

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sindney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1538

ESTHER SACOLICK

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 14, 1992

ESTHER SACOLICK

Mrs. Esther Sacolick was born on December 17, 1936 in the city of Toronto, in the nation of Canada, the daughter of Louis and Freda Davidson. She attended secondary school at Central Commerce located in Toronto, Ontario, graduating in 1954.

Following high school, Sacolick soon married Mr. Eugene Sacolick. Mr. Sacolick was a native of Youngstown, Ohio. Because of the employment opportunities in Youngstown, the Sacolicks decided to move to Youngstown. They arrived here in January of 1956. Soon after, Mrs. Sacolick delivered the first of three children, Fern Sacolick. Mrs. Sacolick stayed at home with her children as they grew to maturity. Eventually she took a job with the Youngstown Auto Salvage Pool in 1970, working there until 1980. In 1982, Mrs. Sacolick took a job with the Congregation Rodef Sholom as a bookkeeper. Along with her job, Sacolick also serves as an active member of both the local chapter of ZOA, Na Amet, Ohev Tzedek Temple.

Presently, Sacolick is still employed at the Temple Rodef Sholom. She resides with her husband at 414 Jaronte Drive Youngstown, Ohio. She continues to be an active member of the congregations of both the Temple Ohev Tzedek and Temple Rodef Sholom. She spends much of her free time both cooking and reading.

B: This is an interview with Esther Sacolick for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz, by Matthew Butts, on July 14, 1992, at Temple Rodef Sholom, at 12:30 P.M.

Tell me something about yourself as far as your childhood, like where you grew up and your education?

S: I come from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I have four older brothers. I am the youngest and the only girl. I was brought up in an Orthodox background. My father and mother were Orthodox Jews. I now am really a Conservative/Reform Jew. I belong to Ohev Tzedek Temple, we have for many years, but I am also a member of this [Rodef Sholom] congregation because I have worked here. So both temples are really in my heart. I had a high school education. My father was from the old school; girls did not have to go to college and boys went to college. Girls got married and had families. I am sure if he were alive today that he would feel differently. I was married right out of high school. So I really never had a higher education. I thought about it many times, but when you are raising kids, it just never came to pass.

B: What did your father do?

S: My father was a house painter. That was his vocation.

B: What was his name?

S: Louis Davidson.

B: Your mother's name was?

S: Freda.

B: Your brothers and sisters?

S: I had four older brothers. My oldest brother's name is Al. He lives in Florida now. My next brother is Mannie. He lives in Toronto and is retired. My third brother's name is Harvey. He lives in California. My fourth brother's name is Murray. He is a physician in Toronto.

B: When did you arrive in Youngstown?

S: In January of 1956.

B: What was it like when you came here?

S: My first visit to Youngstown, I have to be honest, I never heard of Youngstown, Ohio until I met my husband. He was born and raised in Youngstown. I have heard of Youngstown, New York which is right across the lake from Toronto. I was still a kid. I was eighteen years old. I thought all cities in the United States were like what I was used to seeing in the movies. Which meant New York or Hollywood, California.

When I came here, I realized it is a small town in comparison to where I came from. I remember one of the sights to see was taking a ride to see the steel mills and the red skies from the steel mills. I remember my first reaction was, "So. What else is there?" I was a very young person then. Of course at that time, I did not realize that I was going to be living here someday.

When I met my husband, he came to Toronto to look for work there. His mother came from Europe to Toronto. He had a lot of family there. He was thinking of possibly getting a job and living there. That is when we met. My mother was also very ill. When I was a senior in high school, my mother found out she had cancer.

During my senior year of high school, I did a lot of growing up. I took care of my mother and my father. The youngest of my brothers was still at home. He was just to be going into college and finishing high school. I grew up to face a lot of responsibilities my senior year in high school. After my mother passed away a year after I was married, my husband's father convinced us to come back to Youngstown.

When I first came to Youngstown, it was about six weeks after my mother died. It was very difficult. It was so soon after my mother died and I was leaving my father and my brother at home to fend for themselves. That was difficult for me when I first came here, but after awhile you make friends and I realized that my father and my brother were going to be all right. You make a life for yourself and start having children.

It took me seven years to become a United States citizen because my husband kept saying, "We'll go back." Then he said, "Maybe," and "Someday." Then it became, "Forget it. We are not going back. We are staying here." So, I decided that if I am going to live in the United States and I had children and I wanted to be able to vote for school levies. I wanted them to go to good schools. We have lived in Boardman since I have been here. I became a United States citizen after seven years. I could have applied after three years, but I kept thinking, "We are going to be moving back to Toronto."

B: What was Boardman like when you first moved there in comparison to today?

S: It has expanded enormously. It was a big community then, but it certainly has changed and expanded.

B: What street did you live on first?

S: I lived on Rockdale. Which is just north of Route 224. I remember from our dinette window, we would be sitting and having our breakfast and I could look out over a field and look at Boardman Plaza. Within a year or two, they started building houses so I could no longer see the plaza.

B: Did you get many opportunities to come to Downtown Youngstown? Was that still a thriving commercial area?

S: Yes. You went Downtown to go shopping. Strouss's and McKelvy's was Downtown. The two big department stores were basically Downtown. So, if you wanted to do shopping you went Downtown to Strouss's or McKelvy's. Before long, they built the Southern Park Mall. I think it was when they started building malls that people stopped going Downtown.

B: Describe for me the three different sects within Judaism? Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform?

S: I always felt that growing up in an Orthodox home that there were a lot of limitations on me and things that I was not permitted to do. The holidays were wonderful. Family was always a very big part of my life and my parents life. The children, aunts and uncles, and cousins, the family was always very important and the high Holy days were always very important.

The Sabbath was always observed in our home. Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday evening. Candles were always lit. There was the prayer of the wine. Family was always together for the Sabbath meal. All of my fathers life he always went to temple on the Sabbath. The limitations I had was you do not ride on the Sabbath. Sabbath is the day of rest. I used to argue with my father that if you are supposed to rest, that why do we have to walk everywhere.

The question always came up that you do not turn on lights on Sabbath. When I was very little girl, we had a coal burning stove in the kitchen, and you are not supposed to light the stove. That stove was what we used for cooking and heat. My father or my brothers or my mother could not light that stove on the Sabbath. So, there was a non-Jewish person who would come to our house on the Sabbath and light that stove. My parents did not do it. Very observant to that affect.

Of course, as I got older, that is when the limitations came. I was not allowed to do this or that. I resented it a lot of time. On Friday evening before sundown, the kitchen light was turned on and it would stay on all night because you were not supposed to turn the electricity off or on. I used to say to my father, "Back in Biblical days I could understand that building a fire was work," now "all you do is go over and flick a switch." But the idea is, somebody is working to make that electrical power go.

My father never really gave me satisfactory answers. He was a very good and charitable person and you did not ask questions in those day, you just did it because you were told to do it. When I moved to Youngstown, I joined a Conservative temple because as an adult, you are living your own life. It is not that the Sabbath is not observed. It certainly is. Of course, one of the things in Orthodox Judaism is that you observe the Koshreth, keeping Kosher. You certainly did not eat things that were not Kosher. You did not mix meat and dairy food. Everything was separate. You had a separate set of dishes for dairy meals or meat meals. You had separate pots and pans and

cooking utensils. We had separate dish towels.

My mother would make her own dish towels. She would buy yards and yards of cloth. The dish towels for the meat had red strips and the ones for the dairy dishes had a blue strip. In Conservative, they do ask people to observe the Koshreth also, but many people do not. When I first moved to Youngstown and had my own home, I did not keep Kosher. I observed the Koshreth, but it became very difficult for me because there was one Kosher butcher shop in Youngstown where I had to get my meat. There was a Kosher poultry place where you could get Kosher chickens. I used to get all my meat from Toronto. Toronto is a very large city with a large Jewish community and large Kosher butcher shops. It is not hard to keep Kosher.

We would go up to visit my family and I had a friend who had a Kosher butcher shop. So, I would write him a letter and tell him I want ten pounds of ground meat, one pound packages. He would get it all ready for me. A half a dozen ribs steaks and he would put two in a package. A roast that was three or four pounds. He made it very easy for me. He would get it ready for me and freeze it. I would pick it up and pack it in dry ice and come home and stick it in my freezer. He marked and labeled everything for me. It was wonderful. Of course, in those years I could spend a hundred dollars to fill my small freezer.

Since I started having children, we were not going to Toronto as often. I started buying meat here. I did not have a car available to me to go Downtown because the butcher shop was Downtown. So, my husband would stop on the way home from work. They would close at six and he would get there at like five to six to pick it up. I remember calling Downtown and saying, "You know I will be a steady customer and I want you to give me nice meat. I cannot come down and pick it up myself. You will have a steady customer." Well, number one: I was paying more money because they did not have a Kosher slaughter house here in Youngstown. Everything was brought in from either Cleveland or Pittsburgh. So of course the shop here would charge a little more which was understandable. I knew that I would have to pay more than I was used to paying. In Toronto, for one thing, he was a friend and he would give me a discount. I was not happy with the product. I was really unhappy with the type of meat that I was getting.

Today there are a lot of people in Youngstown that still keep Kosher, but they go to Cleveland or Pittsburgh to buy their meat. Some of them have a little co-op where they order the meat as a group and it is brought into Youngstown. In those years, they did not have anything like that and you either went into Cleveland or you went into Pittsburgh. That was impossible for me to do at that time. So, I stopped keeping Kosher. It was difficult the first time I went into a super market and I went over to the meat counter to choose meat, but it was something I got used to pretty fast. I still do not eat pork. I do not take pork in the house or pork products. It is something that I do not like to do. Many people who say they keep Kosher in their home go out to a restaurant and eat. They eat non-Kosher foods in restaurants, but their home is Kosher. Certainly Conservative Judaism is much more liberal than Orthodox.

Now we come to Reform and again that is again a much more liberal way of

thinking. It is more up to date. Conservative Judaism now, too, is involved in what is going on in the community and in the greater world. I think when I was growing up Orthodox, you were concerned about your own little group in your particular synagogue or the Orthodox community rather than the greater world. We were always taught to be charitable. When I grew up, believe me, we did not have very much. There was five children in three rooms, but there was always that little blue box, the charity box, even if it was a couple of pennies. We were always brought up to be charitable to others and to help those less fortunate. I always grew up with that. Like I say, even if it was pennies in that little charity box.

I remember my mother turning collars on shirts, you know, the collar would get worn. She would turn the collar so that the worn part was on the under side. I remember my mother making me little pinafores or aprons from shirts that were too worn already or the collar had been turned but the back was still good. So my mother would make things from that. The charity box always got something.

That is the kind of background that I had. I was always a people person. Even as a youngster I was involved in organizations and was vice president of this or chairman of that in the youth organization that I belonged to. After coming to Youngstown, I got involved in charitable organizations and the Sisterhoods and the temple. I was always involved. I guess that is one of the reasons I enjoy my job here because I am dealing with people and I feel I get a long well with people. I am certainly an extrovert. I really do love people and I guess that is why I enjoy this job.

B: How about a woman's role within the three branches of Judaism?

S: It has changed greatly. I believe even in Orthodox church. For one thing, in Orthodox Judaism, women are not permitted to do certain things. In Conservative, it used to be that way. It is no longer. For example, a woman was not allowed to touch the Torah. I am sure you know what the Torah is. It is an honor for a man to be called up on the bema and say the prayer by the Torah. A woman was never permitted to touch the Torah, read from the Torah. As a matter of fact, in Orthodox Judaism the women were segregated from the men. In Conservative Judaism that is not so.

When I first came to Youngstown and joined the Conservative temple certainly a woman was not permitted to read from the Torah, touch the Torah, to be counted as part of the ten persons needed for a service. That has changed. Now we are permitted. We are not the step down from the men any longer. I do recall vividly when we changed at the temple where I belong we had some of our older members who still leaned to the Orthodox ways and when they were going to vote on allowing the women have an aliyah. It is called an aliyah when you are called to say the special blessing before the Torah. When we were going to vote on allowing women to have an aliyah or allowing women to be counted, as in minyan as a tenth person for services, one of the older members who really was a very sweet man whom I respected and admired came in before I went to the meetings and asked, "Esther, what are you going to be doing in there?" And I said, "I have not made up my mind yet." Even though I had, I did not want to upset him. I

remember him shaking his finger at me saying, "Esther, remember." I do not know what he wanted me to remember, but we did vote on it. Women were permitted to come up on the bema and have an aliyah and be counted in a minyon.

The very first time I had, I agreed to do an aliyah because it is a honor when you are asked to participate, he happened to be up there standing at the pulpit with the Rabbi. When the Rabbi rolls the Torah open to the portion that he is going to read, that is when you say the special blessing. What you are supposed to do, in Conservative Judaism the men wear the prayer shawl, the tallis, you touch the Torah with the tassel on the end of the tallis. Women do not wear a tallis, so the Rabbi said that we could use a binder that goes around the Torah and take it and touch that portion and then touch it to our lips. This gentleman, who shall remain nameless, was up there and when I went to touch the Torah he rolled it shut real fast so I would not touch it. (Laughter) I remember I got so upset he made me so nervous that I felt like lightening was going to come down and strike me or something. I was really doing something against our faith and I should not do it. My father would have probably been the same way because my father was Orthodox.

Now, women do take their place beside the men in Conservative Judaism because certainly they are allowed to be Rabbis and Cantors now. So, that is nice. The Reform, as far as services, is much shorter than Orthodox or Conservative. I must say, that in Reform services, there is a lot more decorum than there is in Orthodox or Conservative. When you say here, for example, at Rodef Sholom that the service begins at ten, it begins at ten and people are there and the service is over at eleven. Conservative or Orthodox, the service does begin at nine fifteen in the morning, for example, but most people do not come until ten and some come at ten thirty. They get up and they walk in and they walk out. That does not mean that they do not care, there just is not as much decorum, in Orthodox or Conservative services. I think we all are heading in the same direction. We are just taking a little different path.

B: Could you please describe Rodef Sholom for me? What does it physically look like?

S: We just celebrated 125 years. We have not been in this building 125 years but the congregation is 125 years old. The physical building, and especially the sanctuary, although it is very old, is a very beautiful, warm sanctuary with beautiful stained glass windows and domed ceiling. There is a warm atmosphere in the sanctuary. The building on the outside, is an attractive building. We are right across from the park. Unfortunately, the surrounding area is no the best. We now have to keep our door locked. That is too bad.

There was a time when a church or a synagogue could keep their doors open so that people could come in. Your home could be that way, too, at one time. I know when I grew up, during the day the door was never locked. You locked the door at night when you went to sleep. During the day time the door was open. That cannot be true for any place anymore. They are trying to make a lot of different improvements in the building itself now. One of their big projects is to make it barrier free. We are looking

into putting in an elevator so that our seniors or handicapped people will not have trouble coming into the sanctuary or going down into the social hall for a social function. We do have a stair tracker that will take people down stairs and up and around corners and everything, but people are not comfortable in it. We have a nice big school building. I know the board is looking into probably opening up the temple to organizations for meetings and things to bring more people into the temple.

B: Describe the bema for me?

S: The bema here at this temple is a nice large bema. We have two pulpits, one for the Rabbi and one for the Cantor. The Holy arch was just refurbished a few years ago lovingly by the women at this temple. The cost of it was underwritten by Mr. and Mrs. Murray Fibus. We had it enlarged somewhat. The Sisterhood women of this temple needlepointed new Torah covers and panels on the door. Thousands of hours of work went into it. The arch, even though it is not an enormous arch, was redone beautifully and lovingly by the women and certainly with the financial support of Mr. and Mrs. Murray Fibus. The women now have just completed a beautiful new hupa which is the wedding canopy which will also be used on the bema.

B: Do you recall when you first had the opportunity to meet Dr. Berkowitz?

S: I had certainly been to services here at Rodef Sholom prior to my working here. I had heard Dr. Berkowitz speak from the pulpit. When I first came here to work, I was kind of in awe of him because of the reputation he held in the community. He was a very well known and respected man in the community. He was involved in a lot of community service. He received many awards from various organizations and so forth. When I came here and got to know him a little bit, he was a person like the rest of us. I found him to be a very down to earth kind of person.

He used to kid around a lot and tell jokes. Some of the jokes he would tell me he would say, "If you dare tell anybody you heard it from me, I will deny it." I felt I had a good rapport with him. When I first starting working here, I replaced the bookkeeper who passed away very suddenly. Naturally, I had a whole list of questions and I had a pad on my desk and I would write them on that rather than call one of the officers every two minutes. I had several questions I would call. I remember leaving the pad on my desk and coming in the next morning and all these questions were answered. Dr. Berkowitz would come and look and he would see my questions and he would answer them.

One time it was really funny, because we had hired a part-time secretary and she was typing something and she asked me how to spell a word and I said, "I think you spell it this way." She had a pad on her desk and she wrote it. Then I said, "No, I think you spell it this way." We were spelling it several different ways and I remember saying to her, "This is ridiculous, there is a dictionary sitting there so why are we playing games, lets look it up this word." Of course, she typed it correctly in the letter. That pad was

still on her desk. The next morning, Dr. Berkowitz came in and said, "Who does not know how to spell this word." I said, "Do not worry Dr. Berkowitz, we looked it up in the dictionary and the letter went out correctly." I remember saying to Linda at the time, "Do not ever leave anything on your desk because Dr. Berkowitz will come in and see it." (Laughter)

I started in July 1982 and Dr. Berkowitz as of January 1st of the following year took on the title of Scholarin Residence and Rabbi Powers took over as the main Rabbi. For that first month in January, he was much more relaxed because he felt that all the pressure of being the head Rabbi was off of his shoulders. Dr. Berkowitz was a very well groomed immaculate person. He always looked very neat and sharp. I remember the first time I saw him come in here with a very nice pullover sweater and I said, "Dr. Berkowitz owns a sweater?" because you never saw him dress that way.

When I first started working here, Dr. Berkowitz was away on vacation. He came back after a couple of weeks. I had no reason to go into his office because he was not there. As well groomed and immaculate as he was, when I walked into his office and I must have done a double take because you have never seen such a mess in your life. His desk was piled high with files and papers. He had a short file cabinet next to his desk that was piled high. He had a table next to that piled high. I guess he must have seen the look on my face because I was rather surprised to see this. So, he said, "Don't you say one word to me." Behind his desk on a shelf was a little sign that said, "A neat desk is a sign of a sick mind." I always remembered that. I remember how surprised I was that he knew where everything was.

Like I said, in January he took on this title of Scholarin Residence. He was much more relaxed. One day in February on a Friday morning he came into the front office and I remember him walking in and checking his mail and he asked me a question and I answered him. I remember commenting to him, "My my aren't we in a good mood today?" He says, "You know what Esther? I feel terrific." Then he said, "I have several things I am doing today, so I probably will not be back in the office. Isn't that great? I do not have to come back into the office," because he really was semi-retired. That was the last time I saw him. He died the next night.

It was such a shock when I was called Sunday morning and I was told that Dr. Berkowitz had passed away. One of the last things he said to me was, "I feel great." It was very sad. A lot of people really loved Dr. Berkowitz. The Rabbi had gone through their life cycles together; births, Bar Mitzvahs, Bat Mitzvahs and weddings. It was really devastating to so many people when he passed away. Of course, his funeral service was held here in our sanctuary. Bishop Malone was one of the key speakers, he delivered the eulogy because Rabbi was good friends with him. It was a tribute to him because the sanctuary really was full.

B: What did he physically look like?

S: Dr. Berkowitz, I would say, was about five foot seven or eight. He was not a really tall man. He was slightly built. He wore glasses. His hair was thinning and receding. Dr.

Berkowitz was, I guess, born with a hair lip because you could see the scare. This was what they termed as hair lip when I grew up, I do not know what the medical terminology is now, but it certainly did not impair his speech any or his life.

B: Do you recall the color of his hair or eyes?

S: The color of his hair was brown and graying. I do not remember the color of his eyes.

B: Everybody I have talked to speaks about his ability to be a great orator. What made his speaking style so magnetic?

S: I suppose years of experience his education and I am sure when he was speaking that he spoke from the heart. That is important. If you are not, people see through it. You are just reading words. I imagine he did a lot of research. I cannot honestly verify that because I did not work with him that long.

B: You spoke about all these papers and things on his desk. Was he real involved in the community?

S: Very involved. I wish I could list all the things, but as I say, I did not work with him that long. There are all kinds of listings in his obituary. I could probably give you columns of the organizations that he was involved in and the honors that he received from so many of them. I can tell you honestly that he liked to be referred to as Dr. Berkowitz, but he did have his Ph.D. degree. It was an earned one. It was not an honorary degree.

B: Is there anything that we really have not touched on that you think we need to add?

S: As far as what?

B: In operating the temple, how did he operate? Was he very involved with every aspect of the temple?

S: Yes, he was. He was truly an administrator too. Everything went by Dr. Berkowitz. Did you get to speak to Mimi Berkowitz? She was the secretary

B: I contacted her and she said she really did not feel up to it right now.

S: Mimi used to say, "Dr. Berkowitz runs a tight ship around here." In every office there is a lot of scrap paper and you did not go out and buy message pads when you have all this scrap paper. We made our own pads. He had one in his box and, when he would get a phone call I would go over and write the message on his message pad. I wrote the date, the person who called, the time they called and what their message was. Then I wrote the next one and the next one. I thought I was being very efficient. He came into the office

and said to Mimi Berkowitz, "You better teach Esther how to write messages." I remember that I was really taken aback. I thought, "Gee, I thought I got the name, the date, the time, and the message correct." I said to Mimi, "What does he mean?"

I worked in an office before, I am not a newcomer out of school. Well, the thing is you do not start writing the messages at the top of the page, you start writing them at the bottom, then you can fold it up and rip it off. Registers were turned off to save on the heating bill. I remember I was teasing him because his office was right across from the ladies restroom and it was so cold in there in the winter, I said to him, "Dr. Berkowitz, one of these days when I go into the restroom, if you hear a loud scream coming the ladies restroom it will be me." He said, "Why?" I said, "Those toilet seats are like sitting on a block of ice." And he took it very good natured. I remember Mimi used to be surprised that I would even say something like that to Rabbi Berkowitz, but he was a person like everybody else. He said, "Well, I will turn the heat back on in the restroom, I do not want any screams coming from the ladies restroom."

B: Is almost universal that people mention his sense of humor?

S: As I pointed out, he did have a good sense of humor.

B: Did he play on words real well?

S: I think he did. He used to kid around a lot. He came into the office one afternoon and Rabbi Powers happened to come in at the same moment. Mimi was there, myself and the part-time secretary by the name of Linda, and he closed the door to the front office and he said, "Okay everybody pay attention." So we all stop what we are doing and looked up at him. He said, "Every day we are going to have a meeting here in the front office" Rabbi Powers looked at him strangely and said, "Why are we meeting every day at noon in the front office?" He said, "Because Esther is going to teach us how to dance the alley cat." We all started to laugh. I said to him, "How do you know I know how to do the alley cat?" All day long he would come by, "There she is, Madam Lazonga." I kept saying, "Madam Lazonga." He said, "You are too young to know that."

I guess, many many years ago probably during the war there was a song that Madam Lazonga taught you how to dance or something. He called me Esthermysh Vester or Madam Lazonga. He came over next to my desk and he started doing the steps to the alley cat and I said, "Is this how you do it?" So I got up and I was showing him. I remember Mimi sitting there so astounded. She was from a different generation than I was and she just did not do things like that. I kept saying to him all day, "How do you know that I know how to do the alley cat." Then as the day progressed, I remembered that he had gone to the dentist and a friend's daughter worked for the dentist. We had been at a social function Saturday night and I was doing the alley cat and Vicky had seen so she must have told him. He refused to tell me how he knew. He really had a good sense of humor.

B: Is there anything else we really have not touched on? You answered just about all of my questions here. Is there anything you think we need to add?

S: No. Like I say, my time with Dr. Berkowitz really was short.

B: This is a very helpful interview. I thank you very much.

S: Thank you.