

Max Wohl 6 20 1995

Q: This is an interview with Max Wohl, on June 20th, 1995, in the offices of the ACLU of Cleveland. And we're talking about the history of the ACLU and his part in shaping the organization. We'll start. OK, so, let's just start: when did you first get active in fighting for civil liberties?

A: Well, the year was --

(break in audio)

A: -- the [Fokerman?].

Q: The whole file was gone.

A: Oh, that's terrible.

Q: Yeah.

A: And they're all the...

Q: [Chris?] was looking for them, but...

A: And she couldn't find them?

Q: She thought maybe they'd be in her house, but they're not, so --

A: (whistles) Oh, what a shame.

Q: -- we're going to have to try again.

A: Because I...

Q: They're somewhere around.

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you have [01:00] an estimate?

A: Well, let's see. (laughter)

Q: It doesn't have to be exact.

A: No. Probably around nineteen --

(break in audio)

A: -- here in Cleveland, and I went to hear him.

Q: Who was that?

A: Norman Thomas. And that's when my friend, [Ed Newman?], who had been active in the Civil Liberties Union... And then I became chairman. I was chairman of the board for a while, for a couple of years.

Q: Do you remember when you were chairman?

(break in audio)

A: The newsletter, about four, or five, or six months ago, I was interviewed. And I had some of those dates written down so I could give it to her, as I recall. And when I served as chairman --

Q: Oh, well, maybe I can call you later and get those dates from you?

A: I'll have to look them up.

Q: Oh, that's fine.

A: I have to look them up to see.

Q: That's fine.

A: Yeah. So, I served as chairman, and then I was on the state board and the local board, [02:00] and been on ever since, both the state board and local board.

Q: I know you're a lifetime board member.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. And you got involved through Ed Newman? He was --

A: Right, Ed Newman was the active ACLU-er that I knew. He was also a member of the Socialist Party, and he had invited me to come hear Norman Thomas.

Q: And what did Norman Thomas speak about?

A: He spoke about the challenge, as I recall, the challenge to the civil liberties movement -- the violation of rights that had been taking place in society.

Q: OK, that's [fine?]. Well, what were your special interests in the ACLU? Did you have --

A: Well, my special interests were in seeking equal rights for everybody and opposition to discrimination, which was so prevalent and continues to be so prevalent, violations of

[03:00] rights of people. And so, as a result of my [socialist?] background, I had a great interest in civil liberties and was glad to become involved and interested in helping out the organization.

Q: Do you know what type of organization existed before you joined? As far as I understand, there was a committee set up in Cleveland in 1922, and later, in 1954, there was a chapter. But I'm not familiar with what their...

A: Well, when I joined, we had a state organization. The state organization was in Cleveland.

Q: And that was in 1940?

A: God... (laughter) I think so. I'd have to try to figure out... Have you interviewed Ben Sheerer?

Q: No, you're my first victim. (laughter)

A: Because Ben has a terrific memory. [04:00] But the state office was here and was moved to Columbus, and then they had to recognize the whole office. And let's see, we reorganized that office when I left and retired early from Tremco. I started there in 1928. So, '69 -- I worked there 40 years. In 1969 is when we established the Cleveland office, when the state office moved to Columbus, and I became a full-time volunteer then, and retired early. And Norma Coffey was the secretary in the office. We were two of us, and we had --

Q: K-O-F-F- --

A: C-O-double-F-E-Y. And we had one part-time clerk, subsidized by [05:00] some community welfare organization. And that was the reorganization of the Cleveland chapter here, or of the Cleveland office.

Q: How about before then?

A: How did we find...?

Q: How about before 1969? What was --

A: Before that, the state office was here. And we had the state secretary, and executives --

Q: That was started in '54?

A: Right, right, prior to that date. Right.

Q: What about before that, do you know?

A: I don't recall clearly enough. You'd have to talk to Jack. You have Jack Day to interview. He was here then. I mean, he was one of the people who heard (inaudible) speak and was interested in the Civil Liberties Union as well as the (inaudible). He has a terrific memory. I'm sure he'll be able to recall all those details much better than I can at this time.

Q: OK.

A: But the only thing I was involved in is when the state office was moved [06:00] to Columbus. And that year is

when we had to reorganize, and we started afresh with the (inaudible) office, just the two of us.

Q: And that's when you became --

A: And that's when I became active in the ACLU.

Q: OK. Could you explain why there's a difference between the chapters? In the 1950s, like, Cleveland became a chapter then, but then there's an original startup date before then. In 1922, there was a committee. I don't understand what the difference in the status of the organization was.

A: Right. I think when they started up in 1922, I forget which was the first chapter in Cleveland. I don't remember that history anymore. There again, Jack will be able to tell you because I think he was in almost at the very start. [07:00] They established a chapter right from the beginning, as I recall, in the history. Let's see, where did I see the record? I'll have to look through some records I had. I had some files that somebody had given me, and I don't remember. I think that had some early history in it. I'll have to look it up and see if I can find that for you.

Q: Sure. Do you think I might be able to get a copy of that?

A: I'll give you that file if I can find it.

Q: Oh, that'd be great.

A: I think I remember where it was when I last saw it. Seems to me it had some history. Some of the material I got, I had given to -- what's her name, in Toledo?

Q: Naomi Twining?

A: Naomi. She has a lot of the history. Actually, just a lot of these things. If Jack doesn't remember, you could probably get it from Naomi Twining, because she's written all that up.

Q: Yeah. Do you know what was the specific event or issue around which the Cleveland chapter [08:00] got started? Like, perhaps the Rosenberg Trials, or something like that, that sparked the ACLU?

A: I don't remember. Again, you'd have to either consult this history if I could find it, or Jack Day, because he was in on the start, as I recall, or so close to the start that he would know. Because I had gone to the meeting and heard him speak. He's been an active ACLU-er before I even became interested in it.

Q: Do you know who the founders of the chapter were? It was Jack Day?

A: Yeah. Naomi has that all written up -- that history. She would have to give it to you, if it isn't with the material that I have. I've forgotten what I've kept, that [Sally?] left with me. And I'll look it up, and you'll give me your

name and number and I'll call you. And I'll see if I can find that for you. But I've read all of that, but my memory is no good anymore, to be able to... [09:00]

Q: OK. (laughter)

A: I have enough trouble remembering my own dates, and I'm 86. So my memory is not as good as it was --

Q: (laughter) Oh, I don't believe that.

A: -- 50 years ago.

Q: Do you know who was on the executive board of directors when you joined?

A: One of the best legal aid-- a civil liberties attorney -- Bernie Berkman was the chairman. And (inaudible) was the -- active civil liberties attorneys in the city here, handled a number of our cases. A very tremendous civil libertarian attorney, Bernie was. He was the head of the organization. Oh, God, I don't remember the names of the others. I'd have to try to sit down [10:00] and try to remember. Bernie, I remember so well because I used to drive down to Columbus with him for all the state board meetings, and had a lot of contact with him. Oliver Deeks, the principal of South High School, was on the board at that time.

Q: Do you know if he's still alive?

A: No, (inaudible).

Q: No? OK. We had a question about that.

A: He's the only one name that I can call to mind. There was a number of others, but I can't remember their names.

Q: OK. What was Oscar Steiner's role in the Cleveland chapter?

A: Oh, Oscar Steiner, I was trying to think of him. Well, he was really one of the more active members. As I recall, [11:00] he was one of those who was active in establishing the chapter and the affiliate in Ohio. He was one of the original organizers.

Q: Was he the first president or executive director?

A: That, I don't remember. I don't recall that much history. Jack will be able to tell you. But he had been very active prior to the time that I joined. He was still active at that time, when we had that annual meeting that Norman Thomas was the speaker. Because he was older then, he wasn't very active anymore, but he was available for consultations and discussions. And we used to meet with him fairly regularly, just to talk over things and get his advice.

Q: So, he was a lawyer?

A: No, he was a businessman.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: Right.

Q: So he's just a --

A: But he knew civil-liberties law very well -- their knowledge of a civil libertarian. [12:00]

Q: And what did he do to help the organization? Did he --

A: Well, first of all, he was one the primary fundraisers and fund contributors. So, he was able to help financially both in contributing and raising funds. And second of all, he was very knowledgeable about civil-liberties issues, and played a good part, as I recall, in the discussions as to which cases were civil-liberties issues and what we should be doing in order to strengthen the civil liberties movement and our place in the society.

Q: I found a statement that Oscar Steiner wrote in the board minutes from April 10th, 1951, and he was talking about Cleveland's policy towards representing fascists and communists, and whether the ACLU should get involved.

[13:00] And I was just wondering, what were the repercussions of this statement, and why was it necessary?

A: Look, it's probably before my time and I'm not the... One of the first cases we had when I was involved was Nazis in the City of Cleveland who wanted to sit in their uniform at the city council meeting. That's the first contact that I know of, for the ACLU here. And the ACLU won their right

to sit in the public area of the city council, even though they were wearing their uniform.

Q: Do you remember where that was?

A: What year?

Q: No? (laughter) Do you remember the name of that case? OK. OK. So, you don't know about [14:00] the 1950s, like the Blackburn Commission, or the House bill (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

A: No, I don't remember those.

Q: OK. Do you know --

A: I wasn't a lawyer; I was a businessman. So, while I knew, heard, and read about the cases and things, I was not involved legally with them. So, my job was to run the office and --

Q: Weren't you a volunteer coordinator of the legal services?

A: Well, I was a volunteer in the office. But I didn't have any law background. And so, I learned everything (inaudible), whatever I learned, with the cases that I'm interested in. But I didn't have any legal background, so most of my activity was just running the office and keeping the ACLU going and raising funds and carrying out the administrative work.

Q: A man called who's writing an encyclopedia of Cleveland, [15:00] and he was asking about a Russell Chase. And I was just wondering if you recognize that name?

A: Russell Chase?

Q: He said it was a former president of Cleveland chapter, but he didn't have more information than that.

A: The name sounds familiar, but I...

Q: Does it?

A: He was before my time --

Q: Yeah, probably.

A: -- but the vague impression that I have... Jack Day would (inaudible).

Q: Jack Day?

A: Jack Day and Ben Sheerer. Ralph Rudd was another one who was active in that time that I became active.

Q: Was he ever the executive director?

A: No, he was an attorney, and Ben Sheerer was in the same office. But Ralph was a very active civil libertarian. He was active in the ACLU, and took a number of our cases.

Q: OK. Do you remember some of the major cases that the ACLU was helping out on? [16:00]

A: I can remember some, but Ben Sheerer can rattle all these off. (laughter) He's got a tremendous memory.

Q: OK. Do you remember what year you were a volunteer coordinator of legal services in Cleveland? Around when? Because all I have is a reference to that. I don't have any kind of dates in it.

A: No, I served as legal coordinator, and was primarily the intake coordinator. That was my job, and to arrange for the legal committee meetings and things like that. I didn't get involved really in the cases. I saw the records and everything else. But I wouldn't remember them anymore. But I was legal coordinator only in the sense of getting and taking calls. I was the intake coordinator, really. I took all the calls for most of the years that I was here. I took all of these calls that came in from people, and I developed enough experience so I'd know which ones would be [17:00] probably considered for our legal committee, and which ones I'd tell them, it's not a civil-liberties issue. So, I was able to do that. But that's about all I had to do as any legal... My job was just to run the office and things.

Q: You were working here, like, a couple of hours a week as a volunteer?

A: No, I worked fulltime.

Q: Oh, as fulltime?

A: I retired from my other job and I started in 1969 -- yeah, 41 years later. I worked 41 years at Tremco. So, it was 1969. I retired early there -- an earlier raise in '65 -- in order to man the Cleveland office. And I worked fulltime here, then. I was the coordinator for 10 years.

Q: There were just three people in the office, then?

A: When we started, yeah, it was just myself, Norma Coffey, the office manager, and everything else. And we had a part-time [18:00] clerk, and some community organizations subsidized her.

Q: And did you have a lot of cases that volunteer lawyers were taking, or...?

A: We had a number of cases, because Bernie Berkman was here then, and we had a real leader group. Our caseload was good, but all of the records and everything else, the money was raised by the state office. We had a budget of \$12,000, the first year.

Q: Wow, and that was (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

A: And [that was just?] Norma Coffey's salary, and a very small part of it was (inaudible). Then, from then on, we used to have a girl, but that's all our budget was -- \$12,000.

Q: Wow. Let's see. [19:00] Could you tell me about Jack Day and his role in the ACLU? Just a little about him?

A: Well, yeah. Certainly one of the outstanding civil-libertarian leaders that we've run across. He's very knowledgeable. You know, he became a judge, so he had to minimize his civil-liberties work for a number of years because he was in the government, as a judge and some other positions. But he always was involved, even on a consultant basis. Truly knowledgeable. As a matter of fact, the first civil-liberties meeting I ever went to, when I became a member, Jack Day gave a speech there. It impressed me a great deal. And he's been a tremendous asset to the organization: very knowledgeable, a very fine person, a wonderful guy.

Q: He's still active, right?

A: Yeah. He's still [on the loose?], on the Cleveland board and the state board, as I recall. [20:00] But he didn't accept on the state board, because he was on the Cleveland board. Comes to as many meetings as he can, and he still does some practice -- tremendous skill.

Q: And I know he helped as an administrator. But did he also help with legal cases, then?

A: He took cases, then, yes.

Q: He did?

A: Yes.

Q: As a volunteer?

A: Right, right.

Q: And Ralph Rudd was an affiliate chair in June '56 though '57. Do you --

A: His job was only in the legal work.

Q: Legal work, right.

A: He worked with the legal committee and he took cases on his own, as well as helping some of the younger attorneys to handle their cases. I'm sure he was a big help to Ben Sheerer, for example. Ben was in the same firm. They were partners, or part of the same firm. Ralph always has been active civil-liberties attorney.

Q: [21:00] Was he one of the founders, too?

A: I don't think he was.

Q: No?

A: I'm not sure though. I know he was active when I joined, but how far back he went, I don't know. Jack Day probably would know.

Q: OK. Did you have any contact with Benson Wolman while he was executive director of Ohio?

A: Yeah, I had a lot of contact with him, both before we moved the state office... I had met him down in Columbus, and then when he became the state executive director, then I had a lot of contact with him at regular meetings and... So, I've known him all the years that he's been involved.

Q: And what can you tell me about his role in the ACLU?

A: Well, Benson is a very knowledgeable [22:00] and very capable person. I wouldn't want this for the record, really. Is this being taped? I wouldn't want it on tape, because I wouldn't say it --

(break in audio)

Q: OK, sorry.

A: He had won a number of cases and he won some substantial fees in (inaudible), doing very well financially. Primarily because of the fundraising that Harold did. Because most of us (inaudible), because he really solicited from us because he was such a wonderful guy, everybody was willing to support him. And then, when the state organization started to go down, the Cleveland organization started to have problems. You know, we then combined into one, some years ago, back again.

Q: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

A: Harold tried his best to combine, but he never could put up with -- and this, again, is off the record -- but [Bob Henderson?]. He couldn't accept him, so we started our own organization. But we couldn't get affiliate status. He tried to get affiliate status, but they wouldn't grant

affiliate status to two institutions in the state of Ohio. So, we were a separate unaffiliated branch of the ACLU of Ohio. I was the only one who went down to the state board meetings, where I remained active, because I was always opposed to the split. I worked closely with the Cleveland organizations and that was the one I was involved with. And so, well, I continued to go down to the state organization when we had nothing to do with them, but contributing things to them, until they united about, what, three, four, or five years ago.

Q: How do you think the organization has changed through the years? Is there different goals now, or do you feel that there's different issues that the ACLU [24:00] is dealing with, you know, in 1990 versus when you came on board?

A: Well, Ben Sheerer could answer that better than me, but...
(laughter)

Q: What do you think, though?

A: Well, I think there's new issues, but I can't spell them out because I'd have to think of the specific cases. But all the years that I've been involved, basically --

Q: Do you think some people should --

A: -- what the differences are, well... I can't think of the cases, so the...

Q: Do you think, like, for example, censorship is as grave an issue as it was 20 or 30 years ago, or do you think it's getting better?

A: Oh, I think we've made some progress in the censorship, but I think that, basically, there's more [25:00] for us to do today than ever before in that. Society has become so divisive, and the power of corporate America -- I mean, right-wing America has become strong enough so that the violations of what we consider civil liberties -- I think there's more of that today, and a greater need now of the Civil Liberties Union than at any time.

Q: Just a couple more questions. How have you been involved in the chapter today? You're on the state board, and...

A: Yeah. Well, I'm on both boards as a layperson. My involvement primarily [26:00] is not in the area of discussing civil-liberties cases, although I have been asked questions [when they call me?]. But that's the part [I've been playing?], because my expertise is in the fundraising and the organizational work and the volunteer work. But [is it?] necessary for laypeople just as it is for the attorneys that we'd have on the ACLU, because we had to pay for everything. But we never could do the kind of work that we have done for the betterment of our society.

Q: It must be quite a challenge to get all the volunteers together and to get them working.

A: Right.

Q: How did you deal with that?

A: Well, fortunately, there's a lot of people in our society who are interested in building a better world, whether they're liberal Democrats or liberal Republicans or Socialists or any other kind variety on the political scene. [27:00] And those of us who are interested in building a better world realize that unless there are civil liberties, it's very difficult to have a better world -- that the civil-liberties rights are fundamental to building a better Democratic society. And so, whether we might differ to some extent as to what we'll have in that society, if you don't have civil liberties, you're not going to have anything. And, you know, you see what happens to countries that have dictatorships and totalitarian states. It's only more important to make sure that we have these civil liberties to protect us in a democratic society. It's only if we have the Democratic society, are we going to build a world of peace and plenty and prosperity.

Q: Did you help with the organization of the volunteering lawyers? Did you kind of contact them?

A: Well, I'm just the coordinator [28:00] in keeping the records and making calls from time to time on attorneys. You know, only to that extent was I involved. Our (inaudible) secretary at that time did a lot of that. But I took the intake, and so I used to talk to these attorneys, our legal attorneys, and then I'd get the answers to questions that people asked, and to see (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

Q: Was it intake on the phone, or was that --

A: On the phone, intake on the phone.

Q: So, that's changed.

A: Yeah, that was a good part of my job -- was to do the intake.

Q: And how many calls did you get a day?

A: Oh, anywhere from 10 to 50.

Q: Wow. And these were people --

A: Because that was my job and as a volunteer, when I had the time, we took all the calls and talked with people. When we lost Michael, who took my place when I left. Then, [29:00] they had people write in. They didn't have somebody who was on the phone and could give people advice. Part of the responsibility of the intake coordinator was not only to answer questions, to see if we could help them, but to guide them as to what agencies in town they might go

to if we couldn't help them. And a lot of people called who had legal problems, not civil-liberties problems. And our job, both Ben and myself, we were able to tell people to call this agency, call that agency, and try to give them advice as to how to proceed, when it really was not a civil-liberties issue. Now, they don't have the staff -- but maybe they do now. But for a long time, they didn't have the staff or time to give that kind of advice on the phone that we were able to give.

Q: If you were dealing with a civil-liberties issue, would you refer that then to a --

A: Well, anything that I (inaudible) was a civil-liberties issue, I would then review with our legal director.

Q: And then you'd find a volunteer? [30:00]

A: And then he would decide yes, it's a civil-liberties issue. We'll bring it to the legal committee.

Q: There were no --

A: We always had a legal committee in all the years when I was there.

Q: But there were no lawyers employed by the ACLU at that time --

A: No.

Q: -- like there are now.

A: Right.

Q: Wow. OK. My last, final questions. (laughter) I just wanted to know who you thought would be an important person for me to talk to about this project because, like --

A: Well, Jack Day, for sure. Ben Sheerer.

Q: And he's in Cleveland?

A: Yes, he's a Cleveland attorney and extremely knowledgeable, and he'll help all he can.

Q: Do you remember when he came on board with the ACLU?

A: He came on board either just about the same time I did or shortly after, and got involved with the ACLU.

Q: OK.

A: You may want to talk [31:00] long distance or write to Ralph Rudd. Ben has his address and telephone number. He would be certainly worthwhile, because he was active in the early days. Jack Day, Ben... That's the people who could give you the best background on the early ACLU in previous years.

Q: OK. My final question was I just wanted to know if you had any documents, and if I could contact you later?

A: Yeah, I'll look up and see if I have that history. I have a lot of old files.

Q: It'd be great if you could find those dates, and maybe I could include them.

A: Find what?

Q: You said you did an interview about four months ago and you had [32:00] dates written down for when you joined, and...?

A: Look at the newsletter from about six months ago, eight months ago. They interviewed me and it seems to me that I had some dates then, that I looked up for that interview.

Q: OK. A few months ago.

A: Because (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

Q: OK, I will definitely --

A: (inaudible) I have a file here of the last six, [I'm sure of it?], current issues of the civil liberties issue and it has one column of people they've interviewed. And it was about six months ago when I was interviewed for that.

Q: OK, I can go look for that, then. Thank you very much for all your precious time.

A: Well, glad to talk to you about it. (laughter)

Q: Is there anything I missed that you'd like to --

A: I can't think of anything except that it's a wonderful organization. (laughter)

Q: Well, thank you very much.

END OF AUDIO FILE