

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

Rabbi Berkowitz

O.H. 1536

DANIEL B. ROTH

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 22, 1992

DANIEL B. ROTH

Attorney Daniel Roth was born on September 17, 1929 in Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Benjamin and Marion Roth. Growing up on the Northside of the city, Roth attended school at Hayes Junior High School and the Rayen High School, graduating in 1947.

Following high school, Roth attended Miami University of Ohio, achieving his Bachelor of Science degree in Finance in 1951. He then entered the United States Air Force. He served as an officer on active duty from 1951 to 1953 when he entered the Air Force Reserves. While serving in the Reserves, Roth attended law school at Case Western Reserve University. Following his graduation in 1956, Roth returned to Youngstown to practice law. Throughout his life in Youngstown, Roth served the community in various civic and business endeavors. He also maintained his involvement in the United States Air Force Reserves as a Lt. Colonel until his retirement in 1977.

Presently, Roth is a President of the Law Firm of Roth, Stephens, Blair, Roberts and Company. He is also Vice Chairman of both Torent Incorporated and the McDonald Steel Corporation. He is a former President of the Temple Rodef Sholom and resides with his wife, JoAnn, in Youngstown, Ohio. He continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Temple Rodef Sholom. He enjoys spending much of his free time cruising long distances aboard his yacht.

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INTERVIEWEE: DANIEL B. ROTH
INTERVIEWER: Matthew Butts
SUBJECT: Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz
DATE: July 22, 1992

B: This is an interview with Daniel B. Roth for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Berkowitz project, including the Youngstown Jewish Community. The interview is taking place in the Bank One Building in Downtown Youngstown, Ohio, on July 22, 1992, at 5:10 p.m.

Okay. We'll get started now. We normally start off with some biographical questions about the interviewee. Tell me something about your childhood, [such as] where you grew up and where you attended school, things like that.

R: I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio. I attended Harding Elementary school, Hayes Junior High School, and the Rayen School. I left Youngstown to attend Miami University in Oxford, Ohio for four years. I then served in the Air Force during the Korean War for a period of three years, and then attended Case Western Reserve University Law School in Cleveland. After graduating with my law degree in 1956, I

returned to Youngstown where I started practicing law and I have remained in Youngstown ever since.

B: What was it like growing up in Youngstown? What do you remember about your childhood here?

R: Having grown up during the Depression, I was actually aware of the economics of the community even at the grade school age, because there were so many children who really were in very difficult financial circumstances. But as far as I was concerned, I think of it as having a very normal, very happy childhood. When Pearl Harbor occurred, I would have been 11 years of age, and I can distinctly recall the emotion and trauma surrounding the beginning of the war. I can certainly also recall growing up and attending school during the war years. When I was in high school, a number of my fellow classmates dropped out of school to enlist and, interestingly enough, when I got to college, it was immediately after the end of World War II. So, many of the students who were in my class were veterans of some pretty heavy combat. Of course, my turn came when Korea broke out. None of us who were in good health escaped military service in those days. But as far as my childhood is concerned, I think it was a normal growing up on the North Side of Youngstown during the Depression.

B: Was there any ethnic flavor to the North Side? Were there any distinct ethnic groups? Were there any Italians or Jewish cultivations?

R: I think that there were sort of geographic areas. When I attended grade school at Harding, it was a mixed group, but from the upper class and upper middle class as far as socioeconomic situations were concerned. When I got to Hayes Junior High School, which was more of a melting pot of the whole North Side and continuing through Rayen, I think there were delineations. You had the Smokey Hollow group, which is located just east of Youngstown State University. You had the Brier Hill group, which of course, is over on the other side of the North Side, the west side of the North Side. Then, your upper North Side. During Hayes, I think there was a very definite delineation and tension between those three groups. By the time we got into Rayen High School, I think that the delineation had become pretty fuzzy and most of the people were able to get along pretty well. Yes. There were definitely differences because of the economics during the Depression.

B: How about the Rayen High School? What was your education like there?

R: Well, first of all, I think Harding Elementary School prepared us very well. There was a very progressive, excellent training ground. I frequently think of Hayes, the education during the seventh and eighth grades, as almost being a loss as far as book learning is concerned, but on the other hand, I have joked in the past that if you could survive life at Hayes, you can face anything in your adult life, because it was really a pretty rough place to go to school. Fights, knife fights were very, very common. I would say that Hayes was a very rough place to get through. By the time we got to Rayen, things were

calming down. A number of the real trouble makers at Hayes had never continued school. they just dropped out before they got to Rayen High School, or they enlisted in the military.

So, I think of Rayen as having given us a very good education. I think, at that time, academically, Rayen was probably one of the best schools in the Youngstown area. It prepared me very well for college, as far as I could tell. I did not have any problem academically in college, and I think I got the basis for that in Harding and in Rayen.

B: Do you remember any teachers that have had a major impact on you, from Rayen or Hayes?

R: There was Miss Seeger, who was our Latin teacher, but a strict disciplinarian from the old school. There was Dr. Andrews, who was my Spanish teacher, who made us realize that you could teach with a great sense. And of course, the athletic coaches, whom I knew pretty well because I was active in athletics. But, probably the representative of the old school would be Miss Seeger. I was also very close to Mr. Nishwitz, who was the director of the choir, because I was very active in music. I think he had a great deal of influence on my future.

B: I'm intrigues with the athletics you were involved in. Was Ralph Robinette coaching there?

R: He arrived while I was still there. I think he became head football coach while I was there but he was not head football coach when I arrived. I think that Mr. Coma was. They were both there during my four years, but I don't remember the years that each one of them was active. It seems to me Mr. Coma was in charge when I got there, and Robinette replaced him.

B: He's coaching out at a high school I'm involved with.

R: Is he still around?

B: Yes. Yes. He's still coaching as a matter of fact.

R: I wonder how old he is? He's got to be in his seventies.

B: Oh, eighties. In his mid-eighties and he's still a wonderful football coach.

R: More power to him.

B: What did Youngstown physically look like, as far as the downtown area?

R: Certainly, your retail center was downtown. Your offices were downtown. I lived on the upper North Side on Elm Street, not far from Gypsy Lane. Gypsy Lane was the end of the city. There were very few people living out in Liberty Township. I think that's true in Boardman, too. There's no question that downtown was where the action was. When we could get the money to ride the bus from the North Side to downtown Youngstown, that was exciting. That's where the stores were. That's where the theaters were. That's even where the soda fountains were. It was the place where the action was. There was no such thing as an outlying retail center like we have now.

B: What do you remember about the steel mills growing up?

R: I knew that steel was vital to the community, even as a child. I can still clearly remember the color orange in the sky when the open hearths were very active. I can remember, of course, we didn't have any air conditioning, so in the warm weather we'd leave our doors open. I remember steel dust on the window sills, but I think that even as a child all of the kids realized that this was the life blood of the community.

B: How about Idora Park? Did you have many opportunities to go there?

R: Yes. Idora Park was a great place to go. There again, it was one of the main attractions of the area.

B: Did your family always belong to Rodef Sholom?

R: Yes. From the time that my parents were married in 1919, they belonged to Rodef Sholom. I would say my family is one of the oldest families historically in the temple that still has people in the congregation.

B: Were all three sects within Judaism present: Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform?

R: Yes.

B: Do you remember where each one's synagogue would have been located?

R: Rodef Sholom, at that time, was located on Elm Street. When I attended there--I started in the first grade--it was located on the corner of Elm and Woodbine, just as it is now. At that time, the congregation was located on Elm Street, a block or so south of where Rodef Sholom is. When I was a child, Ohev Tzedek congregation, which is located on Glenwood, had not yet been built. I think that was perhaps built at the end of World War II, but they did have Children of Israel and Temple Emanuel, which were the more Orthodox, and I cannot even recall where they were located.

B: What was the area around Rodef Sholom like?

- R: Oh, it was a very beautiful area. Very large homes that are still there. The homes on Broadway and Park Avenue were certainly some of the most beautiful homes in the city, and I would say that as a child that was a very nice area of the city.
- B: Using today as a landmark, describe what the temple looks like physically, both from the outside and from the inside.
- R: That's a difficult question for a person who is not an architect. I'll take the interior first. The sanctuary is very beautiful. It has a stage area, which is called a bema. That is where the rabbi and the cantor sit. That is where the arc is built, which contains the Torah. The synagogue seats, I think, perhaps 300 or more people. (There are) beautiful chandeliers, beautiful stained glass windows, and a balcony. Then, we have a library and of course we have offices. We have the main office in which the secretaries are located, and the rabbi has his office. The cantor has his office. The school principal has her office. Then we have classrooms. As far as the outside is concerned, I think it looks like a building that was designed for religious purposes. It has the look of a building that has been there for a long time. During the last 15 years, the congregation was able to purchase all of the homes going east on the block between Elm Street and Kensington. We also bought the homes running in a southerly direction along Kensington, so we were able to tear all those houses down and build a very large parking lot, which has been provided with excellent lighting. We can have festivities at the temple and get a group of 300 or 400 people there without a parking problem.
- B: Within the Bema, where would Rabbi Berkowitz deliver his sermons from?
- R: There are normally two podiums. If you were sitting out with the congregation, Rabbi Berkowitz and our present rabbi would be standing at the podium on your right. Then, between the two podiums, you would have the arc holding the Torah. Then, on the left hand side looking from the audience, that is another podium that would be used by the cantor. The seating is pretty much the same way.
- B: Do you recall what Rabbi Berkowitz wore to services?
- R: He would wear a black robe and sometimes a scarf, so to speak, of religious symbols, which would be in white. But basically he would wear a black robe, similar to what a judge would wear in a court room.
- B: Describe for me what he physically looked like.
- R: I would guess that he was roughly 5 feet 9 inches tall, of average weight. You would not think of him as being thin, but you wouldn't think of him as being fat. I would say he had a solid build. Glasses. He looked like an educated person, and certainly once you met him, you knew he was a highly educated person. Nice looking man. Thinning hair.

- B: Do you recall the first time you had the opportunity to meet him?
- R: Rabbi Berkowitz arrived at congregation Rodef Sholom about 1946. I would have been in my senior year in high school. Although I don't remember the specific occasion, I know that I would have met him that first year simply because my family was so active in the congregation. He remained at Youngstown during the entire time that I was away at college, so I did not have much contact in that four year period.
- B: Describe a child's religious education within the Jewish community.
- R: In those days--and I'm distinguishing the current days and the way I was raised--children who attended Rodef Sholom were given a Classic Reform Judaism education. I did not study Hebrew. I was not bar mitzvahed. I was confirmed, and this was the standard for the children of a Reform Jewish congregation in those days. We did not wear Yalmukas on our head. We wore nothing on our head. We were taught a lot about the Jewish faith in terms of what it stood for and the meanings of the different holidays and the history, but we were not given any education in Hebrew. We were not trained as the children are today. I have seen definite swing back towards a more Conservative to Orthodox Judaism during the last 10 or 15 years. But, when I was a child, we were raised in what today would be called the Classic Reform portion of Judaism.
- B: Where would Rabbi Berkowitz fall within the spectrum? Would he be termed Classic Reform or . . . ?
- R: When he arrived, I think he thought of himself as a Classic Reform rabbi, but I think that he had the vision and foresight to understand that a certain number of members of the congregation wanted a more ritualistic portion of the religion. So, he was instrumental in having the congregation hire our first cantor. When I was growing in the temple, we never had a cantor. The first time that we had a cantor, was a few years after Rabbi Berkowitz arrived. As a result of Rabbi Berkowitz bringing a cantor to the congregation and of bringing more Hebrew into the services, Rodef Sholom began to attract more members of the Jewish community who were leaning towards Reform but had hesitated to leave the Conservative branch of Judaism because they felt it was too great of a departure.
- B: Who was the first cantor? Do you remember the name?
- R: Yes, certainly. Larry Erlich, Cantor Erlich.
- B: What were some of the responsibilities of the cantor?
- R: My understanding of it is that he was in charge of the music program. He assisted Rabbi Berkowitz in officiating in different types of religious ceremonies. He participated in the services by chanting the prayers. He was also running the religious school. He trained children for confirmation and, for those children who were going to receive a bar mitzvah, he trained them. So, he was very instrumental in the operation of the congregation and the temple.
- B: When you began to practice law there, was Rabbi Berkowitz already very active within the

community?

R: Yes. I didn't come back to Youngstown until 1956. That meant that he had been here for ten years already, and perhaps longer. I'm not sure of the years.

B: What were some of the things he was involved in? Do you know?

R: I remember that he was very active in the community in general. He was extremely active in the American Red Cross, Rotary International. I think he was involved with the hospitals. But, I think of him as having been a very active asset in the community. I'm sure there are many, many, many organizations that he was affiliated with, but I guess that the two that stick in my mind most prominently were Rotary and the American Red Cross.

B: Are you a member of the Rotary?

R: No. No, I'm not.

B: Tell me a little bit about how he would run a service at Rodef Sholom.

R: Normally he would start off with prayers and reading sections from our prayer book. We used a book that is not used very much anymore. The normal Friday night service would last perhaps an hour, of which perhaps twenty minutes would constitute a sermon. I always enjoyed his sermons. Rabbi Berkowitz was a Rhodes Scholar, as I'm sure you know. He was a very intelligent individual, and this was reflected in his sermons. They were quite educational. So that, out of the hour, which I would say were about twenty minutes totally devoted to his sermons, perhaps another 10 minutes to music, and then, the other half or so to prayers.

B: A lot of people do mention his ability to be a great orator, having a very meaningful style of speech. What made it so unique to you?

R: I think he was an exciting speaker because he not only had great intelligence, but he had an excellent sense of humor and he was a great orator. He could not only think about what he was going to say and make it interesting, but he had the ability to deliver a speech, and at times, get you quite swept away with his emotionalism. On the other hand, he could work humor into his sermons, so he kept you awake, one way or another.

B: What stands out in your mind? Do you recall anything specific?

R: Well, not any specific incident, but generally speaking, he had a great sense of humor, as does his wife, Pauline. I think of Rabbi Berkowitz as having a great sense of humor, and I think of Pauline Berkowitz the same way. They were both delightful people.

B: Were you involved in anything with the board at the temple at any point?

R: Oh, yes. I became deeply involved. Unfortunately, I do not remember the years, but I'm going to guess that I went on the board while I was still in my 30's and remained on the board for perhaps eight or ten years, at which time I became a member of the executive committee and ultimately

served as president of the congregation. So, yes. And I have been the lawyer for the congregation for years on a non-fee basis.

B: As president of the board, what were your duties?

R: If I were to take a legal pad and try to list the duties, I think I could use up three or four pages of long yellow paper. Certainly, you're charged with the responsibility of conducting the meetings of the board and of the congregation as a whole, but that was probably the least part of your duties. You were chairman, in reality, of many, many committees, but you normally have to cope with daily decisions. I would have to say that during the two years that I served as president, I don't believe that one week would have gone by that I did not have something of importance and sometimes of great importance to deal with in the congregation. I felt a definite responsibility to become involved every time a member of the congregation died. I wanted to be involved in every occasion of members of the congregation, which would be fitting for a representative of the temple to become involved in. And, of course, working with the rabbi, working with the cantor, working with the office staff. So, I would say that the role of the president of the congregation of this size is a very demanding responsibility.

B: How did Dr. Berkowitz work with the board? Was he involved with the board also?

R: Well, of course he was never a member. He was never a voting member of the board. There would be many times when the board would meet without either the rabbi or the cantor being present. For, example, we would be discussing their compensation or a question of that nature. They would not be present, but he was not only a presence at every board meeting, but an active participant. We would start our board meetings by his offering a prayer. Then, during the meetings, we would frequently ask his opinion, counsel, and advice. He was certainly very free at giving the advice, which we wanted.

B: How would you say that he ran the temple and other activities?

R: He was highly talented as an administrator and had the ability to select good employees. I think we had two secretaries when he was there, and I think they were both very long term employees of the temple. The people who worked with him had the greatest respect and feelings for him. He was able to handle a myriad of daily problems and not ignore his responsibilities as our religious leader.

B: How about his dealings with other religions in Youngstown?

R: I think this was one of his strong points. He established an excellent rapport with representatives of--I want to say all of the other faiths in our area, but I'm afraid to be so general. I know he had a very close relationship with Bishop Malone of the Catholic Diocese. He was close to the members of the Council of Churches in Youngstown. I think that they held him in very great esteem. He also frequently traded pulpits with ministers and priests from other religious organizations.

B: So, you think he did a lot to develop a basic understanding of the various religious beliefs?

- R: I think that he undertook, as one of his responsibilities, making the community in general more aware and intelligent of the Jewish faith. One of the reasons I think that he became so active in the community activities was not just because of his love of doing so, but because I think he felt that the Jewish faith should be recognized as being interested in the community. Certainly, he was a leader in the community.
- B: What so you think his impact on the Youngstown Jewish community was?
- R: Very, very strong. I'm going to guess--and this is definitely a guess--that the size of our congregation probably doubled from the years before his arrival until the time of his death. If it did double, it was because of his appeal to not only Reform Jews, but Conservative Jews. Today, I think many of the members of the congregation would have still been members of other congregations if it hadn't been for Dr. Berkowitz.
- B: There's a couple things I came across when I was doing my research for this project. Do you know if he was very active within the Civil Rights movement within the city?
- R: I believe he was. I know that he frequently attended meetings with members of the black community. Now that I think about it with your question, I think that he was active in the Buckeye Elks, but I'm not sure of that. I know that he would invite members of the clergy of minority groups, such as the blacks to participate in our services, and I believe that he did the same with them.
- B: How about the labor situation in Youngstown? Was he ever involved with the organized labor, trying to advance its cause?
- R: As, I recall, when the steel mills shut down, he became very involved with the clergy group who were desperately attempting to soften the economic impact upon the community. I don't think that he thought of it as union versus non-union. But I think he was looking at the overall economic disaster that was being faced by the community and attempted to work with members of the clergy to figure out some way of softening the impact.
- B: Was it part of the "Save Our Valley" campaign?
- R: I can't recall the name of it, but I do recall that he was very active in it.
- B: Do you recall him making any speeches or any sermons dealing with the Vietnam War?
- R: I don't recall anything off-hand, and I honestly don't recall even his feelings on the situation, but don't forget that he was a combat veteran himself. I think he held that rank of major in the Chaplain's Corp during World War II, so I would assume that any views that he had would have been colored by his own combat experience.
- B: Is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you think we need to add?
- R: Yes. I think that we should comment on the fact that he was a good family man. He raised several very outstanding children and was very active socially, he and his wife. I think if he were living today, he'd be very proud of the progress that his children have made in the world.

B: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

R: No, other than the fact that I would say even to this day that he is really missed by not only the congregation but by the community in general.

B: Thank you very much.

R: It was my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW