

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1529

NATHAN H. MONUS

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

June 25, 1992

MR. NATHAN MONUS

Mr. Nathan Monus was born on October 14, 1921 on the North Side of Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Frank and Sarah Monus. He attended secondary school at the Rayen High School, graduating in 1939.

Following high school, Monus attended college at the Virginia Military Institute and attended Ohio State University. His post-secondary education was interrupted by the United States involvement in World War II. He enlisted in the United States Army, serving in the European theater of operations. After his discharge from the Army in 1946, Monus returned to Youngstown. He gained employment with the Tamarkin Food Company, eventually becoming integral in the leadership of the company. Later, Monus became involved with Tamco Distributors, was a board member of Phar-Mor, and helped to found Phar-Mor Incorporated in the Youngstown area.

Throughout his life in Youngstown, Mr. Monus remained involved in the local business community. He is a past president of the Austintown Rotary Club. He also remains an active member of many other organizations including the Leadership Youngstown, Mahoning County, received the Man of the Year Award by Mahoning County Economic Development Corporation, 1988. [He also] received Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree in 1991, from the Youngstown area.

Presently, Mr. Monus enjoys retired life. He resides with his wife, Frances, at 1380 Virginia Trail, Youngstown, Ohio and lives in Palm Beach, Florida during the winter months. Mr. Monus spends much of his free time traveling and golfing.

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INTERVIEWEE: NATHAN H. MONUS

INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts

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

DATE: June 25, 1992

B: This is an interview with Mr. Nathan Monus 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, 1380 Virginia Trail, Youngstown, Ohio, on June 25, 1992, at 2:50 p.m.

Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, [such as] your childhood [and] your education?

M: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio on October 14, 1921. Of course, we've lived most of our life here in Youngstown, except for the past 10 years when we've been living the winters in Florida and summers in Youngstown. My wife was also born here, so we're native Youngstowners. We both attended the Rayen School. After that, I decided to go to the Virginia Military Institute. I spent two years there. From there, I went to Ohio State University and almost finished when I decided it was time for me to go into the Army. So, joined the Army and served from late 1942 until 1946. At that point, I returned to Youngstown, Ohio.

B: Where did you serve when you were in the Army?

M: In the European Theater.

B: In Germany, France, or. . . ?

M: Germany, Holland, Belgium. First, we were in France, coming through France. As a matter of fact--this is not pertinent--after the war was over and everybody was waiting to go home and I was just sitting around, they had an American University in Biarritz, France. I was called and asked if I wanted to go to Biarritz, and of course, I went. I went there and taught some classes and attended some classes. I got to be so interested, I was almost concerned about staying an extra year or so, but of course, my future wife was at the dock waiting for me to get off the boat.

B: (Laughter) What division did you serve with?

M: It was the 84th Infantry Division, and I don't want to discuss the war years.

B: Yes. We have a big collections of various war mentions at Youngstown. What was Youngstown City like growing up?

M: Well, in those days, this was primarily a steel town. We had no problems with smoke. The more smoke, the better the community faired. We had various ethnic groups living in Youngstown, Campbell, and Struthers. Many of these people worked in the steel mills. It was a very, very good place for children to be brought up. Our school system was wonderful. The Rayen School graduated more students, and they went to the best universities all over the country. We had no problems going into the universities of our choice. We weren't involved in the steel making industry, but it was a prosperous community. I don't know what I could say other than the fact that it was a great community in which to live.

B: Physically, what did the city look like?

M: Well, a lot of the steel mills are removed, but traveling through the city, you would see mills almost from one end of the community all the way into the other end and into the Campbell area and into the Struthers area. There were mills everywhere. But beyond that, of course, we had some very prosperous areas where some of our wealthier inhabitants lived outside of the city. We were a family of moderate means, so we lived on the North Side, and we lived in a home that was very comfortable. It was not too far from the school I attended, which was Rayen. I could see no place that would have been better for us to have been brought up than

the city of Youngstown. The downtown area was certainly not what it is today. It was a downtown area filled with shops that mainly catered to the steel mill families, but it was a busy downtown. At that time, I think we had about 180,000 people living in and around Youngstown. It was a very prosperous community.

B: Speaking about the ethnic background of the city--that's sort of what I'm specializing in for my historical studies--like with the Italians settling in the area of Smokey Hollow, did the Jewish community settle in any specific geographical center of the city?

M: I'd say for the most part, it depends on how far back you want to go. Early 1900s, there was a Jewish community on the East Side. But from time to time, they became prosperous and moved to the North Side of town. That's pretty much where they are today, whatever is left of them. Of course, many have moved away from the community.

B: What did your father do?

M: At one time, he was in the millinery business. We had 100 and some odd millinery stores throughout Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and so forth. Then wigs came into being, so we transferred some of these stores into wig stores.

B: What was your father's name?

M: Frank Monus.

B: Speaking about the Rayen School, what was your education like there?

M: Well, there's nobody to compare to the teachers of those days. I'm not saying that derogatorily. But for the most part, the teachers in those days were so dedicated, they took an unusual interest in their pupils. I don't know if the teachers are doing that today, but our teachers took such an interest in the students that there was no way you could not receive a good education. I can still to this day--that's been 50 odd years ago--remember the teachers and how they taught us to be good students. Rayen School was just a wonderful, wonderful school. I'm not saying that the other schools in the city were not as good, but I think without any question that we probably outshined them when it came to educational advantages. For instance, I know that the students in my class and the students in the classes behind me, there was no concern about them getting into any universities of their choice.

B: Do you recall the first time you met Rabbi Berkowitz?

M: Well, let's see, we had probably been married about four or five years, so it probably would be 1952. We had belonged to another temple at that time, but my wife and I decided that we wanted to become members of the Rodef Sholom Temple because it was a Reform service and we were impressed by what we had heard about Rabbi Berkowitz. We liked the idea of belonging to the Reform movement. So, I would say early 1950s, as well as I can recollect.

B: Were you a member of either Orthodox or Conservative?

M: Conservative Temple. Our family at one time was Orthodox. Then, we belonged to the Conservative Temple, and of course, my wife and I joined the Reform Temple.

B: Could you describe the difference between these three different types of temples?

M: Well, the Orthodox were the very religious. They adhered to the laws, such as not riding on Saturday, not turning on electricity, and maintaining a diet of strictly Kosher food. Conservative Judaism was half way between the Orthodox and the Reform movement. Reform Judaism was completely different. We had no dietary laws. When the holidays came, we attended services, and two hours was as long as it was necessary to cleanse ourselves of our sins. It was just a whole different program. So, we're like at the other end of the spectrum.

I might go on to tell you that because of Rabbi Berkowitz, I became a member of the board of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, which graduates rabbis. From there, I went on the board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which directs Reform movement. I became a member of the executive committee of that organization, and I'm still on that board. So, all of this was really due to him. I should probably say, off the record, I spend more time going to meetings than I do going to temple. But anyhow, I believed in it, and I've been very active ever since.

B: In the time period when you and your wife decided to move to the Reform Temple, was this common within people of your age group?

M: Yes. Pretty much. We all wanted our children to attend that Sunday School. We brought them up within the confines of the Reform movement. It's probably difficult for the Reform movement to accept this, but it is more enjoyable practicing religion. It's not that we do not adhere to our Jewish principles as much, but it was easier.

B: Is there still an Orthodox temple in Youngstown?

M: There is.

B: Where is it?

M: It's adjacent to the Temple El Emeth, which is out here in Liberty. They both sort of operate out of the same area there. I don't know how it's worked, but they have a temple that's adjacent to the other one somehow or another. I guess they use some of the common facilities.

B: With a Conservative?

M: Right.

B: Would the Orthodox be the smaller section of the community?

M: Yes.

B: As president of the board, could you speak about some of your duties?

M: Well, I had Rabbi Berkowitz's involvement because it was through his friendship that my wife and I and the rabbi and Pauline became very good friends. We used travel together, and we used to spend a lot of time together. So, in his inimitable fashion, he decided to advise me to become the president of the temple at one point in time. Well, first I asked to become a member of the board. Then, I became president of the temple. During the course of that, he insisted I become a member of the board of overseers of the Hebrew Union College, so I joined that organization.

B: What are the duties there?

M: You attend board meetings, and for the most part, a lot of the problems have to do with the economics and the daily operation. Then after that and through that affiliation and some other friends that I've made along the way, I went on to the Union of the American Hebrew Congregation, which is the national Reform movement. The duties there are, again, all over again, attending any board meetings. My certain area of responsibility had to do with finance and the endowment, whatever the endowment situation was and how we invested the monies. To become really actively involved, you spend a great deal of time, much more than I could really allow myself to do. So, I only got involved in certain aspects of it, but the more I tried to get out of it, the more they tried to get me into it, I guess, because



I ended up on the executive committee of that board. I'm not unhappy because it's a pretty high honor, and I respect the organization at Rodef Sholom. I chaired the annual monthly meetings. I established dues principles for new and existing members, set salaries for temple employees, and arranged contracts for the rabbi and the cantor, was responsible for the continuing maintenance of Rodef Sholom temple and our cemetery grounds.

B: What about Rabbi Berkowitz? What was his personality like?

M: Rabbi Berkowitz had a wonderful personality. The rabbi that preceded him, that was at the temple for a long time, was--well, there was no question about the fact that you knew he was a rabbi. He looked like a rabbi. He acted like a rabbi. Everybody revered him for that reason, for the fact that that's the way that religion should be taught. Then along came Rabbi Berkowitz, and he was a whole different person. You know, your idea of a rabbi is somebody that you can't discuss everything with. That's not the case with Rabbi Berkowitz. He was just a wonderful, wonderful person. He had a great personality. I think that the things that he did most and that I enjoyed about him most, was the fact that he finally took the bull by the horns and got the religious community of Youngstown together. He was a very dear friend of Bishop Malone's. By that, he became friendly with people of all the various religions in Youngstown. I think he did more about bringing everybody together than any one person. He was President of the Youngstown Rotary Club. He was on the national board of Red Cross. Maybe you've gotten that from Pauline. I don't know. Have you talked to her yet?

B: Yes. I had lunch a couple time with her. We were supposed to do some interviews. . . ?

M: Well anyhow, that's the kind of person he was. He was so easy going. When he spoke in temple, well, sometimes you're inclined if you're a little bit tired to fall asleep during the sermons. He was so interesting all the time. It was a pleasure to go there; it wasn't an effort. He did so much for the temple and for his congregates. He was a special person. Anybody that had any problems or something, he just moved right in and tried to take care of their problems, whatever they might have been. If you were ill or you're in the hospital, he was always concerned about you and visited you. I could go on for hours talking about what I think are his important faculties, because what he did

to the Jewish community in Youngstown, getting it to be intermixed with all of the other groups was just unbelievable. He started it and continued with it. I just think it was a great thing for the city.

B: A little more into the temple itself, how did Rabbi Berkowitz operate the temple?

M: Well, you understand that the temple has a board of trustees. There's a temple board and there's a president of that board, of course. They have a meeting once a month, so they covered pretty much the problems of the temple. For the most, maybe they were financial. I don't know, in all honesty, I think the rabbi pretty much ran the temple, and he did it very easily. It wasn't difficult for him to do that. Every year, it was necessary just by virtue of growth to raise more money to operate the facility. That was somewhat of a major part of the concern of the board and Rabbi Berkowitz. Beyond that, he our spiritual leader. To my knowledge, it would be difficult for me to remember anything that would have been disturbing to the older members of the congregation itself. I would have to think very hard to remember anything that would have been disturbing to anybody.

We had such a good relationship that it was very simple to be president, because I used to take charge of the meeting, and he arrange the agenda. That's pretty much the way it went. He was here for 34 years, and for somebody to serve that long a period is evident of the loyalty he enjoyed. If there was anybody that didn't agree with him on any subject, he was always willing to listen and compromise.

B: What were some of the major issues, things about the temple he took care of?

M: Well, we didn't seem to lack for membership. I don't exactly remember the numbers, but I think at one time we had 700 members. The one thing that I think was a problem--of course, it always reverts to finances--we didn't raise everybody's dues to what levels they should have been.

We had to make some changes. They became problems. All these things required money. The temple on the corner of Elm and Woodbine, there were some houses that were behind it. We made the determination--this was during my tenure as president--that we should try to buy all these homes and remove them and make a parking lot there. Little by little, we did accomplish that. Of course, all reserve funds were expended because of what we had to do, but this was necessary. As time went on, the area changed. We had to use security for

any event at the temple. The temple, I don't know if you've every seen it, really is a magnificent structure. They just recently celebrated their 125th year. It's probably one of the oldest in the United States, I would imagine.

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

M: I thought he was extremely well-accepted in the community. That's why I think he did such a marvelous job. Not only as being the temple rabbi, but what he did--I think I've said this several times to you during our conversation--for the community and what he accomplished to bring all the various religious leaders to respect each other. We're living together, and we should live together as friends. We're all living together, and it's common knowledge that it's for the betterment of the community. I think among the things that he has accomplished during his lifetime, I think this really was one of the most important.

For instance, for him to become the president of the Rotary Club of Youngstown, he might have been the first Jewish person to have obtained that position. So that, he was just well accepted by the entire community.

B: What was it, do you think? Was it because of his personality or force of personality?

M: By all means, because of his force of personality. He was a very easy going, easy speaking person. He had a tremendous sense of humor. I don't know when Bishop Malone attained the title, but I'm remembering early on. He was whatever position he was in. But for me, even saying hello to the bishop was unthinkable. Now, we're good friends. Really, it's only by virtue of the fact that Sidney brought all this about. Of course, things have changed all over the country, but he made sure that it happened here.

B: Speaking about his humor, in all the interviews I've done so far, this is universally mentioned. Is there anything specific that you can remember that he said?

M: (Laughter) That would be very hard for me to remember. I can't remember any specific individual incident. But he would use humor in his lecturing as well.

B: In my research, I ran across some of his dealings. Do you remember anything with him dealing with Civil Rights movements in Youngstown?

M: I can't say that I remember that very well. I'm sure that he has if you have in your notes that somebody's mentioned that, but I just don't remember anything about that.

B: How about the American Red Cross?

M: I think he was on the national board and probably the only Jewish person on the board, and possibly the first. I know that everybody in the community was so happy about the fact that he was on the national board. It was just one of those things where they knew the board would be better for the fact that the rabbi was on it.

B: How about, during the Vietnam War, I came across his name quite frequently, dealing with the anti-war movement. Are you familiar with anything with that?

M: I don't remember anything about that. In what years was the Vietnam War?

B: Basically, 1964 to 1972.

M: I'm trying to think of whether or not I could ever recall him. . . . I don't think he brought that subject into the temple, if I can remember correctly.

B: Was the Jewish community split like the rest of the nation over the issue of the Vietnam War?

M: Of course, yes.

B: How about mediating labor disputes? This has come up a few times, too.

M: Yes. I know he was involved in mediation. I think he tried to do everything he could in his power to see that those disputes were not prolonged. For what ever he could do, he was always there. In some instances, I think he was an arbitrator in some of the labor disputes.

B: Right.

M: I knew that whatever happened at that time, he would have been fair to both sides.

B: During the Rabbi Berkowitz's tenure as a rabbi from 1946 up until his death in the early 1980s, would you say that he along with who else would have been the leaders of the Youngstown community?

M: Well, he was certainly a religious leader, along with Bishop Malone. The other leaders probably would have

been from the business community. If you'll excuse the fact that I don't want to name names, I don't want to leave anybody out.

B: Moving back into the temple, describe how Rabbi Berkowitz would have ran a service on Friday night at the temple.

M: Well, in addition to the rabbi, we have a cantor who sings the liturgy. We have a choir, and we have an organist. The service lasts no more than an hour. You could set your watch by the fact that it would start at 8 o'clock and end at 9 o'clock. The first part of the service was responsive reading by the rabbi and the congregation. The cantor would sing some of the program, along with the choir. I don't know if it's important to mention or not, but none of the members of the choir were of Jewish faith. They were hired because they had such beautiful voices. It was just a pleasure to listen them.

The rabbi's sermon lasted anywhere from 15 to 18 minutes. I think I could always remember him saying, "If you can't get to them in the first few minutes, forget it. If you tried to reiterate what you were saying over and over again, you're going to lose your audience." He said, "If you can't do it in 15 minutes, don't do it." A lot of his subject matter had to do with what was happening in today's news. He was not always hell, fire, and damnation. That wasn't his way of speaking to the congregation. He had no problem discussing his opinion about any situation. That's why he was so interesting. I'm not saying that he never reviewed some of the Bible. He did that on certain holidays, but beyond that, he lectured on current issues.

B: Were his services very well ordered? Were they very punctual?

M: When that clock struck 6:00, 7:00, 8:00, whatever time it was, he was punctual. I don't ever remember him being late for any event where he was involved.

B: Describe what you think Rabbi Berkowitz's impact on the Youngstown Jewish community was.

M: I think he got along pretty well with the other rabbis of the other temples. I don't think there was a problem.

B: There was no animosity?

M: No, none whatsoever. No. They accepted him for the kind of person he was and what he was doing for the community. I think they accepted him on that basis.

B: A little bit about the temple itself, Rodef Sholom. During Rabbi Berkowitz's entire tenure, was there growth during the entire period?

M: You mean membership?

B: Membership.

M: I would say that he certainly added, probably several hundred members from the time he began until four, five, six, ten years or whatever after he was the rabbi at the temple. I can tell you that, after he left, I think the temple membership dropped. But, not all that contributed to the fact that he wasn't there any longer. Some of it was due to the fact that some of the people left town and what was happening to the community. The steel mills closing. A lot of the older members leaving for climate changes. So, it wasn't entirely due to the fact that he was no longer here.

B: How about Rabbi Berkowitz's position, as far as the Jewish State of Israel? Was he a strong supporter?

M: Oh, yes. Yes. He was a very strong supporter.

B: I've heard a couple of the interviewees speaking of the other members of the temple not being that active.

M: That's correct. There was a group who did not care whether Israel remained a state. They didn't support it financially, because they weren't interested. We did have some members in the temple who belonged to that group, very few, but there were some.

B: They didn't cause any problems for Dr. Berkowitz there?

M: No. None whatsoever, not outwardly. No, because he made it very evident that he was very much in favor of the state of Israel. The temple had bond programs. Members would sign up and be responsible for some portion of bond in case of non-payment by the state of Israel. Sidney was definitely an advocate in trying to keep Israel strong.

B: When Rabbi Berkowitz decided to retire from being rabbi at Rodef Sholom, was there a vacuum of power when Rabbi Powers came in?

M: I don't want to get into the Powers situation.

B: Okay.

M: I would have to tell you that no matter who came into the temple as rabbi that would follow Sidney, he wouldn't have any easy road. Powers just wasn't Berkowitz. I would say that it created a problem for the temple. Of course, since then we've replaced him with Jonathon Brown. He's doing his best to try to be a good rabbi.

B: Do you think when Rabbi Berkowitz died the ecumenical developments with the Youngstown community sort of stalled?

M: No. I think they were so strongly entrenched that they continued. But, that Jonathan Brown has continued when Powers left.

B: If somebody had never met Rabbi Berkowitz, what would you say to them about him?

M: His appearance was deceiving, and you will enjoy his humor, speaking ability, and his personality. It would be very difficult to describe him other than the fact that he was all things to all people. In addition, he did not let us forget our Jewish principles and kept everyone interested in attending functions. It would be very easy to say that you're going to meet a rabbi and you probably will never meet another person like him, not only as a rabbi, but as a person. That's the way I felt about him anyhow.

I remember when he decided to retire, and we were in Florida. Our daughter-in-law at that time, who was pregnant, wasn't supposed to be in Florida. Nevertheless, the baby was born in Florida. We'd always have a ceremony when there's a boy baby, and Sidney was in Florida, but a good distance away from where we were. Somehow, I managed to reach him. I said, "Rabbi, you've got to come here. We have a grandson who was born here, and we'd like for you to perform the ceremony." He and his wife traveled several hundred miles to be with us. I think if I would have called him in Youngstown, he would have come down. That's the kind of friendship we enjoyed. It was several weeks later that he passed away.

B: Is there anything that you haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

M: I don't know how else I could describe him except to tell how much I enjoyed the fact that I knew him and what he meant to me as a person. Nobody outside of my immediate family meant so much to me. There's no question about that. We're still very friendly with Pauline. We established a fund in his name which permitted us to bring important speakers to Youngstown.

I think if I would search into my soul and my memory would allow me, I don't think I could ever remember when he did something that made me angry or disappointed. Fran and I lost a very dear friend.

B: Thank you very much for your time.

M: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW