

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1519

ROBERT M. HAMMOND

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

June 24, 1992

ROBERT HAMMOND

Attorney Robert Hammond was born on June 3, 1916 in Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Gerald Fitlamund and Hazel McCreary Hammond. He attended secondary school at Culvert Military Academy, graduating in 1934.

Following high school, Hammond attended college at the University of Michigan, being awarded his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1938. He then entered Law School, achieving his Jurist Doctorate Degree in 1943. He then returned to Youngstown, where he opened a law firm. Mr. Hammond's law practice was interrupted by the United States' involvement in World War II. He enlisted in the United States Army Air Force, serving from 1941 to 1946. After his discharge from the Army, Hammond returned to Youngstown to reopen his law practice. To date, he continues to practice law in the Youngstown area.

Presently, Attorney Hammond resides with his wife, Mary Carl, at 2008 Volney Road, Youngstown, Ohio. He is involved with numerous local organizations including the Youngstown Playhouse, the Butler Art Museum, and the Youngstown Symphony. Mr. Hammond spends much of his free time traveling and enjoying photography.

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Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT M. HAMMOND

INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts

SUBJECT: Rabbi Berkowitz, Youngstown, Rodef Sholom,  
Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz's impact on the local  
Jewish community

DATE: June 24, 1992

B: This is an interview with Attorney Robert M. Hammond for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Berkowitz project, including the Youngstown community and the Youngstown Jewish community, at his residence, 2008 Volney Road, Youngstown, Ohio, on Wednesday, June 24, 1992, at approximately 9:25 a.m.

Okay Mr. Hammond, I think we'll get going here. The first questions are very similar to what we filled out here. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, as far as your childhood [and] your education?

H: Oh, I was born in 1916 in Youngstown. I grew up in the 1920s, a very good time to grow up. I lived on the South Side of Youngstown all of my life. I remember nickel street car rides and Idora Park, and the great period between the wars. I remember the Dempsey-Firpo fight and the great athletes of the 1920s, Babe Ruth and so on, and also the Depression. In 1929, the Depression did not have much effect on my family personally, but of course, it had a great effect on the whole community. I graduated from college in 1938. I was in law school when I got called into service in April, 1941, before the war. I hadn't graduated from law school, but we were at war, so I went into the

service. I served for about five years. I served in this country the whole time and got out of service in 1946. I started practicing law in Youngstown with my father in the family firm, and I'm still there today.

B: Could you tell me your parents' names?

H: My father, Gerald F. Hammond, was raised in Ashtabula County and grew up in Conneaut, Ohio. He went to Oberlin, graduated, and then [went to] Michigan Law, graduating there in 1908. My mother, Hazel McCreary, graduated from Slippery Rock, which was a "Normal" Academy, that allowed her to teach the lower grades only. She moved to Youngstown from Ashtabula County. They knew each other as young children in Pierpont, Ashtabula County. She moved to Youngstown and after he graduated from law school, he took the Ohio Bar. Then after he borrowed 10 dollars, he came on a train from Conneaut and boarded at her home in Youngstown. He lived at her house, and they were married in 1911. They had two children, my sister and myself.

B: What was the city like growing up in the 1920s?

H: Oh, it was a delightful time. My father came here because it was a growing steel town in 1908. Conneaut was a farm community. Of course, he came here principally because that's where my mother lived. It was a very relaxed and open time. There was very little stress in the economy until the Depression.

When my father came here in 1908, he couldn't make a living practicing law, so he taught English at the YMCA. At that time there were, according to my father--along Front Street, which is the street where the courthouse is, east of Market Street--there were a series of houses. There were either warehouses or boarding houses. The boarding houses were where the men from the mills slept. There were three shifts in each bed. The beds would never even get cold. The men would sleep and then go back and work 10, 12 hours; then, come back. These men were coming over from Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia, the ethnic middle European countries at that time. According to Kenneth Roberts, the author who wrote a lot of books about the immigration of that period, the steerage fair from the continent to the United States in that period was 35 dollars; they brought your own food for the trip. The mills needed that labor.

B: Speaking about the ethnic development of the city, growing up, were you aware of the different locations of the various ethnic groups within the city, where they resided?

H: Yes, partly by name. Smokey Hollow and Monkey's Nest were names for different sections of the town. My impression of the 1920s is that when an immigrant family would get into an area, the church was a very important part of that family. They would bring other families of their background to that part of town, and they would be at that church. It was generally a Catholic or sometimes Eastern Orthodox church, but they would gravitate to that area. It was a matter of being with your own kind, driven principally by the fact that they had their language in common. When immigrants came to this country, they spoke little or no English for many years, and these little ethnic islands of groups grew in that way. Just as many different groups as the Serbs and the Croats are now in Yugoslavia. But, these people did not bring with them the ancient hatreds that these ethnic groups seem to be carrying out to this day in their home country.

B: Were you aware where the Jewish community resided?

H: Yes, because Rabbi Philo of the Rodef Sholom Temple was a good friend of my father's. He was an outstanding Jewish leader in Youngstown. I had very little contact with him myself, but I knew him. I knew who he was. Ann Kendall was his daughter. He was followed by Sidney Berkowitz. Sidney Berkowitz used to tell of coming to Youngstown in military uniform from the service and getting off the train--that shows how long ago that was. A member of the congregation met him there to take him to the temple. I met Sid early on in starting my law practice. I probably met him through Rotary. I joined Rotary in, I think, 1946 when I got out of the service. Sid, of course, became very prominent in Rotary. He was on the board, and he was also president of Rotary. He was very active in civic affairs, especially when they related to the Jewish community. He was a very influential figure.

B: How did you perceive Dr. Berkowitz's role within the Youngstown community?

H: Well, he was both a spokesperson for the Jewish community and a defender of the Jewish community. He was not a mild man. I don't think he would be quick to take offense where none was intended, but he was a staunch defender of Israel and its people, the Jewish community, and its place in Youngstown. An example of that was the fact that in Rotary I proposed for membership a very good friend of mine. This friend of mine was of Jewish parentage but married a gentile woman and did not support the Jewish religion or Sid's temple, although his father had strongly supported the temple. When I tried to get my friend into Rotary, Sid Berkowitz just howled and screamed and tore the roof down,

because this man had not supported the temple as his father had. I remember I put some oil on the water, and I did some peacemaking and got things smoothed over, and my friend was admitted to Rotary. But Sid Berkowitz was a man of very strong feelings. Fortunately, as far as I was concerned I never heard anything but good from him about me and my family. We had occasion to spend more time with the Jewish community at the temple than a lot of gentiles because, by accident and design, many of our good friends were and are Jews. In that connection, for more than 30 years, I have taped bar mitzvahs at the temple for their parents. That wasn't being done much 30 years ago. My wife and I have been invited to many Jewish weddings and bar mitzvahs. There have been many times when we've been the only gentiles at a reception at the Squaw Creek Country Club (Jewish) that it's sort of laughable. But, it's almost as if we had an associate membership. There's been a good relationship between our church, First Christian, and Rodef Sholom Temple. Sid Berkowitz was a good friend of Pastor Eugene Beach, Dr. Eugene Beach, First Christian Church. When the temple got a parsonage for Sid and Pauline, there were two couples, there were only two gentile couples invited to that parsonage for that reception. Those two couples were Eugene and Gladys Beach and my wife and myself. The other guests were all Jewish. But, we were there, and I'm very proud of that connection.

B: Speaking of the Youngstown Jewish community, growing up did you feel that there was any anti-Semitism within Youngstown towards the Jewish community?

H: Oh, I'm sure there was as I look back at it. This is a side note in our history. Philip Frieder was a very prominent Jewish businessman in Youngstown, (and my father knew Dr. John Edward Hardman). My father was one of the founders of the Tippicanoe Country Club and got Phil Frieder in as a member of the Tippicanoe Country Club; and he was the only Jewish member. They were good friends, and Phil Frieder was a good friend of mine. Of course, I suppose as a little boy I was conscious of the fact that something was different about our Jewish friends, but no, not very aware of it.

B: How did Rabbi Berkowitz deal with the gentile population in comparison with--I guess there wasn't very much anti-Semitism, but how did he project the Jewish community to the non-Jewish community?

H: I would say Sid was aggressively Jewish. I think you'll probably hear that at other places. I never ran into it, but if there was any anti-Semitism in you, he would answer it. He was a great, forceful, great public relations man for the Jewish community in

Youngstown. Our Sunday School class at First Christian Church, I remember, had Sid come and talk to our Sunday School. That was an unusual thing to do. He made the point that, "You know, you Christians are fortunate. You have Jesus as your prophet. Our Messiah is to come. We have to think of eternity without personalizing it. You Christians can personify it in your Christ. To us, he was just another teacher, but to you he was the Messiah; he isn't to us. We're a little bit envious of the fact that you have a real person," which was interesting.

B: Other than Rotary, were you familiar with any other of Rabbi Berkowitz's activities within the Youngstown community, say the Civil Rights Movement?

H: Oh, I don't know about the Civil Rights Movement, but he was very active in charitable matters and charitable activities. I'm sure that his name in the 1950s and 1960s would be very prominent in the committees on different public charities in the area.

One thing that hasn't been touched on, which you have to know, is Sid's wonderful sense of humor. He had a genius for making very powerful, one sentence prayers. He could put more religion into one or two sentences than a lot of ministers could into a paragraph. He was noted for that. It was always a delight to have him give an invocation or invoke a blessing because of his style. He was far from wordy, but he was a powerful preacher.

B: Speaking of his humor, do you remember any specific things that . . . ?

H: Oh sure, but one that's outstanding? (Laughter) I don't know. In those days, my family had a connection with the Palace Theater, in the 1950s and 1960s and so on. They would "road show" big pictures, like The Ten Commandments and Ben Hur. They'd have a big "road show." If the normal admission was 75 cents or 1 dollar, on a "road show" that would be \$3.50 or 4 dollars admission. Mary Carlton and I took Sid and Pauline to The Ten Commandments. After the show was over, I remember it got a standing ovation. Everyone was standing up and clapping. Sidney was clapping his hands and crying, "Author! Author!" (Laughter) Oh, this was wonderful! Very quick, very quick-minded.

Sid was a student at Cambridge University, England, and I believe, at Selwyn College. Our son-in-law, Peter Thompson, is a Britisher, graduate of Cambridge and also of Selwyn College.

- B: Going back to Rabbi Berkowitz's activities in the community, how about his mediating anything, say labor disputes of some kind? Are you familiar with anything?
- H: I don't know. No.
- B: How about some more attributes? Other than his humor, what were some of his attributes?
- H: We knew him pretty much just on a social level, and we knew that he was active in so many organizations for the good of the community, but to the detriment of his own health. I know when he died, Pauline's words were, "He died of 'total burnout.'"
- H: One of the remarkable things about Sid was the fact that Bishop Malone, our Catholic Bishop, gave his eulogy. I remember Pauline saying that they had discussed earlier what should be done in the event of his death. His reference to Bishop Malone shows a lot about that relationship. He said, "In the event of my death, as far as any talk is concerned, I think you'd have Jamie Malone." Now, who would call a bishop "Jamie" Malone? Yet, I don't think Sid would yield to anyone that his belief and his faith were strong and right.
- B: Given this view, how do you think he was able to develop such a great rapport with the other major religious figures in Youngstown at this time. I believe for the Catholics it was Bishop Malone. I believe for the Protestant churches it was a Reverend William Speicher.
- MH: (Mary, Robert Hammond's wife responds) Oh yes. Speicher was in charge of the Council of Churches. Well, I just think total respect for other people's beliefs and their ideas.
- H: No. I think that would be correct. I think he respected the Christian's right to be wrong. (Laughter)
- B: How would you say that Rabbi Berkowitz worked within the Youngstown community? What was beneficial about him so that he could develop this great rapport with just about every aspect of the community? The Afro-American community, the Protestant community, the Catholic community.
- H: Oh, I don't know other than what I've said. I think probably the thing that is outstandingly different from many of the leaders today is, I suppose, that he was always able to see the doughnut instead of the hole and see the good of the whole community instead of trying so zealously to defend his particular part of it that he became xenophobic on that. I think some of our

modern leaders find a position they can stand on which promotes a particular small segment or view and that becomes so overwhelming that it's the only thing you hear. Leaders now somehow seem to be so afraid that they're going to be overlooked that they overlook the total good. I don't know.

B: This is a little bit different perspective. This is kind of interesting. Being non-Jewish, being invited to weddings and bar mitzvahs, what struck you about how Rabbi Berkowitz ran a religious service at the temple.

H: They were quite formal, I felt. I always felt like an outsider, but I felt a privileged outsider. I felt honored to be there. I think we always felt that--I don't know how this is going to sound, but I think we always felt that they were honoring us instead of the fact that we were honoring them by our presence. I never felt that with regard to the Jewish community or the Black community. I had some activity here years ago bringing in the Guardian Angels (the Black groups) to try and get Guardian Angel groups started here in town. I have never felt that I was condescending or bending to them. I never felt better than anybody. I always felt honored to be included in those situations, yet you knew that all you had was a temporary visa; you didn't have a passport to be there.

B: Also from a non-Jewish perspective, describe what you think Rabbi Berkowitz's impact on the Jewish community was. Was it more cohesive?

H: Oh, I think so. One way in which I think that the Temple Rodef Sholom and our church were much alike, in strong pastorates. Beach was minister of our congregation for over 30 years. Sidney Berkowitz was rabbi of his congregation for I don't know how many years. But, he was it. You didn't have the revolving door of ministers and rabbis that you often have now. I can't tell you how many rabbis have been through Rodef Sholom since Sid Berkowitz died, but I think there have been several, just as there have been many ministers in our church. We don't have a long ministry anymore. I think that's part of the world change. I now understand in the disciple church, which is our church, ministries average about four years. When I was growing up, the ministries averaged about 25 years. I think that whole thing has changed with us, and very possibly it may have changed with the Jewish community, too.

Consequently, in his later years, Sid was ministering to members of his congregation whom he had bar mitzva-hed. I mean, these had been the little kids, so he had that whole paternal influence in the relationship with

them. That makes a great difference in a religious situation, I think. All for the better, I think.

B: I'm intrigued by [the fact that] many of the interviewees have spoken about his stance on Israel, being a firm supporter of the Jewish state. Did that cause any dissatisfaction within the Jewish community or within the Youngstown community? Was there anybody who was an ardent critic of him over this issue?

H: Oh, I think so; I'm sure there was. I don't know the other Jewish temples, but I believe that there were others with equally strong feeling. I think there was a schism in the Jewish community about the state of Israel. I know that I had a very good friend and client, Sid Moyer, of the Moyer Manufacturing Company. His brother Henry had been in the business with him, but the difference between them, I believe, was that Henry did not support Israel as a separate state in the way that Sidney did Moyer. I think there was a division in the Jewish community along those lines. Sid Berkowitz was so positive that 100 percent wasn't good enough for him, he had to be 1,000 percent for the things he believed in. In his own way, he had the reputation of being very narrow in his focus.

B: Could you describe his view on Israel as a Jewish state?

H: I don't know. I'm not qualified.

B: Was there anything you were aware with Rotary? You mentioned how he became president, things like that. Was he very focused with anything that he took part in?

H: He was very motivated. He tended to chair most of the things that he was associated with and do them all. I think he tended to run things.

B: Ellie Katz mentioned how he loved golf. Her husband's an avid golfer. Rabbi Berkowitz was also involved with golfing. He wasn't a very good golfer, but he was very in tune with it. He was a very active participate in it. Can you remember any specific occasions when Rabbi Berkowitz attended a service at your church or within some other church within the Youngstown community?

H: No. His mind was exceptionally quick, and his tongue was tart. You'll hear that, I'm sure. I never felt the bite of it, but. . . .

B: Would you describe him as a stubborn man?

H: I think he was strongly self-willed. I would characterize Sid as a leader, and most leaders are stubborn and

self-willed and motivated and direct. They may be wrong, but they're never in doubt.

B: Do you remember any occasions like that?

H: No.

B: Can you think of any other good individuals to contact about Rabbi Berkowitz?

H: What members of the Jewish community have you talked to?

B: Oh, there's a list here. This week I've spoken to Dr. Milton Yarmy and his wife. There's a whole series that we have [of] around a hundred names. Sidney Klein.

MH: (Mary, Hammond's wife says) Fran and Phil Millstone.

B: Yes.

MH: Do you have them? They would be the origin of my contact with Pauline.

B: This Thursday I have an interview scheduled with them.

H: I'm curious. How many gentiles do you have on your list?

B: Oh, there's a number. There's representatives of many of the churches, pastors of the churches of the community. I'm interviewing Bishop Malone and the representatives of the black community, because I guess he was very active in the Civil Rights Movement. Above all else, Rabbi Berkowitz would be a spokesman of the Jewish community.

H: Yes.

B: Do you think there's more acceptance of the Jewish community through his workings with Bishop Malone and Reverend Speicher, or just generally?

H: That is partly because of the continuity over a period of years. You cannot establish a strong presence in the community if you have three or four year pastorates. Bishop Malone has been here as a bishop for a long time. Eugene Beach was here a long time. So, you have an increase in their influence over that period of time. That is lost when you get a succession of people going through these religious chairs.

B: You mentioned when you first met Rabbi Berkowitz, was that near his early arrival within Youngstown?

H: Is that when he came here?

B: Yes.

H: Oh, I'd say it was in the 1950s sometime.

B: And he had already developed this ecumenical feeling within the community during this period, or was it a gradual progression?

H: I think it was gradual. Again, it was time and intense leadership.

B: Are there any other things about Rabbi Berkowitz that we haven't covered that you would like to add?

H: No. Not that I know of.

B: Is there anything else that you think that we should touch on right now?

H: No.

B: Okay. Thank you very much for your time. It was a very good interview, and we'll get a transcript to you.

H: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW