

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education Project

Jewish Education in Youngstown

O. H. 523

CLARA SEGALL

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: CLARA SEGALL

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kurtzweig

SUBJECT: Formal and Informal Education, Staff,
Curriculum, Effectiveness, Students

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K: This is an interview with Clara Segall for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Beth Kurtzweig at the home of Mrs. Segall on May 27, 1980 at 4:00 p.m.

First of all, could you please tell me a little bit about your background, your family, how many brothers and sisters you had?

S: I had two brothers and a sister. We were religious-oriented. My mother's family, the father was considered very religious; he was a rabbi in Europe. I didn't know much about my father's family; he didn't seem to talk much about his family, but I knew his family in the States and they too were religious-oriented. We observed all the holidays. We went to the synagogue. We attended afternoon Hebrew school at that time which was in the Temple Emmanuel on Rayen Avenue. From there we went to the Jewish Center which was organized on Lincoln Avenue. It was basic. We learned to read and write and did some conversational Hebrew. I don't recall that it was synagogue-oriented; it was a little more secular from what I can remember. As far as the synagogue orientation is concerned that developed as a personal thing with each youngster--what they felt personally they wanted to do.

My sister and I were leaning more towards synagogue study rather than my brothers. They were BarMitzvahed and that was it. I leaned a little more strongly toward it than the others. There is no accounting for it. As I talk to people it seems that there is one in each family who leans a little more towards a religious affiliation than

others. After high school I went to New York and attended the evening classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary. We could not afford college for me during the Depression. I had to work during the day and attend classes in the evening. I came home to Youngstown and with that little bit of background I became qualified for a Sunday school teaching position at Rodef Sholom. I taught Hebrew then; by then I knew enough to teach.

Then we became involved with the Anshe-Emeth. We joined the Anshe-Emeth and I became involved there as a teacher and I taught for many, many years.

As far as teaching is concerned in the Hebrew school system here, those who taught really weren't trained. Most of them were like me--we leaned toward Yiddish life style so that qualified us for a teaching position, but we were really not trained to teach.

K: What did you mean by "Yiddish kind?"

S: Kind is the Yiddish word for child, Jewish person.

A love for Judaism, a love for things Jewish, a love for the state of Israel, I think that was the main motivation as far as I was concerned. Somehow I had that feeling when I was a little kid, when I was eight years old I was already knocking on doors with a little pushka, a charity box, a little blue box. That's something that is sort of in the genes of people. I became involved with the young Judea and anything that had to do with Israel before attending high school. In high school I became involved with junior Hadassah. When my own children came along I started to take them to the synagogue on Sabbath morning when they could barely sit on the seat. Every Sabbath morning they had to get dressed and go. It's either there or it isn't there. In my experience it has been a matter of doing it and living it rather than being intellectually involved with it. It was more of an emotional thing.

K: Going back to your childhood, do you remember if you went as a family to shul?

S: Yes, I went to the Hebrew school at Temple Emmanuel. We used to have to walk from where we lived. We walked across the Market Street Bridge up to Rayen Avenue. Yes, we went on all of the holidays.

At the Temple Emmanuel, the women sat upstairs and the men downstairs. We did then what kids do today. Most of the time we were outside visiting the girls looking

at the boys and the boys looking at the girls. The kids were the same then as they were today. It wasn't as formal, the services weren't as formally structured as they are today, but we went. I don't remember going every Sabbath though. I do remember that we would walk. We lived on Kyle Street and on Sabbath my mother would take us. We would walk from Kyle Street to Bissell Avenue on the north side for Havdalah services (the service which ushers out the Sabbath) at a relative's home. We did certain things to observe. We had our Sabbath meal on Friday and the nice thing about it was that we would sing a lot in our family. After Sabbath meal we would sing a lot. As a matter of fact, even last night I asked Fran Gottesman to write the music for a song that we used to sing.

My father was nationalistic. It's just unfortunate that when they fled Russia that they had no alternative. It meant hiding in a wagon and going across the border with shots ringing out behind them and trying to get to Bremen, Germany so that they could board a boat for the United States. That was the thing to do then. Palestine was just a dream as far as emigration was concerned so they came to the States. My father would have been a real pioneer in Israel. He wasn't very religious, he was nationalistic and he read everything that had to do with Israel.

My mother was more ritually oriented.

K: As a child did you get it from both parents then?

S: I got a little of both. My Zionist dealings came from my father and the ritual came from my mother, the Challah (egg twist) baking, the gefilte fish, the preparations for Yom Kipper, Sabbath, all the holidays. We always had the old blue boxes and the little charity boxes around the house. She was a very caring person. I can't call it charity; it was more a sense of sharing. With as little as we had mamma always had something for someone who was less fortunate than she. I feel that I got the best of both of them because I try to remember the best in each one and try to live up to the best in each one. My father, I think about him so often, how frustrated. He died when he was fifty-two and I think he died of a broken heart. It's just unfortunate that not everybody gets what they want out of life.

K: What were the type of things that were taught in the usual Sunday school?

S: It depended upon who the rabbi was at the time.

Rabbi Manello was very deeply immersed in Jewish history and made it relative to our times. It's amazing how much you can retain that is stored away and then as you get older you recall. We would just sit in awe of him then in those days. Here he was with all of us, talking about these things that were so far above us, but in such a way that he didn't turn us off. Some people can do that; some teachers can do that and turn you off, but he didn't. It was like we were walking with God when we studied with him.

It depends upon who was the rabbi, or who was the educational director. Some were more secular; some were more religious.

The lay people became more involved in the school and became the leaders. They wanted to have their say, without any qualifications. At one time the lay people did not mix into the education or complain about the rabbi because they were aware of their lack of knowledge, which was great. When these people started to feel their oats, and wanted to have something to say about it then it began to shatter the whole system. It stayed that way for a good many years. People who were involved really weren't qualified. I know they were not dedicated.

As the young couples were assuming a place of leadership in the Jewish community, they felt compelled to show some interest in their children's religious education. But, in reality, this was very superficial, because the easier course was to assimilate into the American culture rather than take the time to keep a kosher home or attend regularly at religious services.

I was self-taught; I read a lot and I observe. I think I sort of tried to inspire the kids with a love for Judaism, nothing really profound, just the basic love for Judaism because it's something to love. I don't know why some of these teachers even wanted to participate because they just came on Sunday just to get it over with and that was it. Their knowledge was so limited in some of the things they would say and even the way they would pronounce some of the words. It was so ridiculous; it would upset me so. Not that I was a scholar, but at least know the minimal if you're going to teach kids. The synagogue just had to take whoever was willing to get up on Sunday. Someone said to me when I applied somewhere once, "Are you willing to get up on Sunday mornings?" I said, "If I wasn't willing to get up, I wouldn't have asked you." That kind of an attitude I could not deal with. It is sad.

I feel my children had not received the kind of education

they were capable of absorbing. Thank God all three of them . . . However, there was a time when they drifted. Of course, through high school as long as they were in this house we went every Sabbath morning or Friday nights. They didn't go off to band and playing football games and all that sort of thing. Friday night was Friday night at home. As a matter of fact, Cheryl had a very unhappy experience when she left home and went down to Columbus. The first time she was away from home, she started meeting some of these kids and everything was on Friday night. She wasn't in the habit of carousing on Friday night and they just ridiculed her. That was a bad experience.

They're not as strict as that now, but at least they are observant to a degree. Dick, now that he has two children . . . Lewis attends Hebrew school and loves it. It's surprising because his mother was raised in the very secular Jewish home. They celebrated the holidays with an ethnic Jewish meal, but that's as far as they went. They never belonged to anything Jewish-oriented. You wonder what inspires kids.

My Bob had drifted for a long time. I attended a little shul (synagogue) that he goes to. He goes there and he davens (prays). They ask him to daven for the congregation. As they express it in some way, they show a sense of belonging.

Cheryl too. She's in Dallas, Texas now and the first thing she did there was go to the Jewish Center. She went around to the different synagogues to determine where she would like to belong. She's very much involved with Jewish groups now. She had had some pretty bad experiences. She had married and divorced and lived in a community where there were no Jews at all. She loves them; she's even making a trip from Dallas to Newburyport where she had last worked to visit with these people that she loved. Just because they were Gentile doesn't mean she didn't love them. She still missed the Jewish elements. She's down there with 2300 single members of the Jewish Center in Dallas.

The youngest one went all the way over; she's a Lubavitz.

K: Do you want to explain what that is?

S: This is a form of Chassidic Judaism which is extremely Pious. Literally, their belief in God is absolutely literal. God is responsible for everything--you don't question it. She's quick-witted, very observant. Their belief is in righteousness and knowledge and understanding. They believe in modesty. The restrictions on the women are purely because of modesty and not because women are being

discriminated. Women are very, very highly respected in their community. There are different aspects of this. In this particular one though, women are very highly respected, it's just that they're expected to be modest and not to impose themselves in public.

Each one of my children had the same background; we all did the same things together, but as they have grown older each one is expressing his need for religion in a different way. There are many options in Judaism.

K: Would you say that their formal education had anything to do with it?

S: Both Boys worked on the Ner Tamid in Scouting. This is the religious award. We went through the whole bit with Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and AZA (Aleph Zedek Aleph--Hebrew letters for the Hebrew words which mean love, charity, unity) and BBG (B'nai B'rith Girls) and USY (United Synagogue Youth--the youth branch of the Conservative Movement in Judaism). That's where they got it. When they got in is when they really felt it. Cheryl and Aviva went to Camp Ramah in Canada. Aviva has been to Israel; she spent her junior year in high school in Israel so maybe that's why she has gone to the extreme. Even though half of Israel is non-religious, she sought out the religious part of it.

What was the question again?

K: About their formal education?

S: Yes, I started going on with the Boy Scouts and all that. In scouting before they were Bar Mitzvahed they wanted to earn their Ner Tamid recognition. Do you know what that is? In scouting they have different achievements. The Ner Tamid is the eternal light that is in the synagogue. What they receive in scouting after they go through a particular period of training is a little medal that is called the Ner Tamid. The training is so rigid and they had to have special instruction with the rabbi and they did a lot on their own. The rabbi was the counselor in this and they had to achieve a certain amount of learning certain textbooks, certain literature, and of course, a lot of the Bible. They felt that they got more out of working for the Ner Tamid than in all the years up to that point. It was a concentrated effort on religious education. There is a comparable award that is given in the Christian faith.

K: Boy Scouts in the sense that we know Boy Scouts or was it just a Jewish unit of the Boy Scout government?

S: No, we didn't belong with a Jewish group; we belonged with the Pleasant Grove. Our boys belonged to the Pleasant Grove troop. They were with non-Jewish boys all of the time.

When they went out camping and all that they brought kosher food for them because my kids kept kosher all of the time.

K: Do your kids keep kosher now?

S: Aviva and Cheryl are the only ones that keep kosher. The boys, when we come over, make it a point to get kosher food. When we were in New York for Passover, we took a trip up to the Adirondacks where Robert, the artist, has some property. We took a Passover lunch with us and Robert and his wife, who incidentally is not Jewish, went out and bought special things for us to take on the picnic. They were bringing hard boiled eggs so they went out and bought a special pot and Erica said, "I want you to know this is strictly kosher. These hard boiled eggs are strictly kosher."

My children are very conscious of being Jewish. They don't flaunt it and they don't make a big thing about it. It's just that they're Jewish and they do things that are Jewish. Even my husband and I have as many friends in the non-Jewish community as we have in the Jewish community. I know all of the years that we were in business and we would close the store on holidays--Sabbath morning we would keep it closed to go the shul and we would have to open it in the afternoon--we were very highly respected. They thought it was just beautiful that we would observe that. I don't feel that inspiration came through education. I had hoped that the commission on Jewish education would succeed. I had worked on the commission when the Elsters were here. At that time there was a wrong reason for wanting a commission.

K: What year was that?

S: I would say probably ten years ago. There was a wrong reason at that time. The school system on the north side . . . It was a racial reason, I have to say that. That's what it was. It was not so much for the education as it was for wanting a private school. They wanted to organize a day school. If it were for the right reason it would have been fantastic, but it wasn't for the right reason. At that time a couple of people who were involved in trying to organize it did not want to affiliate with national educational center; they wanted to do their own thing. They couldn't have qualified in the state as far as the state was concerned. For years after that other groups had tried. By the time this recent group started I really didn't think it would come to any fruition, but it did.

K: Explain why Rodef Sholom is kind of isolated?

S: It is the reformed denomination of Judaism. It does not believe in some of the rituals that the other denominations

believe in. It does not feel that certain things are very important. They've done away with some of the rabbinical ritual, with some of the traditional ritual. They don't wear skull caps; they don't wear the talis, the prayer shawl. The prayer service is mainly in English although in the last couple of years there is a movement towards a little more of the traditional approach, but there are still people who want as little religious commitments as possible and still remain Jewish. They settle for literature, history, language. The religious study is delegated to Sunday morning where you can have as much or as little of religious practice. It's a compromise, but it's something. At least the community is aware of the need for professionalism. I'm very impressed with the director, Mr. Flexner. I have taken some adult education courses with the present commission and am very impressed with them. For me, they're great. If the community really takes advantage of them I think that there will be some revival here because I feel we've gone too far afield. What we have done to compensate for all these other things that we didn't want to take the time for was just paying our way with contributions for poor Jews all over the universe, mainly Israel for a few years. Most people thought they were being a good Jew by making a nice big contribution to these different organizations, but the personal commitment and the living, it wasn't there so maybe there will be a revival now. I was impressed with the people that I had seen at the adult education classes. They're people who really missed having the opportunity.

K: What I hear you saying then is that really the way this commission was set up is now meeting the needs of the community educationally and spiritually, am I correct?

S: It isn't the setup, it's the people who are involved. Luckily, as far as I'm concerned, I think these three people are great. I'll tell you someone else who did a lot of pioneering in that respect is Saul Friedman. When Saul Friedman came to town he did a lot. A lot of people respect him for what they have learned from him. I have taken courses at the university with him too and he did a lot for the community. There should be a different kind of personnel that comes into a commission, not just people who want recognition. We need knowledgeable people who are inspired.

K: These are professional people as far as certified education?

S: Right.

K: Do you think that makes a difference? Do you think that is the difference in comparison to the other setup as far as Hebrew Sunday school situation was set up? Do you think the idea that they do have this certification in Jewish education . . .

S: It isn't the certification so much as the ability to convey a love for Judaism. I don't know what is going on in the school now. I don't know if the kids are responding to this or not. I feel that the only other thing that some of the teachers who were not certified, people like myself, is that if that love for Judaism shows through then you can inspire also, but you have to have something to back it up with too. You can't just say I love Judaism and that's it. I had to do a lot of studying. What I did was in my activity with the women's league, I went to a lot of conventions and a lot of conferences and I would pick up a lot of things that way. I would try to meet a lot of people that would teach me something. I would try to learn from the rabbi. Just going to shul every Sabbath morning and listening to the sermon you learn something. I have always tried to convey something of that to my students. It isn't always the certified . . . No, that's not true, you know that. You can be certified and you can be a scholar. Rabbi Leiter was a scholar, but he couldn't teach.

K: He couldn't convey?

S: No, In private he shared. He's a fine person, it's just unfortunate that he couldn't convey. I looked forward to Sabbath morning. Of course, I always went; I always went automatically. I just loved going there and being with the people on Sabbath. They're different on Sabbath than they are during the week. Everything is different on Sabbath. This is what Sabbath was meant to be. Sabbath was meant to be different and not to use it as a catchall day for all the little things that you couldn't do, all your little errands and things that you couldn't do during the week. This is what I usually tried to teach and some of the ethnics. As a matter of fact, my last class I taught was at the Rodef Sholom. I started at the Rodef Sholom and I ended my career at the Rodef Sholom, would you believe it? Some of the kids thought I was being too religious. I was very careful not to say, "Go home and tell your parents you have to do this," and such and such. I would say you have to do this. There is no reason for you to go to McDonald's for Sabbath dinner. There is no reason why you can't light candles. There's no reason why you can't say a brocho (blessing). They don't even have Sabbath morning services at Rodef Sholom, just Friday night. First it's basketball games, then football games, then baseball games; they're all Friday nights. We can't interrupt the cartoons on Saturday morning and, of course, they attend all of the above, so there is poor attendance on Friday night.

K: What are you trying to say then? Where is this force from? You say you have a problem with the kids as far as their attitudes are concerned. How do you deal with that? Where

do kids pick it up?

S: It has to come from the home. I know that throughout my career some of these young men would meet me and say, "You were my inspiration." Not everyone, but there has to be some emotional contact with some of them. Some of them would go home and they would say I want to do this and I want to do that, and the parents would say they couldn't be bothered; they didn't have time for it. They had to go here or they had to go there. They have card games on Friday night they have to go to or they have to go to clubs or something. It has come to the parent learning to do it, to take the time because a lot of kids do come home with information regarding religious observance and a lot of kids just do it on their own. I know families who are very devoted to the synagogue but didn't keep kosher, for example. A couple of the kids wanted to keep kosher and went out and bought their own food and brought it into the house. Luckily, their parents didn't reprimand them for it. Even ourselves, we've always kept a kosher home. When the kids were growing up we would go out, the drumstick was the big thing. You would get all that chicken. When they started going away to the USY camp, they came home and said they were not eating non-kosher food anymore.

I know when Dick went away to college--he went to Miami Univeristy--I would fix chickens and run them down to the bus so that he could pick them up as soon as the bus arrived there. But the poor thing couldn't store them in his dorm, he had to take them clear across campus. He found a frozen locker or something to put them in, but they couldn't last long. They went off the deep end, but my husband and I never have gone back to non-kosher food. Richard now doesn't eat any meat at all. My youngest one keeps them on their toes when we are all together. She is so fanatic that she won't even eat in my house, even though it is kosher. I'm not still as strict as she would like me to be. I keep a separate box with a separate little hibachi and pans and dishes just for her when she comes here. It's really no sweat if this is what your kid wants to do. They have to believe in something worthwhile.

Just this morning I was talking to someone whose nephew came to town; he's twenty-one years old. He was raised in a non-observant home, totally non-observant. At twenty-one he's seeking his fortune. He's been traveling around. He was in the Lubavitcher community in New York where Aviva lives; this is in Crown Heights in Brooklyn. I haven't met him yet. All of a sudden he decides he wants to be a rabbi. He has never had any affiliation with a rabbi; he has no idea what is involved. A rabbit has to go through so many years of study, and with secular studies too: an undergraduate,

graduate, and post. He has no idea, but he decided that that is what he wants to do. It's a pity that a family can't at least expose their children to it even if they don't believe in it. Where else can it come from? It has to come from the home. They blame it on peer pressure. These kids are pretty strong-willed. That's just an excuse. Kids today are pretty independent and they do pretty much what they want to do. It would have to be a pretty weak sister to be influenced by that. The weak ones aren't even part of the group anyway. This is the pecking order, each one wants to be with someone that they can look up to, not down to. They're pretty strong.

We have a half of a dozen little Bar Mitzvah boys at the temple right now who are absolutely precious. These little boys, I don't know what inspired them, but last Saturday night we went to the Havdalah service. This is the service that is at the end of the Sabbath to usher out the Sabbath and usher in the weekday. This is a special service with candle lighting and the spice boxes and all that. These little ones asked rabbi to meet with them an hour before the service so they could have a discussion on the service. When he came in there they were huddled around him and with opinion they raised their hands. These are sophisticated youngsters, they come from well-to-do homes and there's nothing they want of material; this is what they want. They want to meet with him every week. I don't know how long they will last, but right now they want it. There is nothing more beautiful to watch than these kids sitting there and each one raising his hand to express an opinion.

I think it has to start with an emotional expression. You can't expect it from every single one. The people that don't have it should not ridicule the people who have, and that kind of bothers me. For a while there we would go to cocktail parties; non-kosher food is served and people try to persuade you to eat it. You don't want to eat it, this is our form of discipline. We want to be disciplined and this is the way we feel we want to observe. They don't do it so much anymore, although we went to the club last night and they had nothing that we could touch outside of salad. These people invited us and that means that they're going to have to pay for us to eat a salad; it would have been ridiculous. Our host went to the maitred' and he found fish for us. It makes it very interesting to see how people will respond to this. It's the way we want to live; it's our life style and we do not ask for any special privileges.

Dick is a professional and he will not open his office on Saturday. Maybe he does other things that you're not supposed to do on Saturday, but he doesn't want to earn money on Saturday. That's the oldest whose wife was brought up in a very non-religious home and she respects it. She

loves it and you can see the way her nine year old is devouring it. It impresses her a lot.

My husband feels the same way I do. He doves every morning. The synagogue is our social center.

- K: Do you have any final comments about what we were discussing today?
- S: I just hope that the pendulum has swung as far one way as it possibly can and that we're finally going the other way because I feel that as Jews who know what Judaism is we can make a real contribution to civilization just by being the kind of people we're expected to be as individuals.

END OF INTERVIEW