

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Project

Youngstown Area

O. H. 551

MARION ROTH

Interviewed

by

Irving Ozer

on

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INTERVIEWEE: MARION ROTH

INTERVIEWER: Irving Ozer

SUBJECT: Jewish Federation, community involvement

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O: This is an interview with Marion Roth for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown Area Jewish Community, by Irving Ozer, on February 5, 1987.

Mrs. Roth, where were you born?

R: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio.

O: When?

R: July 20, 1898.

O: When did you first come to Youngstown?

R: I came here as a bride in 1920.

O: Would you share with us a little bit about how you met Ben?

R: I would be glad to. I met him during the time that I was at college. I was at college at Oberlin. He was in law school in Cleveland at Delbert College of Case Western Reserve University. My mother had to undergo a very serious operation so I decided to come home and leave school for the semester. My cousin, Morton Zaller, was a good friend of Ben Roth. Ben was a big man on campus, president of Zeta Beta Tau Fraternity and head of the debating team. My cousin called and asked if he could bring over a friend of his to meet me. I was very happy to have him do so. We had quite an argument during the first meeting because he thought Western Reserve was so much better than Oberlin. He couldn't understand why a Jewish girl would leave Cleveland and go to Oberlin College. I explained to

him that I liked Oberlin College because sororities and fraternities were not permitted. It was a liberal college and it had a very high scholastic rating. Before he left our home, he asked me for a date for that evening. We went to a movie and enjoyed each other's company. Very soon after that he enlisted in the Army during the First World War. We corresponded during the time he was in the service and had fallen in love by that time. We got married February 12, 1920 in my parent's home. The rabbi was Rabbi Louis Wolsey of the Euclid Avenue Temple which was a Reform temple in Cleveland. I had attended Sunday school in that temple and was confirmed there. He performed the ceremony.

O: Ben was from Youngstown?

R: Ben was born in New York City. He was the son of Rose Printz Roth and Samuel Roth. There were seven children (five boys and two girls). All of them were born in New York except the youngest son, Joseph, who is now living in Boardman. Joe was born in Youngstown.

O: Where in the seven kids did Ben fall?

R: Ben was the fourth. There was Jacob "Jack", the oldest, and Fanny, Minnie and then Ben.

O: What brought his family to New York? Where did they come from?

R: Dad Roth came originally from Hungary. His people had vineyards. He was brought up as a gentleman. Mother came from Austria. They must have known each other before because when his former wife died, dad Roth had mother come over to this country, married her and they had these seven children. Bert Printz, who was the owner of Printz Men's Haberdashery on Federal Street, was her cousin, so they came here to Youngstown because they didn't like living in New York City. They thought there were better opportunities here.

O: How long were they in New York?

R: I can't tell you that.

O: Were they a traditional background, Orthodox?

R: They belonged to the Orthodox Temple and later joined the El Emeth Conservative temple in Youngstown.

O: What brought your family here?

R: My mother and father both came to this country when they were about five years old. My mother came from Czechoslovakia

and my father came from Warsaw, Poland. They met here in Cleveland.

O: Why did they come to Cleveland?

R: I think their families had friends in Cleveland. They belonged to the Orthodox temple. In the town in Europe that my grandfather came from, he was regarded as a "RAV" and people came to him for advice. He was a very learned man, a great storyteller and he knew all the stories of the Bible and the Jewish writings. Mother was much more Orthodox than he as and I recall that she attended temple regularly. It is interesting that she should be the more religious one of the family. I remember going to her shul one time, which was extremely Orthodox. It was just like the Orthodox temple here in Youngstown where the women sat upstairs and the men sat downstairs.

O: You were married in a Reform ceremony?

R: My mother and father were members of a Reform temple right from the beginning of their marriage. In fact, at first we belonged to the "Temple" in Cleveland which was even more Reformed than the Euclid Avenue Temple. It was so Reformed that my parents were not very happy with that.

O: When you and Ben got married, did you go through any process of deciding to be Reform?

R: We naturally were Reform. Ben had already joined the Rodef Sholom Temple here. He was secretary of the Reform temple here when we got married. He was already teaching the confirmation class. I also taught Sunday school during the first couple of years of our marriage.

O: His parents and your parents . . .

R: We got along just fine. Both sets of parents were very understanding and very liberal. I was brought up in a very liberal household where my parents judged people by their character rather than by what church they belonged to or how much money they had. Everyone who was of good character and was interesting was given hospitality. In fact, my mother used to call the college and she would invite students who were here from other countries who had no relatives in Cleveland. Every Friday night we had people at the table who were very, very interesting and who were appreciative of having a home-cooked meal.

When we came to Youngstown after our wedding; we went right into our own home which was then on McClurg Road in Boardman and which we had purchased a few months prior to our wedding. Our only transportation was the use of the Youngstown and Southern Railway which ran only every

half hour and which took us to Front Street in Youngstown.

O: That was in 1920 when you came here?

R: Yes.

O: What was Youngstown like then, downtown?

R: My parents were shocked that I would move to Youngstown from Cleveland. They thought Youngstown was just a little steel town which couldn't compare culturally and in many other advantageous ways with Cleveland. However, after our first child (Constance) was born, it was most inconvenient because we had to come to town to get medical services and couldn't even get groceries delivered except by the G. M. McKelvey Company which was the only Youngstown store that made deliveries once a week out in the suburbs.

My first impression of Youngstown was that it was a nice town. Everybody I met was very friendly. Even though we lived so far out in the country people came to visit us every Sunday. We had an acre of ground and the neighboring farmers plowed half of it for us and planted vegetables on it.

O: Is there any particular reason you elected to go out in the country?

R: Yes, a very good reason. It was immediately after the First World War and homes were at a premium and you couldn't find a place in the city to live. This house became available because it had belonged to another attorney that my husband knew. He and his family were moving South and when my husband found out their home was going to be available we purchased it and moved in. We were very happy there for two years.

O: Did you drive at that time?

R: We didn't have a car. We depended on the Southern Park Car Line.

O: How far did you walk to get the streetcar line?

R: About a quarter of a mile. We had to have electricity brought into our house. We had bought an electric range because there was no gas. We originally had a coal or wood stove in the kitchen. I was afraid of using it so my husband bought an electric range. We had to pay \$3000 to have poles put up to bring the lines over from Southern Boulevard.

O: Did you have a well?

R: We had a very good well and excellent drinking water. We also had a pump in the kitchen. My husband used to get up at 6:00 a.m. in the winter time and he would tell me to stay in bed. He would say, "You wait until I get the house nice and warm." He would go to the basement and see that there was a good fire in the furnace; then he would go in the kitchen and put wood or coal in the stove. He would then make a fire in the fireplace in the living room. When the house was nice and warm he would tell me I could get up. We sold the house then after the end of the two years and moved into Youngstown.

O: What was downtown Youngstown like?

R: The Roth's owned three stores in the early days. When my father-in-law came to Youngstown in 1900 he had a horse and wagon like so many people did when they came to this country and he peddled out in the country.

O: What sort of thing did he peddle?

R: Dry goods. They opened a dry goods store on West Rayen Avenue. They also had a store on St. Clair Avenue and when a customer would come to one store if they ran out of anything they would have one of the boys run to the other store. Jack, the oldest boy, had a leather store on West Federal Street. It was a quiet town, although I can remember Paramount Theater already there, the State Theater and the Palace Theater. The Warner Brothers built that beautiful theater later (The Warner Theater, now called Powers Auditorium).

Klivans' had a couple of stores. Klines Department Store was on East Federal Street. There was a kosher meat market on East Federal Street and a Jewish restaurant. Ritter and Meyer Men's Clothing store was at the S.W. corner of Phelps and W. Federal Street and Levinson's Jewelry Store was at the corner of N.W. Phelps Street and West Federal Street.

The two biggest department stores were McKelvey's and Strouss-Hirshberg, both on West Federal Street, just west of Hazel Street. Strouss later took a 99 year lease on the building which they occupied until just recently, near the public square on West Federal Street adjoining the Union Bank Building. Brenner's Jewelry Store was at the corner of N.W. Hazel and West Federal Street. There were two very fine confectionery stores downtown which were patronized especially on Saturday nights; one was Burt's on W. Federal Street and the other was Martin Friedman's which adjoined the Palace Theater. In those

days, many people would come downtown on Saturday evening and window-shop, go to a movie and possibly go into one of the confectionery stores for ice cream and candy afterwards. It was very different from now.

I thought Youngstown was a very nice place to live; it was quiet. It was much different than Cleveland because it didn't have all the traffic. It was very strange to me to find that the people were in very isolated groups. Those who belonged to the Reform Jewish Temple associated with the people in the Reform temple; those who were Orthodox or Conservative thought their group was the best and only associated with those people. There seemed to be a great deal of prejudice among them.

I was asked to be president of the Sisterhood of Rodef Sholom Temple when I was only here a few years. I imagine I was asked because the members felt that as a newcomer I would be neutral as there was friction between the people who came from various European backgrounds. I learned too of the friction that existed between the Protestant and Catholic group.

Later on when I was elected president of the Sisterhood again in 1945, I felt that something ought to be done to correct this situation. I brought the idea of having an Interfaith Meeting and Tea to the Board of Directors of our Sisterhood and they were very enthusiastic with the idea. Dr. I. E. Filo was then the Rabbi of our congregation and his daughter, Fritzy, was my program chairman and she went along with me on this idea too. I want to set the record straight. Right now I seem to be getting all the credit but the credit should also be shared by the members of the Sisterhood because a program of this kind needs the full cooperation of the entire membership. At the initial meeting of the Interfaith Teas the ladies really worked and put on a wonderful afternoon. Our Temple was filled to overflowing there were so many people in attendance. We had sent out invitations to all women that worked with other people (schoolteachers, the ladies societies of the various Protestant and Catholic local churches, nurses, social workers, and the womens' clubs affiliated with the Youngstown Federation of Women's Clubs, etc.) We had a remarkable speaker from Hebrew Union College who gave a wonderful talk on Judaism and many of its rituals.

O: Did this become an annual affair?

R: Yes.

O: Has it changed in basic format or philosophy in forty years?

R: No. Much depends on the minister of the church where the

the meeting is held.

O: Have you ever had an affair where the speaker or somebody else on the program embarrassed you with anti-Semitism?

R: There was only one instance, but I wasn't present at that meeting as I was out of town. Some of the women felt one minister was not very ecumenical and that he had said things that were not appropriate.

O: Let's move onto another phase of your life. When you moved to Youngstown or were living in Cleveland, did you ever have any recollections of being a victim of anti-Semitism?

R: I only knew of one person who I felt was definitely anti-Semitic who wasn't happy that a Jewish woman was going to head the Youngstown Federation of Women's Club, when I was elected its president. However, the Youngstown Federation of Women's Clubs Board of Directors unanimously supported me and were wonderful to me during my entire administration. The officers, directors and many workers during my term as president even honored me by founding a club, the Marion B. Roth Club, which consists of almost equal numbers of Jewish, Protestant and Catholic women. After thirty years, this club is still in existence.

Mrs. McKelvey was one of the early presidents of the Youngstown Federation of Women's Clubs. Mrs. I. Harry Meyer--Helene Strouss, sister of Clarence Strouss, the president of the Strouss-Hirshberg Company--was her vice-president. I knew that the organization was not prejudiced because of this. Its motto has always been, "Unity in Diversity".

In fact, the Council of Jewish Women was one of the fourteen clubs that organized the Federation of Women's Clubs. Internationally, the Jewish women are a definite part of the organization and we had and still do have clubs even in Israel.

O: In your personal life, in purchasing your home, or having access to a country club, you experienced anti-Semitism?

R: Yes. My husband's office was in the Dollar Bank Building first, and then he moved to the Union Bank Building after 25 years. At that time, they did not have any Jewish members in the Youngstown Club or the Youngstown Country Club. However, when the Youngstown Sheet & Tube Company moved their offices out on Market Street, the club lost a number of its members because the people weren't going to come downtown. My husband received an invitation as



did Sidney Moyer and about nine or ten other Jewish people to join. My husband felt that since they didn't want him all those years, he wasn't going to join. We didn't join but many of the others did. Later on, my son, Attorney Daniel B. Roth, did become a member of the Youngstown Club, as his offices are in the same building and it's very convenient for him to take clients there for lunch. But even now I don't think the Youngstown Country Club has any Jewish members. I don't resent that because our Jewish Country Club (Squaw Creek) is not open to the public either.

O: What was the impact, as far as you could see, of the Depression? How did it hit Youngstown? How did it affect you and the Jewish community?

R: It was a terrible thing. I was young enough to know what it was all about. My son, Daniel, was born in 1929 just before the crash. We had to live through many, many years of depression. My husband was not on a salary and there were many times when he didn't earn any money at all. People would come in to his office and maybe bring apples or chickens; those were wonderful days if he brought home anything like that that was edible. There were many times where he didn't know where the money was going to come from. It was a terrible thing for Youngstown. There were many of our friends who lost everything they had. We were very fortunate to be able to keep our home which we had bought but had to give up our membership in the Country Club and we even sold our automobile.

My husband had a warning about the coming catastrophe. He told me one day when he came home from the office, "I can't understand why there are such long lines at the bank." One person that he told that to was a little smarter than we were. She went down to the bank the next day and drew out all her money. That didn't happen to very many people, unfortunately. Most people were caught unaware. They had confidence in the banks that they would pull through. My husband hesitated about withdrawing our funds from the banks because he felt it would encourage other people to do likewise and so precipitate the banks' closing.

O: Do you recall what you heard when this was brewing, when the stock market started experiencing difficulty?

R: I didn't like the gyrations of the stock market. I can remember very well what the charts looked like in those days. Whenever you see gyrations like that where they go way up, they usually do down. I took it as a warning and I didn't like it.

O: Can you recall how and when you first became sensitive as

to what was going on in Europe?

R: I read every newspaper I could get ahold of and I was terribly interested. I can't give you a very good answer.

O: When you looked at the newspapers did you think in terms of implications . . .

R: I just knew that we had to go to war. All five brothers in my husband's family served either in World War I or World War II. My husband served on the draft board for thirty years without any compensation whatsoever and received several certificates of appreciation from the government.

O: When did this business in Europe reach critical proportions in your mind?

R: In the beginning we didn't realize what was happening. All we knew was that Hitler was coming into power. The movies showed him and his army marching. I think we began to worry when we saw that.

O: What did you think about the German Jews?

R: We felt terrible about it; we didn't know what to do. We didn't know how we could help.

O: Did the community tend to think--that's somewhere else, that doesn't affect us?

R: At first, of course. You couldn't believe anybody would do the things that he did. It just wasn't in the realm of possibility. You couldn't believe anybody could be such a beast.

O: When war broke out, how did you first hear of it and how did you react? How did your family react?

R: We were watching television and my aunt and brother were visiting and all of a sudden they showed a picture of Pearl Harbor and it was terrible. My Aunt Bess Spanner was my mother's youngest sister. She had served as a nurse in a field hospital with the American Red Cross during World War I, having gone over to France with the first contingent of nurses. She was extremely upset with the news. My younger brother, Sanford Benjamin, decided that he was going to enlist and he did. He enlisted immediately in the Air Force and was shot down in New Guinea during his service. He returned as a shock victim. But both my aunt and my brother did what they could to serve our country.

O: What was the reaction, despair, hopelessness?

R: Shock. I don't think we were hopeless. We were terribly frightened because we didn't know how we could fight Germany, Italy, and Japan.

O: How did you perceive Roosevelt?

R: From the beginning we thought he was wonderful. The greatest thing about him was that line, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.' I kept thinking that, too, and praying. I felt terrible when he went to Yalta and they broke up Europe and gave Russia all those countries. That made me sick.

O: Do you think he did that because of lack of principle or he just wasn't capable at that time of making decisions?

R: I don't know.

When we have international conventions of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, we have representatives from the many countries that were taken over by Russia following the end of the war. They naturally plead with us to do whatever is possible to seek freedom for their families who still live under Russian rule.

O: Looking back over your life, is it possible for you to say that you had more gratification in one area than you did in another, like serving the women's club?

R: I've loved everything that I have done. If I had it to do all over again I would do exactly the same thing. The first time I was president of our Sisterhood I would come home and I would cry because I just felt I wasn't getting anywhere with some of the women. As I began my presidency for the second time of the Sisterhood in the 1940's, most of the prejudices had been broken down and my presidency and my administration was a pleasant and rewarding one. It was during 1946 that I started the Interfaith Meetings to see whether something could be done about getting the women of the various churches and religious groups to overcome their feelings of prejudice against the others. I'm sure the Interfaith Teas have been instrumental to a great degree in overcoming this situation.

During the next several years I was president of the Council of Jewish Women, president of the Ohio Federation of Women's Clubs, active in a great many community, social, political and philanthropic agencies and organizations. These are all listed under my autobiography in "Who's Who of American Women, 1970-71 Edition" and in "Ohio Lives, 1968 Edition".

O: What would you say the greatest contribution your husband made in the community is?

R: He started out as a "Big Brother" when he first came out of college. He was secretary and served as president of Rodef Sholom Temple. He served on St. Elizabeth's Board of Directors for over twenty-five years. I was director of the International Institute for many, many years and my husband followed me in service in that organization. He was president of the Mahoning County Bar Association, served for over thirty years of the Draft Board, served on the Youngstown City Council. He was active in the Republican organization, serving as central committeeman. He was elected to the Society of Benchers of the Case Western Reserve Univeristy which honors most outstanding law graduates of the law school. In the service of his country, he was a Second Lieutenant in the Motor Transport Corps in World War I.

My son, Robert, was Second Lieutenant in the Navy and acted as a purser on the troop ship which went back and forth to the Pacific area during World War II.

My son, Atty. Daniel B. Roth, served as a First Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force. He is now retired and is presently Lieutenant Colonel of the Air Force Reserves.

To tell you a little bit about my father, he came to this country when he was about five years old. He was very artistic. He started out as a tailor but went into designing having graduated from the Cleveland School of Art. He opened his own factory and manufactured better ladies' dresses. He called it Florence Dresses; they were very fine. All the time I was growing up I never had to buy a dress and I was always fashionably dressed, usually wearing dresses that would be included in the next season's showing.

My mother was like every other devoted Jewish mother, I suppose. She just felt that it was more important to give her children a good happy home and a good education than anything else. All of the five children in our family graduated from college. My brothers studied law and one sister was a nurse and one sister headed the Region Chapter of B'nai B'rith Women in Los Angeles.

O: Who were the people who made the greatest impression on you, particularly in the Jewish community, over your lifetime?

R: I don't know how to answer that.

O: Did you know Clarence Strouss very well? Can you tell me something about him?

R: He was a very, very fine man, very generous and active in most community affairs. We were close friends. His sister,

Helene Meyers, is the one who gave the first contribution for Heritage Manor. She donated \$100,000. They wanted to name the home after her but she was very modest and didn't want it that way, so they used her initials "H.M." instead of using her name.

O: Thank you for sharing your time and memories with us.

END OF INTERVIEW