

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H 1528

MICHAEL MONUS

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 14, 1995

MICHAEL MONUS

Mr Michael Monus was born on the Northside of Youngstown, Ohio to Nathan and Frances Monus. He attended Harding Elementary, Hayes Junior High School, and the Rayen High School. He graduated from University Prep School in Cleveland, Ohio in the mid-1960s.

Following high school, Monus worked for Tamarkin Enterprises, and Tamco Distributors. He helped in the founding of Phar-Mor Valu Drugs in the early 1970s. Over the next twenty years Monus headed the growth of Phar-Mor as it became a successful corporation. He was also very instrumental in founding the World Basketball League, bringing a franchise, the Youngstown Pride, here in the 1980s. Along with his many business responsibilities, Monus has also served as a trustee for Youngstown State University.

--Matthew Butts

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INTERVIEWEE: MICHAEL MONUS
INTERVIEWER: Matthew Butts
SUBJECT: Rabbi Berkowitz
DATE: July 14, 1992

B: This is an interview with Michael Monus for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, for the Rabbi Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on July 14, 1992, at Phar-Mor Center, at 3:00 p m

Could you tell me something about your childhood, such as where you grew up, and where you went to school?

M: I grew up on the north side of Youngstown Until I was five years old I lived on Ohio Avenue, and then moved to Goleta near Crandall Park I went to Harding Elementary School, and Hayes Junior High School. The first two years of high school I went to Rayen, then finished my high school in Cleveland at University School which is a country day school, or prep-school

B: What was Youngstown like growing up in the city?

M: Explain what you mean

B: Was it a thriving community? Was it real busy?

M: Youngstown was a a middle market type community It was not like

growing up in Cleveland and Pittsburgh. It was reasonable in those years because the steel mills were very active and unemployment was down pretty low. We were a steel based economy, and the third largest steel producer in the country at one point. It was reasonable thriving from that standpoint in terms of people working. There was a life to it. Where I grew up near to Crandall Park, in my spare time I had a lot of opportunity in the winter to ice skate and sled ride. In the summer we would play tennis, basketball, football, and baseball. I was very athletic and liked sports a lot when I was growing up. I had a good opportunity to do that, and good facilities down around where I lived.

B: Was the Northside very ethnically oriented? Were there streets that were predominantly Italian?

M: I would say it was basically mixed, although the majority of the Jewish people in our community lived on the Northside of Youngstown, even though they were dispersed throughout the community. I do not have the statistics, but a great majority of them lived on the Northside at that point in time when I was growing up.

B: Was Rabbi Berkowitz always the rabbi growing up for you?

M: That is correct. He was rabbi from the time I was an infant. Interestingly, one of my parents belonged to Temple Emmanuel, and the other belonged to Temple Anshe-Emeth. When they got married, one of those was a conservative temple and the other I believe was an Orthodox temple. When they got married they decided to join the reform temple, and then belonged to the Rodef Sholom Temple once they were married. I do not know exactly when that transition happened, but it was within a couple years from the time they were married. The interesting thing in the present day is you look today, Temple Emmanuel and Temple Anshe-Emeth merged. The surviving temple there is the one on Logan Avenue in Liberty. It is called Temple El-Emeth. It is a combination of the two names.

B: Describe to me Temple Rodef Sholom for me. What does it look like physically?

M: The actual temple part is a very interesting structure, a dome type structure. It is very beautiful. It has been kept up very nicely. There has been talk about relocating the temple over into the area where El-Emeth is. I think the traditionalists from the temple loved the architectural beauty of the facility.

where it is now and could probably never duplicate that. That is one of the reasons the temple stays in the area that it is in

B: What is the first recollection you have of Dr. Berkowitz?

M: When I was growing up and going to religious school on Sunday mornings, he was always a participant in the activities that went on. Although, Cantor Erlich of the congregation was the director of the religious school he reported to Rabbi Berkowitz. Rabbi Berkowitz was always involved in the activities that went on there.

B: What did Rabbi Berkowitz look like, physically?

M: He was a smaller type guy. He kept his weight under control. He wore glasses. He was a good looking man.

B: What about his personality? Was he a jovial person?

M: He was always an upbeat kind of person. He always had the time for anyone that had to talk to him. That is what really made him the spiritual leader that he was. He really devoted himself to his congregation to make sure he could help them wherever help was needed.

B: What was confirmation classes like with him? Were they fun?

M: The confirmation classes and how they related to me was that there was a big sacrifice I had to make to be confirmed because the confirmation classes were on Monday afternoons. I think that is when you are a sophomore in high school. I was an athlete and a basketball player, so I had to give up basketball practice during the basketball season to go to confirmation class. I was not necessarily a happy camper because that affected my athletic career by going to the confirmation classes on Monday afternoons. He was very informative. As a matter of fact, in terms of overall religious school, the real learning that I got out of it was in his class. He had very good lectures about the Jewish religion and the important things in the Jewish religion, what it meant to be a Jew, and the important readings of Judaism. It was very interesting. He taught the class in a very scholarly type of fashion.

B: Did he have a great rapport with both the younger and older congregants in the temple?

M: Yes, I believe everyone liked him. He had a good rapport,

regardless of the age of the people.

B: Speaking with most of the interviewees I have done, they speak of a sense of humor

M: He always had a sense of humor

B: What was it like?

M: He kept your interest in times when you would not think, he would be cracking a little joke. He would keep your interest. Understand, it has been several years for myself since I have been confirmed here I am 44 years old today, and I was a sophomore in high school Let us say I was fifteen We are talking almost 30 years. The absolute toughest thing was that our families became very close in the later years of his life. He and his wife were very close to my parents My parents really respected him He was around the entire time I grew up into my adulthood years. When he died, you really felt like you lost something You lost part of you.

The most difficult thing was for the person that came in after him, not just in my mind, but in everyone's mind you are comparing the person that became the rabbi of the temple to him He just had his way in terms of how he conducted the service Not that he was right or wrong in terms of how he did it, but you were so used to the way he conducted the services and how he preached the sermon, and how he conducted himself on the pulpit. It was very difficult to get used to the people that came after him. Because of his many years being the spiritual leader, we were so close to him that it was very difficult when he died

B: Not only with his congregants, but within the community, what was his role in the Youngstown community?

M: I think he thrived through the community to really be involved in a non-sectarian type manner, and to make sure that he was there to be friendly to everyone and be concerned about everyone. He really wanted to get the message out there that Jewish people are not any different than anyone else Even the thought of anti-Semitism is ridiculous We are people like everybody else and should not be treated differently We are not greater, we are not less. We are ordinary people. Let us all be part of this same community, and same world together

That is the role he played with the community I believe that he was very close to Bishop Malone They both came up through this community around the same time They were very close friends. I even think Bishop Malone eulogized him I am

not sure, but I think at his funeral that might have been the case. He got involved with the other spiritual leaders in the community. That was his message, that we are part of this community together. None of us are any different. We have to build together, or we could go down together. It is much easier to build together than to destruct together.

B: Growing up did you experience any racial slurs? Do you think Youngstown had a tinge or anti-Semitism, here?

M: This is a personal belief. I believe that there is some of that in almost any community. I do not think it is any more here than any other. As a Jew, you always have to be aware of the fact that it could be the case. That does not mean you are a separatist. It means you have to be careful because that is there. That type of slur is not only towards Jews. It could be towards any religion or nationality. Sure, there is some of that there.

B: Another thing that is universally brought up by a lot of people is his ability to be a great orator. What was it like when he gave a speech or sermon, or just talking?

M: He had the ability to communicate. He was a great orator. You listened when he talked. He had a great command of the English language, and the ability to communicate. Just for the fact that he was our spiritual leader, you listened anyway. The fact that he was a great orator made it that much more interesting. It kept your attention that much more.

B: What do you think his impact on the Youngstown Jewish community was?

M: I think as he became the senior leader. That is what he was looked as. He was involved in all the major decisions in different areas of the Jewish community.

B: Is there anything we really have not touched on about him, or something we should add?

M: I think you have touched on the core points in terms of the significant role he played in the community as a Jewish leader, and in the community as a leader. There has been no reflection of him in those that have followed. Rabbi Brown is there today, but someone that has that type of tenure and has been around that long, with that kind of leadership role in the community does not happen that often. Particularly in this profession today there

seems to be a lot of turnover Youngstown being a middle market, if someone is good they go to another market with a larger congregation The uniqueness was that he was very good and very effective and here for a long time.

B: Thank you very much

END OF INTERVIEW