

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1541

RICHARD D. SHAPIRO

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

July 22, 1992

DOCTOR RICHARD SHAPIRO

Doctor Richard Shapiro was born on July 19, 1937 in Warren, Ohio, the son of Sigmond and Ruth Shapiro. Shapiro attended secondary school at Warren G. Harding High School, graduating in 1955.

Following high school, Shapiro attended Miami University of Ohio, achieving his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1951. He then entered the medical school at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he was awarded his Doctorate of Medicine Degree in 1964. Shapiro returned to Warren after his speciality residency, fellowship, and one year of private practice in Princeton, N.J. He opened an ophthalmological practice and soon became active within the community. Throughout his life in Warren, Shapiro served the community in various civic and business endeavors, including the Trumbull Medical Society, the Ohio State Medical Society, the American Medical Association, and the Ohio Ophthalmological Society. He has also been an active member of the local Jewish community, serving as the congregational president of the Temple Rodef Sholom.

Presently, Shapiro continues to practice ophthalmology in the Warren community. He is an active member of the local chapter of the Lion's Club. He resides with his wife, Anita, at 6177 Sodom-Hutchings Road, Girard, Ohio. He continues to be an active member of the congregation of the Temple Rodef Sholom. He spends much of his free time enjoying wines, cars, and participating in various athletics.

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD D. SHAPIRO
INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts
SUBJECT: Jewish, Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz, Rodef Sholom,
Youngstown community
DATE: July 22, 1992

B: This is an interview with Dr. Richard Shapiro 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 his residence, 6177 Sodom-Hutchings Road, Girard, Ohio, on July 22, 1992, at approximately 2:50 p.m.

Okay. Everything looks good. Let's start out with some biographical questions. Could you tell me something about yourself, as far as your childhood, [such as] where you were born [and] where you grew up?

S: I was born in Warren, Ohio, in 1937. [I] went to public school in Warren, graduated from Harding High in 1955. [I] graduated [from] Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1959. [I went to] medical school at Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia, graduated in 1964, and interned in Pittsburgh. [I did] eye residency at Jefferson Hospital [and a] fellowship after that at Ohio State. I practiced in Princeton, New Jersey for one year. I came here in 1970. I practice ophthalmology in Warren, Ohio.

- B: Okay. Growing up in Warren, what was it like? What did it physically look like?
- S: It really looked like it does today. It's essentially the same. Some of the outlying suburbs, such as Cortland and Howland weren't well developed at the time. The high school is the same. Everything is the same.
- B: How about, was there an ethnic flavor within Warren?
- S: Basically, there was an Italian ethnic flavor in Warren. [It's] more Black now. There weren't quite as many Blacks at the time. The Jewish community, it's grown a little larger through the years, [but] essentially the same.
- B: Are there temples within Warren?
- S: There is one temple in Warren.
- B: Is it Conservative [or] Orthodox?
- S: That is Conservative.
- B: Okay. And its name is?
- S: Beth Israel.
- B: Okay. And where is it located?
- S: On Market Street.
- B: Okay. Growing up, were there other temples, or has this always been the only temple within Warren?
- S: That was always the only temple in Warren. Although I belong to Rodef Sholom, my family has been members there for 100 years.
- B: Okay. Describe the Temple of Rodef Sholom for me, physically, please, what it looks like.
- S: Well, it's at the corner of Elm and Woodbine. Gosh, I can't think of the type of architecture. I know the building is one of three in the country. There's a Rodef Sholom temple in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, designed the same way, and the police building in Brooklyn, New York is the same type of--I think it's a Gothic--architecture. The temple has had a couple of additions through the years. There's a Tamarkan Chapel and one wing they put on, but the temple, as it is, has been there since the 1950s.
- B: How about the interior, is there anything distinctive about it?

S: The main sanctuary is beautiful. It has been refurbished. The acoustics are excellent there. I know that the lighting was designed by this one particular person whose name I do not know, who supposedly at that time was the lighting person in the country. [He] has done some famous places, and the lighting, it's excellent. You can see anywhere. You can read your text anywhere. The lighting is soft, no glare, that kind of thing.

B: How about the bema? Describe that for me.

S: The bema was added to--I think in the 1950s it was extended towards--the congregation. We lost a few rows of seats, which at that time, they put a balcony in. There are two podiums present on both sides. The arc is in the center. Do you want physical description?

B: Yes.

S: There are chairs in the back. There are controls on the bema, you know, for the music and for opening the arc. It's been there so long, it seems like it's always been that way. It's a very impressive structure. [Have] you been inside, yourself?

B: Yes. How about, where would Dr. Berkowitz's services take place? Where would he be located at?

S: Dr. Berkowitz, if you're looking at the bema, he'd be lecturing from the right hand side. On the left hand side is where the cantor or the singer usually sits.

B: So, you pretty much grew up with Dr. Berkowitz at Rodef Sholom?

S: Yes. My wife was in his first consecration class. He married us, buried my parents, her father, and confirmed both of us, so we've been involved with him [and] known him well for many years.

B: People usually mention his ability to be a great orator. What was there in his voice or in his speaking style that made it so unique?

S: Number one, he was prompt. He never spoke too long. Everything was timed. He would always look at his watch. He would take his watch off his wrist and lay it on the bema. His sermons were 20 minutes. The services were an hour, and he started on time, which is one thing we strive to get anymore, but at that time, it was always on time. They were punctual. He had just the ability for the inflections in his voice to make it interesting, and of course, he was very

knowledgeable. I can remember one Friday evening, when I was a kid, someone didn't show up. Extemporaneously for 20 minutes, he spoke about an article in Life Magazine. It just came out that day, and it was extemporaneous. People also respected him for his knowledge. He was also very much involved in, not only religious affairs, but in civic affairs and national events. He was involved in the march with Martin Luther King for civil rights, so a lot of his lectures were timely on that basis.

B: How about other hot subjects, like the Vietnam War? Was that something else he touched on?

S: Well, [during] the Vietnam War, I was out of town doing my schooling, so I don't know. I'm sure he was.

B: Okay. Let's do a little bit of the things with the history of Warren and Youngstown, too. Being familiar with both cities, could you do a little bit of a physical description? What was Youngstown like, coming here to the temple?

S: Well, the temple in Warren is more Conservative, and when I was growing up, it was more on the Orthodox side. It was slanted that way. So, there were some of us, a number of families, that always wanted to be Reform, so we drove into Youngstown. Of course at the time, it was a two lane road all the time. In good weather and bad, we had a car pool. Everybody shared. I only remember the North Side of Youngstown, just driving in. All my growing years were in Warren, until I started driving, and at that time, I rarely came into Youngstown. I dated girls in Warren. I was involved in the high school quite a bit. So, I really don't remember much about Youngstown.

B: How about the area around Elm Street?

S: The area around Elm Street and that North Side was always a very nice area. At that time, you could walk anywhere around there. Of course, it's changed, now. My grandparents and my mother grew up on the North Side, and I can remember as a kid visiting and staying at their house, at my grandparents house. They were near Wick Park. They lived on Redondo and Guadalupe. Is that Wick Park?

B: Crandall [Park].

S: It's Crandall. I remember Crandall Park well, playing there. I just remembered it as just a nice residential kind of area. That's all I remember.

B: How about Dr. Berkowitz--being a child within his congregation, what was his interaction with children?

S: It always seemed that he cared. You always had the feeling that he was interested in what was going on. He did like children. As a kid, you can always get the feeling from an adult whether they like kids or whether they don't like kids. And the feeling was that he was always interested in us and everything. He did a lot of counseling that no one knew about. Of course, that was a province of his ministry. What was the question again?

B: His interaction with children.

S: I'm just trying to think of something. I remember my wife and when he just came for consecration, which is an initiation into the religious school at a young age. She had fallen on her bicycle, I think the day or two before, and her face was just one big clot, one big mess. She didn't want to go. Of course, her parents encouraged her to go. When he saw her on the pulpit, he picked her out, picked her up, and kissed her, and she has never forgotten that. That was just the type of charisma that man was capable of.

I remember in confirmation class--of course, I was in high school at the time. It was difficult to commute. [It was] confirmation class, which is tenth grade in religious school. There are extra subjects. You know, it's your last year. You have to be proficient in many things, and they have special days, afternoons where the students from Youngstown came in for an extra hour or two. It was difficult to get a ride and to be involved in Warren, with athletics and stuff like that, so we were allowed to do something extra, an extracurricular activity, and not have to go to those classes. He didn't make it difficult for us. I remember I outlined the book for him, and that was acceptable. I just remember him as just being a very kind, caring, very intelligent person who has just made a good name for the Jewish community in Youngstown. [He] reached out.

B: Could you describe for me and elaborate on what education a Jewish youngster would receive? How it starts out and the progression.

S: Today or before?

B: During Dr. Berkowitz's time and today. We could do a little [comparison].

S: Well, in Dr. Berkowitz's time, the Reform movement was what was called Classical Reform, in which there was very little Hebrew taught or spoken in services. It was sort of a being Jewish, but not being religious Jewish, sort of trying to assimilate more at that time into the Gentile society. The whole movement was that way. It's changed now since the Jews are more comfortable and more established in the U.S., but at that time, the religious services, of course, were almost all in English. Very little Hebrew. Of course, no Yalmulkas or skull caps were worn. As a matter of fact, at that time, if someone had one on, they were asked to take it off. The services were exactly one hour. As far as the religious training, we got Jewish history. Of course, we had to learn Hebrew, the alphabet, and the basic prayers. It was basically at that time then, a little bit of Jewish philosophy, as much as we learn as kids. We try not to learn it too much, you know, going to school all week. We try to shun what they try and teach us religiously. But, it appeared to me that a lot of it was repetitious from year to year, so by the time you hit the last year, you'd been through it all.

The religious training today is a lot more Hebrew. Of course, there's a Hebrew day school in Youngstown. These kids come out knowing everything, knowing all the prayers and can speak a little bit, or can speak a lot, depending on the student. They're given a lot more of the religion. Of course, in Rodef Sholom today, the rabbi wears a Yalmulka, or skull cap. A lot of the congregants do. Of course, the nice thing about Reform Judaism is that you can really do what you want. If you want to be more religious, you can. If you want to eat Kosher, you can. If you don't, you don't. If you want to wear a skull cap, fine. There's music in the temple. The Reform movement sort of swings back and forth like a pendulum. Conservative is more middle of the line. Orthodox, of course, is very strict, doesn't waver, strictly the way, according to what it was a couple thousand years ago. So, the Reform movement today is more toward the traditional, but we still have a choice. In a nut shell, that's how it's changed.

B: Okay. Were you president of the temple?

S: Yes. I was president of the temple.

B: Was this during Dr. Berkowitz's tenure?

S: During Dr. Berkowitz's tenure, he ran the entire temple. The board sort of rubber stamped everything he wanted. At that time, he'd been there 30 years or so. He knew everything about the temple. He knew the exact wattage of every light bulb in the temple and where it

was located and how to get to it, because apparently it was a little tricky to get to some, up in the dome of the sanctuary. He basically hand picked who he wanted on the board. How he picked me, I have no idea. I was asked to be on the board. I felt it was an honor. I got on the board and actually didn't feel that I offered that much, and I was asked to stay on the board. Then, I was on the board when Dr. Berkowitz died. I went on the executive committee and went through the chairs until I was president of the temple, which was--it started about four years ago.

B: How about describing the hierarchy within the council there, within the board?

S: Well, there's a president, two vice presidents, a treasurer, and a secretary, the executive committee. The executive committee had to learn, when Dr. Berkowitz died, to make all their decisions without having to rely on a wise sage who had been there for years. So also, the board today is more indicative. Since I was chairman of the nominating committee, we tried to get a broad spectrum, a base of people that belonged to the temple: young, old, affluent, non-affluent, representatives from Youngstown, from Warren, from the outer areas. The board and the executive committee, of course, rule in effect according to the constitution, which is followed and that kind of thing. It's essentially the same as any other institution. The only difficulty we had was we had a change of rabbis. Dr. Berkowitz's successor did not stay on. I was president then, and we had to get another rabbi; so I was involved with that, which was quite a lot of work. But, according to the constitution, things were done. According to the national organization, there are certain ways of obtaining a rabbi. All these things are followed. It's all set up for you, step by step.

B: You spoke a little bit about Dr. Berkowitz's running of the temple. Could you expand on that a little bit? Would you describe him as very autocratic or very hands on?

S: Basically, all of us, everybody on the board is working. We volunteer our time. It's easier if someone knows what's going on to listen to their advice, and if it sounds good, just follow it. It's much easier for me to walk in and, [if] a question arises about something and if there's someone that knows what they're doing or I respect their opinion, it's easier to say, "Fine, let's do that." Everybody says, "Ah, ah."

So Dr. Berkowitz, number one, basically picked who he wanted on the board--this is certainly in no means meant to be derogatory at all--but he picked who he

felt would be effective on the board. Secondly, he knew everything that was going on, and for the most part, almost everybody was pretty happy with the way things were going. So, that was the easy way out, and we were all busy. It was easier to say, "Fine. That sounds good to me." I can remember being on the board. Questions would come up, and they would say, "Dr. Berkowitz, do you remember we need so and so." He'd say, "Oh yes. I remember we need this so and so." This went on. That went on. This was done. That was done. He just remembered everything. It was a hell of a lot easier than to have to go through the minutes or ask the secretary what was said six months ago or whatever. So, that's the way it went, and obviously, no leader pleases everybody 100 percent of the time. For my purposes and from my perception, I was extremely happy, and of course, very respectful. [I was] very happy with him and always felt that through the years he made the right decisions. So, I was happy. I think that when he got older, some of the younger people and the children didn't feel that he was quite as effective as he could have been with their problems. The other thing is that he kept us more on a Classical Reform type of Judaism, which was very fine with me. A lot of the younger people wanted to be a little bit more religious, so they're happier now. A lot of the older members--and I still don't consider myself an older member yet--are very unhappy today because it's more traditional, but you can't please everybody all the time.

B: Yes. That's definitely true. Could you describe how Dr. Berkowitz looked physically?

S: Dr. Berkowitz was, gosh, I suppose about 5 foot 8 inches, 5 foot 9 inches, medium build. I remember him wearing a lot of suits with vests. [He had] black hair, glasses. [He] always dressed well. [He] always dressed appropriately, with a white shirt and a tie. That's what I remember. The type of individual, when he walked into the room, you would respect. He had the air about him such as Bishop Malone has. It's the same type of charisma and presence that the both of them have.

B: How about the relationship between Dr. Berkowitz and Bishop Malone?

S: Very close. [They were] very close. Unfortunately, I was out of town when Dr. Berkowitz died, and I was on the other side of the country and couldn't make it back. I understand that his remarks at the funeral--and he gave part of the eulogy--were just fantastic. They were very, very close, and they did a lot to meld and blend the two communities together.

B: How do you perceive his role within the Youngstown community? You mentioned a lot of the community service he did and things.

S: Dr. Berkowitz was probably the most powerful Jewish influence and just overshadowed the other religious leaders. Number one, because he was there. Number two, because he was respected. Number three, because the Rodef Sholom was much larger than the other temples. Because of his community involvement--he belonged to Rotary and was president of Rotary--and his interest in ecumenical affairs, he also had the respect of the Christian community at large, and also the Black community. Well, that's Christian, but he made a definite effort in the Black community. The two made him a very powerful influence in the community at large.

B: I see in my research that the temple had a large increase in the number of congregants during Dr. Berkowitz's tenure.

S: Yes.

B: Is that due to basically his forceful personality or a gradual changing to the Reform movement?

S: No. I think that, number one, the Youngstown area was doing quite well. People were moving into the area. Number two, yes, because of his magnetism. Three, there were beginning intermarriages between Christians and Jews, and he would marry the two. Then, they could not be married in the Conservative or the Orthodox temple, so they would be married; and they would stay in the temple, whether they converted or they didn't convert. I think for this reason, we had at one time about 750 family units [or] 730 family units. We're down to about 500 now. But proportionately, the other temples have decreased also because of many other factors. But, at the time, Reform was very popular. A lot of the member's children were staying in town, which is not true today. So obviously, they came back to their own temple. I think all these factors made Rodef Sholom the largest institution. As a matter of fact, thinking about it, Reform Judaism by numbers is the largest of all the three major divisions of Judaism. It's definitely the largest.

B: Could you describe for me how Rabbi Berkowitz would run a service on Friday night at Rodef Sholom? What was unique about the way he would run a service?

S: Number one, it started exactly at 8 o'clock on Friday night, not one minute before, not one minute after. His weddings, as a matter of fact, started exactly on time. I remember going to a wedding in Philadelphia. It was a 5 o'clock wedding. My wife and I didn't know. We got there at 4:40 p.m. The temple was hardly even open. We thought we were at the wrong place, because the invitations are sent out with a time half an hour before they expect to get started. So, they started exactly at 8 o'clock. People sat for the hour. No one got up to go to the bathroom. It was expected. People paid attention. There was the old prayer book. Of course, there was the liturgy and the music. We had a cantor, which was unusual for Reform Judaism in those days. As a matter of fact, when he first brought Cantor Erlich to the temple, a lot of the very Classical Jews were really upset. [They were] really, really, upset. But, he felt that was the way it should be and that was the way it was. His sermons were exactly 20 minutes. He'd walk up. He'd take his watch off, put it on the bema, and always start, "My friends." We would in the audience say to ourselves, "And you are my friends." We still always say that. There was not as much singing. At 9 o'clock, it was over, every Friday night. Obviously, we didn't go every Friday night, but when we went, it was like clock work. Everything was precise. He dressed precisely. He ran the board meetings precisely. He ran his services precisely.

B: What did he wear to the services?

S: He wore a black--I can't remember what you call it--a gown.

B: A robe?

S: Yes. A robe. No Yalmulka. No prayer shawl, which they're wearing today. That was felt in its day to be too religious also because the very Reform congregations, the rabbis wore just a business suit. But, he always wore a robe, a clerical robe.

B: How about some of the duties of the cantor? What did Cantor Erlich do?

S: The cantor was responsible for training the kids if they were bar or bat mizvahed. Actually, he at that time was director of the religious school. Then, he was responsible for the choir, make sure that they knew what was going on and that they were practicing. Then, he and the rabbi shared duties as far as visiting the sick, the infirmed, the people in the hospital. Then, of course, if the rabbi was out of town, Cantor Erlich took over and ran the services.

- B: How about your wedding with Dr. Berkowitz? Do you remember anything he said that might have been especially poignant?
- S: Yes. It's interesting. Number one, I can remember before the service that he told me he had a brand new clerical robe that he was wearing for the wedding, for our wedding. My father-in-law, both our parents were physicians. My dad practiced in Warren. My father-in-law practiced in Youngstown. That family was very influential in Youngstown. It was the Tamarkin family. There were two that were in the grocery business, you know, Value King and that. My father-in-law and his brother were two physicians. So, he had been on the board in the temple and, of course, knew the rabbi well. So, during the service, the one nice thing in any wedding, in most weddings, the clergy will expound or say some things about the family that they knew. Well, of course, both our families had been associated with the temple for years. In fact, one of my cousins had been president of the temple in the 1930s. So, he mentioned about knowing the families through the years and that kind of thing and made a very personal touch, since he knew both sides, as opposed to one family coming in from out of town he doesn't know anything about. The other thing is that he always seemed to know exactly the appropriate thing to say at the appropriate time, which was his weddings, his funerals, everything. He just knew exactly what to say. Most people don't have that knack.
- B: How about, a lot of people I've interviewed have mentioned his sense of humor. Did you find him. . . ?
- S: When I was growing up--of course, as a kid I don't remember his sense of humor at all. I really don't have much recollection. I know he was supposed to have a good sense of humor, and he would laugh; but I was never a party to any of the things he was laughing about or who he was laughing with. I really couldn't give you too much information on that.
- B: Okay. How about, what do you think his impact on the local Jewish community was?
- S: I think that, in a broad sense, he gave the community and its members a sense of respect for themselves and for the rest of the community, since Jews have basically been persecuted for years and are basically a paranoid kind of people. He gave us a deep sense of respect in that we belong. I think that he also gave the Gentile community a sense of respect for the Jews and probably went some ways in eliminating prejudice or prejudicial views or ideas that some people might have grown up with that were not Jewish. I think that

that's what he gave to the community. Yes. I think that's basically what I could say about it.

You know, that temple's been there for a long time, and it seems, looking at it, like it's a solid foundation, like a piece of granite or a piece of ground that's not going to go anywhere. I think he was a stabilizing force in making a lot of us feel that way.

B: Okay. Is there anything we really haven't touched on that you think we need to add?

S: Yes. I think one thing that hasn't been touched on--it's not really him, but since I had been recommended by his wife--I think that it's interesting that she was a woman ahead of her time. She was sort of like a Jackie Kennedy in that traditionally the rabbi's wife would be terribly involved with the sisterhood and do everything, whereas she was her own woman. She's really a modern woman way ahead of her time. She didn't do all these things, wasn't interested. She became a French and Spanish professor at the university. She did what she wanted to do, but still had the respect from us. I think she was a good stabilizing influence on him, although--I'm very fond of Pauline--she really felt that her husband worked too hard. I remember her telling me that he was absolutely, totally committed to that temple. Today, it's a little different. Although, the rabbi we have today is very totally committed. Not including the present rabbi, but a lot of other rabbis have a lot of other interests and that. He was just totally committed.

B: How about all his community activities? Would you say that he was involved with the same type of feeling?

S: Yes. You know, as you get on in life, as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't make a damn bit of difference when you die how much money you have, what kind of clothes you have. People remember you for the respect of what you did for your fellow man, really, because you can't take it with you. That's what my father taught me, and that's what Rabbi Berkowitz left.

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

S: [You're welcome]. I hope it was helpful.

B: Very, very helpful. This is exactly what we were looking for.

END OF INTERVIEW