

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Area Jewish Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1118

ISADORE SMIGELSKY

Interviewed

by

Harry Alter

on

May 6, 1988

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
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Youngstown Area Jewish Project

INTERVIEWEE: Isadore Smigelsky

INTERVIEWER: Harry Alter

SUBJECT: Jews in Youngstown

DATE: May 6, 1988

A: This is an interview with Isadore Smigelsky for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Youngstown Area Jewish Project, by Harry Alter, on May 6, 1988.

Where were you born?

S: I was born in Mt. Carmel, Pennsylvania, August 19, 1901.

A: That's up in the coal mining district?

S: Yes, hard coal, anthracite coal.

A: What was your family doing there? What was your father's business?

S: He had a general merchandise store; groceries, dry goods, shoes.

A: You said also that your father manufactured overalls?

S: Yes. that was his original business. That was his knowledge. that was his life before. Things just went bad for him. He

didn't have funds to do things with and so forth. It was easier to open up a grocery store there in Struthers.

A: That was after you came to Struthers?

S: Yes.

A: That was in 1908?

S: 1901.

A: Oh, you came in 1901. what kind of town was Struthers back in those years when you grew up there?

S: Well, it was progressing. The Sheet & Tube was spreading out. That was the main mill there. Then, there was Struthers Furnace Company and other activities in the steel industry that made Struthers a viable town.

A: Were there many Jewish families in Struthers then?

S: No.

A: Mostly in business?

S: That's all.

A: The Jews who lived there had their own stores?

S: [They] had their stores or whatever. Surrounding Struthers there were a few Jewish families.

A: Can you recall the names of some of the families who lived there at that time?

S: There was on family, but I can't remember their name. They had a grocery store up on the hill on the north side of Struthers, the hilly side. They had a grocery store there and I can't remember their names.

A: Where did Max Schwarz have his store?

S: Downtown.

A: Did he have a grocery store or a clothing store?

S: He started as a clothing store and later on he put in other merchandise.

A: Where was your father's store?

S: On Bridge Street. That was the main street.

A: You went through high school in Struthers?

S: Yes.

A: Then in what year did you get married? You got married while you were living in Struthers, what year was that?

S: That was 1924.

A: Was that when you moved to Youngstown?

S: Yes, around then.

A: Where did you live then?

S: On Bristol Avenue.

A: You told me once that you started a printing business in your house?

S: Down in the basement. Before that it was down in my father's store. He had a retail store and I was in the back there. Then I bought the small hand press operated by foot power. I brought that with me.

A: What was your business like? What did you print mostly?

S: General commercial work; business letterheads, envelopes, business cards, and the like.

A: How did your get business? Did you go out and knock on doors?

S: Yes. I went from store to store on Federal Street until I got enough business. I used to wait for their phone calls to come see them. When they wanted to buy some printing I used to go out and call on them.

A: And you were the chief cook and bottle maker? You did everything?

S: Everything down the line. My wife used to help a little bit, like what we call collating, gathering, or something of that order. She used to help on that.

A: Then you moved to Wood Street?

S: That was after I was established in Youngstown already. I had to get the press out of the basement. It was getting to the point where the tenants were complaining. So, I happened to get this location on Wood Street. It was a reasonable figure and I moved down there and I was there ever since.

A: All those years?

S: All those bears. But I was on three different locations on Wood Street over the years.

A: Where did you start? Where were you at the beginning?

S: I think I was at 32 West Wood. That was my first location. Then I moved further up when that became too small and impossible to maintain.

A: I remember when you were just above the hill up near Phelps Street, between Phelps and Hazel.

S: Elm and Phelps.

A: You were in a little shop.

S: Yes. [It was] a small place right next to St. Columba Cathedral on the next corner.

A: Did you get any business from St. Columba?

S: Oh, yes.

A: Did you get a lot of their work?

S: I used to get most of their work.

A: How about work from the Jewish community?

S: Yes, I did quite a bit for the Jewish community.

A: I remember when I was in the BMD club and every time we had a dance we had a program with ads we went down to see Mrs. Smigelsky.

S: Yes, that's right.

A: Your other business came from down on Federal Street?

S: Oh, yes. A great many because Federal Street was lined with stores. The whole line with Federal Street was almost lined with stores and stores. I usually got a lot of business from downtown.

A: You did a lot of union business?

S: As the unions became stronger and Jim Griffith [director of district 26 of the United Steelworkers of America] took a liking to the way I treated him. I used to treat him real nice. I'm not talking social treating, but business. He was

very nice. He knew my parents from Struthers. He favored me with the best earnings he could out of the office.

A: That was the steelworkers CIO?

S: Yes.

A: You did a lot of political printing didn't you?

S: Yes because we had a union shop and it was a reasonable price--that was important then, of course--I did a considerable amount of political printing.

A: Your brother Mel worked with you didn't he?

S: He worked with me when he was younger. Then he left Youngstown for California during the Depression. He happened to hook on with a printer in California. He had a pretty good position with them. He was a foreman of the printing department of a pretty reliable printer in San Diego.

A: It was sometime after the war that he came back here?

S: I can't remember the date.

A: It was after World War II, sometime after the 1950s?

S: Yes. It was right after World War, you could put it that way. World War II Mel was back and I was expecting one of these days that I may have to go.

A: You mean the war draft?

S: Yes.

A: They probably wouldn't have taken you anyway because of your age.

S: Well, that was the whole thing, the age and nothing else.

A: But you were never drafted were you?

S: No.

A: All those years you were so close to the downtown and you did business with all the stores and all the unions, what would be your observation of the changes over the years from the time you went into business until the time you sold your business?

S: I think that at that time the downtown was depreciating right along and going down.

A: Your experience with the people, your customers, how would you rate all of them?

S: I think I got along excellent with them.

A: As I recall, you were always willing to help design something, choose the type, the layout of any printing that someone would bring in.

S: Oh yes. That's something I always did. I always took time for that. I always took time to layout a better design if I thought that it would be better. I'd try even sometimes change their article a little bit in the wording and all. That is something we always did.

A: Some of the printing magazine reproduced something that they thought was done very well in printing. Was some of the printing you did reproduced in some of the magazines like Graphic Arts Monthly?

S: There was some, but I can't recall what they were.

A: I remember seeing some of the work that you did.

S: Some articles?

A: No, some of the printing that you did.

S: They have, but I don't remember what they were.

A: In your dealings with the Jewish community, you did the printing for practically all of the organizations over the years.

S: Yes, I did.

A: Would you like to make some comments on your relationships with the Jewish organizations?

S: In what respect?

A: The different organizations that you've printed for?

S: I can't remember the names. I'm trying to remember the names, but I can't.

A: The Council of Jewish Women, the Docent?

S: The Docent, we never got much from that.

A: How about all the junior organizations, like the BMD and ADA?

S: Those, practically all of them.

A: What type of printing did you do the Jewish community over the years?

S: The had affairs, dances, banquets. They were advertising for the events and banquets. Tickets were a big thing in those days. A lot of tickets for the different organizations.

A: Besides the work that you did for the organizations in the shop, were you active in many of the organizations?

S: Yes, I was active in B'Nai B'Rith, I was active in the BMD, YWHA.

A: The YWHA had several divides. One was right after World War I and then another one a few years later. Were you a member back then?

S: I was a member.

A: Just you and John Cochran?

S: Yes, John Cochran was head of it and I was secretary or something.

A: How about the other organizations, were you active in them?

S: To the extent that I could, yes I was active in them. I was active in practically all of them at that time.

A: Back in those years there were some Jewish days out at Idora Park?

S: I was active in all of them.

A: What did you do?

S: I either worked in the grocery store or supervised the actions.

A: Were you active in any of the synagogues?

S: Not too active, but just because you worked in the synagogue doesn't meant you were active in it.

A: The temple you were affiliated with first, which one was it? Was it the Temple Emmanuel on Rayen Avenue?

S: Yes, I think it was, I'm almost sure of it.

A: Did you join any other congregations later?

S: The one on Elm Street.

A: Anshe-Emethe?

S: Yes. Then I was at Anshe-Emethe all the time after that.

A: Isadore, you were in a business man for a lot of years, when did you sell your business?

S: I started somewhere in 1924, then I taught myself how to do printing. It was just so fascinating that I just pursued it, that's all.

A: You just stayed with it?

S: Yes, I stayed with it until I built it up.

A: What year did you finally decide you had enough?

S: It was because we sold it to this last party and I would say that he gave it up. He didn't continue his payments, he didn't bring money into it.

A: You finally sold your business when?

S: Two years ago. The man who bought it he just didn't seem to take care of it. The customers left him fast. He wasn't giving them the service. They used to meet me on the street and tell me about it. They said, "Come back, I need you."

A: Going back, the company's name was Royal Printing Company. Was that the name you gave it originally?

S: Yes.

A: Well, thank you very much.

S: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW