

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education Project

Jewish Education in Youngstown

O. H. 690

MIMI SNIDERMAN

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: MIMI SNIDERMAN

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kurtzweig

SUBJECT: formal and informal education, staff, curriculum,
students

DATE: May 20, 1980

K: This is an interview with Mimi Sniderman for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Beth Kurtzweig, at the home of Mimi Sniderman, on May 20, 1980, at 4:30.

Okay, Mimi, can you tell me a little bit about your background, about your parents, brothers, and sisters?

S: My parents both came from Hungary when they were in their early teens. They came from a fairly religious background. They observed all the holidays and religious ceremonies. My own family, there are four children; three of them are male. All of them have had a religious background in the Hebrew education and history.

K: Can you tell me a little bit about your home life with your brothers and parents? Did you come from a religious family as far as your parents observing all the holidays?

S: Yes, my parents observed the holidays. We lit candles on Friday night and we had our prayers before the meals. My sisters and myself did not receive a formal education as far as a Hebrew background is concerned, but my brother did. He went on to almost the secondary phase of Hebrew education.

K: Around your home did you have religious ornaments or books that had history? Were these types of things emphasized in your family?

S: We had a lot of different cultural books. Some of them were of Hebrew background, but we didn't have any particular artifacts symbolic of the Jewish religion. Except, of course, most families have a symbol at the door, which you

can wear around your neck too.

K: As far as your brother is concerned, what kind of an education did he get that you said that you didn't get?

S: When he was bar mitzvahed he was able to read from the Torah, which is supposedly quite a thing to accomplish. He used to sing at the rabbinical performances because he did have a good voice. I would think that he had a rather good background as far as education goes.

K: How did he receive that education? Did he go to Hebrew school?

S: He had a private tutor because years ago you didn't have that many schools that were in your area.

K: The tutor, what kind of background did he come from? Was he qualified?

S: He was a teacher; he was a learned teacher.

K: Teacher with specialty in Jewish education?

S: Yes.

K: Let's move up a little more to the present. How many children do you have?

S: Four.

K: Boys? Girls?

S: Three boys, one girl.

K: Was a religious environment created in the home for your children would you say?

S: I wouldn't say it was a strict religious background. We did light candles on Friday night. All four of them attended Hebrew school. We observed the holidays, but I don't think the necessity of going to temple every Saturday morning or every Friday night was something that was enforced that strictly.

K: You said that your children did attend some type of formal education as far as Judaism is concerned. Did they go to Sunday school, Hebrew school? How was that system set up?

S: Hebrew school and Sunday school. Hebrew school was once or twice a week, and Sunday school, until they were bar mitzvahed, the boys, or confirmed.

K: When did this education start as far as comparing it to the regular school situation? What grade were they in when they started?

S: I don't know. I would imagine they started fairly early. I would imagine around the third grade or something.

K: Was it after school?

S: Yes.

K: Was there any time in between or was it directly?

S: No, it was directly.

K: For how long a time?

S: Until they finished their education.

K: How many hours?

S: I would imagine they went from about 4:00 till about 6:00.

K: If you can think back, do you remember any of the courses or subject matter that were given at the temple?

S: Not having that much of an education in Hebrew myself, I would not be fully aware of the curriculum that they covered. I would imagine they had the beginning learning of the Hebraic words, what they meant, but I don't think they had what you would call enough training to read any literature.

K: Other than the Hebrew language were there courses in history and culture?

S: Yes. I would imagine that Sunday school probably covered the history or the discussion groups as they got older.

K: Who ran the Sunday school and the Hebrew school?

S: They had a religious board of the Jewish religious school that was set up. They would hire the teachers and set up the curriculum.

K: Was there a person that was designated as head, or was that the rabbi's responsibility?

S: I think the rabbi worked with somebody that was appointed to the head of the program.

K: As far as the teachers are concerned, were they teachers who had had training in Jewish history and Hebrew and that or would they have been considered as lay people who had gained

knowledge?

S: I would imagine most of them were lay people who had gained knowledge through education along the way, but I don't think anything was really formalized as far as teaching. They probably gained that with experience of having these classes.

K: Did the rabbi work with the teachers? Were the teachers required to have lesson plans or did the rabbi work with them if they had difficulty, like an in-service type of thing?

S: I imagine most of the classes were more or less worked out in advance as to what they were covering each day. I think the rabbi did go from class to class at certain times to see that this was being taken care of.

K: Thinking back once again, do you think that your children were given a good Jewish orientation as far as formal education is concerned?

S: I think they had a fairly decent background in it. The only thing that I think, possibly, that made it hard for them, and every student, was going to school right after they had just completed being in school from 9:00 until 3:00. I don't think their attention span was that great at the end of the day. I would say that under those circumstances they probably benefited as much as they could, but perhaps it would have been more interesting if there was a time element between or thought had been given to that fact. Maybe there was no other way of doing it so they just had to do it them to fit in with their program.

K: Were there any other things that you can think about that would have been problems that had existed at that time in the Hebrew school other than the time factor there?

S: No. I do know that it was hard to gain their attention at that hour. I think they had a few disciplinary problems trying to get the kids to pay attention.

K: Overall would you say that they did get a good education as far as Judaism?

S: I think a good education is sort of relative there because what one person might think is a good education somebody might feel is not good enough. They might have higher expectations. They might expect them to be all-knowing and be very knowledgeable after going to Hebrew school. Some parents expect them to have enough of a background so that they would know where their people have come from and their roots. That, to them, is enough of an education. I really feel that every family

has a different idea of what is enough.

K: Do you feel that the education that they were given and the people that were working in that educational environment were actually meeting the needs of the students?

S: I don't really feel they were meeting the needs of the students, but I felt at that time they were doing the best that they could with what they had. Possibly in larger cities they would have a larger scale or more students, and perhaps they would handle the activities a little differently. Possibly they would learn more or get more out of it, or have more feeling for it.

K: You said that they really weren't meeting the needs of the children. How, in your estimation, could some of those problems have been rectified?

S: I feel that when you're trying to learn something it has to be taught in a way that it would be interesting to hold your attention. When you feel that all of this knowledge is sort of crammed into you, you have to learn it, and this is what is expected of you, there is a different attitude. I feel that if the approach was a little different so that it could have been more enjoyable, that you would have had more feeling for it and would have come away with a whole different idea of the subject matter.

K: You were talking about the time element. Do you think the problem could have been with the teachers? You said that they were basically laymen who had gained an education, not a formal education.

S: That probably has a lot to do with it. They may have known, had the background, but were unable to teach or present the material in a better way. It's a possibility.

K: Right now there is a commission for Jewish education that has formed here in the city, do you know anything about that?

S: I've heard a little bit about it.

K: Can you tell me a little bit about what you know?

S: I think they are trying to more or less tie all the Jewish education together in all the different synagogues so that they are all parallel in their studies. I think they're trying to have teachers who are more qualified and have possibly a better background and understanding of handling children.

K: Do you think this is a step in the right direction?

- S: Yes. This is what is expected in your education through the schools in Youngstown. You expect teachers to have a background and be knowledgeable and also to be able to teach.
- K: Do you remember any of the surveys or anything like that that were sent out?
- S: No.
- K: Overall, what would you say would be the best thing, the ideal situation, to give children the best Jewish education and best background possible?
- S: I believe that at the beginning the fundamentals have to be taught, but after you reach a certain point I feel that children are interested, they're inquisitive, and if this interest isn't stimulated they're not going to have any further interest in it. They used to have a discussion period; I know that they liked that, but they were held down a lot about some of the things that they had to say That seemed to be their pet peeve, that every time they got into a discussion about something and somebody came up with something that was taboo or didn't want to be discussed or they felt they weren't old enough, they just got shot over. It provoked a lot of anxiety that way.
- K: If I hear you correctly you feel that the children should have some type of input into the situation.
- S: Yes, a discussion group where they can be heard and also where they can be told or corrected or set straight as to how things are. You should know what is in their mind, what they are thinking, so that you can develop it from that point.
- K: Is there anything else that you would like to add?
- S: No.
- K: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW