

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1515

CAROL D. CUSHWA

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

July 13, 1992

CAROL CUSHWA

Mrs. Carol Cushwa was born on August 8, 1944 in the city of Kansas City, Missouri, the daughter of F. Carl and M. Elizabeth Burt. Growing up in the suburb of Kirkwood, Cushwa attended secondary school at Kirkwood High School, graduating in 1952.

Following high school, Cushwa entered college at Beloit College of Wisconsin. She later transferred to the University of Kansas, achieving her Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1966. Cushwa then entered graduate school at the University of Hawaii. In 1969, she took a job with the Michigan State University Natural History Museum, working there from 1969 through 1976. At this point, Cushwa became employed with the National Jewish Hospital. Cushwa worked for the National Jewish Hospital when she arrived in Youngstown, Ohio in the late 1970s. In the early 1980s, she gained employment with the Mahoning Valley Council of Boy Scouts of America.

Presently, Mrs. Cushwa continues to be very active in the Youngstown community. She resides with her husband, Charles B. Cushwa III, at 82 Poland Manor, Youngstown, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Holy Family Church in Poland, Ohio. She spends much of her free time taking part in the activities of the Youngstown Playhouse, the Butler Institute of American Art, and the Youngstown Symphony.

Matthew T. Butts

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INTERVIEWEE: CAROL D. CUSHWA  
INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts  
SUBJECT: Rodef Sholom, religion, Rabbi Berkowitz's  
impact on the Jewish community of Youngstown  
DATE: July 13, 1992

B: This is an interview with Carol Denise Cushwa for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Berkowitz project, including the Youngstown Community and the Youngstown Jewish Community, at her residence, 82 Poland Manor, Poland, Ohio, on July 13, 1992, at 3:30 p.m.

Okay. Could you tell me something about your childhood, [such as] where you grew up [and] your education?

C: I am a product of Vermont and Kansas City, Missouri. My emotional affiliation is with Vermont. I was educated in the public schools in Kirkwood, Missouri, and then on to various colleges in Wisconsin, Kansas, [and] Hawaii. Then at that point, majored in college in Anthropology and Art History. I landed in a Ph.D. program, my ex-husband's Ph.D. program at Michigan State University, in the biological sciences. I have done field work in biology in Hawaii. Well, [I did research in] Kansas with bats. [I did research in] Hawaii with phalangid birds, as part of the Smithsonian Institution Project. [I did research in] Michigan [with] mice in the upper peninsula, and deer in the upper Peninsula. At the same time, I was an assistant curator for Anthropology at the Natural History Museum at Michigan State and was also the Archaeological Editor. At the time at which I left Michigan State, I

went back to Vermont and did some projects in development fund raising for Johnson State Teacher's college in Johnson, Vermont. [I] moved to Chicago and worked with National Jewish Hospital.

B: When did you arrive in Youngstown?

C: My first trip to Youngstown, I was traveling out of Chicago with N.J. H. and A.C. in 1978. I moved here in 1982.

B: What struck you about the city when you moved here?

C: When I moved here, or when I first came?

B: When you first came, then when you moved here? Draw a parallel there.

C: Despair. Short sightedness. A community of have and have nots. A community that never got its act together. A community that demographically was very similar to Grand Rapids, Michigan and yet psychologically worlds apart. Grand Rapids also [was] being a community that had lost its major industrial base, the furniture industry, but managed to bring it back together with the vision of its leadership. I did not perceive tremendous vision on the part of the leadership of Youngstown, Ohio.

Now, in all fairness to Youngstown, I have to say I arrived here just six months after the Sheet & Tube had closed, and I'm quite sure the community was still in shock. My perception of Youngstown, at that time, was it was 20 years behind the times in virtually all areas, particularly in just the fact that there were very few women in the workplace, and those who were did not have sustenant positions. There were still ladies who were floating around all over the place. It was just a restful little backwater. It also occurred to me, at the time, that the people didn't know what they had and had badly let the community slip. Now, what was the second part of the question?

B: Draw a parallel between that and when you moved here. It's the same thing as present?

C: I see progress. I see more women in the workplace in more sustenant positions. I see a community that has very little that [isn't] more glitz than it is substance. By that I mean very often people tend to judge on exteriors rather than what is really going on. We had a lot of people here who love to play "rich and famous" and end in bankruptcy the next day. I see a community that has little loyalty to some of the established institutions. It's nomadic behavior. A new

restaurant opens and flip, they go there, and flip, they go [here], forgetting some of the places.

In many ways, people here do not support the community, and yet, some of that becomes an issue of privacy. It was very difficult to walk into a store and buy something when everybody in town might know who you are, and therefore, people tend either to get the newest, the latest [styles] to go out.

There are many, many benefits of living in Youngstown. The family values here are incredible. It is a family town. Raising children here is great, up to a certain point. Beyond a certain point, they have very little opportunity here, unfortunately. In many ways, it is a closed community. I think that we do not appreciate what we have here. The cost of living here is incredibly low. The economy has obviously turned around and diversified, and yet, some of the older leadership, still, are in the "poor me" psychology. You cannot have much better quality of life anyplace than you can have right here, given the bang for the buck that we achieved in Youngstown. It just has many, many fine qualities. It tends to be carefully reborn, but anyplace can be reborn. It tends to be the individual's responsibility to overcome his own boredom. That's it, I think.

B: Have you always resided here in Poland?

C: No. We lived on the North Side for a while.

B: Physically, what did Youngstown look like on your first trip and when you first moved here?

C: A dump. The ingress and egress was horrible. Physically I would say that, in a lot of ways, it still looks the same. [Route] 224 was not nearly as developed as it is now. [The] best example of the physical things I can tell you is that, at one point, my boss and I traveled in from Chicago. He intended to spend the night. We had a meeting with Art Young at Mahoning Bank. He intended to spend the night. I drove him straight up Market Street, and by the time we got downtown, he asked me how quickly he could get out of here. After the meeting with Art, we went immediately to the Youngstown Airport, and the gate was shut. He literally banged on the gate to get on the plane for Chicago. I had my evening free with my husband. It was horrible.

You still see that, if you go north on Wick, north on Logan, with the weedy lots, buildings that are in disrepair. [There is] disrespect for the community, on basis of the building owners or possibly just poverty.

People are stressed, I suppose, but I've never seen such a disregard for property. Well, I probably have, but it just seems to be more pervasive here. It's not an uplifting place to wander around in, and what is new and well-kept tends to be the franchises, the Strip, [Route] 224, Boardman to Canfield, that area. Downtown, of course, was before many of the renovations, and the demolition had occurred down there. So, it was pretty grim. The whole thing was grim.

B: Would you characterize Youngstown as an ethnic community when you first came here?

C: No, because I wasn't aware of the ethnicity. I wasn't particularly looking for it and wasn't struck by the ethnicity of Youngstown.

B: Was there a lot of miscegenation between--is that a possible reason why?

C: No. No. I was simply dealing with the leadership of the community and never, never looked too awfully far beneath the surface of the leadership. I don't deal with ethnicity. It's not something that really comes to mind. When I deal with an individual, I don't tend to categorize them a whole lot, didn't use to. Having lived here for 10 years, I'm very aware of the ethnicity of the community and some of the polarization that occurs on the basis of that anti-ethnicity.

B: When did you first have the opportunity to meet Dr. Berkowitz?

C: Well, if I first came here in 1978, it probably was 1979 or 1980.

B: Was that in conjunction with a project?

C: Yes. Let's see. How do we best explain this? When I first came, I was sent to Youngstown, because it was N.J.H.'s version of purgatory. They really wanted to get rid of me. At that point, I was working on what they called a letter of appeal program, which was developed, pioneered by N.J.H. in the 1930s. [You] walk in the man's office. He gives you his--with his approval obviously--letterhead signature, et cetera. He writes the letter, fund raising, solitation letter to a list of his choosing. On the first trip here, I met both Larry Heslong and Milt Handel, and it happened that it ended up being an extremely successful trip, which amused me to no end.

I made another trip a year later and probably at that time was asked to do a feasibility study to see if we couldn't put on a special event fund raising

testimonial dinner. I believe it was Larry Heslong who suggested honoring Birky, and it may also have been Milt Handel. I believe Milt might have asked Birky if he would consider receiving the National Humanitarian Award, and he said, "Yes." The fun started then.

B: What did Rabbi Berkowitz look like physically?

C: I never really considered it. Short. Round. Rounder; he was not slender. Glasses. But, the force of his personality was such that you really didn't pay a whole lot of attention to his physical appearance. He was a powerful man, I think, but I never paid that much attention, and it's been so many years since I've seen him. I have pictures of him sprinkled about, but he was adorable, absolutely adorable, just sparkling.

B: Describe his personality to me.

C: Which one? Do you want the scholarly Sidney Berkowitz? Do you want the leader of the Jewish community? The public Sidney Berkowitz? You can have the caring Sidney. You can have the angry one, the one who stood up for his beliefs regardless, on occasion, of personal cost. You can have the very proud man who was quite aware of his position and would allow no one to compromise it. You can certainly detect a sense of a naughty boy with a sense of humor. Which personality did you want? The caring, the very caring, personally caring person?

B: Were there any traits that culminated all of them?

C: Yes. The very unique ability to make you think, whenever you were with him or talking with him, that he was focused entirely on you. [He had] tremendous sense of humor throughout, just tremendous sense of humor, always.

B: What type of humor was it? It wasn't slapstick from what I understood. What was it more?

C: We don't really want to go into that. Not on tape, at least. [Laughter] I will say to you that at one point I had a joke brokerage thing going that extended from Colorado Springs to Chicago, to three different locations in Youngstown, and in reverse. The reverse always went from Pauline to Sidney, to me to Colorado Springs, and back through Charlie in Youngstown, not to mention the office and a few other places in Chicago. Pauline's rather wicked, and Sidney would often pass on her jokes to me.

B: Did you ever get the opportunity to attend anything at Rodef Sholom?

- C: Oh, I'm sure I did. But were they conducted by Birky? Undoubtedly. I'm just trying to remember which ones though, probably bar mitzvah. Well, you might know. Did he do the Moyer girls? I think Dave Powers did that. I think Birky was dead by then. Undoubtedly, I have been to services at Rodef Sholom. At the very least, funerals that he conducted, but I couldn't tell you specifically which ones.
- B: How about his ability to be a great orator?
- C: Oh, fabulous! Fabulous! Yes, he was a pro.
- B: What in his speech magnetized the crowds?
- C: I only had impressions. I did not have that kind of contact with him in terms of his public speaking, and if it was, it was limited. As I say, I'm sure I've attended the services at Rodef Sholom that he's conducted, but I can't speak to that.
- B: You spoke of his personality, one of them being the leader of the Jewish community. What do you think he perceived his position or his job as leader of the community to be?
- C: I don't know, because it was not something that he and I particularly discussed. My instinct is that he was the pointman of the Jewish community to the rest of the community. No one since has been able to develop the ties within greater Youngstown that he enjoyed.
- B: Was there close cooperation between the major religions and with the Youngstown community when you arrived here?
- C: Oh, I don't know. No. I don't know that. I only know how it worked in a function I planned for him in his honor.
- B: Was Bishop Malone present for that?
- C: Oh, sure. Malone was there. Dick Spiker was there. Lonnie Simon was there. It coalized the whole community. Because Birky was the "honoree" and Art Young, who at that time was the chairman of. . . . Art crafted a very fine group of co-chairmen that really reached out into the whole community. Yes. We had over 500 there, had it put on closed circuit television, the whole 9 yards. It was so successful that it upset people terribly, which was fine. I couldn't blame them for being upset given the economic conditions in Youngstown at that time. Within the Jewish community, Birky was not afraid to be decisive at all. I mean, he sure

stood his guns, because that was the time of the dispute with El Emeth. He said, "This might be a problem, but I'm going to stick by my guns regardless of how the attendance turns out."

B: What was the dispute with El Emeth?

C: I don't remember all the details of it. Somebody from Rodef Sholom would have more knowledge of it. It seems to me--and, I could be just dead wrong--they had decided to join forces and build a temple together or something like that, and it didn't work. The congregations had a great deal of animosity with each other at that time, but I don't know the ins and outs of that. All I know is that Birky decided to go ahead with the thing, regardless, which took some courage on his part.

B: You mentioned as another personality or human behavior, was it very difficult to raise any ire in him, for any individual to do this?

C: I don't know on a personal basis, but I do know that he could become angry with an idea, concept, a thought, [or] a mistreatment. I don't believe he was every angered. . . . I never saw anger directed at an individual. Although, I also suspect that he was quite capable of it. Anybody who has the leadership qualities that Birky had doesn't always lead by rolling over and playing dead. He was pretty forceful.

B: You refer to him as Birky. How many people use that name?

C: That was just my little irreverent. You would know better than I. Have you heard anybody refer to him by that name?

B: One individual said that he preferred always to be called either Rabbi or Doctor.

C: Yes. Well, I did get away with a lot of little stuff like that. I just always called him Birky. He tolerated it well with me. We had a wonderful relationship. I tell you. You want to hear about cooperation with the churches. He did some, you could call, personal counseling. He just gave me some really good advise about some of the things I was dealing with in my relationship with Charlie as it was developing. Of course, my husband is Catholic. Birky was well aware that I was going to convert to Catholicism. He [Sidney Berkowitz] died in the spring, and we got married that fall. He wanted to co-officiate our ceremony, which Charlie and I were absolutely determined he would do, absolutely. Now, that was fairly unusual. He had taken me through some very rough stages in the

relationship. These are not my husband, but other people. He just followed along to see me through to completion. That was something that gave him a lot of satisfaction, to know that we would like to do something like that. As large and as wonderful as his ego was, as secure as he was, in so many ways I sensed that he was slightly insecure when it came to the non-Jewish community and his place therein. He had someone there at that time that had the stature that Charlie did. Not that Charlie had any stature, particularly, but he was a prominent Catholic, perfectly happy. He [Rabbi Berkowitz] just became all sorts of warm fuzzies. It did wonders for his ego. But he also had no ego problems. [Laughter] So I don't think that insecurity was possibly his way of relating to others.

I was devastated when he died so suddenly, and we never saw that mission through to fulfillment.

B: I just want to make a note on the church, and it'll come back to me in a second here. Are you familiar with [him] on a more social note? What would he do for fun? Did he have any hobbies?

C: I don't have the foggiest idea. I really don't know. I always had the sense that people were his fun, and his relationships with people were his fun, and Pauline. I sense that they had a very, very good, very strong marriage. Pauline was not traditional in any sense of the word, or is not, and it takes a very strong individual to be able to deal with it, particularly in the context of the rabbi's wife. It takes a strong rabbi to allow his wife--not allow. I don't think allow had anything to do with it. Just very indicative of a very strong marriage.

B: What was it like going out, say, if you were going out to dinner with him? What would he be like across the dinner table?

C: Absolutely charming. Now, please don't think that we socialized a lot. We didn't. I can think of only one occasion, really that we [had dinner]. Oh, we had many lunches together, sure, not many. Some. I can only think of one occasion in which we went to dinner with him. He entertained a colleague of mine when we came in, at one point, before I moved over here, out in New Wilmington. He was a terrible driver! [Laughter] As I recall, we rode up with him. It wasn't New Wilmington. It was over at the other inn, up at. . . . He was not a good driver. I remember being in terror as we drove for 45 minutes up and back. But he was absolutely a delightful, gracious host, charming. He was just Birky. I'm sure many other people have eaten with him a whole bunch more than I have. They could proba-

bly tell you [more]. He was just a constantly cultured individual, renaissance individual, who could look beyond all sorts of issues and come up with a good solution to the problem. Not always a popular solution, but certainly a viable solution. I think that any leader of the Jewish community, any Jewish community, walks a very, a real tight rope within the non-Jewish community and the Jewish community, as well. I think Birky walked that tight rope very, very well. I'm pretty sure he can be real tough with some of his compatriots. He would have to be. He would absolutely have to be, in a situation like that. But he did it, and Youngstown was the better for it, I think.

B: Did he push himself very, very hard as far as . . . . On the schedule of an average day, I have a list of 30 odd organizations he was in.

C: Yes, he would have had to have [been]. Yet, his personal demeanor. . . . Now, I was sitting in an office in Chicago when I would call. I never had the sense that I was interrupting anything, or that he was doing anything more important than talking with me. And I know that I am not unique in that feeling. I also know, though, that I was up at the temple and visiting with him, and he had a zillion things going on. Did he push himself? Yes, I suspect that he pushed himself terribly, terribly hard. Terribly hard. He would have had to have [been], because you can't do justice to all those 30 odd organizations and allow people to interrupt you, in the way at least that he allowed me to interrupt him, and not be stretched. He didn't die suddenly of a heart attack for no reason. People don't.

B: Is there anything about him or anything that he did that we haven't touched on that you think we should add?

C: No. No. Remember, I wasn't living here with him. I knew him more, well, personally [and] professionally, but I really wasn't living here with him. When I did move over here, we sure kept in touch a lot. But, no.

B: How about his successor, David Powers? Was there any great difference between them?

C: Age for one. Experience. David certainly would have--and once again, because I'm not a member of Rodef Sholom [and] I'm not aware on a daily basis--I would say that David carried through with the intellectual tradition. He certainly was a bright, bright fellow, as obviously was Birky. I doubt that David had the experience in controlling that rather difficult to control congregation that Birky had and did not, by

virtue of age, have some of the leadership skills. David was very, again, a lot of fun to be with, but he never, probably because of age and inexperience, was able to take the place. I sensed, at some point, some controversy within the Rodef Sholom community regarding David, but I could be way off base about that, too. We certainly enjoyed him and found him in many ways to be certainly a lively successor to Birky.

B: In 1992 the inter-faith ties were very strong in Youngstown during Dr. Berkowitz's tenure as Rabbi at Rodef Sholom. Are they still present and as strong today as they were?

C: I don't know. I really cannot say that, because I am out of that whole scene at this point. It's not really something that I observe that much any more. I sense that there are fewer forms of commonality. I mean, I just don't know. My husband would have a much better idea of that than I. [He's] much more involved. I doubt that Youngstown Rotary has a rabbi in it, at this point. I think that was very important. I know Rotary was very important to Birky. Once again, [it] allowed him to maintain the Jewish presence in a predominantly non-Jewish setting. Although there are certainly members of the Jewish community in Rotary, his presence was beneficial to the Jewish community, I think. I don't know if there is a Rabbi there, now. I'm certainly not aware of it. I don't even know David's successor at Rodef Sholom. I have no contact with Rodef Sholom, other than through its membership.

B: Can you think of anything we need to add?

C: No.

B: Okay. Thank you very much for your time.

C: You're welcome. I'm sorry I don't know any better. If you would like, I can wander upstairs and see if I can't find some of the old brochures and stuff from that dinner. That might be interesting for you. I can't do it today, but in the future.

B: Yes, in the future.

C: Let's see what kind of records I might have up there, because it was really an incredible cross-section of this community that showed up for that event. I mean, it really truly was.

B: Okay. Well, I thank you again. This was very helpful.

C: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW