

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education Project

Jewish Education in Youngstown

O. H. 272

MIRIAM BERKOWITZ

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

May 15, 1980

Miriam Berkowitz

Miriam Berkowitz, the daughter of Herman and Lena Reese, was born August 24, 1918 in Youngstown, Ohio. After attending local schools, she graduated from South High in 1936. She then married Sidney Berkowitz and had two children named Lee and Barbara, who were born in 1952 and 1955, respectively. Throughout the years Miriam has been actively involved in various temple affairs.

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INTERVIEWEE: MIRIAM BERKOWITZ
INTERVIEWER: Beth Kurtzweig
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K: This is an interview with Miriam Berkowitz for the Youngstown State Univeristy Oral History Program by Beth Kurtzweig at the home of Miriam Berkowitz on May 15, 1980 at 8:30 p.m.

Okay, the first thing that I'd like to ask you is if you could possibly give me some background information about your family?

B: My mother and father were both born in Russia, and came here as very small children. My mother was raised in Pittsburgh, however, my father was raised in Youngstown. He went to Front Street School, which at that time was located at the foot of the Market Street Bridge, next to where the old post office is now. He went through school. He attended Rayen High School when it was on Wick Avenue, and he went through school without any problem. Youngstown people were some of his schoolmates, including some of my teachers.

I was also born in Youngstown and have lived here all my life. I went through the regular scheme of things in school. I graduated from South High School and that was the end of my education as far as formality is concerned. However, in those days they had post graduate courses, which I took, and I also remember taking a course in math at what was once Youngstown College. Now this was done during the time when I was already working.

Now as far as my religious education is concerned, I had no formal training because it was not available to people in our area; however, I did come from a home that was traditionally rich. I have many warm and wonderful memories in my home. It was a truly religious home, but with joy. We looked forward to our various holidays and enjoyed our customs and our traditions. It did give us a sense of fulfillment and a certain amount of strength and warmth.

I always remember my parents with much pleasure and happiness. While they demanded and expected their children to be observant, it was no chore; it was really enjoyable.

Our family consisted of three children: my brother, who now is a doctor, my sister, who is retired from the IRS Service, and I make up three. We were all raised in the same way. I believe everything we were taught still clings to us because I think I have transmitted my feelings, my attitudes, my ideas, subconsciously to my children; and I would hope that they will retain all this knowledge as long as they live.

K: Okay. You said that you really didn't have any formal type of religious education, that most of it dealt with things that you were taught at home, the traditions and that. Do you have any memorable experience that you can share with us about one religious holiday or something like that that would show us exactly what type of education and who was it, your mother or your father, or was it a joint effort? Was it a family type thing that you would learn about, for example, history or the language, Hebrew, or what?

B: While my mother and father spoke excellent English, they also spoke Yiddish, which we children learned. Much to my regret, I did not speak Yiddish fluently. To this day I really don't speak fluently, for which I am sorry, because it is a beautiful language. However, I have tried to go back and remember some of my Yiddish-speaking experiences because my ignorance was made so obvious when I flew to Israel. In Israel they speak either Hebrew, or Yiddish, or English, and it was then I realized how important and how nice it would be to know my Yiddish again. Little by little I have tried to use it with the end result that I think I can converse pretty comfortably now.

K: That's good.

B: My father was the master of the house. This is the way it was. My mother was his helpmate, and she was his partner. They traveled together. No matter what, their ideas were together. This is a beautiful relationship that we remember.

My father would sit for many, many hours and talk to his kids about history, and he frowned upon our reading frivolous material. I can remember very clearly--and I have a set of books--he would say, "Why are you reading that nonsense? Why don't you pick up a volume of Graetz's History of the Jews?" I think this also stayed with us.

We always knew . . . it was a nice, warm holiday. Even when you entered our house, the atmosphere was so warm before High Holy Days, before Passover, before Hanukkah. It was so enjoyable. We played games. It was really a wonderful experience and so nice to look back upon.

K: Did any of your siblings have any type of formal Jewish education?

B: May I insert this--my grandfather was a rabbi. My father's father was the first reverend in Youngstown.

K: Really?

B: Now getting back to my siblings. In those days, it was a boy in the family who had to learn because he had to observe his Bar Mitzvah. It was thought that it wasn't necessary for girls to learn, whereas the attitude today of course is all different. The end result was my brother had the strict Hebrew training I never had. Unluckily, I never had one. I've often felt remiss in my ability not to be able to read Hebrew and to understand it.

K: Who gave your brother this kind of training?

B: There were various men in and around the city who taught young boys. We lived on Ellenwood Avenue and I can remember there was a man on Hayes Avenue who taught my brother. He used to walk down to this gentleman's house after school. He instructed my brother.

K: Did you ever take any adult education classes?

B: I think I took a little bit of Hebrew one year when my children were very young, but of course I don't remember too much about it.

- K: Let's move up a little bit closer to the present time and talk a little bit about your children. Can you tell me a little bit about your family, about your husband, and your children?
- B: Well, my husband, of course, was in the generation of "Boys must learn." He had the same kind of training that my brother had for his Bar Mitzvah. He was the oldest of three boys. He has retained his knowledge. He is quite traditional. He believes in the saying of Kaddish, which is a mourner's prayer for those who have passed away. Our house, I think, has retained tradition because of his attitude and because of my attitude.
- K: Okay. How many sons and daughters do you have?
- B: I have two children. I have a son who is 28 and he's a doctor; I have a daughter, 25, who is a social worker in Cincinnati. They had a very fine, formal religious education. They went to Sunday school and then they went to weekly school. With attending service, I would say each of them spent eight hours a week in religious areas. I'm of a generation where there was no permissiveness. Our children had to go whether they wanted to or not, with the end result that they did learn and while they did protest at times, I think today they appreciate what they have learned. They still know what to do and how to conduct themselves and what is expected of them as Jews. I think they're very strong in their feelings.
- K: Okay. You say about week day school, which is Hebrew school and Sunday school and that . . . When did they go to classes? During the day, what part of the day did they go in?
- B: On Sundays, they probably went from 10:00 to 12:00 or 12:30, and during the week they went after school, I would say from 4:00 to 6:00. They attended Friday night services from 8:00 to 9:30 or 10:00 and Saturday morning they went from 10:00 to about 12:30. All in all they can still read, understand, and they know what they are saying. They can conduct themselves with propriety in a religious kind of atmosphere.
- K: If you can think back to when they were going to Hebrew school and Sunday school, can you recall any of the courses that they were taking back then? What were some of the subjects?

- B: As I recall, they had customs, traditions, language, history, and music of course. I can remember Israeli dancing, which was a part of their training, which is enjoyable. That, I think, was the main course of study that they had.
- K: Did they have a choice in what kind of courses they wanted to take?
- B: No, they did not. They were told what would be offered and this is what they accepted. It was done.
- K: Was there someone who really ran the Sunday school or the Hebrew school? Was there some type of coordinator of this?
- B: Yes. At that time, the rabbi was the administrator and the principal, so to speak, of the religious school. He fulfilled all the expectations and he held that position. A firm hand was kept often, I'm sure.
- I think they are proud to say that they had a formal education. I'm sure my son is proud that he had a Bar Mitzvah, and my daughter a Bat Mitzvah. I'm sure that they are happy they were confirmed.
- K: You said really that the Sunday school itself was run by the rabbi . . .
- B: He was the administrator.
- K: The courses were pretty much set down as to who was going to take what according to years, am I right?
- B: That is correct.
- K: Was it the rabbi who worked with the teachers, do you know, to design the courses?
- B: Yes. Yes, and as I recall, the teachers had to submit to the rabbi their curriculum, and study plans; it was quite a well-organized kind of course of study. The children did homework, and they had study hours in which they had to do things at home. I was pleased with it.
- K: You said that they had to submit plans and that. What kind of people were the ones that were hired as being teachers?
- B: They were well-qualified people. Some were professional teachers. Some had gained their knowledge through

their own efforts with the end result that they could present it properly to students.

K: You said qualified and you said professionals?

B: That's correct. Some were teachers in the public school system and were able to face a class and know what to expect of the young people.

K: What kind of qualifications did they have as far as Jewish education was concerned? Did they ever take courses at a higher level educational institution that would give them the type of information they would need?

B: I don't know if they had a formal exposure to such a line of study or whether it was inbred within them, or whether they absorbed it, but they all seem very knowledgeable. The Hebrew teachers could speak, and read, and write Hebrew. I would say as I said before: I thought my children were in a great position to have all this kind of knowledge presented to them. I think that they remembered and retained quite a bit.

K: As far as we were talking about the fact that some of the teachers didn't have actual courses that they took, that if I understand you correctly, a lot of them were well-read that they had that type of information. You appear to be quite satisfied with the type of education that your children were given, their Jewish orientation. If you had to state what some of the biggest strengths of the exposure they had to Jewish education at the Jewish Institution of Learning, what would you say some of those would be, some of the biggest strengths?

B: I was very happy with the school because there were a great many advantages. It was a warm atmosphere. The teachers were very enthusiastic. Equipment was modern and up-to-date. The books were the kind that would really transmit knowledge. The students felt comfortable with each other because they grew up together and they even attended public school together. They were almost like brothers and sisters.

The parents were strong in their support of the teachers. They stood behind the teachers. The parents were not permissive. The children had responsibilities and they knew it. All in all, I think the children that came out of that particular religious school are fine today. I say that because they've all grown up into respectable, nice adults that brought honor not only to their family, but to their fellow Jews and to the entire community.

K: Okay.

B: I think this is an influence, not only of their home, but of their religious school and their temple affiliation.

K: You were mentioning equipment and things like that. Do you recall any pieces of equipment?

B: They had overhead projectors and they had recording machines in those days; and they had their books, they had tapes, things of this nature.

K: Did all the teachers use that thing, or did the majority of them utilize that type of equipment?

B: I can't tell you that. I really don't know. I know they had them in some classes. Now, I don't know whether they do that in kindergarten, in the lower grades, but they certainly used them as the children grew older and got into the advanced learning stages.

K: You just mentioned about grades. When did a child start going to Hebrew school and Sunday school?

B: Kindergarten in public school is synonymous with kindergarten in religious school, and that's when the child started.

B: Okay, and when did it end?

K: When they were sophomores in high school. Probably around the age of fifteen they were confirmed and that was it. They had two years in public school where they did not go to religious school unless they so chose to go to a post graduate class. I think they did have that at that time.

K: That part was optional then?

B: Yes.

K: Another question that I have is, was there any type of communication between the staff, meaning the teachers and rabbi, and the parents? Were there parent-teacher meetings or anything like that where parents could view their opinions or say, "Hey, this is really good," or "Hey, I question this." Were there any type of meetings like that?

B: I think they had open houses, as I recall. I suppose if there were problems, the teachers would ask the

parents to come into school. Their doors were always open and so was the rabbi's door open, to any parent.

K: Okay, you talked about some of the strengths, some of the things that you thought were good about the Jewish Educational Institution. If you had to stop and think about some of the things that did not please you, some of the things that you felt could have been improved in some ways, what would you say some of those would have been?

B: Perhaps a stricter discipline; although, you had to remember that when the kids did go to school they had already put in a full day in public school under severe circumstances of discipline or whatever, and at that point of the day I think they were tired and maybe they would become unmanageable at times. I think this is to be expected and it's not an abnormal circumstance. As I look back, and maybe it's this way with everything, you always remember pleasant things and things that pleased you. In any circumstance I think this is probably why I remember all the nice things.

I know that sometimes the semesters seemed long to the students, but then it always does. I'm sure that when spring and summer came they were happy to be relieved of their responsibilities so that they could be gay and carefree for a couple months anyhow. I think this was probably the most negative thing about school, which is that way in any case. As far as the teachers are concerned and general atmosphere, and the warmth, I was happy about that, with the end result that we had very little trouble or negative experiences. I think the end result is that our kids grew up pretty nicely.

K: Do you feel that the teachers were sensitive to the fact that the kids were tired and that they had already put in a full day?

B: Yes, I think they were. I think they took that into consideration too. Inasmuch as many teachers were also parents, they understood the situations, which made them aware of all these things.

K: Did you have any recommendations at that time that you could have gone in and said, "Hey, what about this? Do you think this would work?" By the way, what years were involved there as far as when your kids were in school?

- B: My son started kindergarten in 1955. He was confirmed in 1967, at the time of the 1967 Israeli War. He graduated from high school in 1969. My daughter started in religious school, 1959, and she was confirmed, 1971 or 1972. I don't recall now. I think maybe 1971. Well, that was the span of the years in which I was associated with religious school.
- K: Would there have been or were there any times that you thought that you had an idea that might have been a good one in order to implement into the school curriculum that would have behooved the students, would have created an additional type of educational experience for them that was not suggested, or was not implemented already?
- B: No. Inasmuch as I had not had a formal education, I felt that I was not qualified to submit suggestions to people who had been in the field and who taught for a period of years. It was a time that I felt the teacher had the ability and the learning, and certainly had the knowledge to present to the children the best kind of training that she knew how. This is what they were trying to do.
- K: Would you have felt open if you thought that you were justified in some type of complaint or some type of recommendation? Was it an open type of atmosphere that you felt at ease to go in and talk to the rabbi about a problem, or with a teacher?
- B: Oh, yes. Yes, they were very cooperative. As I said before, I was not qualified to say, "I think that you should talk about thus and so in a class." After all, they had had more training, more experience, more knowledge, more ability than I. I would certainly not impose upon them my thinking which I felt was not as superior as theirs. I would think that would be an affront to them. If you don't respect the teachers, then you cannot expect your children to respect the teachers, because subconsciously, parents will transmit feelings to children in any area. I always went with the premise that the teacher knew what he was doing and that he was doing the best he knew how, and this is what they have to observe and to respect.
- K: If you had to reflect on some of the other parents, how was their attitude toward all of this?
- B: Well, my contemporaries were raised the way I was, and we were not permissive parents. Children were expected to do thus and so and it was their responsibility to do it. We were not the kind of parents that accepted flimsy excuses from the kids for their

not going to religious school, as well as to public school.

All of my children's contemporaries were raised the same way.

K: Around, I would say, the early 1970's, there was a group of people that were asked to come in to evaluate the educational opportunities as far as Jewish education was concerned here in Youngstown. They did what is considered as a "needs assessment" and they had contacted the rabbis, some parents, students and such to find out what their feelings were toward the type of orientation students were being given as far as Judaism was concerned. Were you aware of this when they had come down?

B: I knew this was happening, and there was publicity concerning it. I knew that there were interviews and there were group meetings and assessments made and decisions made. Every religious school in the city of Youngstown was judged. I know that reports were made concerning all of them with the end result that I guess it was a consensus of opinion that there be one kind of religious school for all the temples, and just recently the Commission for Jewish Education was instituted. Of course, I have no children going there, but what I've seen and what I've heard, I would say that there is a great deal of satisfaction in this new arrangement.

K: If we can go back to when they first came in, do you know where the group of specialists came in from?

B: I think they might have come from Cleveland, but I can't be certain. I know that they work with all the various educators in and about the city and with the Jewish Center, and people that were qualified to sit in on these meetings and to express their opinions.

K: Was it initiated by one individual or was it initiated by the group of rabbis? Do you have any idea on that?

B: I can't remember that exactly. I really can't.

K: What about the parents and the students that were interviewed, or were included in the study? Were you one of those parents or do you have any idea how the people were selected to participate?

B: No, I really don't know, inasmuch as I was not involved. As I told you, my kids were out and gone by that time. I was really not involved in this kind of position at all.

K: Why do you think it was essential to have a Jewish Commission of Education, to set one up, and the idea of the unification of the schools?

B: The only reason that I can see is that apparently they felt this is the best way to transmit religious education to the Jewish youth of Youngstown. By having such a school, they can really have what they judge as qualified, the teachers that they have in their employ, because you know it is not easy to get religious schoolteachers. I would think this is one of the reasons, too. As far as I know--of course I have no exposure to it, really-- I would think the parents are pleased.

K: Do you think this is a step in the right direction? Do you find that this is one way to truly improve the situation and to give the students the best educational experience and exposure that they could have?

B: If I had children of a school age, I would certainly feel that way, I think.

K: Would there be anything else that you would like to add as far as what we've been discussing about or end up with?

B: Well, I would hope that all our Jewish children will have strength because it's not easy to belong to a minority. In order to have strength they have to have knowledge and learning, and know who they are.

K: Okay, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW