

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education Project

Jewish Education in Youngstown

O. H. 647

BETTY KURTZWEIG

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

June 8, 1980

BETTY N. KURTZWEIG

Betty Kurtzweig was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on August 6, 1926. Her parents were Max and Elizabeth Nidoff. After attending the East Liverpool Public schools, she graduated from East Liverpool High School. She then attended Ohio State University from 1944 to 1948 and received a B.S. degree in social work. On September 11, 1949 she married Alfred Kurtzweig and settled in Cleveland. While in Cleveland, she worked at the Cleveland Rehabilitation Facility from 1948 to 1949 and then at the Jewish Family Services from 1949 to 1950. After moving to Youngstown, Betty had two children, Diane in 1954 and Beth in 1957. Betty has been involved in the Ohev Tzedek Sisterhood, B'nai B'rith and Hadassah. She also served as the head of the temple kitchen for many years. From 1965 to 1973 she was employed at the Easter Seals Center as senior caseworker.

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INTERVIEWEE: BETTY N. KURTZWEIG

INTERVIEWER: Beth A. Kurtzweig

SUBJECT: formal and informal Jewish education, staff, curriculum, effectiveness, students

DATE: June 8, 1980

BAK: This is an interview with Betty N. Kurtzweig for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Beth A. Kurtzweig at the home of Mrs. Kurtzweig on June 8, 1980, at 8:00 p.m.

First of all, would you tell me a little bit about your family, the background as far as your parents are concerned?

BNK: As far as my parents were concerned their names were Max and Elizabeth Nidoff. My mother's family came from Hungary. However, she was American born. My father who was born in Russia left at the age of thirteen and worked his way through Paris, then he came over to the United States. He wasn't in the United States very long when the First World War broke out. Since he was not a naturalized citizen they couldn't draft him, but he enlisted because he knew that he could get his citizenship papers if he enlisted in the Army. My father was a trained butcher. My mother finally did go in to work with him when they got their own grocery store. My parents were happily married. They had two children, one of whom is not living at this time. They not only worked together, but were very close familywise.

BAK: As far as your father was concerned, what type of education did he have?

BNK: From what I recall, he said that he went to the third grade in Russia which would be comparable to the fourth grade in the United States. His family was very, very

poor. The very poor families did not go to school; they worked and helped their parents.

BAK: As far as religious education, did he attend the Hebrew School or Sunday School, or what kind of religious affiliation did they have?

BNK: I don't think they ever had any type of religious affiliation. I don't remember him ever talking about going to Hebrew School or going to a Jewish temple or even being Bar Mitzvahed.

BAK: So you don't think he was Bar Mitzvahed at all?

BNK: I rather doubt it. I have never heard him speak of it.

BAK: As far as your mother was concerned, how many brothers and sisters did she have?

BNK: She had six brothers and sisters. Her parents were quite well off in numerous businesses of their own.

We didn't talk about my mother's education, but my mother did graduate from the eighth grade and was made to quit at that time so that she could take care of her ailing mother. She did go to Hebrew school and Sunday school as I remember her talking about it very often.

BAK: What kind of religious orientation . . . Did she ever tell you if she came from a religious family?

BNK: From what she had told me and I saw it also, my grandparents were very, very Orthodox Jews and all of the traditions and the cultures were had in their home.

BAK: Going on the fact that she came from a religious background, what kind of environment were you raised in? Did you celebrate holidays and things like that?

BNK: We celebrated the holidays and my mother did cook traditional foods. Now I must say that I came from a conservative home, not an Orthodox home like my mother. My mother was much more liberal. However, she did see that we got some kind of Jewish education, but not as much as she had had in her life.

BAK: Did you keep kosher at all? Did your mother keep kosher?

BNK: Like I say, in the early days of their marriage she did keep kosher. In the days when we were growing up she did not keep kosher then.

BAK: As far as the way the holidays were, can you think of

one holiday that you celebrated when you were a youngster? How was it celebrated in your home?

BNK: I can remember the high holidays. My parents, as well as my sister and I, went to the temple. My mother cooked all the traditional kinds of food and it was more or less a time of family getting together and it was a happy time.

BAK: So you went to the temple as a family then?

BNK: Oh, yes, we went to temple as a family all the time.

BAK: Did you ever have any kind of religious materials around the house, for example, books or newspapers or magazines that dealt with Judaism?

BNK: Not very much. We had a few things, a few books that we took to the temple with us, but there was not a large amount of reading material that was Jewish.

BAK: Did you have Jewish objects around your home?

BNK: No, we really did not have any that I can recall around the house, except the candelabra, which my mother used at Hanukkah. She did have candles that she did light on Friday night.

BAK: And Sabbath, right?

BNK: Yes, the Sabbath dinner.

BAK: When you were growing up, did you attend any type of Hebrew school or Sunday school?

BNK: I started Sunday school late because my parents were living in a small town at that time that did not have a temple or a Sunday school or whatever. But when my parents bought their first business we moved to East Liverpool and there was a Sunday school and Hebrew school there and my mother registered me. However, I was not in the kindergarten class. I went there when I was about ten years old.

BAK: How many sisters and brothers did you have?

BNK: I just had one sister.

BAK: Did your sister also go to school, Sunday school?

BNK: No, it was too late for her to enroll in the temple, so I was the only one that had to go.

BAK: Do you remember the kinds of things that you were taught in Sunday School?

BNK: They taught you Jewish history and Jewish customs, all about the high holiday, all the biblical stories . . .

BAK: Did you learn Hebrew at all?

BNK: No, we did not have Hebrew class.

BAK: Did you have boys in your Sunday school class?

BNK: Oh, yes, we had the boys as well as the girls.

BAK: Did the boys learn Hebrew, do you remember?

BNK: Well, a lot of the kids that came to that Hebrew school really came from Conservative or Orthodox homes. There was no other Sunday school that they could go to. They had to go to this one if they were ever going to get any kind of Jewish background. So the boys did study for their Bar Mitzvah with an old rabbi and he taught them to read and such.

BAK: Correct me if I'm mistaken, but Hebrew was taught to the boys for the purpose of being Bar Mitzvahed then?

BNK: Right, exactly right.

BAK: At that time there was no such thing as a Bat Mitzvah for girls?

BNK: No, there was no such thing as a Bat Mitzvah for girls.

BAK: Do you recall how often during the week you went to Hebrew school?

BNK: We didn't go during the week. We only went on Sunday.

BAK: Do you remember approximately how many hours though?

BNK: It was from like nine to twelve.

BAK: Let's bring it up a little bit more to the present now. You have two daughters?

BNK: Yes.

BAK: Do you remember when or how many times a week they went to Sunday school or Hebrew school?

BNK: They went twice a week to Hebrew school and they were in temple Saturday morning and Sunday, Sunday school.

BAK: Do you remember how many hours it was when they went for Hebrew school?

BNK: Hebrew school was from four to six twice a week. Saturday morning services started about nine o'clock until noon, and Sunday school was from like ten until twelve or ten to one.

BAK: Do you recall what kind of classes they were enrolled in?

BNK: Well, like I said before one would be Jewish history; one would be Hebrew school; one would be . . .

BAK: Would cultures and customs tie in?

BNK: Yes, something like that.

BAK: And traditions and ethics and things like that?

BNK: Yes, ethics definitely.

BAK: As far as the teachers were concerned, were they certified teachers do you know?

BNK: Some of them may have been certified, but the biggest majority of them were not. They just knew Judaism and how to teach it to the children. Ironically enough, they had a very good Hebrew school, a very good program and the teachers seemed to be very efficient.

BAK: Who ran the Sunday school, do you remember? Was it an educational director?

BNK: Well, when my children were going to Sunday school, the rabbi was the one who did the program planning and such.

BAK: Did the rabbi ever have any meetings with the teachers because they were teaching people? Did he talk with the teachers and set up a program? How was that done, do you have any idea?

BNK: As I said before, the rabbi did the programming. He did have weekly meetings with the teachers and he gave them suggested readings to do and that type of thing. I think he was the one who had the final say-so as far as what was going to be taught and so forth and so on.

BAK: Did they go to meetings in Cleveland or other places to get some additional help or don't you know?

BNK: I think they did attend some meetings in Cleveland with some other Sunday school people and Hebrew school personnel.

BAK: Did they ever have like joint meetings at the other temples, do you know?

BNK: No, I don't know whether they did or didn't.

BAK: We talked about the different subjects that were taught. Overall, do you think that the education that your children were given was a good education? Did you see any problems that could have been worked on or things like that?

BNK: There were always problems with the parents. However, I always felt that my children got a very good Jewish background. I was pleased with the Sunday school program most of the time.

BAK: Do you know what area the complaints were from the other parents? Were they justifiable complaints?

BNK: Oh, sometimes they were and at times it was just really nit-picking.

BAK: What do you think about the fact that the Hebrew school was held right after class? Did you think that that created a problem at all?

BNK: Well, very definitely it did create a problem in that the children were tired before they came to Sunday School and exhausted by the time they left. They would have a very long day, say from 7:00 in the morning and they never got home from Hebrew school until about 6:00 in the evening.

BAK: We really didn't discuss the type of Jewish orientation your children were given at home. Did you carry on any of the traditions that your parents had as far as your orientation? Did you celebrate the holidays?

BNK: Yes, we celebrated the holidays and I cooked the traditional kinds of food. We celebrated Hanukkah and we celebrated Passover. However, I must say that I was not as efficient at it as my mother.

BAK: Did you have Jewish types of objects around your home?

BNK: Around my home, yes. We had like Hanukkah candelabras and we had Israeli Kaddish cups. We had all the Hanukkah decorations, that kind of thing.

BAK: That was in your home?

BNK: In my home.

BAK: What about in the home that you've created for your



children?

BNK: Well, I just told you. That was my home.

BAK: The home that you have for your kids?

BNK: Yes.

BAK: Were they the same type of ornaments? We've got a confusion here. The home that you were raised in with your parents we've discussed that, but in the home that you have with your husband and your children, were they the same type of things that you had in your home?

BNK: Well, yes, as my mother had had in her home, I have most of the things in my home.

BAK: The traditional ornaments and that. What about literature, did you have books on Jewish history in the home that your children could read?

BNK: No, we didn't. However, there was a temple library where they could get the books and read on their own.

BAK: From what I gather, most of the Jewish orientation that your children received, as far as history and that, would really come from the temple?

BNK: Yes, it came practically all from the temple. I really feel that the children got a really good background.

BAK: At the time that your kids were going to Hebrew school and Sunday school, do you remember anything as far as commission for education or a group coming down from Cleveland investigating the situation here in Youngstown?

BNK: I think we all kind of heard about it, but nothing ever came of it. I understand now they have a commission for the Sunday school.

BAK: Were you ever involved in it as a parent?

BNK: No, I had no involvement in it at all.

BAK: Do you know, by chance, what the reason for the people coming down from Cleveland was at that time?

BNK: I think they were interested in setting up a Jewish day school because they had many of them in Cleveland and they were interested in getting one here.

BAK: When you say Jewish day school, what do you mean?

BNK: It would be like a Jewish Parochial School; that's what it would be like. They would go to school for the Judaism as well as the reading, writing, and arithmetic.

BAK: The combined studies, the religious, it would all be together then?

BNK: Yes.

BAK: As far as the Jewish Commission is concerned now, are you aware of what the situation is there?

BNK: No, not really because my children are long out of Hebrew school and Sunday school, so I don't really have too much information about it. The only thing I did do . . . On Tuesday mornings they set up a program for the parents. I did take two of their classes this winter and I thought they were very interesting and very worthwhile. The same teachers who teach the children in Sunday school and Hebrew school now were teaching these classes on Tuesday mornings.

BAK: Were these the same teachers that were teaching in the Sunday school before the commission?

BNK: No, these are new people who are hired by the commission to teach.

BAK: Are they professional teachers?

BNK: Yes, most of them have a degree in education. One of the girls has a Master's in one of her seminaries; her father is a rabbi. Another one of the girls is an Israeli and she teaches Jewish history.

BAK: Now that there are "professional teachers, certified teachers", do you think that the situation would be better? Do you really think that there would be a difference as far as the public education children would be getting?

BNK: I hope there would be a difference.

BAK: Can you expand on that?

BNK: Well, I would like them to update the Jewish education of the children. They are still teaching, as I am told, Jewish history, Jewish Bible, and those types of things. I would like to have them brought up to more important things of what is going on today in Israel and with the Jewish people in this country. Not just teach Bible and that type of thing, but I think they should modernize it and bring it up to an everyday program with some traditions and some culture taught.

- BAK: Let's take a step backwards. If you had the say-- now that you have a little bit of idea of what's going on in the system as far as the commission--what kind of improvements would you have liked to have seen when your children were going to school?
- BNK: Well, there again I would have liked to have brought them up to everyday history at least by the time two years before confirmation. I think they should have had present day type of lectures.
- BAK: You said confirmation. How old were they when they were confirmed?
- BNK: The children were sixteen at the time of confirmation. That meant that they had no more Hebrew, nor did they go to the Sunday school. However, they could come if they wanted to come as teachers in the lower grades or they could take postgraduate or post confirmation courses with the rabbi.
- BAK: Did your kids go through their senior year in high school?
- BNK: Yes, they did. Both of them did.
- BAK: When their secular studies started, that was the same time as their Sunday school or Hebrew school started and then it went straight through to high school?
- BNK: That's right.
- BAK: Is there anything else that you would have liked to have seen other than updating?
- BNK: Not really. I think they have a well-rounded program, but as I said, I think they should have updated it the last two years before confirmation. Other than that I really think they did a very good job.
- BAK: What about other ways that they would have gotten education. Do your children participate in any type of religious organizations such as USY?
- BNK: Well, they belonged to USY and that was about the only religious oriented thing that they did belong to.
- BAK: Do you think that this really enhanced their knowledge as far as Judaism is concerned?
- BNK: Well, I think that everything they were exposed to would enhance the situation.
- BAK: So it's really as if they could get something out of

attending the camp or . . .

BNK: Oh, yes, I think the experience was marvelous for them.

BAK: What are your opinions about Jewish education? Do you think this is going in the right direction or what?

BNK: I think it's going in the right direction. I like certified teachers teaching who are very knowledgeable. I can't really complain too much about what's going on because I'm not really knowledgeable at this time.

BAK: I have read numerous studies that at one time in the early 1970's or late 1960's there had been a turn around where parents were more concerned about the Jewish education. Do you feel that this is so, that there has really been a turn around?

BNK: Oh, very definitely there has been a resurge back to religion. Parents now are participating more and the children look forward to the different kinds of Jewish experiments. Some of them have gone to Israel. I think at this time, yes, religion is coming into the home again.

BAK: Is there any additional comments that you would like to make on the topic that we've been discussing about Jewish education?

BNK: I think not; no.

BAK: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW