Sidney J. Levy: An Autobiography

My parents were immigrants to the U.S. from The Ukraine in Russia. I heard about struggling to make a living in retailing when my mother spoke of the little shop in the town of Vishgorodik in the old country where my grandmother sold such commodities as kerosene, sugar, and ribbons. My maternal grandfather succeeded in bringing his family, setting me a great example of perseverance and making me grateful that he escaped czarist tyranny. My father came on his own as a teenager and later brought over his parents. They lived in St. Louis, Missouri, where my parents met, married, and then moved to Chicago. Life was difficult. My father was a frustrated poet who labored most of his life eking out a living in small produce stores where he advised me: “Don’t go into the garbage business.” I worked in those stores after school from the age of nine until about 15.

That store experience meant participating in marketing first hand, learning how to serve customers, make little advertising signs, noticing the qualities of successful popular fruits. I have often told students: “Don’t be a complainer: be a learner. Observe what is going on around you and think about what it means.” I thought about the natures, uses, and appeals of produce such as California Sunkist oranges compared to Florida oranges. Sixty years later my doctoral student Deborah Heisley studied in her dissertation the symbolic nature of fruits and vegetables, about which I had a lot of associations. As a teenager, a job in a local theater ushering taught me about running a theater and audiences consuming entertainment. Twenty years later, a colleague and I studied and wrote about Living with Television.

Early work experience

Being graduated from high school in 1938, my ambition was to become a history teacher. But with the Depression, it was necessary to go to work to contribute some to the family income. In the next four years I had four jobs. One was just a couple of days in a light factory assembling toy cardboard periscopes for a cereal package premium; another was a few weeks in a factory

assembling and lacing Venetian blinds, finding both jobs intolerably repetitive and mindless. The next job was at Program Press, a small printing company that specialized in flyers for small local movie theaters advertising coming attractions.

Still, ambitious to do better, I took a civil service examination for a government job. I was hired as a messenger boy. The work entailed delivering and picking up mail and getting acquainted with many personnel and included a stint as Chief Messenger on the swing shift. I then worked for a while on the teletype machine, learning about communications between the office, arsenals, and contractors, observing selling, buying, and negotiating among the military and its providers. That was a basic education in the way marketing went on in that sphere.

Service in the military

As a cadet in the Army Air Force, I was in the military for two years, where I eventually earned wings as an aerial gunner. I learned about planes, trucks, the use of Morse code and how to strip and reassemble a rifle while blindfolded, naming all the parts. I did not know that I was going to become a professional student of consumer behavior, but was an assiduous observer and attentive listener, learning about the official demands of differences in rank. I also acquired an enhanced understanding of grooming, eating and drinking, vulgar language, and sex on weekend passes. It would be difficult to overestimate the value of this learning, but nothing compares with the profound benefit to my life of having earned two years' worth of education on the G. I. Bill.

The University of Chicago

Starting college late, being 23, I worked hard to get through the liberal arts program, one that was focused on The Great Books. By taking five courses per quarter and through the summer as well, course credits piled up. I thus completed the four year Bachelor's degree in 22 months. It is hard to imagine my mind without Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and the great Greek plays. Recently, preparing an article about the history of consumer behavior, it seemed necessary to me to re-read the hilarious Satyricon of Petronius as part of thinking about reports of the consumption of food by rich people at lavish and lascivious banquets.

The year spent in study of “Personal Freedom and Social Control” confronted me vividly with some of the most important issues in life. A basic decision was made when I became close friends with doctoral students who studied with the interdisciplinary program called The Committee on Human Development. We spent a lot of time together and they indoctrinated me into the higher realms of behavioral science. I enrolled in the Committee program and worked toward becoming in my mind an interdisciplinary psychologist.

My career at Social Research, Inc.

Social Research, Inc. was a small company set up in 1946 just off campus by three University of Chicago professors. The goal was to provide behavioral science research services to organizations, to consult on issues of morale and consumer behavior. I joined them as a student part-time worker in order to earn money to pay for my experience of psychoanalysis that is related in “Marketing on the Couch: Sidney and Psychoanalysis.”

Finishing my course work I became fully engaged in the company working full time there from 1950 until 1960 and then part time through the 1980w. Over the years, we carried out many research and consulting projects for many organizations: manufacturing companies, advertising agencies and their clients, schools, museums, hospitals, government agencies, countries, professional associations, and media. Over my 40 years as a marketing researcher and consultant for all those outfits I learned a lot about management and its problems. Some of the clients for whom I worked on projects are listed here, to my retrospective amazement: A.B. Dick, Abbot Labs., Activision, American Dairy Assn., Armour, Cadillac, Chevrolet, Chicago Tribune, D’arcy, Masius, Benton & Bowles, DeBeers, Gardner Advertising, General Mills, Harris Bank, J. Walter Thompson, Jewel, Kimberly-Clark, Kraft, Leo Burnett, Marsteller, Meyerhoff Agency, Michael Reese Hospital, etc., etc.....Zenith.

While working at SRI, it was notable to see the way the consumers we interviewed would use their perceptions of the brands we were asking about. That led to discussions of brand imagery in some of our reports, and to publication of the article “The Product and the Brand.” The article, elucidating the idea of “the brand image,” was a huge success. It has been cited thousands

of times and is still regularly cited by scholars whose secondary research goes farther back than the last ten years.

My career at Kellogg School, Northwestern University

That article and other publicity about the work at SRI, led Harper Boyd, Jr., the marketing department head at Northwestern University to invite me to join the faculty, where I was hired as a full professor in 1961. The appointment was especially supported by the success of the article, "Symbols for Sale" in 1959, which is still often cited.

Along with heading the department's doctoral program and chairing the department from 1980 through 1992, I continued to work on projects with SRI and to use that practical experience in my teaching and academic research writing and publishing. The timing of articles is not predictable, given the scheduling of journal submissions and reviews, but 1963 was a productive year. Harper Boyd and I were effective collaborators, publishing two articles that year: "New Dimension in Consumer Analysis," in the Harvard Business Review, and "Cigarette Smoking and the Public Interest," in Business Horizons. In 1966 we also published "What Kinds of Corporate Objectives?" in the Journal of Marketing. In addition, I published "Symbolism and Life Style," Proceedings, American Marketing Association (1963c). It was subsequently reprinted in several anthologies. Then there were "The Meanings of Work" and "The Public Image of Government Agencies" in the Public Administration Review.

Life got another strong shift in direction in 1968. The dean, Don Jacobs, asked the marketing department how it might contribute to the education of increasing numbers of students who wanted to work in non-business settings. I knew from my years of experience with Social Research that the many different organizations we had worked for, and for whom we had studied their audiences, patients, patrons, students, members, were all engaged in their own versions of marketing. I brought a memorandum to a department faculty meeting titled, "Broadening the Concept of Marketing." It explained that since marketing was basically a process of exchange and that the exchanges were not just of goods and money, but included all the kinds of offerings and responses that went on among people, among all organizations and individuals, of

services, ideas, and emotions. Philip Kotler and I then wrote the often cited article with that title for the Journal of Marketing in 1969.

Retiring to non-retiring

In 1991, the law still allowed universities to retire workers at the age of 70. Dean Jacobs therefore retired me. Then he hired me back to continue as department chair for another year and to continue teaching. My wife and I moved to Tucson, Arizona, but I kept returning to Kellogg to teach. Then, in 1997 I was chosen to head the department of marketing at the University of Arizona and did that for seven years. I then moved down the hall to the office where this memoir is being written. This semi-retirement for the past dozen years has allowed me to keep doing research, writing articles and books, and enjoying especially working with colleagues and doctoral students.