

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1525

DONALD MC KAY

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

July 15, 1992

DONALD MC KAY

Mr. Donald B. McKay was born on December 27, 1919, on the North Side of Youngstown, Ohio, the son of J. Russell and Cynthia McKay. When he was nine years old, the McKays moved to Boardman township. There, Donald attended Boardman High School, graduating in 1937.

Following high school, he attended Brown University, achieving his Bachelor of Arts Degree in June of 1941. He completed one semester of law school at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, in the fall and winter of 1941-1942, and entered the United States Army in April of 1942. After his discharge from the Army in 1946, McKay returned to Youngstown. He gained employment with the Home Savings and Loan Company, and has served there until the present day.

Throughout his life in Youngstown, Mr. McKay remained involved in the local business community. He served as an active member of many local organizations.

Presently, Mr. McKay remains employed by the Home Savings and Loan Company. He resides with his wife, Phyllis, at 7680 South Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio. He continues to be an active leader in the Youngstown community.

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INTERVIEWEE: DONALD MC KAY

INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts

SUBJECT: Jewish community, Rabbi Berkowitz, religion,  
Youngstown, Boardman, Rodef Sholom

DATE: July 15, 1992

B: This is an interview with Donald McKay for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Berkowitz project, including the Youngstown Community and the Youngstown Jewish Community, by Matthew Butts, at the Home Savings, & Loan Building, in downtown Youngstown, on July 15, 1992, at approximately 10:15 a.m.

Okay. We'll start off by asking some real brief biographical questions. Tell me something about your childhood, [such as] where you grew up [and] your education.

M: My parents lived on Halleck Street on the North Side of Youngstown. That's where I was born. We lived there until I was nine years old, when my grandmother died. My parents sold their home and moved out to my grandfather's house in Boardman, and that became my family home.

B: You attended Boardman High School?

M: Yes.

B: What was your education there like?

M: It was great. Of course, back in those days, Boardman was a very small community. I think there were 5,000 people in the entire township, and now they have more students than in the public school system alone. Our graduating class was less than 80 people in 1937, but it was a very solid mixture of suburban residents and farmers. It was a great community because everybody knew everybody else. That could lead to some complications sometimes because, not only did everybody know everybody else, but they knew what kind of a car they drove. You had to be very careful where you were seen and with whom, so that you didn't get into trouble with somebody else's boyfriend. (Laughter)

B: Describe physically what Boardman looked like, growing up?

M: In essence, from Route 224 south, it was farms, and there were a few housing developments north of 224. The first one had been largely built during the 1920s, such as Forest Glen, which is still one of the finest residential sites in the area. Like every place else, the entire community came to a standstill during the 1930s--the Depression years.

There wasn't much construction going on. It boomed during the 1920s, slowed down during the 1930s, and stopped during the war years. After that, it just exploded. What are now well-developed residential areas were farms back then. It has completely changed in nature from a very small suburban, farm-like community to a very busy metropolitan area now.

One of my favorite stories is that when I played football and basketball at Boardman, the high school was on Market Street, south of the [Route] 224 intersection. I used to have to walk home after practice (about a mile and a half) because there wasn't enough traffic on [Route] 224 to hitch a ride home. Now, more than 25,000 cars a day go through that intersection. It was a very different community then.

But, I suppose like most other communities, people struggled with the problems of the Depression, and that caused a much simpler life. It was a congenial group of people. Everybody knew each other and were friendly with each other.

B: Did you have any opportunities of coming down to downtown Youngstown?

M: Yes. As a young boy and later on, I spent a lot of time down at the YMCA. Of course, my father and grandfather both worked here in this building, and as a consequence, I was familiar with downtown Youngstown.

B: What did it physically look like?

M: It was a very busy downtown. Some place in the company archives is a picture that was taken of the area from Belmont Avenue, looking east up Federal Street in 1939. There were sidewalks jammed with people. [There were] stores of all kinds, most of which have since been torn down or emptied. It was the commercial heart of the entire area. People came downtown to shop. There were no such things as malls and that sort of thing. That picture that I mentioned shows, not only the crowds on the sidewalk, but things we had: the electric trolleys, or trolley buses. They were buses, but they ran on electricity. It was a busy, busy town. Back in those days, for example, McKelvey's Department Store, which later became Higbees, had a very large grocery store in the back end of it. People used to call in there and place grocery orders over the telephone and have the McKelvey delivery trucks deliver the grocery orders to their homes. In a way, it was one of the first supermarkets.

B: How about when you lived on the North Side? What was the North Side like? Was it a very ethnic part of the city, or was it mixed?

M: It was mixed. The thing that really made the North Side very important was the reputation and quality of the Rayen School. The Rayen School was, in those days, one of the finest educational institutions in the state. They had very strict standards and were very highly organized. For a long time, the top 10 percent of the graduating class of Rayen School could be admitted to almost any university in the country. Of course, then you had a lot of people of considerable means who lived on places like Wick Avenue and Fifth Avenue and those areas. The North Side was a very good and very stable community. I still have a number of friends who grew up there on Halleck street. Of course, eventually, almost all of them moved away to some place--Boardman, Poland, or wherever. There were several dozen families who lived on that street, who still keep in touch with each other through our long-time friendships. The North Side of Youngstown was a great place to live.

B: I see your induction into the United States Army. Where did you serve?

M: I was originally inducted into the Army in April [of] 1942 and went through basic training. After basic training, I got a chance to try out for Officers' Candidate School and got my commission as a Second Lieutenant in October, 1942. Then, I was assigned to

Kansas City, Kansas for a couple of years. From there, I had an opportunity to get into military government work and went to Yale University for six months to study Japanese and Japan. The thought, in those days, was that to win the war we were going to have to invade Japan and the casualties in the civilian population would be so great that they would need to have a military government imposed on them just to keep the society functioning. So, we were being trained to help support the remnants of the Japanese population to maintain city services. Of course, it didn't work out that way, but we spent six months at Yale University and learned to speak Japanese. Then, we went out to California and, eventually, to Japan. I was stationed in Kyoto, Japan for about six months. Because of the Atomic bombs and the Japanese surrender, the invasion never occurred. Our services were not really needed, and eventually, I got sent home in April, 1946.

B: When you returned to Youngstown, what had changed from when you had left?

M: In 1946, not a whole lot. Remember that during the Depression years, during the 1930s, the steel mills were down. The Depression was at its greatest, and economic activity in Youngstown didn't start to pick up until about 1938 or 1939, when the war was starting in Europe. Business began to boom and continued during the war years when the demand for steel and steel products of all kinds was enormous. It had become a prosperous town by 1946, and jobs were very easy to come by. In fact, employers were desperately searching for people, because there were more jobs than there were people to fill them. But, nothing really had changed except that people were employed and busy. It was still the same kind of a community. The exodus out to the suburbs didn't begin to occur until a few years after that when some of the strip plazas, the Southern Park Mall, and the Eastwood Mall were built. All of those things have changed the hopping habits of people. They began to go other places to do their shopping than downtown, and that caused the downtown to begin to shrink.

B: So, what happened to the downtown? Was it that the closing of the steel mills really didn't have much of an impact? Downtown was already pretty much. . . ?

M: It was changing. By the time the steel mills closed, it had already changed dramatically. The Southern Park Mall, for example, was the place to go. A lot of other outlying smaller plazas were drawing business away. But, everything else was changing. Up until the time in 1978 or 1979 when the steel mills closed, the four most important people in town were the heads of the

steel industries: United States Steel, Republic Steel, and Youngstown Sheet & Tube. The fourth one of the most important factors was the United Steel Workers, particularly Jim Griffin, who was a very powerful man. His labor policies affected almost every other organized labor group in the city. The steel workers were paid well, had good wages and benefits. Because they were so strong, everybody else was strong--the carpenters, the plumbers, the electricians, etc. Those four people, the union head and the three major steel industry leaders, pretty much dictated labor policies and wage patterns. After the steel mills closed, instead of having a very small number of very large employers, we began to have a large number of small employers. In many ways, I think it made for a more diverse and stronger community because you did not have power concentrated in a few hands. Instead, it was spread among many. I think the community of Mahoning County is, in many ways, stronger than it was then, because you have a whole wide diversity of interests instead a concentration of power in a few hands.

B: Okay. We're going to get into dealing with Dr. Berkowitz. Do you recall when you first met him?

M: I suppose my first recollection of Sid was as a member of the Youngstown Rotary Club. I was involved in a lot of civic enterprises of one kind or another and frequently encountered him in those areas. But, I saw more of him in the Youngstown Rotary than I did any place else. I appreciated his wisdom. I remember the day that he and a group of others who had been down in that Selma, Alabama situation, arriving back in town just in time for a Rotary Club meeting. They walked into the meeting, having come directly from Selma, and it made a huge impression on everybody when he told what had happened down there.

Sid was a very bright man and very active in so many places. He had a terrific reputation in Rotary for giving an Invocation, which consisted usually of one or two lines with a very sharp comment. I always kind of looked forward to his Invocations, because he always had a point.

B: Are there any that stick out in your mind?

M: No, not specifically. All I can remember is that when Sid gave the Invocation, you listened! (Laughter) He was a great guy.

B: Describe for me what he looked [like] physically.

M: He wasn't a big man. I don't recall exactly how tall he was, but I would say about 5 [foot] 7 or 8 [inches],

something like that. I suppose he weighed about 150 pounds. He had a quick wit and a ready smile, and a voice that was penetrating and that you paid attention to. Those are the things I remember most about him.

B: What was his role in Rotary?

M: I don't know that he ever held an official position as a board member or president. I'm not sure that he was ever anything other than an active member. If you had lunch with him, why there was always very lively conversation.

B: Did he have many interests?

M: I wasn't that close to him personally to know what his hobbies were. Of course, he had a great interest in people and was obviously very concerned with the treatment of the Black population. That was why he got so involved with that Selma situation. Of course, like a rabbi should, he was interested in people who needed his help.

B: Do you remember anything he had to say about the Civil Rights Movement?

M: Not specific words. All I know is that he found it very hard to believe that everybody wasn't as engrossed in it as he was, because he spent an awful lot of time doing what he could. I don't remember specific words, but I do recall him being astonished that people were not as avidly interested as he was.

B: You mentioned some of the other specific things that you had occasion to run into. Do you remember what any of those were?

M: Honestly, at times I belonged to so many different organizations from Red Cross to Mental Health, and I ran into him in those meetings.

B: Was he actually involved in Red Cross?

M: I don't recall specifically, but I am sure he was.

B: Would you describe him, though, as one of the leaders within the Youngstown community?

M: Certainly. He was by far, I think, their most visible spokesman and very, very good at it. [He was] respected for it.

B: Looking at the Youngstown Jewish community, growing up, did you ever feel that Youngstown had any anti-Semitism base in it?

- M: I never did. I have had a lot of friends, many of whom happened to be Jewish, but as far as I'm concerned though they are friends, not Jewish friends. I never saw any visible signs of anti-Semitism.
- B: How about Rabbi Berkowitz? You sort of alluded to him being the spokesman for the Jewish community? [Are] there any other religious figures who were in the same way for their own religious backgrounds?
- M: Oh, gosh! I'd have to stop to think. There were, and are, a lot of very, very prominent ministers who were very active in their field. Obviously, all of the Jewish community in town did not belong to Rabbi Berkowitz's temple. But, he came to a position where he was speaking for them.
- B: Did Dr. Berkowitz have a lot of contact with Bishop Malone?
- M: Bishop Malone is also one of the people that I've admired so heavily through all of my life, and I have nothing but admiration and respect for him. I would assume that they probably did have a lot of contact. After all, it would be very natural if they did. But, I don't know that, so I can't say "Yes, they did."
- B: Everybody mentions Dr. Berkowitz's great ability to be a great orator. Describe for me, when he spoke, what his magnetism like? What about his speech was so wonderful?
- M: I don't know if I can answer that. He had a way of phrasing things that caused you to pay attention to what he was saying. He had a very good command of the English language, was a talented speaker, and knew how to emphasize the points he made. Whenever he spoke, you listened. I just remember I used to enjoy listening to him because he was good. I don't know how to describe personal magnetism, but he had it.
- B: Did you have any occasion to attend any function at Rodef Shalom?
- M: No, none at all.
- B: How about, people usually. . . . The individuals I've interviewed so far have mention his sense of humor. What type of humor was it? What did he do that was so. . . ?

M: Oh, I don't know. He always had the ability to put into a few words, comments that were real apt to the situation. Then, he did it in a fashion that demonstrated his sense of humor. It's kind of a hard thing to recite, because I can't quote you anything that I specifically remember. I would say that he was a very determined person. He was not at all unwilling to debate if somebody had a different point of view than he did, and with an occasional use of sarcasm. I always enjoyed, as I've said several times, listening to him and hearing him talk both as a speaker and also just as a conversationalist. He was a sharp guy!

B: How about--was he able, not only to help the Jewish community, but the entire specific community of Youngstown?

M: Yes. I think that Sid, in particular, was very sensitive to the sufferings that the Jewish race had had historically. He was very aware of that, and therefore, he was very sympathetic to people who were in the same category--Blacks, for example. He was very sympathetic to their causes and was very outspoken about it, as he should have been. That's about all I can say about that.

I do remember one time. I was walking down the sidewalk with a Black friend of mine and Sid, and I said to the both of them that there always seemed to be a certain affinity between the Black community and the Jewish community when it came to political persuasion. I asked, "Why? Why is this so?" Both of them commented that it probably was because, historically, in their background, they both came from situations in which they were oppressed, and maybe they had a certain similar ambition which was to get away from that oppression. I can remember that conversation very clearly.

B: Was there anything that we haven't touched on that you think we should add?

M: I'm sure that there an awful lot of people who knew Sid personally far better than I did who could be more help to you than I can. As I say, my relationship never got to that of a personal thing where we'd eat lunch together or we'd visit each other's home. I wasn't that kind of friend. I was just an admirer of the talents that he displayed and the things that he did.

B: Did you have any business connections with him?

M: No.

B: Okay. Well thank you very much for your time.

M: You're very welcome. I'm afraid I'm not your best candidate.

B: No, this was very good.

M: Because I don't have the personal knowledge of him that a lot of other people would.

B: Well, this was very good. Thank you.

M: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW