

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1532

MARILYN I. OYER

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 20, 1992

MARILYN I. OYER

Mrs. Marilyn Oyer was born on August 7, 1934 in the city of Youngstown, Ohio, the daughter of Marvin and Sara Itts. Growing up on the North side of the city, Oyer attended school at Hayes Junior High School and the Rayen High School, graduating in 1952. Oyer attended the University of Michigan for one year following her graduation. She returned to Youngstown to marry Mr. S. Martin Oyer in August of 1953. Over the next twenty-five years, Mrs. Oyer stayed at home to raise her three children Randell, Jay and Susie. Along with her responsibilities at home, Mrs. Oyer became involved in a number of organizations in the Youngstown community, including Hadassah, the Youngstown Symphony Board and is an active member of the Temple Rodef Sholom.

Presently, Mrs. Oyer enjoys retired life with her husband. They reside at 3530 Fifth Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the Temple Rodef Sholom, serving as the congregational vice-president. She spends much of her time looking for antiques and listening to classical music.

-- Matthew Butts

B: This is an interview with Marilyn Oyer for the Youngstown State University Oral – History Program, on the Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on July 20 1990, at 2:30 pm.

Can you tell me something about yourself, as far as your childhood, where you grew up, your education?

O: I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio. I have lived here all my life, except for being away at college just for one year at the University of Michigan.

B: What was the city like growing up here?

O: It was a good place to grow up. My family had a lot of family in town and we visited with relatives. I had a lot of friends as a youngster. I was involved with the Jewish Community Center. I have good memories of living here.

B: What street did you grow up on?

O: When I was born, we lived on the South side. We lived there until I was about ten. Then we moved to the North side and we lived on Brookline Avenue. Then we moved to Rodonda Road. At Rodonda Road is where I met Marty. We got married in 1953. Most of our married life we have lived in this house on Fifth Avenue. We have lived here for thirty-seven years.

B: I do a lot of work with the ethnic histories. Were there ethnic neighborhoods when you were growing up? Or was any specific part of the city, say Italian?

O: I am not sure how to answer that. Maybe my husband can clarify that more when you interview him.

B: What did your parents do?

O: My parents started out in the grocery business. Then my dad opened up an aluminum company which ran until after his death until about five years ago.

B: The companies name was what?

O: Zarmar Aluminum.

B: What was your father's name?

O: Marvin Itts. I-T-T-S.

B: Your mom's name?

- O: Sara.
- B: Do you have any brothers and sisters?
- O: Yes, I do. I have a brother and a sister, both living in town.
- B: Their names are?
- O: My sister is Phyllis Landau. She is married to Dr. Mace Landau. He is a pediatric dentist, a children's dentist. They have three children. My brother also lives in town. His name is Robert Itts. He is married and has three daughters.
- B: How about your education? Did you go to Rayen High School?
- O: I graduated from Rayen High School. Before that, I went to primary school at Harding and to Hayes, and then to Rayen.
- B: What was your education at Rayen like?
- O: It was great. It was a great school. In fact, it was so funny, just five minutes ago, as I was coming at the same time you were coming home, I just waved to Mel Catzolis, who is retiring as the school superintendent. He was the president of our class. I went all through school with him. He is a great guy.
- B: Was there anything which the faculty emphasized there when you went to school that you think is different than what they emphasize now?
- O: They do have a lot of emphasis on languages. I took Latin and Spanish. I do not know that they do as much now. I am not sure, my children have been out of school a long time, so I am not sure how they handle it now. I always thought it was a well-rounded school. We had a very good athletic experience there. We had good teachers that taught gym for the women and the men. Rayen was a great school. The thing that is so sad when we had our twenty-fifth year anniversary, I had to go to see Mel Catzolis, he was still principal at Rayen. I had to go in and knock on the door and identify myself. They had to keep the doors locked and I felt real bad about that.
- B: What did the city physically look like as you were growing up?
- O: I remember when you got to Gypsy Lane, that is where the city ended. There was not anything out here. In fact, when we moved out here, Fifth Avenue did not even go through. We had to go around. That was my best recollection, that the city ended at Gypsy Lane on the North side. Of course, I had been on the North side at that point for a long time, and I was not real familiar with the South side. There were no such things as the Eastwood Mall or the Southern Park Mall

when we were young.

B: Is there anything you remember about the steel mills?

O: I remember one year we went through them from school. They took us through and I enjoyed it very much. I just knew that kids always had a summer job at the steel mills. It is sad that our city does not have that now. It is sad for the young people who cannot find a good summer job.

B: Did you come from a reformed Jewish background?

O: No, conservative.

B: Were you a member of a temple on the South side?

O: No. We were members of Anchemif Temple. Three years after we got married, Marty and I joined Rodef Sholom and we have been members there since. I am now vice-president of that congregation.

B: What are some of your duties as vice-president?

O: Keeping the budget intact, raising money, dealing with keeping the building in good shape, keeping the congregation happy.

B: Can you outline some of the differences between conservative Judaism and reformed Judaism?

O: In conservative Judaism, there are some things that you do not do in reformed Judaism. Reformed Judaism is the least emphasized of the three types of Judaism. Besides reformed and conservative, there is Orthodox. They are the most religious, reformed is the least religious. They probably do not observe the holidays as much, the Sabbath as much. Even though I belong to a reformed temple, I still consider myself to be in the conservative vein. I think my family was probably raised that way. My husband, I know, was also. Meaning we keep kosher. I imagine you know what that means. I do not now, but we did as children, because the dietary laws said that was how you did it. Meat and things are processed differently now, so it is not as important. I do not know, you observe the Sabbath in a more traditional way. Conservatism is more traditional. Reformed is more people who just go to the Temple for the holiday. They go if they have a death in the family or a birth or a wedding, that type of thing. I do not know whether I am making myself sound right or not.

B: Describe Rodef Sholom physically for me.

O: It is a gorgeous sanctuary, the main place that you worship. They have got this

beautiful Moroccan type domed ceiling. Have you ever been in it?

B: Yes.

O: It has a beautiful pipe organ. Plus it has got wonderful stained glass windows. That is the main sanctuary. We have a classroom wing where we educate children. We have a chapel that holds about seventy-five people for smaller worship services during the summer and so on. We have administration area offices. We have a social hall and a kitchen attached to that where we have wedding receptions, barmitzfa receptions, or just Temple dinners. It is a very beautiful structure. In fact, we are hoping to do some barrier free work on it in the next year. We have been raising some funds to put in an elevator and do some barrier free work in there. I know it is going to be super when we are done.

B: The main sanctuary faces toward Elm Street?

O: Right.

B: Do you recall the first time you met Dr. Berkowitz?

O: We joined that Temple in 1958. I do not exactly remember the first time. No, I cannot say that I do.

B: What did he physically look like?

O: He was just a medium size man, maybe five foot eight. He was just a nice looking gentleman, a very pleasant man.

B: Did he wear glasses?

O: Yes, he did wear glasses.

B: Do you remember the color of his hair?

O: He had dark hair.

B: What was his personality like?

O: He and I got along well. I liked him. He had a mannerism that he could get a long with anybody. It did not matter if you were a member of his congregation or not. He reached out to you. Of course, in the non-Jewish community, I do not have to tell you after talking to Bishop Malone, you know how well liked he was and how well he got a long with people. He was a gentleman. We have been very fortunate in our family. I do not know how many people can really say this, but he married all three of our children and I think that that is probably an

accomplishment that not many people can brag about. He went to Philadelphia to marry our oldest son. He went to New Jersey to marry our second son. Of course, our daughter and her husband got married here. We are very proud of that. Pauline always came with him. We were always very very good friends. He was not just our spiritual leader; he was our good friend.

B: What did he do at each one of these weddings that made it special?

O: The first wedding, our son married a girl who was Catholic, and he did participate in the service for us. He did a blessing over the married couple and just him being there was a help to us because we were not happy with the situation. Although she was a lovely person and so was her family, marrying outside of the religion was very upsetting and he kind of made it easier for us. Of course, our second son's wife was Jewish, and it was a funny situation because she was conservative and her Rabbi did not drive until after sun down. He never quite made it to the ceremony. So thank goodness Rabbi Berkowitz had come prepared with his robes. He prepared for the service and he wrote the Putuba and he did the whole service. We were very tickled with that. Then our daughter had a regular service here at Rodef Sholom. It went smooth. By then my dad was not living anymore and I would have loved to see him at that wedding, but my mother was, and she enjoyed it.

B: How would you say Rabbi Berkowitz operated the temple?

O: He was the domineering presence at the temple. He had a hand on everything. Most modern Rabbi's do not care to do that. If we had budget problems, he dove right in and helped us out. Whatever problems there were, Rabbi Berkowitz was a part of it. There was nothing that he pretty much would not do for the betterment of his community. He was proud of it. It was very sad when he passed away. He was a big loss to us.

B: Were you involved in anything else within in the temple while he was Rabbi there?

O: I was on the temple board for many years. I was always active in the temple sisterhood. I was president when he was alive. We had a very good relationship

B: Do you recall when he came to town?

O: I was too young, I do not remember that. We still have a good relationship with Mrs. Berkowitz, if you are interested about hearing about that.

B: Yes.

O: We have remained very good friends. We have gone to dinner with her. We

tried to help her over her period of griefment after Dr. Berkowitz passed away. My husband went over and helped her with certain things. Just last year, she did not want to live in her home anymore -- that was the temple parsonage. My husband saw that it was sold at a fair price so that there was some advantage to her. We have remained very close friends

B: You spoke about Dr. Berkowitz's role within the Youngstown community. How did you perceive his role in the community?

O: I was proud of it. He was president of the Red Cross. He was very active in Rotary. It was nice to have your spiritual leader so highly thought of in your community.

B: How do you think he was able to be involved in so many things at one time? Did he push himself really hard?

O: I do not know. I think he was just really interested in his community. He became friends with Bishop Malone and other people of that nature who had an influence in the city. I think that the congregation itself was happy to have him involved in things like that. It showed that our congregation cared about the people in the city. Our current Rabbi is a lot like that. He is trying to take care of the people who do not have what we have. I think that is a wonderful trait, and Dr. Berkowitz had it.

B: What is your present Rabbi's name is?

O: Jonathan Brown.

B: A little bit with Bishop Malone. Was there a lot of cross religious activity between both the Catholic community and the Rhodef Sholom?

O: Rabbi and Bishop were very good friends. They spoke on each others pulpits. Our Rabbi would have interfaith type things at our temple. Bishop Malone gave the eulogy at Rabbi Berkowitz's funeral. He has spoken in our temple quite a few times since, as recent as in May when we had our 125th anniversary. I think he is comfortable with us. Also, our temple participates in an interfaith with the other Jewish Women's organizations. Every few years it is at different temples and different churches. The women get together and have a tea once a year. This was started by a member of our congregation, Mrs. Roth. The Rabbi, I am sure, was very proud of it because it was started at our temple. He was proud that we had this association within the community. Other Sunday school classes would come in to see about our temple. We have a very beautiful temple. The Rabbi encouraged that type of thing. Our sisterhood is now involved with soup kitchen's down at St. John's. We have a lot of interaction between churches in the city.

B: What is Mrs. Roth's first name?

O: Marianne B. Roth.

B: Everybody mentions Dr. Berkowitz's ability to give great sermons and speeches. What made his speaking style so unique or special?

O: He was so intelligent. He told you things that you would not have heard any other place. He wrote beautiful speeches. He knew how to express them. He knew how to carry them over. He was just unusual. He was cut out to be a Rabbi. Have you had the pleasure of meeting either one of his sons?

B: No.

O: His one son Roger is a curator of a museum in Toledo. He looks exactly like him. He was here in May, also. Roger's wife, Rhoda, is a Professor at the Toledo Law School. Our one son who is an attorney had her as a professor. When I see Roger, I think I see Dr. Berkowitz walking in. It is quite uncanny.

B: Do you remember any specific sermons?

O: No. He spoke about everything, whatever was current. If it was the war, an election, anti-Semitism, everything was current. Plus he taught. He taught from the Torah.

B: You speak of the war. Are you referring to Vietnam?

O: Vietnam.

B: If you could, describe for me how he would run an average service? Was it very outlined?

O: A text was followed. We had prayer books. We had a High Holiday prayer book, we had a Sabbath prayer book, and a Festivals prayer book. Most of the services were one hour on our Sabbath. It was outlined, the type of prayers, the lighting of the candles, the responsive reading, the sermon, the closing prayers, and the hymns. There was kind of an outline, if you want to call it an outline, but there was a pattern to it. He ran it according to that dictated by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

B: Was he very punctual on things?

O: When the service was called for eight o'clock, you sat down and knew that at eight o'clock the service was going to start and at nine o'clock it was over. The

congregation appreciated that.

B: If you could, explain to me what the bema looks like at Rodef Sholom?

O: It is a center stairway. They are marble steps. I would say about four feet raised. These marble steps are in the center, however. Around the sides there are a small set of steps that the Rabbi comes out from one door and the cantor comes out from the other door. They have these big chairs that sit on the bema. The center is the holy arc that holds the Torahs. It is marble. It has electric doors that you push and are opened. The back of the holy arc, the Tora covers, and the bottom front of the holy arc are done in needle point. Members of the congregation did them in needle point. They are very vivid colors. They are intertwined with bronze, gold, and silver threads. Above that is the choir loft. This is where you see the exposed pipes of the organ.

B: How about some other personality traits of Dr. Berkowitz?

O: I think his ability to remember people. He met you once, saw you, and knew your family. There will never be another Rabbi in my mind that will equal him. There are other good Rabbi's, but there was just something about him. I guess it was his charisma. He was special. I know a lot of people feel that way. A lot of people for that reason do not have patience. We had Rabbi Brown with us for seven years. He was a nice young man. He had a tough job. He was chosen by Rabbi Berkowitz to succeed him. A lot of people just make too many comparisons, not realizing that no two people are alike. It is very difficult on this Rabbi. There will be some people who will never be satisfied. There is not a darn thing they can do about it and they should realize it, but they do not.

B: What was the name of Rabbi that followed Dr. Berkowitz?

O: David Powers.

B: How about Dr. Berkowitz's sense of humor? A lot of people mention that about him.

O: A lot of people might have thought he was a little too sarcastic. I thought he had a good sense of humor.

B: He was good on play-on words?

O: Yes, in my opinion he was.

B: In my research, I have noticed a large increase in the number of congregates at Rodef Sholom during Rabbi Berkowitz's tenure there. Was it basically out of the magnetism of his personality? What could be some other reasons?

- O: Probably a couple of reasons. His personality, I am sure, had a lot to do with it. A lot of people were embracing reformed Judaism rather than conservative because it did not make as many demands on you. I think people liked that. At that time, there were more young people in the city. A lot of them no longer stay here. A lot of young people do not tend to stay here anymore. That is probably a couple of the reasons.
- B: Presently, are all three sections of Judaism present in Youngstown?
- O: Yes.
- B: Conservative, Orthodox, and Reformed?
- O: Yes.
- B: Are the congregations basically divided equally among each?
- O: No. I am sure there are probably more conservative Jews than there are reformed Jews.
- B: Is there anything that we have not touched on that you think we need to add?
- O: I would probably just like to summarize in my little time with you saying that I feel my family is probably one of the luckier ones having had him for our spiritual leader while my children were growing up. I feel very fortunate that we knew Rabbi Berkowitz. He was our friend. I hope our association will continue many years with the temple no matter who the spiritual leader is. He has left a very positive mark on our family.
- B: Did your children ever have anything to say about both the confirmation or Sunday school with him?
- O: They all went to Sunday school. We never gave our children a choice. It was a part of growing up. They all were confirmed. My boy's had their barmitzfa's. I am sure they all had a positive experience.
- B: Did he have a good rapport with the younger members?
- O: Yes, he did. There are people that you do not ever satisfy. We were happy to be a part of his congregation. He left us at too young of an age.
- B: When he stepped down as Rabbi, what was his position then? A scholar in residence?
- O: I am not sure what his title was at that time. Whether it was Rabbi Emeritus, that

is possible, but I am not positive.

B: Was he still perceived as the leader of the congregation?

O: Probably by most people, even though we hired a new Rabbi. Unfortunately, he passed away soon after the new Rabbi came, so we did not deal with it for very long because he passed away sooner than anyone expected.

B: Was he still very involved in the community?

O: Yes.

B: He did not cut back at all?

O: Not too much, as far as I know. He must have been sicker than we knew.

B: You mentioned the American Red Cross. What are some other community activities that he was active in? Do you know if he was active in a civil right's movement? United Way?

O: I assume that he was active in the United Way, but I do not want to say for sure. I know he was active in Rotary and the Red Cross. I am sure probably most everything. I do not want to say for sure, because I am not positive.

B: Is there anything else that we have not touched on that you think we should add?

O: I think we have done a good job.

B: Thank you very much.

O: Thank you Matthew. Nice meeting you.

B: Nice meeting you.

End of Interview