

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz Project

Personal Experience

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MILTON YARMY

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

June 22, 1992

DR. MILTON YARMY

Dr. Milton Yarmy was born on July 27, 1911 on the Northside of Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Sigmund and Sadye Yarmy. He attended secondary school at the Rayen High School, and graduated in 1929.

Following high school, Yarmy attended college at the University of Michigan, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1932. He then entered medical school at Wayne State University and achieved his Doctor of Medicine Degree in 1937. He then returned to Youngstown where he opened a private medical practice. He continued to practice medicine in the Youngstown community for nearly fifty years until his retirement in the late 1980's.

Presently, Doctor Yarmy is enjoying retired life. He resides with his wife Lillian at 2239 Guadalupe Avenue Youngstown, Ohio. Dr. Yarmy spends much of his free time traveling and golfing.

B This is an interview with Milton Yarmy for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Rabbi Berkowitz Project, by Matthew Butts, on June 22, 1992, at 2039 Guadalupe Avenue, at 10 00 a m Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, your childhood, and your education?

Y I was born in Youngstown and went through the Youngstown public school system I was born on the north side and have always lived on the north side I went to McKinley School, then went to Harding School, then Rayen High School I graduated in 1929 Then I went to the University of Michigan and completed my bachelor of arts there in 1932 Then I went to medical school in Detroit, Wayne State University College of Medicine I spent a year in 1945 and 1946 in Philadelphia at the graduate school of the University of Pennsylvania for specializing in internal medicine I was in general practice, from 1937 to 1945, as we used to call it then Now it is family practice From that time I practiced internal medicine I retired in 1988

B What were your parent's names, and do you have any brothers and sisters?

Y I have one sister, Mrs Jean Shagrin who lives here in town My father's name was Sigmund Yarmy My mother's name was Sadye My father was an immigrant who came from Hungary My mother was born in New York City They are both deceased, of course

B As you grew up in Youngstown during this time, what was the city like?

Y It was a smaller community, totally dependant on the steel mills at that time. Most everything that went on was in some way or another related to the steel business The community itself was naturally smaller I think it was a little more cohesive Most of the people that I knew through my parents were pretty much in the same social level There was not as much emphasis on material things because they were not available They did not have things that people have today I remember when the automobiles first became a little more popular, it was many years before my father would even try a car In those days, in the winter you put the car in the garage and left it there until spring The social status was not as emphasized There were some people in different parts of the community who were socially on a level of their own The immigrants were the first generation of the children of these people They were not aware so much of the ethnic past and that sort of thing It developed as time went by The Jewish community in a way was more cohesive Of course, we had people who lived on the south side who had their own groups Those of us who lived on the north side had our own groups Rodef Sholom was the reform temple in those days when I was a child We had Reformed Orthodox The Conservative movement developed as I was growing up, actually We had the Rodef Sholom Temple We had the Children of Israel Temple which was Orthodox at that time, and the Temple Emmanuel which is on the Northside There were temples on the south side which I was not familiar with The first wave, other than the

German groups who were mostly in the Reform congregation, apparently had reform groups in Germany. Their families were rich. Those of us who were children of other immigrants came mostly from Jewish communities in Europe, mostly Eastern Europe. My father was from the Hungarian community. In those days, people came to this country and they would look for their own groups. People who had lived and left their town, they would come here and look for people that they knew. They would sort of group that way. Most of the children, the Hungarian immigrants, went to the Children of Israel Temple. The Russians, Lithuanians, and others were at Temple Emmanuel in those days.

B Working with emigrational history, like the Italian immigrants, they settled into the Smokey Hollow area initially. In terms of the physical area of the city, could you outline street boundaries where the Jewish community would be centered. Was it more along ethnic backgrounds such as Hungarians of any religious background would group together?

Y No, just in the congregations. I should not say that I was not familiar that much with the Southside. The Jewish Community that I was familiar with lived on the Northside. There was a group that lived along Madison Avenue which was a street at that time where Jewish people lived. The extensions farther out had not developed yet. I was born on Ford Avenue below Park Avenue. A lot of our friends lived in that area. We then moved up farther to Thornton Avenue. The Jewish community was pretty much concentrated on the Northside. As the Northside developed, the Jewish people moved farther north. Transportation at that time was by street car. The line went up Elm Street to Thornton, down Thornton to Logan Avenue, out Logan Avenue to G F, where he did fire proofing. That was the end of the line out there at the General Fire Protection Plant.

B When did you first meet Rabbi Sydney Berkowitz?

Y I met him when he first came here. I do not recall the date.

B 1949?

Y Somewhere around there.

B What was your first impression of him?

Y He had a very vibrant personality. Humorous, intelligent, very communicative.

B When he became Rabbi of Rodef Sholom, did you have any involvement within the temple itself?

Y No, at that time my father was a founder of the Anshe Emeth Temple, which was the

conservative temple. That was a split off from the Children of Israel which I mentioned was the Orthodox group. He and the group formed the Anshe Emeth Temple in the 1920s. I was part of that group. I was familiar with it, but I joined it in about 1945, 1946. When Rabbi Berkowitz came I was already a member and we were quite impressed with him. He was very highly regarded and took his place in the community very actively.

B How would you say Rabbi Berkowitz operated the temple?

Y He operated it very efficiently. At that time there was a surge almost of members into the Rodef Sholom Temple. The younger people at that time were joining a lot of the children of the members who had been in the other congregations. I think it was related to the fellows coming back from the war. There was a change in their religious attitude as far as going from Orthodox. They were becoming more conservative and reformed in their thinking. At that time when Rabbi Berkowitz came there was a tremendous surge in the membership. He was very active in encouraging people to join the temple.

B Could you expand a little bit in the differences between a Reformed Jewish temple and a Conservative Jewish temple?

Y The format of the services is somewhat different. The Reform service, prayer book, and the prayers were not too much different. The prayer book was mostly in English, the service was mostly in English, and the prayers were modified to quite a degree in the sense that the service lasted the fixed amount, say an hour and a half. That was the end of the service. The service at the conservative temple and the conservative movement felt there was a little more emphasis on Hebrew in the liturgy. The prayers were more traditional in the sense that there was some repetition. There were lengthy prayers. The services lasted for hours. Some of the prayers were in English. A lot of them were in Hebrew. I think this had a great deal to do with the movement of the people into the reform congregations. There was some concern that there was too much Hebrew, because of something they did not understand. They tended to move to that. There was still quite a lot of Hebrew. There was some repetition. The services were longer. There was still emphasis as far as the Jewish traditional things on food, classifications, what constituted acceptable food, kosher food. That was originally the difference pretty much between the two. I suppose they thought one was more religious in a sense.

B In terms of the surge of new members into Rodef Sholom, was Rabbi Berkowitz personally responsible for the bringing about of new members due to his mystique?

Y I think so. Yes I do. He was well perceived in the community. He was active, and his presence was certainly felt in a very short time after he came here. There is no question that he had a great deal to do with it.

B Speaking with his role in the Youngstown community, how did you perceive his role in the Youngstown community?

Y He soon became the representative in the Jewish community in the community of Youngstown. He was active in all the organizations, but along those lines I would say we were aware of his activities. He enjoyed them all, and they enjoyed him. I think he was most helpful in educating the non-Jewish community to the Jewish community. I think a lot of his ecumenical things were the beginnings of the rapport in the Jewish community. There were times when I was a child when this was not an acceptable thing. It was not carried out very much. Whether it was coincidence or not, he was certainly a factor in representing the Jewish community and being accepted not only in the clergy, but in social groups as well.

B Would you characterize Youngstown when you were growing up as being slightly or moderately anti-Semitic?

Y I really was not aware or exposed that much. I remember we lived on Thornton Avenue. This thing just happens to always stick in my mind for some reason or another. There was a grocery store up the street a half a block that we went to. These were all neighborhood groceries in those days. Very nice fellows, we patronized them and so on. I remember there was a Ku Klux Klan parade. It was the only one I ever saw. I cannot recall if it was an illegal thing, or whatever happened. This was the first time that they unmasked themselves. They marched down Federal Street with their white robes on and caps thrown back. Here were our grocers. I do not recall that there was any appreciable reaction to it as far as I could tell. As I say, I was just a child. I remember how surprised I was to see these fellows. I do not recall whether there was any change in our patronage or not, because they were right on the Northside at that point, and there were a lot of Jewish people who lived right in that section. I was never personally exposed. I had incidences in school where they would call you a name. It is interesting because some of these kids became my patients later on.

B Speaking of Rabbi Berkowitz becoming the spokesperson for the Jewish community, was there any anger from any other of the rabbi's from the other temples because of his leadership in assuming the leadership role?

Y There was some resentment from some of the other congregations because they lost a lot of members to Rodef Sholom. He represented the temple, so he was the recipient of their feelings. That I happen to know because my father was an officer and very active through his whole life at Anshe Emeth. It is now El Emeth. Temple Emmanuel and Anshe Emeth have joined in the last few years. He was active, and they were quite resentful. They felt that Dr. Berkowitz was responsible for it. I think it was just a movement because it was so wide spread. I do not think any one person could have been responsible for it all. Although, he was so personable it was probably part of it. I think it

was just a movement that was almost spontaneous. The other temples did resent that fact that they lost a lot of members. It was not what he did, it was what he represented

B Moving into Rabbi Berkowitz's activities within the Youngstown community, were you aware of his activities of a civil rights movement?

Y Yes, he was active in the civil rights movement. He was active in everything, all social movements in town. I just happened to remember going to the memorial service of Martin Luther King. It was held over at Stambaugh Auditorium. He was part of the clergymen that were on the stage at that time. I just happened to remember because we sat with Mrs. Berkowitz. I saw him as we were going in. He was quite active in the civil rights movement, locally. I do not know if he was involved outside the community.

B Do you remember any other activities dealing with civil rights that he was involved with?

Y No, I was sympathetic with it, but I was not that knowledgeable.

B How about his dealings with the American Red Cross?

Y He was very active in that. It seems to me he was the local president. I am not sure

B National Board, too?

Y Yes, he was very active. That I am well aware of because he publicized it quite a lot his connection. Some related to the Jewish community. At one time the Red Cross was not thought to be too sympathetic to Jewish causes. There was some feeling at that time of what was he doing over there. I do not know where that came from. There was some feeling in the Jewish community that the Red Cross was not always sympathetic with the Jewish people.

B Would you say that Rabbi Berkowitz was able to transform that feeling?

Y He felt he could be more helpful in being involved in backing away, yes he did. It was mentioned to him. He felt that he could do more and make more understanding. He had a great feeling about educating communities, or community about the Jewish backgrounds and the Jewish community itself. There was a rapport, and whether it was something that just evolved, I cannot say. Right at that time there did seem to be much more. We began to have these interfaith meetings and things that we had not had before. We were aware that we had Catholics. They would always agree to be at the service, but they never came, whether it was the fact that they were not supposed to come into a synagogue. The other denominations would come to these things and had some interfaith services and things like that. He was very active in that. I am sure that part of it was his doing.

- B He was very active in the anti-war movement within the Youngstown community. How did the temple react to that? I would suppose that the Jewish community, like the rest of the nation, was split over the issue of Vietnam.
- Y I was not that committed and I was not that knowledgeable. Mrs. Yarmy is coming up here. She might remember more about it than I did.
- B How about Rabbi Berkowitz dealing with labor disputes within the area? Do you remember anything about that?
- Y No. I do not remember any organization. It was an individual opinion. We were anti-war in a sense that we just felt it was a war that was not necessary. Like so many other things, you were not aware of a lot of things going on that you should have. You found out later. I do not think there was anything that I could say the congregation or community had any organized things.
- B Are you familiar with his role in the media, labor disputes, or things like that?
- Y No, I am not. I am aware that he was involved with them, but nothing specific that I could even comment on.
- B Being that he was involved with all these different causes and organizations such as the American Red Cross, you hinted that his congregation was possibly put off by him becoming involved with things in the community more than the temple itself. Was this actually a problem?
- Y Not particularly, no. They felt that he represented the temple. He made it a point that the things he did were represented with the temple and the Jewish community. He did not go off by himself in the sense that he was egotistical at all. He was always in his roll of the leader of the congregation and part of the community.
- B With the temple, describe how Rabbi Berkowitz would run a service. People speak of how he was very emotional. He would get people fired up during services.
- Y He had a way about him. When he would come into a service, the service began. He did not just walk in. He came in and proceeded to check everything out, make sure everything was in its place, then he began the service. He was head of the Life of Voice and he projected that service. It was very dignified. I suppose I have to qualify that because I have seen some clergymen who do not give you that impression. I do not mean just because he was Jewish or anything. Bishop Malone has that quality. When he begins, you know that there is a service. It is not going to be something casual, some substance to it. Rabbi Berkowitz had that ability. His sermons were to a point. He had a tremendous sense of humor and perfect public speaking ability. He tempered with a little

humor, and then get back into the substance again. The service was very well run and dignified, and also satisfying. This was something I think I carried over from moving from the other temple to the Rodef Sholom because a lot of the times the services at the other temples were so long you did not stay until the service was over. Whereas here you felt that you had the whole service. After the service he would receive and you would talk with him a little bit. It was very enjoyable in that sense.

B Is there any service, maybe a wedding or some other event at the church that sticks out in your mind?

Y My daughter's wedding, of course, which was naturally the most beautiful wedding. He conducted the service with Cantor Erlich. It was beautifully done. Everything was an example of his control that everybody was clocked. At this minute you walked down, and he did this. We did not have other people who controlled the ceremony. Once this person was over here by assignment, and this one over here. At 11:00 this happened. At 11:02 this one happened. That is how the wedding ran. Everything he did was clock work. The service began at 11:00. At 11:00 he would appear on the pulpit. The wedding was beautifully done, all the parts of it, especially the address to my daughter and her husband. It was something that naturally stays with you forever. It was very dignified and very beautiful. My daughter was confirmed the year Dr. Berkowitz came here. He was their first confirmation class. They had a particular closeness that really related to that because they were here at the same time. He was very pleased that this was the first group he confirmed, and now he was marrying my daughter.

B How would you describe Rabbi Berkowitz's impact on the Youngstown Jewish community?

Y On the younger community it was very strong. Some of the older people in the community felt a little resentment about the fact that there was such a tremendous surge in the membership. These were people that were not moving into town. These were people that were leaving one congregation and going to another. At that time the Jewish community numbered around 7,500 people. At one time they had quite a community here. It is decimated now. The other congregations were not too pleased with Dr. Berkowitz. They felt he was proselytizing. His own congregation was very happy with him. In the community I would have to say that, other than the fact that there was some resentment from some people. There was not anything about his ability or anything else. It was just the fact that they felt he was trying to sign up the whole community. There was some resentment about that. The younger people were naturally the ones who were joining the temple. The older people had some feelings about it.

B We talked a little bit about Rabbi Berkowitz's dealing with the other churches. How do you think he was able to do this? I have heard talk of describing him and the Protestant leader of that time, and Bishop Malone being described as the Gang of Three.

Y He did not make a point of Jewishness in the sense that it was the reason he was relating with these fellows. I think they really liked one another, personally. They were aware that regardless of their religion that they had the same problems. I think there was some change. He and Bishop Malone were very close, almost from the time he came here. I cannot recall how long the bishop has been in place now. I know that his feelings were that he was not impressing them with any Jewish cause. He was doing this as a personality himself. He was not trying to show them where they have this and we have this, or they have this and we did not. I think he was almost social more than religious as far as his meetings with them and his friendship with them is concerned. I think this was partly the thing. I think there was some change in the relationship with the Catholic church. I think maybe that had something to do with it. I cannot remember the leader of the Protestant community. They had some very wise men. At no time was there any feeling or undercurrent that it was not friendship. It always was. We became more aware of the bishop participating in Jewish activities. I think it was related to Dr. Berkowitz's friendship. They were just not professionals, they were friends.

B Do you know of anybody that would have been opposed to Rabbi Berkowitz or his methodology at the temple or anything, or was he universally loved by everyone?

Y I do not think anybody is universally loved. There were some, and there still are, who were right at that time after the war when Rabbi Berkowitz came here--this was the same time when Israel first was declared in existence, I think in 1947--maybe it was related to that. The services started to have some more traditional prayers in them. There were prayers in Hebrew. There was a Hebrew school where children began to study Hebrew. There were some congregants who did not feel that this was desirable. They felt it was getting too religious. They resented him for that. I cannot say names because it was a general feeling in certain groups that it was getting too religious. That is carried on even now. What has happened was in the service. There has been a gradual shift from one extreme into the center. It has happened in the other congregations, too. The services are quite similar now in all of them. At that time there were some who felt that they did not want any of this. They resented his doing it. They felt he as responsible for it. It was related to at that time when Israel and the Zionist movement became so vocal and strong. There were some who were not in favor of that, a Council for Judaism, something like that. They felt that we were Americans and we had no responsibility toward building up the state of Israel. They were quite disturbed with Rabbi Berkowitz because he took a stand.

B Could you describe Rabbi Berkowitz stance on the Israel issue?

Y Yes, he was active. Actually, he was active in the Zionist organization near the town. They felt that the Jewish state deserved all the support we could give it. That was the only real vocal thing that I had really encountered. There were certain groups in the temple that were up in arms about this. Some of them were quite affluent. Some of them

were quite influential. They resented this feeling. Of course, the rest of the Jewish community knew who these people were. They had no particular influence in the community, but they were well known. They were pretty vocal at that time. He took a stand. He knew that because some of these people were very influential supporters of the temple. The majority of the congregation were right with him. It did not come down to a knock down show down. It was there, and it was expressed. I do not think it came to the point where they felt they would get another rabbi or something like that. This was a group that was very disturbed. They felt that they had all these good arguments. They were concerned that we were going to have a dual responsibility and a dual citizenship and that sort of thing. It was ridiculous. They were not too happy with the existence of the state of Israel.

B When Rabbi Berkowitz stepped down as rabbi of Rodef Shalom, was there a vacuum when he stepped down, a vacuum of power?

Y He died so shortly after he stepped down that it did not have time to really develop. I do not think it was more than a year or so after he stepped down that he died. I cannot put it all in focus now. It never really developed in that sense. Certainly he was missed, and he still is. I was not aware of any vacuum as far as the temple was concerned. I was not involved in the administrative things as far as the temple. I was just a member. I was not on the board, although a lot of my friends were. He was very influential and involved in running the congregation right up to the time he retired.

B As far as a leader within the Jewish community, has there been anybody since this passing that has been able to galvanize the Jewish community like he has?

Y No, there has not. As I say, it might have been the times because of the surge of membership. The temple has lost a lot of members. Some of the younger people are going elsewhere now to join other congregations. There have been no strong personalities in the community that would take his place.

B Do you know any other people who would be very good to contact dealing with this subject?

Y I am trying to think of people who were active in the temple at that time. My close friend Phil Millstone was active, but he has not been well. I do not know whether he would be agreeable. He was the president of the temple and very close to Rabbi Berkowitz. I am sure Mrs. Berkowitz might have mentioned his name. He has not been well. I do not know if he would want to commit himself at this time. The people whom I would ask are either gone or they are not communicative at this time. Dr. Morris Rosenblum was very active. He and Rabbi Berkowitz were quite a team. I do not think Dr. Rosenblum is capable at this time. I cannot think off hand of other old people. There are some that were active in the temple and who worked with Dr. Berkowitz. I suppose Mrs. Berkowitz

has given you names, Milton Rudick. He was the president of the temple and worked closely with Rabbi Berkowitz. Sidney Silverman, he is old, too. I think that is pretty much the group.

B: If you had to sum up something to say about Rabbi Berkowitz, what would you say?

Y: He was a strong character. He would impress you with his sincerity. I was particularly close with him. Years ago, longer than you would remember, Rabbi's were counselors, not only Rabbi's, but clergymen. If there were problems, very often I would run into a marital situation, I would say, "Go talk to the rabbi before you do anything." He worked so subtly because he did things that nobody knew about except me. We would call and talk. I felt his sincerity was most effective, and his personality. He was intelligent, humorous. I think all of those things made Rabbi Berkowitz. He was an outstanding personality. That is why the matter of somebody taking his place, it is impossible. It could never happen.

B: Is there anything else that you think we should add at this time?

Y: I do not think. I think we covered it all.

B: Thank you very much for your time.

Y: I am sure there are a lot of things. I am always concerned about going on when I get started into some of these things. When you are as old as I am and you have seen all these things happening, you could go on and on. It gets pretty annoying.

B: That is not true in the least.

Y: I try not to get too personal because a lot of these things are. My profession has been that way, so my relationships with Rabbi Berkowitz particularly because we were involved pretty much in the same groups. He would do these things, and it was very interesting. We would not have any big discussions. He would never say, "How did this work out?" That was confidential. He respected the confidence and I respected his respecting their confidence. We did not go into a lot of talk about it. We had our own relationships really, like those close friends that you did not have to sit and talk a lot. That was the kind of relationship we had. It was very pleasant. I miss him. I am sure a lot of people do. The world moves on.

B: Thanks again.

End of Interview