

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O H 1514

WILLIAM H COSSLER

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

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B This is an interview with William Cossler for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project, on July 16, 1992, by Matthew Butts, on July 16, 1992, at Coefield Hall at Youngstown State University, at 9:00 a.m.

Let us start off with a couple brief biographical questions Can you tell me something about your childhood, where you were born, your education?

C Youngstown, Ohio I was educated in the public schools of Youngstown, Ohio. College education at Purdue University, West Virginia University, and Chicago under a special armed program. I completed college and graduated from Oberlein College in Ohio in 1948

B Which high school did you attend?

C South High School.

B What did you feel about your education?

C Excellent education.

B What was it like going there?

C I never gave it much thought. I was going to high school in the early 1940s Everybody in the school knew everybody else. I graduated in a large class of around 400, 432 I believe. Getting an education at the time was generally a serious matter because there was a war on We knew that we had certain responsibilities to fulfill.

B Growing up in Youngstown, what was the city like as you were growing up?

C I grew up on the South side of Youngstown My wife and I share an identical background My mother and three of my grandparents were born in Scotland Audrey's mother and three of her grandparents were born in Scotland Our mothers never met until we married, even though they were born in Scotland about eight miles apart My mother came to this country as a child at the start of the century Her family is settled on Warren Avenue in Youngstown. When my mother and father were married they first lived with my mother's parents on Warren Avenue They lived first on Leclued Avenue. That is where I was born Then we lived on Cohasset Avenue, then Evergreen Avenue My elementary schooling was at Monroe The South side community in those days was a pleasant mix of people. blacks, whites, a congenial and good group Those are my reflections

B What did the city look like?

- C There were no suburbs in those days. Basically, the city consisted of many pleasant residential streets with trees. That is a distinct memory. Wherever you went in the city, a pleasant neighborhood with tree lined streets.
- B How about the downtown area? What was it like?
- C Full and booming.
- B Moving to Dr. Berkowitz, do you recall the first time you met him?
- C I do not have a real clear recollection at the precise time we met. Personally, I think everybody in the community knew Dr. Berkowitz either in person or by reputation. Clearly Dr. Berkowitz and I were acquaintances because we were both members of the Youngstown Rotary Club, as was my father before me, and my son is now. The Cosslers were active in Rotary, and certainly Sidney Berkowitz was active. Sid and I are both past presidents in the Youngstown Rotary Club.
- B What did he physically look like?
- C He was a short man. He was a man in appearance of robust health. By his appearance, in my mind at least, a man of keen mind and intellect. I think that would be my description.
- B What about his personality? What was that like?
- C Outgoing, precise. Obviously a sharp and clear thinker, a man able to articulate his thoughts. Obviously, in his efforts, a true representative, in my opinion. A man dedicated not only to his religion, but the interest and well being of the community. I believe that Sidney Berkowitz truly represented service above self, whether it was his attitude in the community at large. That was his precise attitude and conduct with the Youngstown Rotary Club. I know in the early days the rotary was going through some changes. It was beginning to look at what would eventually take place, and minorities will belong to rotary as they do now. Sidney and I felt that should have taken place earlier. We promoted that.
- B Do you recall when he would have been president of the rotary, roughly?
- C It was shortly after I was president. Let me see if I have it here and can be precise on the year. I was president in 1971 to 1972. Sidney was president in 1974 and 1975.
- B What were some of the duties of the president of the rotary?

C The process of becoming president of the rotary, these events would have taken place in any members membership who arrives at the presidency He would have been elected to and served on the board of directors by his fellow Rotarians. The rotary has four avenues of service. Each club divides itself into committees covering those avenues; International service, club service, community service, and rotary foundation service. Sidney would have served as chair on many, many subcommittees He would have served as chair on each of those major committees Then he would have gone through the officers chair, serving as secretary, treasurer. In those years, Sidney and the gentlemen who was vice president in my year, Henry Bertolini, the three of us worked on some ideas together and changed it so the president elects officers. I believe that Sidney ultimately served as the first going from vice president, to president elect, then served as president.

Sidney would have served as chairman of the horse show that the Youngstown Rotary Club used to sponsor at that time in the community fund raising. That would be a substantial responsibility I think that generally covers what he would have been involved in Why do you have community service? Why do you have international service? After all, rotary's concept is to promote world understanding and world peace Many Rotarians that I ever knew understood world understanding and world peace, it was Sidney Berkowitz.

B. Was there any special projects that he undertook when he was president?

C. No president necessarily takes on a specific project. The course of that year is dictated by the president of Rotary International. Each of the many clubs in the rotary throughout the world follow the course that has been established by Rotary International Each president would bring their own twist along for how they are going to conduct themselves, how they will work with, and otherwise interrelate with the membership. I think it is certainly fair to say that Sidney Berkowitz brought a very outgoing working relationship with people in a very organized approach to the office

The thing the members will remember the most about Sidney Berkowitz, why I used the expression precise thinker, is the rotary opens each of its meetings with an indication Sidney Berkowitz's indications were all of one sentence long, sometimes they might be two sentences. That approach based on his reputation and ability, two sentence indication to approach the sermon His one sentence indications were surgically precise When he delivered that you were left with much to think about He had that ability in one sentence to leave you pondering exactly what it was he said and what it should mean to you He was excellent at that

B What was it like working for him? Was he easy to work with?

C Not always Not always because he had his opinions, his sense of how something should be done You certainly were going to hear about it at a

committee meeting He was not hesitant, nor reticent to bring those opinions, but you have to respect that in a person Sidney would sometimes irritate people with that He did not irritate the people that truly understood him, understood what he stood for. I consider somebody easy to work with for somebody who has nothing to say and just rubber stamps anything That would not have been Sidney Berkowitz. He would rubber stamp nothing. Ultimately, whatever the committee arrived at by consensus or vote, he absolutely supported that conclusion He had his input into it, his comments. He bent it to his thinking as much as he could. As it remained unbent he accepted it and went on to the next piece of work

B Outside of the rotary, what other things was he involved with in the community?

C He was involved in many areas that I was not involved in, so I would not be familiar with those I know he was involved in, perhaps the word should be interested, in certain projects which was public schools. Back in the late 1960s, the citizens in Youngstown had defeated the levies to increase the taxes for support of the schools about six or seven times in a row We ultimately passed that levy in either 1967 or 1968. In my recollections, Sidney had organized the community people to assist efforts in that, all through that trying period when the citizens were defeating the levy, and that was three or four years. Ultimately the schools were closed. He would understand that the schools were closed and the children were locked out of the schools approaching two months

It is at that time that my own children who were in high school, and my own daughter became interested in the situation because the statement I made at the dinner table one day was, "We had enough Everybody eat their dinners and we are going out to look at some property that I have been looking at in the suburbs. We are going to move because you children are not going to be educated." To make a long story short, we did go look at the property, but we did not move because the next Sunday in the front section of the newspaper was a picture of my own daughter on the front page of the Vindicator. She stepped out as a sophomore then in order to organize the sophomores in all the other high schools and formed a red arm band campaign to get the citizens to vote for the schools. Sidney was already active in the school situations then I know that he became a very active player in that red arm band campaign

Then the strangest thing happened in my own life That was successful The red arm band campaigning which my daughter had been chairman of was given a lot of credit for it, the children themselves, the teenagers themselves Then the person serving on the Ohio State Board of Education at that time representing this area died in office I think the governor had to fill the position. I think the governor wanted to appoint my daughter, but because she was too young he appointed me instead For the next decade practically I served on the Ohio State Board of Education In those days I was close to Sidney, too, because of educational matters going on and me trying to represent this area, this congressional district of education

Those were contentious days in public education in Ohio. The bussing situation was bad. I often conferred with Sidney on the matters concerning policy because again, he had such a clear mind and was such a good thinker in those areas. For me, Dr. Berkowitz was a tremendous resource, if not public opinion, then at least of what the public should be doing. He could very carefully point that out to me. He was just a great man.

- B: Were there any problems with the bussing issue within Youngstown? Was there a court case that decided it was not necessary for the Youngstown community?
- C: There was considerable litigation that developed, but that was true all over the nation. Youngstown was not necessarily unique in it. The subjects of defacto and dejure segregation came up. Those became big buzz words in those days. Was the segregation maliciously constructed or did it occur through some natural developing residential selection? I do not know. You asked me earlier what was my recollection as a youngster in Youngstown. My recollection of a youngster of Youngstown in my early days was lovely neighborhoods and tree lined streets. Those tree lined streets included streets that black people lived on in the South side. It included streets that black and white people lived on in the South side. The neighborhood schools included schools that black and white children went to together. If there was racism in those days then there is two possibilities. One, I was completely oblivious to it, or two, I was simply naive. My conclusion was that I do not recall it. I can clearly remember close friends that I had at Monroe elementary school. Roland Wilson was one of them. Rolan Wilson was black. I do not ever remember ever talking with Roland, or he with me, about our differences. I am wondering. What is your next question?
- B: How about within the Youngstown community? Did Dr. Berkowitz have anything to unite the bonds between he various religions?
- C: He was very active in that inner faith. He was recognized by the community as the spokesperson for, and the leader, of the Jewish community. When Dr. Sidney Berkowitz spoke, his word was accepted as the word of the Jewish community. I do not know if the Jewish community agreed with that, but it was usually assumed that way. If the Vindicator, our local paper, wanted an interview on a subject it was usually Dr. Berkowitz that was contacted. He worked with the leaders in the Catholic church, the Protestant churches. Equally he worked with not only religions, but he worked with the races. If there were white leaders he was working with them, if there was such a thing. Leaders of the black community respected leaders of those two groups he was working with. In that roll, I think he clearly established himself as somebody who was continually wanting to cement people together and cement the community together.
- B: Were there any other individuals within Youngstown that were doing the same thing, paralleling him at the same time?

- C. Yes I cannot remember their names. Was it Bishop Malone then in the Catholic church? I believe representing the Protestant faith, it was an organization of Protestant churches that used to be here on Wick Avenue
- B. Council of Churches?
- C: Council of Churches, that was it I do not recall the names
- B Richard Spiker, is that it?
- C. Yes, that is one Then the church that my mother first joined when she came from Scotland, the church my parents were married in, the church I grew up in ultimately became John Knox church on the corner of Market Street and Delason. When Dr Braun, who was still the minister there, came to town, it seems to me that there was a close relationship then Dr Braun was interested in those things and played a roll in it. I had then moved to Christ Church out in the Kirkmere area. The precise roll Reverend Braun was playing, I am not sure
- B Would you perceive then Dr. Berkowitz's roll within the community as somebody who cut across all social, ethnic, religious things to cement the Youngstown community?
- C. An excellent cross cutter would be an appropriate description.
- B How was he able to do this?
- C Because he was respected, because he had the support of people. I suppose I ought to say he had the support of thinking people I am sure there were bigots in those days, too, but he had the support of thinking people I think he had the support and the respect, certainly of the political leaders, in those days
- B How about his sense of humor? People usually bring that up Did you find him having a good sense of humor?
- C He had an excellent sense of humor I had forgotten that in trying to remember all of the other things about him He should surely carry the title of a quick wit He could cut a pun, convert a direct remark to him, for instance, into a pun with one and a half sentences You had to laugh at him He was good Quick wit I think would be my description
- B Do you remember any specific occasions?
- C I cannot. I can think of many situations I can think of many times in the public sector, community function meetings or at the rotary club that perhaps somebody

threw a remark either intentionally or in jest at Dr. Berkowitz. It was his ability to take that barb and cast it aside with an immediate response that invariably brought a chuckle to the room. He always came out the winner. He was so gracious in my recollection of being able to do that. I just cannot remember a precise one, but I can remember many of those occurring to the frustration, I think, of some people. I can distinctly recall at a rotary club meeting one day, one of the past presidents of the rotary, a predominant leader in the community, now deceased, rose to the floor. As I recall, it was a committee function that Dr. Berkowitz was responsible for as past president, the direction that the committee was heading. I recall the man almost stomped the floor with anger over the thing for about five minutes. It was not a one sentence indication that Sidney replied with. It was a one sentence that turned it around and left the room chuckling. I am sorry. I do not recall the sentence, but I can recall the incident.

B: A lot of people I have interviewed mentioned his ability to be a great orator, great speech giver. What do you think made it, his ability to give a speech so mesmerizing?

C: I think in oration, first of all, you are either a born orator or you are not. The ability to orate, I think, is a natural gift, not necessarily a result of education. Dr. Berkowitz was a well educated man. When he did speak it would be on a subject that he was prepared in, probably educated in. Frequently he would speak on the Jewish, Christian aspects of certain holidays at the Rotary Club -- a subject that he had total knowledge of. It would be one thing for a person to stand up and address that subject, a student of the subject. It was something entirely else when Dr. Berkowitz stood up and addressed it because not only did he know the subject, but he was able to present it in a manner that would be oration. It would be gracefully received. It would be well received. It would be appreciated because of his careful choice of words. He used skillful construction of phrases and sentences. He was a craftsman in that. He held your attention. By the same token, he could take a subject and cover it totally to your complete satisfaction in twelve minutes. I pick that at random because my next statement is the same. The next person would take 30 minutes to do it and not near as effectively as Dr. Berkowitz did.

B: Is there anything we have not touched on that you think we should add?

C: Well, my question would be what is the purpose of this oral history you are constructing?

B: We are trying to preserve as much of the local history. We can probably shut this off now.

End of Interview