

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1543

JOCELYN W. SPIEGEL

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 8, 1992

Jocelyn Spiegel

Mrs. Jocelyn Spiegel was born on February 9, 1936 on the North side of the city of Youngstown, Ohio, the daughter of Robert and Rheta Weirmer. Growing up on the North side of the city, Spiegel attended school at Hayes Junior High School and the Rayen High School, graduating in 1954.

Following high school, Spiegel entered college at Case Western Reserve University, earning both her Bachelor and Master of Arts Degrees. She then returned to Youngstown where she accepted a teaching position in the Youngstown Public Schools. In 1961, Spiegel married Dr. Leonard Spiegel. She spent the next twenty-two years raising her three children. Along with these responsibilities, Spiegel became very active in the local community.

Presently, Mrs. Spiegel continues to be very active in the Youngstown community. She resides with her husband at 2206 Selma Avenue Youngstown, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the congregation at Rodef Sholom. She dedicates herself to a number of charitable organizations, and Heritage Manor Nursing Home. She spends much of her free time taking part in the activities of the Sisterhood of Temple Rodef Sholom, traveling, and reading.

-- Matthew Butts

- B: This is an interview with Jocelyn Spiegel for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on July 8, 1992, at 2206 Selma Avenue, at 3:45 p.m.
- B: Could you tell me a little bit about yourself as far as your childhood, education, where you grew up, things like that?
- S: I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. I graduated from the Rayen School. I went away to college. I was active in different organizations in high school through the synagogue, Rodef Sholom, the Youth Group, and I had a typical normal, happy childhood, I guess.
- B: What was the Rayen School like when you went there?
- S: It was wonderful. Emphasis was truly on academics. Very little discipline problems that I could remember as a student. It was a very fine school. One of the strongest departments in the school was the English department, and languages, too.
- B: Did they emphasize the classics there?
- S: Yes, very much so. In fact, I can still remember my ninth grade teacher reading the opening scene of Macbeth, toil and trouble, you know, the witches around the caldron. I can still remember.
- B: Do you remember her name?
- S: Yes, Walfacack, and I believe she is still living.
- B: The reason I ask is because this leads into more oral histories that we do. What was the city like growing up? What did it look like?
- S: Obviously there were a lot more houses and buildings around because so many of them have been torn down. One place that comes to mind was the corner of Elm and Bonita Drugs, where we would hang out every day after school, just like the television show Happy Days. Instead of Arnold's, it was Bonita Drugs. Of course, that has been gone for a long time now. The whole corner is just devastated. Idora Park was a big thing in Youngstown. That is gone. The playgrounds, which are still around. In college we used to work on the playgrounds, my friends and I. The whole attitude in the city was different.
- B: What was the downtown area like?
- S: The downtown area had four or five movie theaters, restaurants, shopping. The big deal was to take a bus downtown on the weekends and go to the matinee

with your friends, have lunch downtown, and do some shopping. Really, it was a pleasant place, and it was safe. It was a very safe town, not like today where you are afraid to walk except on this block, which is good because of our block watch.

B: Did you grow up on the North side?

S: Yes, I did.

B: What street?

S: Until I was ten years old I lived on Norwood. Then we moved to Crandall.

B: I do a lot of work with the ethnic development of not just Youngstown, but the United States. Could you describe Youngstown's own ethnic neighborhoods? Was Youngstown flavored in that way where you Italians would be centered one way?

S: I think the place that comes to mind is Campbell which is where the Slovaks mostly came, the Slovaks that worked in the mills. That was back in the days where you could dust three times a day because of the dust from the steel mills. Campbell was mostly Slovak and mostly Catholic and Greek Orthodox. We had a lot of friends out there, so I used to spend time out in Campbell. Briar Hill was Italians. There still is Briar Hill where St. Anthony's Church is, going down toward the freeway. As far as the rest of it, I think it was mixed. Most of the Jewish people in the city lived on the North side. There were some that lived on the South side, but mostly on the North side.

B: As far as the Jewish community, was there a number of synagogues? Growing up was there an Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform present in Youngstown?

S: Yes. I do not remember how long the South side temple has been there. It has been there a good number of years. There were two Conservative temples on the North side. They merged. It was Anshe-Emeth and Emmanuel.

B: Your family was always a member of the Reform temple?

S: My grandfather belonged to all three. He took no chances. I was raised in Rodef Sholom. My parents were married there. Leonard and I were not married there.

B: Your parents were probably married by Rabbi Philo?

S: Yes.

- B: You would only have been a very small child then.
- S: I remember him.
- B: What was he like?
- S: I remember him as being a very big man. Somebody said to me, "Hey dummy, you are a little kid." He looked big and he had the collar. That I remember. He was very much the classical reform rabbi. I just remember him as a person being there, but nothing about him really. I did know his daughters, both of whom who are still living, as a matter of fact. One lives in Florida where her son is a Rabbi, John Kendall. The other one, Fritsy Rosburn, she does not know too much at this point. Fritsy was a dancer and a teacher here in town.
- B: Can you recall the first time you met Dr. Berkowitz? Would that have been at Friday night services?
- S: I really and truly do not remember. I think I remember him just being there, always part of my life. I remember Philo as a person out there some place. I remember Rabbi Thineburg, who was here very briefly and died. Rabbi Berkowitz was part of my life. He was the Rabbi. He taught my confirmation class. I just always knew him, it seems like.
- B: Could you describe for me what the temple looks like inside?
- S: It is beautiful. There is a large dome. The choir loft itself is not so big, but the organ and the pipes are very impressive. The seats are blue and the carpeting is blue, very attractive, the blue and the marble. The ark where the Torah -- the holy books -- are kept, is absolutely magnificent because I must give a little plug here. Our Sisterhood did the needle pointing for it. It is gorgeous, the Torah covers and the ark doors itself. It is beautiful. In fact, the Sisterhood just finished needlepointing a hoopa, which is used during a wedding ceremony, a canopy. That was given to the temple in memory of Rabbi Berkowitz. Actually, the ark itself was given in memory of Rabbi Berkowitz by members of the temple.
- B: Growing up with Rabbi Berkowitz, could you describe to me what he physically looked like?
- S: He was not, in my mind, as large as Philo. Of course, I grew up with him. He was average height, a pleasant looking man. He wore glasses. He was a very warm person, a brilliant man. He was just a very fine person.
- B: Speaking about him personally, what struck you about him? What were some of his personality traits?

S: You did not do anything to make the Rabbi angry as a kid. Again, the way the town and the school system has become, I think it is the same in any phase of life. I see it when I go to the synagogue, when Sunday school is in session. The whole attitude of the kids is different today. Maybe it was wrong, but we did what we were supposed to do. You just kind of toed the line. You did not make him mad. You did what he wanted and you learned.

B: Is there anything else about his personality? Was he a funny individual?

S: He had a sense of humor, very much so.

B: Was it geared more toward children or adults?

S: I can remember that we had him as a teacher for confirmation class, which is the graduation class from Sunday school. We had Sundays and one afternoon during the week -- maybe it was Monday afternoon -- and you went. It was either you went or you went. You did not have an excuse. You went. If you were on your death bed, your mother wheeled it down to the temple and you went to class. I remember the class being wonderful. We learned, but he made it interesting. He truly did. We learned the books of the Bible, which I still remember. When I get angry, I still go through Genesis. My kids just look at me and say, "Crazy lady." He made learning fun. He truly did.

B: Speaking of service at the temple with Rabbi Berkowitz, what were they like? Did he interject his own stand?

S: In the sermons, yes. The services were very much reform. There is a tendency today to swing back towards the Conservative. [In] Most of the reform congregations you will see this swing. For instance, when my husband and I were married, my husband was raised in a Conservative temple in New York. He wanted to wear a yarmulke. Rabbi Berkowitz, "Absolutely not. This is a Reform temple. You do not wear a yarmulke." Today, half the congregation wears a yarmulke. Our son will not walk into a synagogue without a yarmulke, today. He was very much the Reform Rabbi.

B: When I spoke to Dr. Milton Yarmy, he mentioned him bringing in a choir for the first time.

S: I would imagine. One thing that we had under Rabbi Berkowitz was our children. Our oldest son and his friend were barmitzvahed together, which was something that they did not normally do. Because the boys were such close friends, that is the way they wanted it. Our youngest son and our daughter were barmitzvahed together, which was a first. I can remember sitting there the day of the ceremony, watching Rabbi's face. He did not sit in on any of the rehearsals or anything, and our daughter sang those. He sat there like a grandfather. It was

beautiful. He was not one for change. It came rather hard to him.

B: So the temple ran kind of differently?

S: Yes. Again, it is totally different today.

B: A little bit about within the community, how did you perceive Dr. Berkowitz's role within the community?

S: Within the community he was all over. I was very much aware of this because of my father, who was also very much active within the community. Wherever there was anything Rabbi Berkowitz was there. He was with the Red Cross, the Community Chest. You name it, he was involved in it. He truly was. He had a very fine reputation.

B: You mentioned Community Chest. What is that?

S: I meant United Way.

B: Was he instrumental in starting that?

S: No, but he worked with it; Red Cross, restarted. He was very active in ecumenism here. He and the bishop--even today to hear Bishop Malone talk about him if you have not interviewed him.

B: Next week.

S: They were such close friends. The Bishop still talks about him and gets a catch in his throat or tears in his eyes. I mean it. He spoke at his funeral, which was unbelievable. He was very much in the community. He was also very much within his congregation. His congregation loved him. I am not saying he was a saint. I do not think any human being is. I am sure he had his faults, but you could not get anybody in the congregation to admit to it.

B: In growing up in Youngstown, was there always a good rapport between the various religions within the community? Do you think it is because of the leadership of Rabbi Berkowitz and Bishop Malone?

S: I think they had a great deal to do with it. I am really not the person to ask because of the way I was brought up. We had friends from all walks of life. My family was friendly with the Orthodox priests at the time when Orthodox priests could marry. It was totally different. Somebody else might say that they were raised only with Jews. I could never say that. This feeling of togetherness was always in our family. I do not know if that was because of the rabbi or because of my family. I could not answer that honestly.

B: There is a list of things that you mentioned, the American Red Cross, the United Way. Are you familiar with Dr. Berkowitz being with the antiwar movement during the Vietnam War, or opposed of American involvement?

S: I would imagine he would have been.

B: Do you remember any sermons or anything?

S: No, I do not.

B: His name came up a lot when I was doing my research.

S: I would imagine he was.

B: Him and Bishop Malone were always there together.

S: I will tell you, aside from being colleagues of the cloth, they were very close personal friends. I do not think brothers could be closer than the Bishop and the Rabbi. Really and truly, it was beautiful.

B: Were you living here when he lived right up the street?

S: Yes.

B: From the neighborhood, how do you think he was perceived?

S: Everybody loved him. He was a good neighbor.

B: Did he garden or do anything like that? Do you remember any hobbies he might have done?

S: She is a wonderful cook, I will tell you. She is a fabulous cook. I do not know. Did he ever garden? I suppose he did.

B: You do not remember anything?

S: No. Of course, they lived over on Madere for a long time. They moved from there.

B: Do you remember when they moved?

S: I do not remember how long they lived there. Dorothy did not tell you? I guess she told you everything else. I do not remember. The street has changed a lot.

B: What do you think Dr. Berkowitz's impact was on the Youngstown Jewish

community?

S: On the Jewish community?

B: Yes.

S: I think that his involvement at the Center with the Jewish Community Relations Council was probably one of the most important things he did because, again, this was getting out the Jewish community into the community at large. I think he was instrumental in bridging. So many people are afraid of change or getting involved with people who are different than they are. I think he showed them how to do it, really and truly. If he did nothing else, I think this was probably the most important thing, bridging between the Jewish community and the larger community.

B: Do you remember any cross pulpit exchanges where say he would go to speak at one of the Catholic parishes or Bishop Malone?

S: I am sure he and Bishop did. We have had Brotherhoods' business here for how many years? We have had Man of the Year and Woman of the Year that was given by B'nai B'rith for how many years? There was a lot. I cannot tell you of an exact pulpit exchange. I do not know if there really was one. Like Rabbi Powers and Reverend Brewster did, but I know the Bishop spoke from our temple many times.

B: I just spoke to Reverend Brewster today about that.

S: He and David Powers changed.

B: Serving as Rabbi?

S: Yes, because David Powers came in as his assistant and then was there when he died. Going back to how he was as a teacher, maybe I was the one who said it. I told you I had him for confirmation class. Our oldest son John had him for confirmation class too. When Betsy, who is three years younger, came a long, it was no longer Rabbi Berkowitz. John was appalled at what she was not learning in confirmation "You mean you are not learning this and you are not learning that and he did not teach you this?" he would say. She had no idea what he was about and Jon just shook his head and said "You are missing out on everything."

B: Is it just possibly that Dr. Berkowitz had a great ability to communicate with other individuals?

S: It was his approach to teaching. There were things that he taught in confirmation class that are no longer taught -- that they feel is unimportant today and so on.

The kids who had him, even my kid John who had him, felt that it was ludicrous to do away with this stuff. This stuff was important.

B: Many individuals that I have interviewed have spoke about his ability to be a great orator. Can you describe how he would give his sermon, or just his ability to speak in front of a large amount of people?

S: There was always a beginning a middle and a tying up to any sermon that he gave. He always left you with something. His high holiday sermons, of course, were the most important of the year because that is when you have most of your parishioners there to listen. So, you try to have the most important thing said then. As far as anything specific, I absolutely cannot tell you and I am ashamed that I cannot tell you. He was brilliant.

B: Did he interject humor into his sermons?

S: Yes.

B: Do you remember anything like that? Something he said that was really funny?

S: A couple of things that I could not discuss on a tape recorder. I will tell you this, he was wonderful, also, if you had personal problems. I have not been able to talk to a Rabbi since about anything personal, but he certainly was wonderful with that. He just kind of pointed you in the right direction like "Why did you not think of that?" "Why was it so terrible?" and whatever. He was just truly wonderful.

B: How about his views on Israel? Was he a staunch Zionist?

S: I think he supported Israel. I could not tell you if he was a staunch Zionist or not. I would imagine he was involved in all of the Jewish organizations. I cannot imagine him not being.

B: On one of the other interviews I was speaking to somebody and they spoke of being a Reformed Temple. There was a group of individuals within the temple who did not believe that they should be a Jewish state.

S: You would be surprised how many still.

B: Does that cause any problems for them, or was that sort of on the side?

S: No. We went to a dinner a couple of weeks ago for Israel Bonds and someone sat at our table who was absolutely opposed to the state of Israel and very anti-Zionist and Len said, "Why are you here?" He said, "Well, I like the guy they are honoring." Sometimes it is crazy.

B: Just a couple more things about his work within the community. Would you describe him as one of the instrumental leaders during his tenure here?

S: Yes, very much so.

B: He was not involved in politics, was he?

S: As much as he could be as a Rabbi. If someone from the temple was running for office, as in Finance Director -- I think we had one, and school board -- he would mention this from the pulpit and suggest that you give John Smith a vote, or whatever. I do not remember that he was involved in politics too much. I think, at that time, it was a little difficult for clergy.

B: Did he pretty much hand pick who would be temple president?

S: I really do not know. I cannot answer you because I have not been involved in temple politics until recently and I cannot even say it is temple politics because of my position with Sisterhood. As president, you are automatically on the board. So, I could not even begin to tell you about the politics of the temple. I am the wrong person to ask about that.

B: In a Reformed Jewish temple, is female participation encouraged more than say in an Orthodox?

S: Orthodox, please do not bother and, yes, more than Conservative.

B: Can you describe the difference between how?

S: Reformed have had female Rabbis and Cantors for a long time. Conservative just within the past five years, I believe. I do not think that it has been ten years they have had female Rabbi's. Orthodox will never ever have female Rabbi's because a woman cannot touch the Torah and a Rabbi must touch the Torah. A woman by the virtue of being unclean cannot touch the Torah.

B: Did Pauline Berkowitz have any role within the congregation?

S: As the Rabbi's wife, period. She always supported him. I am not saying that she went to services all of the time, but she was always a part of the temple community. One thing that sticks out in my mind is when we named our second child. Our first two children are adopted, and when we named our second child, who was a girl, we would normally have named her Anne Temple, because that is what girls are named. My grandmother had broken her leg so she was confined to her home at that point. So, we named her at my grandmother's house and Mrs. Berkowitz came, too, because this was a part of the temple family. So, she was there when Rebecca was named.

- B: Was Rabbi Berkowitz always coming to perhaps everything?
- S: Always. I remember when my father died, he was right there.
- B: Did he have the ability to be able to meet you once and be able to remember your name and something about you?
- S: Probably. I knew him so long that he knew me. That would never have occurred to me. Yes, I think he did have that ability. I know the kids loved him. When he died, my kids insisted they were going to the funeral and that was it. "Call school, we are not going." Our kids went to a Catholic school, they went to Ursuline. They went to the funeral. This was not, "May I?" or "Do you think I should?" It was "We are going." They truly loved him, and they went.
- B: During Rabbi Berkowitz's tenure at Rodef Sholom there was great growth in the congregation. Is this mainly in part to his magnetism, do you think?
- S: I think a lot of it is. I think Youngstown also went through growth period. I think there were things within the congregation, we had a youth group at that time, which he was firmly behind. We have not had one for a long time, but then again, the Jewish population of the town has dwindled. The Jewish community cannot support a lot of Jewish youth groups. So at this point it is B'nai B'rith Youth. Back in my day, we had a lot. I think now, with the population of Youngstown dying off and moving, I think that that has a lot to do with temple involvement -- all of the temples, not just ours.
- B: How about when Rabbi Berkowitz decided to become Rabbi Scholar? He had a title when he retired from being the actual Rabbi of the temple. Was there a power vacuum created?
- S: No, he hand picked Rabbi Powers to come in to be his assistant. I do not know that people had too much choice. They went through a search and all that. There is somebody on the committee you should talk to about that, but they are away until the end of July. The committee went different places and listened to rabbi's. I think he basically hand picked David Powers and there was never any question of a power vacuum.
- B: He still very much involved within the community? He did not retire from doing that?
- S: No. He was still involved within the community.
- B: Is there anything we have not touched on that you think we should add?
- S: I do not know what to say, except he was probably one of the finest men I had

ever knew. As I say, he was no saint, but he really is. He truly was a wonderful person.

B: Thank you very much for your time.

End of Interview