

Benjamin Rosenbluh Interviewed By Vivian Reed-8-9-84

VIVIAN REED: Today is August the 9th, 1984. And I am Vivian Reed. I'm interviewing Mr. Benjamin Rosenbluh at -- what is your address here?

BENJAMIN ROSENBLUH: Twenty-two-eighty-five Madison Avenue.

VR: Twenty-two-eight-five Madison. OK. I would like to ask you a few questions, if I may, for our living history project. Could you tell me your full name please.

BR: Benjamin J. -- middle initial J. -- R-O-S-E-N-B-L-U-H.

VR: All right. May I ask you your age and date of birth?

BR: Date of birth is September 13, 1901, meaning I'll be 83 on September 13, 1984.

VR: OK. Can you tell me a little bit about [00:01:00] your family?

BR: Well, I'm one of 13 -- 11 children, rather. Eleven children. There are one, two, three, four -- there are five of us left. Both parents are deceased.

VR: Do you remember anything about your childhood?

BR: Quite a lot. Just ask me a question.

VR: OK. Were you born and brought up in Bridgeport?

BR: I was born on Pembroke Street in Bridgeport.

VR: What kinds of things did you do for fun when you were a young child?

BR: Well, all of the things that boys do. Various sports, baseball, football, basketball. [00:02:00] The neighborhood games.

VR: Were both of your parents employed?

BR: Just my father.

VR: And what did he do?

BR: By original profession he was a cigar maker in Austria-Hungary. He came to the United States about 1885 and continued that. Moved to Bridgeport about 1890 and opened a store. Cigar, newspaper, and magazine store.

VR: And what ethnic background were your parents?

BR: They were Hungarian Jewish.

VR: When did they come -- I think you may have just told me -- but when did they come to Bridgeport?

BR: My father came -- they came here in 1891. [00:03:00]

VR: Did they come here to find work? Was that the reason that they selected Bridgeport.

BR: That I really don't know, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

VR: I know that you are a retired high school principal. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your education. Did you complete college?

BR: Yes, I was graduated from the old Bridgeport High School in 1920. New York University School of Commerce, Accounts,

and Finance in 1924. New York University School of Education in 1934. And the Teacher's College Columbia University, master's in 1936.

VR: Is that where you met Mrs. Rosenbluh, while you were studying in the city?

BR: No, we met at [00:04:00] a party one evening in someone's home.

VR: Tell me what your feelings are how education was while you were going to high school in Bridgeport? What did people do? How was the discipline? What types of subjects were offered?

BR: Well, the emphasis was primarily, at that time all over the country, the academic work. So-called classic or college curriculum. There was a general curriculum, but very few students were there. And there was the commercial curriculum. Not too many in there. But as the years went on additions were made to the program. We had industrial arts, domestic arts. [00:05:00] The general program was expanded. the college curriculum remained the same. But at the same time, enrollment in the college curriculum was on a decreasing scale. Not enough to get rid of it, but not as heavy, heavily endowed as it used to be. That is true today, as well.

VR: What types of activities were you involved in while you

were going to school in Bridgeport?

BR: Well, I was in the choral group. Also was in one of the plays we had there. And I played football for a short period of time until I had a nose injury, and I stopped.

[00:06:00]

VR: What was the percentage of ethnic groups that went to high school?

BR: Well, I can't give you percentages --

VR: Well, an approximate mix.

BR: Well, I don't know. I will not venture to give figures, because I just don't know. But there were many Jewish, and Italian, and Polish, and Slovak people.

VR: Were there many blacks at that time in the city?

BR: There were some blacks, but they were rather low figures.

VR: Do you remember anything about World War II?

BR: Well, a fair amount. I had a brother, Charles, who was in World War II [00:07:00] and was overseas for a couple years with an expeditionary army, as we called it at that time.

VR: How about the Depression? Do you recall experiences?

BR: I remember the Depression quite well. Things were very bad. [We had to buy?] (inaudible). That's what a depression is. But we survived it eventually.

VR: I know one of the interviews somebody said they were on the train to New York, and they could look out of the train

windows and see people standing on the bread lines. Was that true all over the country? Was that true in Bridgeport as well? Soup lines or bread lines?

BR: Well, we had some bread lines during the Depression. Oh, yes. No question about that. [00:08:00] Oh, yes. You're talking about the Depression in the '30s?

VR: Nineteen thirties, yes. Twenty-nine through the '30s.

BR: A wicked time in our history.

VR: Did many people lose their jobs?

BR: Oh, yes. A lot.

VR: Were they able to pick up work through the WPA and other government programs?

BR: Well, that's the only way many of them could exist, was through the WPA and other government programs.

VR: Was there rationing, and did that affect your family when you were growing up here?

BR: Well, there was rationing, and it affected our family, as it affected everybody else. Because the rationing meant limitation in purchases. And the limitation of purchases was, of course, with necessities.

VR: I know gasoline [00:09:00] was rationed. How many people had automobiles during the time?

BR: Not too many.

VR: So I guess that wasn't quite as important --

BR: No, not really.

VR: -- to the general public. What do you remember about the neighborhoods in the city between -- well, in the '20s, or '30s, or '40s? The north end, for example?

BR: Well, I can't speak for the north end during that time, but we were living on the east side, East Main Street, at that particular era. And a good part of the time I was living in New York City. Coming to the north end -- we came to the north end in the early -- about mid-'30s was when we really opened up our own home in the north end. [00:10:00] We're not north enders. We've been in north end now for about -- since '35. That year, about -- approximately that [year?].

VR: Did you use the Bridgeport parks when you were growing up?

BR: Oh yes, indeed.

VR: Seaside and --

BR: Beardsley Park and Seaside Park.

VR: And Pleasure Beach?

BR: Pleasure Beach, of course.

VR: How about movies? Did you go to movies in the --

BR: As a kid.

VR: -- '20s, '30s?

BR: Yeah, as a kid we would -- oh, yes. We went to the movies frequently. It was not a regular diet, but we did go

frequently to the movies.

VR: Were they reasonably --

BR: They were neighborhood movies, what you see in the -- every neighborhood had a movies not too far away from where you lived.

VR: About \$0.25 to go see a show, maybe? Fifteen cents?

[00:11:00]

BR: Or less.

VR: O, isn't that great when you consider what prices are for movies today. I'd like to ask you a few questions about schools, since that was your profession. Can you tell me how the schools were managed in the 1900s? Just in general, the organization of the schools.

BR: Well, I think they ran -- as far as I could recall, I think the schools were run smoothly. During those days some of the days -- age 14 was the limit for [some of the kids?]. They were permitted of the lead. Then it became age 16. They were permitted to leave. So school [00:12:00] went along very nicely, as I can recall.

VR: Was there a board of education? Was there originally a board of education, too?

BR: As far back as I can recall there has always been a board of education.

VR: Who developed the schools and hired the teachers?

BR: Well, that was the superintendent of schools. He did the actual hiring. I supposed that with some of the -- prior to my position, the -- pretty sure that the principals interviewed applicants, but the firm decision had to be made by the superintendent of schools upon the recommendation of the principal. Later on, of course, we had civil services where examinations determined [00:13:00] who was to teach.

VR: Was everybody allowed to go to school? Was there -- well, I guess I'm asking whether there was any discrimination, or whether it was a clear-cut American rule that everybody goes to school?

BR: There was no discrimination as far as I could ever see or can recall.

VR: How were the schools supported? By the city? By the state? Were there fundraising events?

BR: By the city and the state. Both were involved.

VR: I think you mentioned before the types of subjects that were taught. How long was the school day? Let's say in the '30s or in the --

BR: Well, I think we generally had about seven periods. And probably the average period [00:14:00] must have been about 50 minutes of class work. And with seven periods a day.

VR: And it began in September and went --

BR: Yes, after Labor Day and went to the latter part of June.

VR: That's about the same as it is today, I believe. That hasn't changed too much.

BR: That's correct.

VR: How were grades based? Was it motivation or academic skill? Were there any standard rules that the faculty used to grade?

BR: Well, I think you have to go by the individual teachers. I think most teachers graded by what the student returned to him or her. In other words, whatever the student [00:15:00] is supposed to have learned via homework or class work, and returned to the teacher via tests and questions, they were the determining factors of our grading.

VR: How high did the level of education go in Bridgeport? Through high school, and I guess then there were some commercial schools instead of colleges?

BR: Well, locally there were no -- there were commercial schools, but they were -- and a number of high school graduates went to these commercial schools afterward, but they were not graduate schools under any conditions. There was no such thing around here. Today, of course, there's the Housatonic College, [00:16:00] community college, where you're supposed to be a high school graduate in order to be

there. But there was no such thing as that type of school years ago. You went there because you wanted to get a commercial education. And usually those that went there were graduates of the academic program. Because the high schools did have commercial courses where they -- mainly with the girls, primarily, where the students -- where they learned typing, stenography, while those in the academic, after graduation, learned -- those persons -- in the commercial schools. Booth-Bayliss, primarily, was [one of those schools locally?]. [00:17:00]

VR: And kindergarten was the beginning?

BR: That's right.

VR: Kindergarten right through high school. One of the questions here is, how and who were the schools named after? Because I know there were a lot of grade schools, some with presidents' names. Who determined the naming of the schools?

BR: The board of education does that. Some of the schools were named by the areas they were in, the schools. Wheeler Avenue, the school there was Wheeler School. School down the south end named Jefferson, named for President Jefferson, that's my guess. And a few other things like that.

VR: Kind of arbitrary. I mean, whoever wanted to, could,

right?

BR: The school down below here has so far had three or four different names. Different individuals. [00:18:00] (inaudible) deceased board of ed member, then somebody else. Then a third person.

VR: It must be a little confusing for the students going there. They ask you, "What school do you go to?" "Let me see what that was called." Was there any entertainment in the schools? Were there any fun things, like dramatic society, or debating?

BR: Oh, yes. There were dramatic societies and debate societies. Oh, yes.

VR: Any movies ever in conjunction with subjects or for after school entertainment?

BR: Well, hardly movies. No, movies were not found in the schools at that time. They didn't have the projection booths. They weren't built in at that time. But now they're built in, generally. You have a booth [00:19:00] where you can show movies, or project movies.

VR: I remember when I was going to public school, we had a required assembly every morning. I imagine that isn't done anymore, but I think it was done for a long time when there was -- when the reins were a little bit tighter. I think at this point assembly has been dispensed with. I'd like

to ask your opinion about something. Somebody mentioned that quite a few years ago if children got good report cards in the schools, they could show the report cards and get free rides and stuff at the beaches, at the parks? In other words, they got rewards in the schools for good grades.

BR: I never heard of it.

VR: Really? Didn't hear of it? I don't know.

BR: This is news to me.

VR: Tell me, if you can, [00:20:00] any changes that you felt were going on in the schools while you were a teacher and a principal. Either in discipline, or in general atmosphere, or in academic emphasis, or anything that you could put your finger on?

BR: Well, yes, I think years ago [the majority?] -- when there were no such things as -- or there was no such school as a school of education -- we did have the normal school for the elementary school teachers. [It took them?] two years. But in the high schools, there was no such thing. You have to go to college. And since there were no schools of education, teachers were in the academic program of colleges. And they became our high school [00:21:00] teachers, because they were the classical -- leading from Latin and Greek. And then adding German, and Spanish, and

Italian. And also [before that?] added Polish for a stretch of time. They were academic. Then, of course, the teachers were lacking something. I recognized that years ago when I was in high school. They were lacking something. Because their emphasis was primarily on getting back from the student what the teacher had projected and what the student's supposed to have learned. In other words, it wasn't, [00:22:00] in my estimation, the best way to teach, because they weren't taught that. They were not taught how to teach. But I would say that today teaching is better than it was.

VR: You feel that? You really do?

BR: Well, the emphasis is, today -- and has been for sometime -- motivating people to learn. But years ago -- and this is our fault. It's our fault. That's just the way it was. The teacher was teaching you. You had to learn it, or you didn't learn it. There was very little that the teachers knew what to do to promote [00:23:00] learning.

VR: But wasn't the atmosphere a little more conducive to learning, because it was much stricter? There was order in the classrooms --

BR: No. No, it was not. Because the atmosphere was conducive in the areas of the classics, of the academic work, because that's what -- that's how they could get into college,

knowing their academic work. English, mathematics, the four languages, and the histories, and the sciences. You learned them. That got you into college. But there was a neglect of those who didn't [00:24:00] want the academic work, because their interests and their minds were not on mathematics, the sciences, languages, and so forth.

VR: That's an interesting interpretation. Well, I -- is there anything else that you would like to mention in conjunction with any of this?

BR: Say it again?

VR: Have we covered just about everything. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you'd like to say before we end the interview?

BR: Well, no. I don't -- anything I said is not a [derogation?] of past education. Not a bit.

VR: No, it didn't sound that way to me.

BR: Times have changed. Times have changed. Interests have changed. [00:25:00] Methods of doing things have changed. There are more people who want education today in proportion to those who wanted the education years ago. Because years ago the opportunity of education was not there. See, today we have boys and girls who are interested in the shop programs and domestic programs. That's where their visions lie. That wasn't true years ago

with boys and girls. We have a greater population today, therefore we have greater opportunities to satisfy more people. And we have places for them in school.

VR: Do you think that today's school system will [00:26:00] help the city of Bridgeport become a better place?

BR: Say it again?

VR: Do you think that today's school system will help the future of the city of Bridgeport?

BR: Well, there's no question about it. Education is always primarily for the future. We learn today -- not only today -- we are learning for tomorrow. Today is just one day. We hope we're going to live more than the one day. And therefore, we are learning for the future, how to handle the future.

VR: Thank you very, very much for your time and for your interesting information.

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