

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 748

BESS LEVY

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

December 22, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Youngstown Area Jewish Project

INTERVIEWEE: BESS LEVY

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Youngstown history, synagogues, Jewish organizations,
anti-Semitism

DATE: December 22, 1986

O: This is an interview with Bess Levy for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Youngstown Jewish Area, by Irving Ozer, on December 22, 1986.

When were you born, Bess?

L: May 7, 1907.

O: Where were you born?

L: In Youngstown, on 1017 Marshall Street.

O: What was your family's name?

L: Newman.

O: What was your father's name?

L: Jacob Newman.

O: Your mother's?

L: Martha Lippman Newman.

O: Were they married in Europe or here?

L: They were both born in this country.

O: Where?

L: My mother was born in Palmyra and my father was born, I think, in Philadelphia.

O: What brought them to Youngstown?

L: Burt's Candy Store. My dad was going from Cory to Philadelphia probably and he had a wait over at the Erie Depot. He walked up Phelps Street and, as he was very fond of candy, he went in to Burt's and the owner started to talk to him. He told my dad that it was a wonderful city and that it was growing and that it was going to boom. He investigated and opened up a men's exclusive hat store at 26 N. Phelps Street, which was directly across from Burt's Candy.

O: What time would that have been about?

L: I have no idea.

O: About the turn of the century?

L: About.

O: Your father had already met you mother?

L: Yes, they were married. My brother was born in 1900.

O: What was Youngstown like at that time? Was Phelps Street paved or cobblestone?

L: I don't know. It must have been paved. There were streets and sidewalks.

O: Do you remember any other stores downtown when you were young?

L: Yes, there was a Tierney Saloon, and across the street was Gentner's Jewelry Store.

O: Where were your favorite places to go when you were downtown?

L: Petraka's Restaurant was on Federal Street. We lived on Pleasant Grove and didn't come downtown often.

O: You didn't come on the streetcar?

L: We rode the streetcar to school. This was a regular trolley car that ran from Southern Boulevard to Front Street.

When I was ten, we moved to Helena Avenue and I lived there until I was married.

O: Were there many Jews in that part of the city?

L: Yes, there were. At South High School there was Sylvia Block, Sadie Gallup, Sadie White, and Rube Seigle.

O: When did you graduate?

- L: About 1925.
- O: As you were growing up did you experience any kind of anti-Semitism?
- L: I don't think so.
- O: Who were your friends?
- L: They were the Gentile girls who I went to public school and high school with. We used to walk home.
- O: What are your memories of Christmas and Hanukkah?
- L: We always had Hanukkah.
- O: You didn't feel different than the other kids?
- L: No. We always went to temple on Sunday. My dad would drive us to Sunday school.
- O: Was that Rodef Sholom?
- L: Yes.
- O: When and how did you meet Phil?
- L: At the Jewish Center on Lincoln Avenue.
- O: What was Phil doing there?
- L: I think he had just come home from school.
- O: What kind of activities did they have there?
- L: We would just hang around.
- O: When you were dating Phil, where did you go, what sort of things did you do for dates?
- L: Saturday night we usually went to a show. If he came out Sunday afternoon, we used to go hiking or for a walk.
- O: Were you dancers?
- L: No, not much. If there was a dance in town, we might go.
- O: Where were the dances?
- L: Stambaugh, and I don't know where else.
- O: Do you remember the Youngstown Jewish Days at Idora Park, Neimark's Farm, or Avon?

- L: Once I remember going to Neimark's Farm for a roast. If we had one day a week, that was it.
- O: Phil was working for Bloom, Rosenblum, & Klein. When did they leave town?
- L: Bloom & Klein went to Canton.
- Phil was in business then. He didn't pass the CPA right away; he was just a public accountant.
- O: How did Phil become involved in the Jewish community?
- L: He was interested in the Jewish Center and it just kind of snowballed.
- O: Who were some people who you remember in the Jewish community as being leaders?
- L: I remember Malvina Kline; I think she was the first secretary of the Jewish Center.
- O: What kind of business did your parents have?
- L: Just men's hats. It was on Federal.
- O: Where did you and Phil live?
- L: We first lived on Hillman Street.
- O: How long did you stay there?
- L: We weren't there long. I don't know why we moved. We moved into a duplex on the south side. The people who owned the duplex wanted to move into it themselves, so we bought a house on Terrace Drive.
- O: Where is that?
- L: Off of Market Street in Boardman. We lived there seventeen years.
- O: Then you moved to the north side?
- L: Phil saw Carl Hamburg's house and we bought it after he saw it twice. We've been up north thirty-two years.
- O: Phil was also very active in the symphony, how did that happen?
- L: I can't remember who got him interested in that.
- O: He also got involved in politics?

- L: He was city auditor. That came about through Stanley Engel and Marvin Itts.
- O: Whose administration was that?
- L: Sebastian's.
- O: Was he involved with the temple?
- L: Yes, he was involved with that. He was president of that. He was involved with Berkowitz. He liked to be a leader.
- O: Did you realize where he was going?
- L: I don't think so. It wasn't any big deal when he was elected to the board of the Dollar Bank.
- O: How old are you?
- L: I'll be eighty.
- O: Where were you at the time of Pearl Harbor?
- L: On Terrace Drive. The name Pearl Harbor wasn't clear in your mind; you had to think twice where it was.
- O: Do you remember how you first heard of the Holocaust?
- L: Terrace Drive was a very friendly neighborhood. The Dougherty's lived next door and we were very friendly with them. People stayed home more.
- O: Somewhere along the line you became aware of what was going on in Europe?
- L: I suppose I did. If there was a particular moment that I noticed something, I can't remember.
- O: Do you remember when Israel was proclaimed a state?
- L: Yes.
- O: How about the United Nations Partition Debate, did you follow that?
- L: No.
- O: When did Phil become involved with Zionism?
- L: I think he was always interested in Zionism.
- O: It wasn't necessarily the accepted thing for Rodef Sholom at the time.

If you were asked who the person was that had the greatest impact on the Jewish community in Youngstown, who would you say?

L: I have no idea. With the Jews in Youngstown I think it was a matter of finances that counted.

O: Do you remember Dr. Philo?

L: Yes, he married us.

O: What kind of person was he?

L: I knew him from temple. I think he was quite tall. After him came Feinburg and Berkowitz.

O: Thank you, Bess.

END OF INTERVIEW