

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jewish Education in Youngstown

Education in Youngstown

O. H. 478

HELEN CAMENS

Interviewed

by

Beth Kurtzweig

on

May 17, 1980

HELEN CAMENS

Helen Camens was born in Youngstown on April 7, 1924, the daughter of Max and Anna Berkowitz. She attended local schools and graduated from South High in 1942. On July 19, 1945 she married Harry Camens and the following year she had her first son, Ronald. In 1950 her son Marc was born. Helen Camens taught at the Ohev Tzedek Sunday School and Hebrew School for many years. She has been active in organizations such as, B'nai B'rith Women, Hadassah, Pioneer Women, and the sisterhoods of various Youngstown temples. She is presently employed at Rodef Sholom Temple as one of the temple secretaries.

Beth A. Kurtzweig

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN CAMENS

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SUBJECT: Jewish education system, ~~personal~~ Jewish experiences

DATE: May 17, 1980

K: This is an interview with Helen Camens for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Jewish Education in Youngstown, by Beth Kurtzweig, at the home of Helen Camens, on May 17, 1980, at 1:00 p.m.

The first thing I want you to do is to tell a little bit about yourself, your family, how many brothers and sisters you have.

C: My parents came from Austria-Hungary around 1904 or 1905. They are deceased now. I had six sisters and one brother. My brother is deceased. I am married to Harry Camens and have two sons: Ronald and Marc. Ronald is an accountant and Marc is an architect.

K: Could you please tell me a little bit about your childhood as far as the environment that you were raised in at home?

C: We were a busy family. Everybody had their own responsibilities. We lived in a very Jewish home. We were a very observant family as far as Judaism is concerned. I had a very happy childhood.

K: Can you give me an idea of a typical holiday? How would that be at your home when you were growing up?

C: My favorite holiday is Passover. In my home there was a lot of bustling that went on previous to the holiday celebration. The house was thoroughly cleaned from top to bottom. Of course, having so many girls in our family we delegated all of the work of which there was a great deal. Everything that was edible or had anything to do with food

had to be removed from our house, which meant that all dishes had to be taken out of the kitchen and packed away for a week, for eight days. All the Passover dishes, which we kept in the attic, had to be brought down and cleaned for use during the week. It was a lot of work. My mother would cook and make all of the traditional Passover dishes. My father would make sure that there was no trace of anything that could not be used on Passover, which we call Homitz. He would go through a procedure the evening before and he would take little pieces of bread and put them all around the house. Then he would take a candle, a wooden spoon, a brush and a piece of paper, and he would brush all of this bread that he had placed around onto the spoon and the paper. Then he would wrap this and burn this. At that point our house was completely ready for Passover. Then he would go to temple and all us kids would be waiting for him and he would come home so that we could have our Passover Seder, which lasted until midnight every year. He never missed a word; he would go through the whole ritual of Passover Seder, which to me was always a very interesting one. It was a beautiful holiday. We all still talk about this holiday even though my parents are gone now. We had these Seders in our own home, which are really nothing like my dad officiated. Passover really is my most favorite of all the holidays because I have very fond memories.

Another fond memory I have of this particular holiday was on a street where we lived. There was a Presbyterian minister who lived there. When it would be getting close for my father to come home from temple my two sisters and I would go down and we would sit on Reverend Miller's steps and wait for my father. At this time Reverend Miller would come out and tell us a story of Passover. We always thought that was the greatest thing because he was not Jewish. We wondered how he knew all about our holiday. We were little children at that time. Then my father would come and we would walk home together. Everything would be all ready for the Seder. That, I think, is my most favorite holiday of all the holidays.

- K: From what I understand, what you are saying is that you come from a traditional type family as far as celebrating holidays.
- C: Probably more Orthodox than traditional because my parents were Orthodox. I'm Conservative.
- K: What other kind of educational experiences did you have at home? For example, were there books that dealt with

- Judaism? Did your parents discuss Judaism with you?  
Could you elaborate on that a little bit?
- C: Our home was full of artifacts. My father didn't have a large library of Hebrew books, but there were Jewish books in our home. My father also studied a great deal of the time. Take the Sabbath, for instance, he would go to temple in the morning and he would come home when temple was over, have his lunch, have a little rest, and then he would study for the rest of the afternoon. He would do this until it was time to go back in the evening for the evening services. Saturday was his day, and he was king that day. That was always a nice remembrance too because he observed the way a Jewish person should observe. Those have always been fond memories for me.
- K: In essence, you really did get a Jewish education in the home?
- C: Yes. On Friday evening mother always lit the Sabbath candles. We always had a big Sabbath dinner. There was no work done on Saturday; we observed it as a day of rest, which is what it should be.
- K: Did you have any other type of educational experiences? For example, did you go to Sunday school or Hebrew school?
- C: When I was growing up they really did not have Hebrew schools as we have them today. They had a teacher who came to the home to teach. In my growing up they taught the boys; they didn't teach the girls. Whatever we learned, we learned just from being in a Jewish home. I really didn't have a lot of what you would call formal training, like going to a school. I went to Sunday school, but not for a very long time.
- K: When did the Sunday school start comparing to the secular type of education?
- C: Probably not until I was eight or nine.
- K: What was the time span?
- C: Probably just a couple of years because there were not enough children to have a religious school; this was not the case at the temple we belonged to.
- K: The teacher that did come to the home to teach the boys, what was his teaching?

- C: It was primarily preparation for Bar Mitzvah. He would come and teach them the services that they had to know and the parts of the chofto.
- K: Let's kind of push up closer to the present now. You do have children and I was wondering if you could talk about their type of Jewish education. Were they raised in a Jewish type of environment?
- C: My children have probably had a better Hebrew education than I had. Like I say, not many of the girls went in my day of growing up. My children both started Hebrew school at the age of six and went through their complete Hebrew education until they were fifteen or sixteen, which included Bar Mitzvah and any other requirement that had to be met. They both had Bar Mitzvahs and we observed in our home all the holidays.
- K: What kind of classwork, what type of curriculum was being used when the children were going to school?
- C: Subjects were Hebrew, learning to read and write script in Hebrew. They were taught the order of the services in the synagogue, music, Jewish history, Bible, any holidays that we might have, any festivities that would relate to the Jewish holiday, lessons, prayers, and participation of services. It was very much the same as you had when you were in Hebrew school.
- K: What about the teachers, who were the people that were designated as teachers? For example, were they people who had already taken classes in Jewish history? Did they have degrees? Did they have teaching degrees? Were they people from the temple?
- C: Teachers who taught in Hebrew school were lay teachers. Just the fact of being Jewish and living in a Jewish home, being in connection with the temple, with the synagogue, it was really just basic knowledge, just having lived being a Jew and practicing. The extra studies generally were courses from the rabbi. Any that I have known did not have degrees in Jewish education because they were lay teachers; however, there was always studying and always research going on. This is how I learned, through a great deal of research and through courses that I have taken under the different rabbis that we have had.
- K: Who was the administrator, the head person of the Sunday school or the Hebrew school?

- C: When I first started Rabbi Arnolds Turetsky was my administrator and we had several different rabbis: Rabbi Sheldon E. Elster, Rabbi Richard Markcovitz, and Rabbi Herbert Schwartz. They really were the ones who taught us what they wanted. In questionnaire we did research.
- K: Were you teaching at the same time your children were going?
- C: Yes, but I never had my own children in my class.
- K: It's going to be difficult to differentiate between your role as a parent and your role as a teacher. If you could say some of the strengths, some of the things that were really good about the educational experiences that your children or that other children attending the Sunday school had, what would you say were some of the best things that the kids gained from attending such a school?
- C: In my particular area I taught Bible and I taught Jewish history. I felt that they gained more from the Bible than from Jewish history. There was a new course that had come out that Rabbi Schwartz was very interested in, this was understanding the Bible. This was more like a conversation like you and I are having. I felt that the children gained more by this course than any other course that I had taught. It was very interesting. They would ask questions and then they would analyze them and really answer them themselves, which was learning as far as they were concerned. I enjoyed it as much as they did.
- K: What about with some of the other teachers in the other courses that were being offered? Just looking at the educational experience overall, what were some of the good things that you felt were gained?
- C: I felt the participation in the religious services, they were able to participate in these services through their background of what they got in the classrooms; they were able to apply it into the synagogue services, which is the primary goal that they're after.
- K: Let us kind of flip the coin a little bit then. What were some of the drawbacks, problems, that were apparent?
- C: There were a lot of problems that were apparent. One, which is generally the case, is that I don't think that they had the backing from the parents that they needed. The parents didn't make it that important for them. It was something that they had to do so the kids came. That didn't mean that they learned. If they had had a stronger

feeling through their parents they could have done better; they would have learned more. They would have put it more into practice than perhaps they did or are doing now. I feel the parents could have and should have been a little more forceful. Maybe I'm not using the right word in saying forceful. They should have let the children know that this was a very important part of their lives, that this was kind of molding them for their future. I don't think that many of the parents did this. I think they just sent them because they had to go and the other kids went. Many didn't fulfill all of their years that they should have; many of them dropped out. Many of them, as soon as they had a Bar Mitzvah that was the end, which really it isn't; it is the beginning. The parents didn't seem to either understand this or they didn't want to fuss with the children.

- K: What about the teachers and the curriculum and that? Do you think there were any problems with that, or discipline?
- C: We had discipline problems; you always have discipline problems. I think the curriculum was a good one for the most part. There were a lot of courses that weren't really interesting. Of course, not having had formal training this was difficult for the teacher to do, I felt. You feel like you have an inadequacy. You have not had a formal training and you're doing this all on your own; you're really like in training at the same time because you're researching and you're studying. You can go and think you have a great lesson plan all worked out and sometimes it just won't work out at all because the children aren't receptive to it. I think this too can affect wrong.
- K: Do you think there are other reasons for the lack of effectiveness of the students?
- C: Yes, I do. I think there are a lot of activities that go on in the secular schools that conflict with many of the things that we do as Jews.
- K: Can you give me an example?
- C: Yes. Many of our schools do not take into consideration that we have a Sabbath. They will put on their holiday programs, like at Christmas, Easter, or Passover. Sometimes they'll have their football games on Friday nights. They will have their practices or whatever during times of our religious school. There are many instances where the secular school does interfere; it is that they don't



take into consideration that we have rights as Jews too. Sometimes I think these are done very heartlessly.

- K: You said it conflicts with the time of the school and that, how many times a week did the students have to go to Hebrew school or Sunday school?
- C: Two nights a week. There were two afterschool sessions that lasted two hours, from 4:00 to 6:00, and on Sunday from 9:00 until 12:00. There were many things though that did conflict with our religious school.
- K: You said that some of the teachers had difficulties because not only were they preparing and researching the information for a class, but there was some type of inadequacy. Was there any type of teacher training or did the rabbi give you any assistance in an in-service type of thing?
- C: Yes, we had an in-service training program; we didn't have them once a month, but we were always under his supervision. He always knew what we were doing. If he felt that we were not giving them what they needed then we would have to change. The curriculum was set up not by us as teachers, but by him as an administrator.
- K: Do you feel that the school was truly meeting the needs of the children?
- C: It could, it should, but I don't know if it did. I don't know if they knew that they were needy. If they felt that they were in need they would have studied harder and absorbed more than they did. I would have children at the end of the year who didn't retain anything. Some, I felt, came out with a great deal more than they went in with. At that point I felt that I had done a good job, that I had gotten across to someone. Our classes were small, so if you had one or two that you were pleased with at the end of the year, then you felt that you had fulfilled your job. Our classes were very tiny. Some had only six or seven in them.
- K: Looking at some of the problems that seemed to be quite apparent, did you or could you have made any recommendations at that time to the rabbi or to the other teachers to try to improve the learning environment?
- C: You could. We did not have a lot of funds to do a lot of things that some of the other temple religious schools did. We didn't have access to a media where we could go to a library that had films or anything like that that you might use in the classroom. Cleveland has a very

large one, but we were never on the top of the list for some of this material as the Cleveland schools were. Anything that we might want to have, such as movies or different music, we didn't have the access to it that they had. It was not as easy for us as it is for religious schools in larger cities.

K: Was the door open for the teachers and for the parents to come in and discuss some of their concerns?

C: Yes, it was always open, but we never had very many parents that came. The only parents that really came were the parents of the children who were the top students, never the ones who were intermediate or in the lower type of classes.

K: Was there ever an attempt to get these people in?

C: Yes.

K: For example, parent-teacher conferences?

C: Always. The only time that I had very good success with parent-teacher meetings was when Rabbi Schwartz went to institute what they called the Meltom system of teaching the Bible. The Meltom system is understanding the Bible, whereby it is discussion and dialogue. When we were first putting this into the school we had a meeting with the parents and every parent came. I took that book and we went through a lesson and they were very pleased with this type of teaching; that was the first time that that had ever been in our school. It was always just the regular old books with questions and testing and so forth. We didn't do that in the class, and I think that was one of the things that made it interesting. There was never any homework; it was all done in class. You got into many discussions of the Bible in relation to today. I think that was probably what made that particular course interesting. That was my favorite course as you can see.

K: I've just completed reading quite a bit of material on the educational system throughout the United States and in the city of Youngstown. A commission of Jewish education has been formed here in Youngstown. Do you remember the planning stages . . . what had transpired there? Who took the initiative to try to get something like this?

C: I don't remember exactly the year that Rabbi Marcovitz was the rabbi at the time. He went to a great deal of trouble; he went to great lengths with the Jewish Community Center, the federation, and the other temples in the city to have a team come down from Cleveland to survey our schools and the community itself because our enrollment

was dropping. Some families, some parents, weren't even sending their children to religious school. We really were in serious trouble as far as this city was concerned and as far as Jewish education was concerned. They came down and they surveyed. This team that came down was not only lay people; these were people that had earned their doctorates. This was their forte. They were here for maybe a week or two, and they sat in on every classroom in this city. I don't know if you remember this or not. This was probably a little before your time in religious school.

K: Did they actually go in the classroom?

C: Yes, they sat in the classrooms and they took notes. They listened to everything that we taught; they looked at our books; they looked at the schoolrooms; they looked at the environment. They did not interview us individually as teachers, but they did have a meeting that came out which we all attended. It was kind of like a seminar. When their survey was finished they went back to Cleveland. All of these men were not from Cleveland; some of them were from different parts of the country. They wrote up a report and I felt very good because Ohev Tzedek was one that came out very well. They liked our curriculum; they liked our method of teaching. We did very well, but their recommendation was in order to save a religious school system in Youngstown all temples should combine and they should have a community school. I think this may have frightened parents or whatever because we did not . . . it just seemed to kind of drop for a lot of years. Then two years ago they formed this commission for Jewish education. I understand now that the school is going very well. Their enrollment is not tremendous, but they have professional teachers who have degrees. The administrator has a degree in administration of Jewish community schools. I understand it is doing very well and that the children are very happy; they like it, which is very unusual. It is only for midweek; it is not a Sunday school.

K: What happened to Sunday school?

C: Each temple has their own Sunday school that is separate from the commission school.

K: Who was teaching it, the Sunday schools? Are they the same teachers that teach at the commission?

C: No, not all of them. The teachers who teach at Sunday school are their lay teachers that they had for many years, which is what I did.

K: They just carry over?

C: Yes.

K: Do you feel this is a step in the right direction?

C: Very definitely. It should have been done years ago.

K: You said that they did recommend a community type situation. Do you recall any of the other recommendations that they made at that time?

C: No. The only other recommendation would be that they would have professional teachers. The city was in dire need actually of a community school.

K: Is there anything else you would like to add?

C: No, not really.

K: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW