Rosalie Silber Abrams Transcript

MARCIE COHEN FERRIS: My name is Marcie Cohen Ferris, and I am conducting an oral history interview with Rosalie Silber Abrams for the Weaving Women's Words Project of the Jewish Women's Archive. We are in Baltimore, Maryland. We're in Mrs. Abrams' house. Today's date is Thursday, May 24, 2001, and we are starting at about 1:10 p.m. in the afternoon. So we're going to start at the beginning. I usually ask the date when you were born and where were you born.

ROSALIE SILBER ABRAMS: I was born June 2, 1916. My birthday is coming up next week, I will be eighty-five. I was born in Baltimore. My parents had a bakery at 1313 East Lombard Street in Baltimore. We lived over the bakery first, and then next door, and the bakery was very much a part of my life.

MCF: What was the name of the bakery?

RSA: Silber's Bakery. My father and mother founded the bakery.

MCF: Can you tell me a little about them? Let's get the origin, where their families came from.

RSA: My father came from a town called Sokol in what was then Galicia and part of Austria-Hungary, and came to this country when he was fifteen, not speaking the language. He could read Hebrew and read The Forward, I remember. But he always spoke with an accent. My mother's father had had a bakery, and when he died, my grandmother said – do you understand Yiddish? –

MCF: A little.

RSA: "(Gay zeech oiys?) Ike Silber." Go find Ike Silber. He's a very ambitious young man." He was selling bread from a pushcart. He acquired the bakery, and he went into the bakery business. We had a very excellent product.

MCF: Let me go back for just one second. What brought the family originally to Baltimore? Do you know what the connection was?

RSA: My mother's family had a lot of relatives in Baltimore and in the county, mostly in the countryside; they were farmers. My father had lots of relatives here, too. I have a picture of my mother and father with my father's family. There are about fifty people in it, older than he, taken with my father's family of uncles and cousins and other members of the Kandel family, my paternal grandfather's family. His mother was a Kandel, and there were lots of relatives.

MCF: Did your mother and father meet here in Baltimore?

RSA: My father met my mother in Baltimore when he began to take care of the business there after my grandfather's death. He fell in love with her when she was about twelve and waited until she became seventeen to get married. [laughter]

MCF: They met through the bakery family business.

RSA: They met through the bakery. My mother worked side by side with my father.

MCF: Can you tell me their names just for the tape?

RSA: Dora Rodbell Silber. Her maiden name was Rodbell, and her mother's maiden name was Kirsch. My mother was brought to this country by her parents when she was three years old. Her uncle came to America to see how she was doing because he was so crazy about her. Kirsch, his name was [inaudible]. When my grandfather died, my grandmother needed somebody to take over the bakery – there was a business next

door, and she gave the business to my father. For the rest of their lives, my aunts were very angry at my father because they thought the bakery belonged to them. We had this constant conflict. I have one still living who is ninety-two, and she still talks about it sometimes. [laughter]

MCF: Go through the siblings in your family for me.

RSA: I am one of eight children. My oldest brother practices medicine in California. He's ninety. He's practically retired.

MCF: What's his name?

RSA: Bernard. Dr. Bernard Silber. He lives in Atherton, California, near Palo Alto. The next one died just six weeks ago. He was a World War II hero. He was very bright and very thoughtful and kind. A flyer. He was awarded four distinguished flying crosses and other medals. A very brave man.

MCF: What was his name?

RSA: Sam Leonard Silber. Shlomo Eleazar. Next is me, and then I have a brother who is a year and a half younger than I, named Sidney Silber. After him was my sister who died a couple years ago of leukemia, Libby. Then my brother, Myer, who died in World War II, was killed in action. Then my brother Earl Silber, who's a doctor – psychiatrist – in Chevy Chase. Then, my youngest sister, now Evelyn Krohn, who lives in Baltimore. Incidentally, every one of us has a graduate degree, which is remarkable, I think.

MCF: It really is.

RSA: It is because my father didn't think girls needed an education. I got my undergraduate degree in evening school and then in graduate school.

MCF: So he talked about that? You have memories of that when you were a little girl?

RSA: Oh, yes. When I got ready to go to college, yes.

MCF: What did he say?

RSA: "We don't have money to send you. Bernard's in medical school, Sam's in graduate school, and next year, Sidney's going to M.I.T." Sidney, my younger brother. We're all bright, fortunately, so anyway, I went myself.

MCF: So that was a closed door, and you figured out another way.

RSA: It was okay. It was a closed door. The funny thing is, I didn't think about it until one day when I was in the Legislature, and we were discussing the Equal Rights Amendment, and it hit me. Now, that's a long time. It hit me that I had been discriminated against because I was a girl. Funny, there was an item in one of these local papers recently about a young girl. Her father said to her, "What are you going to do studying math and physics?" That's what I wanted to major in – math and physics. It's interesting because my sister also was dissuaded from majoring in math and physics, but her daughter, my niece, is a physicist and mathematician. Anyway, it's okay. Whatever happened must have happened for the best.

MCF: Let's go back and talk a little bit about neighborhood and childhood. You had a different experience than some because of eight children—that's a big family.

RSA: Oh yes. Well, first of all, we lived right next door to the bakery most of my life.

MCF: Describe that neighborhood.

RSA: Monroe Street in West Baltimore. It was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood to the west of us, and a predominantly non-Jewish neighborhood to the other side. We

lived on an integrated block. No blacks, but non-Jews and Jews, which in itself was unusual.

MCF: What kind of ethnicity of the other –?

RSA: The next-door neighbor, Mrs. Brittingham, gave me an oil painting one time. They had no children. The woman down at the end of the block stretched lace curtains and sold snowballs, three cents a snowball in a little dish that they then served ground beef in. Behind us were some Blacks in the neighborhood. So, it was very much a mixed neighborhood. There were about forty employees in the bakery, the production end, of every nationality and ethnic group. They worked practically all night. So, I got to know a lot of people. Then, when we opened branch stores, then we had a whole shipping crew. The shipping room was right outside our kitchen door. We lived next door to the bakery at that time. It was just a step down to the shipping room. There were racks full of cookies, chocolate-topped cookies, and other goodies, so I could just reach out and grab them. My father was very generous. There were eight of us, don't forget. He didn't care how much we gave to our friends. My friends were all happy to wait for me when I worked at night. When I was seven years old my father said, "You're tall enough to see over the counter. You can wait on the customers." [laughter] My sister, Libby, said one day – she was nine. I said, "Isn't that something? Why did he make me do it at seven?" "You were taller," she said. [laughter] So, I learned to make change, and we could eat anything that was left over. We didn't keep anything over in those days. What was left over was sold to farmers for feed or given away. When I ran for office first time and every time, I heard more than two hundred times at least people say to me, "We're going to vote for you because your father kept us alive during the Depression." My father had a breadline, and I remember the breadline during the Depression. I was about ten or twelve years old. I realized years later that he had to have baked for that breadline because he couldn't have taken care – I bet there may have been forty or fifty families that he kept alive, that he saved.

MCF: When you say breadline, describe what that was.

RSA: A breadline in the Depression was of people who had nothing, no food to eat – nothing. Some of them had lost their homes and everything, and men sold apples on the corner just to make a few pennies. The breadline were people who got in line early in the morning, about 5:30 a.m., because that's when they opened. They would line up on Monroe Street and work their way around the corner to Westwood Avenue, and they would get a bag full of bread and buns. That was often the only thing they had to eat. So, yes, I remember that very well.

MCF: Were those hard times for your father too?

RSA: They were hard times for everybody. But you know what? I think we were very, very fortunate he was in the baking business. I was tested recently for osteoporosis, a study that Montebello was doing, and I'm in the ninetieth percentile. For my age group, I should have osteoporosis, but fortunately, I got good nutrition as a child. The other thing, I used to go into the bakery, to the store, and take a chunk of Fleischmann yeast every day and eat it. I probably needed it, but ate it every day, and I'm sure vitamin B helped, too. We all worked in the store. Sundays, we helped with cutting up fruit for fruitcake in the winter and cutting peaches for peach cake in the summer, and I remember to get a day off to go out with my friends, to get a Sunday off was a rarity because it was the busiest day of the week. We all worked.

MCF: Describe to me a little bit about what the bakery looked like.

RSA: The bakery. Well, I guess the houses were no more than about thirteen feet wide and ran down about sixty feet. The bakery was on the corner of Monroe Street and Westwood Ave. If I went in through the shipping room – the shipping room was on the Westwood Avenue side, had to take three steps down from our kitchen. The bakery, if I took three steps down, was to the right. There were bread troughs – wooden troughs –

in which the bakers punched the dough. They kneaded it, and it had to be punched every couple of hours. For the rye bread, they had to make a cellar, a fermentation, which they called the “einfrisch,” the “starter.”

MCF: How do you spell that?

RSA: That’s German.

MCF: German.

RSA: E-I-N-F-R-I-S-C-H, I’m guessing. It means the beginning. The einfrisch. I remember as a young girl hearing my mother – I guess this was after my father died – talking to the head baker, “Herman, It’s warm today; don’t forget to put ice in the sour.” Or she would say, “It’s cold out; don’t forget to put warm water in the sour.” The temperature of the sour was maintained, I believe, at 78°. Sour was what made the rye bread, and the rye bread was superb. I have never found another loaf of rye bread to equal Silber’s. People tell me the same thing, and they’re right. I’ve never found a loaf of rye bread anywhere to equal Silber’s.

MCF: Now, was there a family recipe for it?

RSA: Yes.

MCF: Where did the recipe come from?

RSA: My father. He made it.

MCF: So let me get [the] chronology right. When your dad started the bakery, did he start out –? Repeat for me again what happened.

RSA: Okay. My father came to this country when he was about fifteen.

MCF: Right.

RSA: In Europe, when his younger brothers and sisters were born, his parents couldn't take care of him, and they sent him to an uncle. The uncle sent him to learn how to be a baker. He was an apprentice in Europe. He left them and stowed away aboard a ship.

MCF: So that was in Austria or Hungary?

RSA: Right. Out of Bremen. He was a baker's helper, and he jumped ship, left them – I don't know whether New York or Baltimore – and came to Baltimore because he had uncles here and his aunt. I remember some of them. Tanta Beena. [laughter] I remember a lot of them.

MCF: And then?

RSA: He and his brother, my Uncle Jake, started a little bakery in a basement, opening through a trapdoor just like in the movie Moonbeam. Trapdoor basement. They baked bread. When my grandfather died in 1913 of tuberculosis – this is my mother's father – my grandmother said, "(Gay zeech oiys?) Ike Silber. Go look for Ike Silber. He's an energetic young man." So he came in and took over the bakery at 1313 East Lombard Street.

MCF: Then it became Silber's.

RSA: Silber's Bakery. Right.

MCF: Did they start out just with one product or always –?

RSA: I don't remember. Bread was very important, and probably they made buns too. They made a wonderful raisin bun with icing on it, flat. Then, later, they made everything.

MCF: Was it a Jewish bakery?

RSA: Yes.

MCF: What does that mean? Kosher?

RSA: What it meant was we never had a rabbi, but I remember my father arguing with the rabbis often; I listened in on a lot of those conversations. I knew every rule my father—my father broke some of the rules, but he knew – he would tell me why, and it all made sense.

MCF: Tell me about that.

RSA: He was a rebel, I must tell you. During Yom Kippur, he would go to visit the prisoners, the Jewish prisoners. He would say, "Well, that's more important than observing the rule that you can't drive." He really was a very, very charitable man. I remember when he died, we had a long list of people to whom he lent money. We put it down as bad debts, and the Internal Revenue said, "We have investigated your claims, and we believe it was in the nature of Mr. Silber that he did not expect to be repaid." The truth was he didn't. It's interesting because maybe a year or two ago, I've had a cleaning lady who has been working for me for almost fifty years. She doesn't work anymore because she's exactly my age. Anyway, she said to me one day, "I need three hundred dollars, Mrs. Abrams," and so I wrote her a check, gave it to her, didn't ask her why or what for. A day or two later, I called her up, and I said, "Emma, you do not have to pay me back." I thought to myself, "That's what my father would have done." Isn't that interesting?

MCF: Yeah. You really learn those values from family. So, as far as the Jewish bakery went, would rabbis come in and check things?

RSA: What they did was they had a big discussion with my father about Kosher. We could not use puff paste, which was derived from lard, for the pastries. But my father refused to have a rabbi there, and finally, they decided it was okay for Orthodox Jews to

buy our stuff because we closed on the Sabbath and on Jewish holidays. My father said kosher means clean, and we did have a clean place. That was what was so important. Interesting, I'm going to tell you a secret. When we mechanized the bakery, the mixing of the rye bread was missing something. It wasn't turning out right. We called the Fleischmann people, and they came, watched it, and they decided what was missing was the human enzyme in sweat, and they developed a substitute.

MCF: I'm sure.

RSA: The other thing that was interesting and I want to speak about, and that was (Will Crawford?). When I first ran for office in 1966 – my father died in 1945. Anyway, that's another story. When I first ran for office, one of the women from the lower part of my district called me and said, "Ms. Abrams, this is (Marguerite Campbell?). I'm going to run your campaign for you down at the lower end of the district." I said, "I think that's wonderful. But I don't know you." She said, "I'm Willie's wife." I said, "Oh, Willie Campbell!" "Yes." My father had trained Willie Campbell, who is Black, to be a master baker, and it was unheard of in those days. My father refused to have separate bathrooms. I remember, there was a big fight with the Health Department. When we closed the bakery, as we did every year for Passover. We had, at the last day, a sort of picnic in the shop, and we had every nationality. People would come off the boat and come to work for us, and my father would help place them. We had people from Hungary, from Sweden, from Russia, from Austria, from Germany, we had Blacks; we had people from all over. I didn't realize how unusual it was until years later, but that's how I grew up.

MCF: Would you describe – most of the recipes that were used there, were they of a German kind of derivation or Austrian?

RSA: Oh, I guess, Austrian. Yes. We also made German chocolate cake, Sachar Torte. That was later on. When the bakery closed, my brother-in-law gave the recipes to the

Industrial Museum.

MCF: Right. We have to look at those.

RSA: They are there.

MCF: That is so great.

RSA: Yes. They are there for anyone who wants to look at them. Well, he made everything; we had the best raisin buns. He hired people who came over from Europe who brought their skills with them. One I remember particularly was Eric Goldschmidt, who later opened his own shop. He started us making French pastries.

MCF: Other Jews that worked in the business, too?

RSA: Oh, there were both.

MCF: Both.

RSA: There were as many Jews as non-Jews.

MCF: So you worked in the business, too?

RSA: Well, as a young girl, I worked from seven to nine in the evening. Then, later on, afternoons, when people came in after school. Sunday was our busiest day because people waited until church was out, and many of them didn't eat before they went to church.

MCF: Did they make special things on Sundays?

RSA: Well, we made a lot of peach cake. I mean, the store was jam-packed, I'm telling you. Then our branches – we had a number. We were the first ones in the city, I think, to start a number system because there was such demand. We made a good product,

and people came. Somebody asked me not long ago, "What was the secret of the peach cake?" I happen to know they used regular raised dough, they didn't peel the peaches, and they used good peaches. I used to go down with my father at 3 a.m. to the waterfront to pick out peaches. They used an apricot wash on the peaches; that was what was different. It was a good peach cake. Different people say, "Oh, I still remember the peach cake." One of them says, "I still remember the fruitcake." Somebody will say, "I still remember the rye bread." Yes, there were some things. Incidentally, at Green Spring Station, they sell a pecan bun that tastes so much like Silber's. It is delicious.

MCF: A sticky bun?

RSA: A sticky bun, yes. Very good, so I buy one every time.

MCF: Well, don't you think food, and maybe bread in particular, evokes strong memories for people?

RSA: I guess it does because it's so important. It's so important.

MCF: Why do you think it is so important?

RSA: Because it is life. You can't live without it. Bread is important. It is the staff of life.

MCF: Do you think it is more important to Jews in some ways or has more importance?

RSA: To Jewish people?

MCF: Yes.

RSA: Well, I guess, maybe. Matzah, bread is part of the tradition.

MCF: Well, I just think of places that aren't as fortunate as Baltimore. Where I grew up in Arkansas, we didn't have access to a good bakery or to a Jewish bakery. It really feels

like a loss, you know.

RSA: Well, I'll tell you it was. [laughter] One time, my husband and I stopped at the bakery about three a.m. We were coming late from a party, and I said, "The rye bread is coming in, the first batch." So we went and picked up a hot rye bread and ate it when we got home. It was delicious.

MCF: So good. So good.

RSA: The aroma of it was enticing. It is the kind of business where you only build up positive memories, which is the other thing. Not that we didn't get complaints once in a while.

MCF: Who was your competition? Were there other bakeries?

RSA: Oh yes. Many small shops, and large ones like Stanswold and Pariser's, who made rye bread but mostly sold it to the restaurants and other retail establishments. We had no real competition. There were small individual bakeries in different neighborhoods where people made specialty things.

MCF: Tell me a little bit about your growing-up years and what it was like having this working family. What was an average day like when you were six or seven years old? Just from early day to end of day?

RSA: First of all – I'm trying to remember.

MCF: Something like who got up when, who was gone, who fixed breakfast.

RSA: My memory is from living next door to the bakery. You could enter from the front porch front next to the bakery. Anyway, you would go into a kind of living room and then the kitchen behind that. Next to the living room, there was a stairway going upstairs. Upstairs were all the bedrooms of both houses. If you went off on a vacation or you

absented yourself, nine times out of ten, if you had the one private room, you would find your bedroom had been taken over by somebody. I had two younger sisters, and we had two beds. When my father's cousin came from Europe, the three of us moved into one bed, and the cousin had the other bed. I mean, it was that kind of house. One room was usually occupied by a baker newly arrived from Europe.

MCF: Wow.

RSA: He would stay with us until he found a place.

MCF: So, what languages were spoken at home?

RSA: We spoke English. My grandmother spoke Yiddish, and I speak Yiddish very well. My oldest brother spoke Yiddish well and not English. When he went to school, they sent him home and told him to speak English and then come back.

MCF: So, what other family members were in the house outside of your siblings?

RSA: Outside of my siblings? Well, my father's cousin who came from Europe.

MCF: What was [her name]?

RSA: Lily Tiger, her name was.

MCF: Tiger.

RSA: That was her married name. Lily Tiger. Her maiden name was—

MCF: Can you spell that?

RSA: T-I-G- just the way it is.

MCF: Okay.

RSA: That was her married name. Her name was Lily Kandel. K-A-N-D-E-L.

MCF: She came when approximately? He brought her over when?

RSA: When I was maybe ten or so. Late ‘20s.

MCF: So there was Lily, and did your grandparents live with you?

RSA: No.

MCF: Just a baker.

RSA: My grandmother was a widow. My grandfather died in 1913 before I was born. My grandmother had eight children. She lived about a half a dozen blocks from us on Ruxton Avenue. Ruxton and Westwood.

MCF: How do you spell Ruxton?

RSA: R-U-X-T-O-N.

MCF: That was your mother’s –?

RSA: My mother’s mother.

MCF: Right.

RSA: My father’s parents never came here; they died in Europe.

MCF: So when you were growing up, it was pretty much when the cousin came over, sometimes a baker.

RSA: Oh, everybody worked.

MCF: Then all the siblings?

RSA: Yeah, they worked in the bakery after school.

MCF: So, who got up in the morning? Who got up first?

RSA: My mother.

MCF: What time?

RSA: Oh, my father got up first. He went into the shop probably about 4:30.

MCF: And then your mom.

RSA: Mother got up around 5:00. Opened the bakery at 5:30. People used to come. Interesting. People used to come three times a day for fresh bread. When I think today, how long we keep bread. [laughter] Three times a day, they wanted to have bread hot out of the oven. So we baked all day until about, I guess, the last batch about 4:00. Bread, rolls, raisin buns, sticky buns, peach cake, and layer cakes. These were the early things I remember. We had a slicer to slice bread, and sometimes salesgirls, three of them, lost parts of fingers in the slicer.

MCF: So, who took care of you guys at home? Right next door, upstairs. Who fed you, and were you pretty self-sufficient?

RSA: Oh yes. Somebody called me a couple of years ago from The Jewish Times writing an article about Passover, about what interesting things people did. He said, “Was there anything your family did that was different on Passover?” I was on my way out. I said, “No, we had a regular Passover seder.” I told my sister about it. My sister, Libby, who said, “Are you kidding?” She said, "It was the only time we knew everybody who was sitting at the table." My father invited people to come. In fact, one time, one kid came to stay with us, and we had to ask him to leave. I thought he was going to be there for two weeks, but he stayed three months. He was a medical student looking for a place

to live and never found it, of course. He liked it where he was. But my father was like that. Very gregarious. Inviting people in and feeding them.

MCF: So, would you just get up, take care of yourself, and get to school?

RSA: Yes, I remember we had only one shower. I was thinking about it not long ago. One shower, and it was evidently in tin, set in. You really couldn't stay long washing yourself because there were so many others waiting to get in. "Come on, come on. Get out of there. I have to get to school, too." That's what I remember as a child. You had to do your business and get out. [laughter]

MCF: Where did you go to school? Where did you go to grade school?

RSA: I went to grade school at Gilmore and Pressman Street since we had moved to Monroe Street. I was born on Eager Street, where my family had a bakery. The building is still standing because I've been by it.

MCF: How do you spell Eager Street?

RSA: E-A-G-E-R. It was right down the street from the penitentiary. My older brothers used to taunt me sometimes. Tease me and take me down and tell me they were going to put me in it. Anyway, we had a wholesale bakery there – horse and wagon. We went bankrupt there, and I didn't realize until after I took a course in economic geography that the sugar crisis was in 1920. I remember I was about four years old when the bakery went bankrupt. It's interesting, my father's creditors gave him more credit to open another store – the flour and sugar. They set him up in business because they trusted him, and he did repay them. That was interesting. So, as a child – then, we moved to North Avenue, and this was during Prohibition. My father became a bootlegger for about two weeks. He said he couldn't stand it, and he gave it up. Then we opened a store on Mount Street. We had a little shop there and then moved to Monroe Street.

MCF: So tell me a little of your memories of grade school.

RSA: School. Well, first of all, we walked to school back and forth, and we came home for lunch back and forth. It was ten or twelve blocks away.

MCF: I'm just curious about your mom. Was she working in the store all day?

RSA: Oh, yes.

MCF: So if you came home for lunch, did she –?

RSA: Mostly, we lunched on scrambled eggs and spinach mixed and cooked together. She would get it ready and then run in and out.

MCF: Right.

RSA: One time I remember, I guess I was a little older, she was making a mixture for corn fritter. Corn latkes. She told me if it gets too thin, add flour, and if gets too thick, add water. I kept adding and adding. She said, "Oh my goodness. This is a giant pot" by the time I got finished. Yes, we pretty much took care of ourselves. All of us. My oldest brother, I don't remember too well. He was kind of separate. But the brother Sam, the one who just died, he and I were closer than anybody else. He learned to cook. We did everything. What was it like, getting up? I don't remember. In the morning, I think we all just helped ourselves.

MCF: What time did the business close at the end of the day?

RSA: End of the day? 9:00. Because the kids took care of it after school. My oldest brother, Bernard, who's a doctor now, remembers the basement. He would have to go down and make sure the basement was clean. They would put the flour up on wooden racks because the mice were everywhere. That's what he did. My brother Sam and I worked after school because the sales ladies would come in at 6:30 or 7, and they would

get off around 3:00, we worked after school. My most vivid memory is trying to track down my brother Sam so he could take his turn. [laughter] He was always playing football. He was a great athlete. He was great athlete. He started playing lacrosse when he was young and became an All-American. We just went to a ceremony not long ago inducting him into the Hall of Fame.

MCF: Wow. Would you eat supper together as a family?

RSA: No. The only time we ate together was Friday night. Or Passover – the seder.

MCF: What time did you close on Fridays?

RSA: Fridays, we closed before the Sabbath started.

MCF: Before Shabbos? Tell me about Shabbos What was it like? What was a typical –?

RSA: Shabbos was wonderful. It was the only day my mother didn't work, and we would go visit my grandmother or someone else.

MCF: On Saturdays.

RSA: On Saturdays.

MCF: So, what did your mom do to prepare for Shabbos on Friday? Can you remember?

RSA: We lighted candles, and we had challah and wine.

MCF: Did you eat a special meal on Friday nights?

RSA: Oh yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, my mother made gefilte fish, and chicken. She always put chicken in the oven. I remember pans full of chicken.

MCF: But you didn't keep kosher? Did your mom keep kosher?

RSA: We kept kosher for a while. My mother kept kosher until, one day, my father started bringing home steamed crabs. [laughter] First, he ate them in the shipping room and sometimes in the kitchen. Then she decided there was no point in it anymore.

MCF: They ate them in the shipping room?

RSA: Then she started eating them.

MCF: They're so good.

RSA: My mother started eating them. In fact, I used to tell my father she was eating the good part and throwing away the rest, and that was not fair. [laughter] I remember having that discussion. She would eat the back fin part.

MCF: So what about other kind of religious experience when you were a child? Did you attend ¬¬¬–?

RSA: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, my cousin was telling me – we belonged to the Har Zion Congregation. My father bought a whole row of seats and anyone – my cousin told me this because I hadn't realized it. He said anybody could come sit. People who couldn't afford it. He had a row of seats for everybody. My father was a very charitable man. When he died, even though he probably broke every rule, they opened the doors of the synagogue for his funeral procession, which is an honor in itself. He was very, very, very highly regarded by everybody in the Jewish community. He was a very giving man, a very bright man, and a good guy.

MCF: Would you go to services on Friday nights or Saturday during the day?

RSA: Yes, sometimes we did.

MCF: Just sometimes?

RSA: Sometimes we did. I remember going. I went to Hebrew school. I graduated. I went to Hebrew school from the time I was five until I was about twelve or thirteen. I can't read it today, but I could pick it up, I guess, quickly. Now, I went to Hebrew school when my brother Sam went. My mother sent us both. My brother Sam was the only one who was never bar mitzvah, and he wasn't bar mitzvah because his Hebrew teacher, Mr. Kaplan, threw him down the steps a couple of times, and he said that was it. He refused to go anymore. He refused to be bar mitzvah. He met Mr. Kaplan's son one time. They were talking about learning Hebrew, and Sam said, "God, my teacher was so bad I just stopped. He used to throw us down the steps when we didn't know our lesson." Mr. Kaplan's son said, "That was my father." Anyway, the rest of the kids were bar mitzvah. I remember we used to have a party in the store the Saturday morning after the services. We'd cover up the counters, and that's where we celebrated.

MCF: Just for?

RSA: Just for the bar mitzvahs.

MCF: Oh, great.

RSA: After the bar mitzvahs on Saturday.

MCF: Were you open on Saturdays?

RSA: No.

MCF: No, you were closed.

RSA: We were closed.

MCF: Then open on Sundays?

RSA: Opened Saturday night and Sunday. Sunday, as I said, was our busiest day.

MCF: So much work.

RSA: A lot. A retail bakery is a lot of work. We made everything. Later, years later, I remember sitting at a Board of Directors meeting, and I said to my brother-in-law, "You ought to just concentrate on just three or four products," and it really would have been the best way to go. Three or four products. But we made layer cakes, German chocolate cakes, Sacher Tortes when someone went over to Austria. There they were wonderful Sacher Tortes and then chocolate-topped and chocolate chip cookies.

MCF: What are those like? What are Sacher Tortes like?

RSA: Sacher Tortes is a dark chocolate cake with raspberry in between the layers and a dark, dark chocolate outside.

MCF: Yum.

RSA: Delicious.

MCF: What about for holiday preparation in the bakery? Did they make special things for particular holidays?

RSA: Pfeffernaus for Christmas.

MCF: Can you spell that?

RSA: P-F-E-F-F-E-R-N-A-U-S. It's a German word.

MCF: What is that?

RSA: Pfeffernaus. It's a little brown cookie, very spicy. Like a ginger cookie more than anything else.

MCF: What about for –?

RSA: We made [inaudible] challahs for Rosh Hashanah and after Yom Kippur. What else did we make?

MCF: Was there a special challah recipe?

RSA: Challah?

MCF: Was the challah as good as the rye bread?

RSA: Wonderful. We made wonderful challah. Yeah. We made the plaited challah.

MCF: Did your dad do that thing that they're supposed to do where they take a piece of the bread, of the challah, and they burn it? Do you know what I'm talking about?

RSA: They braid it?

MCF: They burn it.

RSA: I don't know.

MCF: You take off a little piece –

RSA: I don't remember.

MCF: To be kosher, you take a little piece and –

RSA: Oh, maybe, I don't remember.

MCF: And throw that in the fire.

RSA: I don't remember.

MCF: I just heard that.

RSA: They had brick ovens, and I remember long, long ladles. I one time tried to reach the end of the oven and couldn't.

MCF: When did the bakery close? The bakeries?

RSA: The bakery. Well, my father died in 1945. We had moved by then to Colonial Village. The bakery had moved to Colonial Village just in the county side on Reisterstown Road. Do you know where that is?

MCF: Yes.

RSA: We had a bakery there. When did it close, did you ask me? It closed in 1979. But before that, my brother Sam, who had been in the Navy, came in and ran it for a while. My brother Sidney, who was an engineer at Boeing, came in – oh, that's right. Sidney came first. Then my brother Sam, who had left the Navy, came into the business, and there was a little bit of conflict between the two. The bakery closed in 1979 because of an unfortunate incident that happened. Somebody found something in the rye bread that they thought was a foreign body, and it was blown up by a reporter, Michael Olesker. That was it. The bakery closed. You live on your reputation more than anything.

MCF: Yes.

RSA: That was unfortunate. My brother Sam is an interesting man. He was the flyer I was telling you about. After the bakery closed, he was ready to leave Baltimore, move to Florida, and I really was glad I was able to persuade him to stay.

MCF: I'm making you talk so much about the bakery.

RSA: That's okay if you want to.

MCF: Well, I'm really interested in how food plays into culture and into Jewish life. So that's why I'm asking you a lot of questions about it.

RSA: I have to tell you something. My nephew is interviewing members of the family to talk about the products. When you finish, I'll give you his name.

MCF: Okay. You went to grade school.

RSA: I went to grade school. I went to #81 School. That was at Gilmore at Presstman Street, right in the middle of a non-Jewish neighborhood. St. Gregory's Church was right across the street. It's interesting. Recently – when I say recent –in the last ten years, I had occasion to go back there when I was Director of the Office on Aging. Jimmy Carter came to dedicate Sand Town, an area for rehab, and my assistant said to me, "Are you sure you know where we're going?" I said, "Yes, I went to school there." The school had been torn down. It was about twelve blocks from where we lived, and we walked to school. I went into the school years later and thought to myself, "Oh my God, these halls I thought were tremendous are so small," and then I realized it was when I was a little girl.

MCF: Did you have Jewish and non-Jewish friends?

RSA: Yes. Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Non-Jewish up and down the street; practically all my brother's friends were non-Jewish. What was the movie? Avalon. Avalon was written about my neighborhood. They made a mistake. They said the circus came down Appleton Street. It came down Monroe Street, where we lived.

MCF: That's a wonderful scene.

RSA: We waited for them. We used to stay up waiting for the elephants to come down the street. They unloaded them about half a mile above our house and walked them right down in front of us. All the cars and everything, down to Easterwood Park, where they

set up the tents.

MCF: It must have been amazing.

RSA: What a wonderful event. We had a lot of wonderful experiences as children. We played sidewalk games, running up and down, playing tag – all kinds of things.

MCF: So interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish were –

RSA: A lot of interaction.

MCF: A lot.

RSA: Never even thought about it.

MCF: What about, was your experience dissimilar from your girl friends' experiences of helping with the business?

RSA: My experiences are entirely different. I have no recollection of antisemitism. Only one time somebody asked me if I was what my religion was. It happened when I was in the Navy. My friend said, "Shall we go to services tomorrow?" I said, "If I were going to go to services, I would have gone today; I'm Jewish." Well, that shocked her. She said, "I never met a Jew before." The other one said, "I didn't know Jews had blue eyes." I said, "Well, here I am. I have a family full of blue eyes." But that was the only time. I really never experienced any discrimination. I trained at a Jewish hospital, where most of my classmates were not Jewish. Very few Jewish girls. I just never experienced discrimination. Never experienced it.

MCF: Did most of your friends, were they also helping out in family businesses? Or did they have more traditional kind of home situations than a working family like yours?

RSA: More traditional. I don't remember anybody else in our situation.

MCF: Did you used to go over to a friend's house for supper or to play? No, you were working full-time after school.

RSA: Oh, yes, working full-time.

MCF: So then high school was?

RSA: I went to Western High School. There was now—you don't know Baltimore well—I guess it was a little farther than my elementary school. Oh, I went to junior high school too.

MCF: Where did you go?

RSA: Gwynns Falls Junior High.

MCF: Spell that for me?

RSA: Gwynns Falls was on—

MCF: How do you spell that?

RSA: Gwynns, G-W-Y-N-N-S – no apostrophe – Falls Junior High School. It was on the lower end of the district, the southern part, below Fredrick Avenue. It was actually quite a walk for kids, but we did it. We walked most of the time. We could take the streetcar, and carfare was only four cents for children.

MCF: So what are your memories of junior high and high school? How did social activities change?

RSA: Junior high school – I'll tell you, all my family is bright. When I first went into the English class, Miss (Sahm?), the teacher, said to me, after about a week, she said, "I am so delighted with you," she said. "I was worried to death when they told me Sam Silber's sister was coming because he was a devil." [laughter]. He created chaos everywhere.

Years later, when I was a school nurse at Patterson Park High School, the athletic director came in and said to me, “A couple of my best players are on report because they were misbehaving and whatnot. Would you try to get the teachers to go back on it?” So, I said okay. I did. I remember talking to one of the teachers, and I said to her, “If anybody had told me any of my brothers would turn out to be law-abiding citizens, I would have told them they were crazy.” Because they were so wild.

MCF: That’s great.

RSA: That’s the truth. I said, “They were so wild as children; you would never imagine that they could ever amount to anything.” So I said, “I wish you’d be a little lenient with them.”

MCF: So you had three brothers?

RSA: No, five.

MCF: Five brothers and two sisters.

RSA: Two sisters. My oldest brother is a doctor.

MCF: Right.

RSA: Sam was the next-graduated college and got his master’s, and then he went into the Navy. He joined the Navy before the war, and he was a commander and had a very illustrious career. He died just a few months ago. Then I was next in age.

MCF: What were the age differences between your sisters?

RSA: Well, my brothers Bernard and Sam are about two years apart, and then I’m two and a half years younger than Sam. My brother Sidney is only one year and a half younger than I. He is an engineer – lives near here. My brother Myer was born in 1920,

and he was killed in World War II in Europe in 1944. Then Libby, who was born in 1923, died several years ago. Then my brother Earl is the next youngest; I think he is seventy-six. Then my sister Evelyn, who is seventy, is the youngest. There is a twenty-year age difference between Evelyn and Bernard.

MCF: So did the sisters and the brothers have their own little worlds, or were you all –?

RSA: Yes. Actually, I remember going to the Druid Hill Park swimming pool, a public pool, my girlfriend and I. She would have her little brothers and sisters, and I would have mine trailing behind me. We had to get their bathing suits. Five cents for a little black bathing suit. I didn't look for them again until it was time to go home. [laughter] We all learned to swim, fortunately.

MCF: Tell me about social life when you were in junior high and high school. Did you have any more time to do –?

RSA: Actually, I was not very attractive because I was plump; I ate too much bakery stuff. I belonged to some girl's groups. I don't remember much about it, to tell you the truth.

MCF: So, what happened after you graduated from high school?

RSA: After I graduated from high school, I was enrolled at Goucher. They asked me to come. I had graduated with honors from high school. Got a Peabody Medal, a special award. I wanted to go to college, and my father said, "No;" he said, "We can't afford to send you. Bernard's in medical school, Sam's in college, and Sidney's going to M.I.T next year." Sidney hadn't even graduated from high school. I told you that early on. So I went to Strayers' Business College. I graduated and got a job for eight dollars a week for Alexander Goodman, who had been in the House of Delegates.

MCF: Is Strayers S-T-R-A-Y-E-R-S? Do you know?

RSA: What is it?

MCF: Strayers?

RSA: S-T-R-A-Y-E-R-S. Right.

MCF: So you got a job with who?

RSA: An attorney named Alexander Goodman. Eight dollars a week as a secretary. Then, my father's friend, Judge Sherbow, had a vacancy for twelve dollars a week. So that's where I moved.

MCF: How do you spell the Judge's name? Sherbow?

RSA: S-H-E-R-B-O-W.

MCF: What did you do for him?

RSA: Same thing. Secretarial work.

MCF: Did you like it?

RSA: Yes, I liked every job I've ever had.

MCF: Where were you living?

RSA: Where were we living? What year? I've forgotten.

MCF: But you were at home. Were you living at home?

RSA: Oh yes. I was living at home.

MCF: With family.

RSA: We moved right before World War II. We moved in 1940 from Monroe Street to Liberty Heights Avenue, 4000 Liberty Heights Avenue. It was right before war was declared.

MCF: What was that move like for you?

RSA: Oh, it was heaven. I mean, it was a great big, beautiful house. An old-fashioned house with a big porch and a garden alongside of it.

MCF: Why the move, then?

RSA: The move then was because my father could afford it, and there were a lot of children. He was trying to better things for us. We were living there in 1944 when my brother Myer was killed. We were living there then, and we had been there a while.

MCF: So, how did you hear about his death?

RSA: I'll tell you, it's interesting. There's his picture somewhere. I'll show it to you later. How did we learn? My sister Evelyn was home alone. I guess she was about twelve years old at the time. The Red Cross came with the telegram and asked her if any of her parents were around. She said, "Well, my big sister will be home soon." So, they waited until Libby came, and Libby got the telegram. Libby was about nineteen. She sat with it. Didn't know what to do. It's interesting; we knew my brother Sam was in the country because his picture had appeared in The Sun paper, getting an award. So, we knew he was in the country. He was a commander and had been stationed in the Pacific. My brother Bernard was in Pearl Harbor. He had developed a skin disease on Guadalcanal, where he had been stationed in a field hospital, so he was back in the country. My parents were on their way home from Florida. So, we just waited until everybody gathered. It was really hard. Actually, Myer was the one who had spent more time with my father than anybody. He was planning to go into the bakery business. We have pictures of him – funny, I'm starting to cry. We have pictures of him with my father at

bakers' conventions.

MCF: Such a terrible loss.

RSA: Nice boy. Sweet. Mischievous as hell.

MCF: Yes, but good brothers. Good brothers.

RSA: Yes. I have good brothers.

MCF: Such close siblings, it seems like.

RSA: Well, we shared a lot. A lot of history.

MCF: Do you want to take a break and get some water?

RSA: Okay. Thank you.

MCF: Let's stop for two seconds.

[Recording paused.]

RSA: Yes, we had a swing that hung from the top of the porch.

MCF: Right.

RSA: We were right on the corner where the kids got off the streetcar and went to junior high.

MCF: Did you have a sense that a lot of people were moving out that way that you knew?

RSA: Yes. A lot of people were moving that way.

MCF: So that was the trend. Everybody was moving.

RSA: Everybody was leaving East Baltimore.

MCF: East Baltimore for?

RSA: For someplace. Park Heights Avenue. Mostly, Park Heights is where the Jewish groups moved. Actually, our move was not to a Jewish neighborhood.

MCF: Right.

RSA: I mean, our neighbors were not Jewish. It was an integrated neighborhood.

MCF: So when the family moved from Monroe Street to Liberty Heights, what happened with the bakery location?

RSA: It stayed there.

MCF: On Monroe Street.

RSA: Stayed there, and then later it moved to Colonial Village.

MCF: Then how did you decide to start opening other branches of the bakery?

RSA: Well, my sister says it was my mother who did most of that. My mother. A lot of people asking for our products. That's why we started opening stores. At one time, I think there was something like fifty stores in Baltimore and in Pennsylvania, too, and we were shipping a lot of stuff out.

MCF: Did you ever think about going into it?

RSA: I worked there for seven years. I managed the branch store and did the ordering for the stores. My sister Libby had worked at the bakery from the time she finished

college. She was in charge of the office, and then she got married while I was in California, actually. I was a nurse. After I left the Navy. I served in Newport, Rhode Island. I helped my brother Bernard set up his practice as an internist. When Libby got married, I came to Baltimore to fill in for her because she had quit work. That was the idea: you had to quit work when you married. I was going to stay only a couple of months. I stayed seven years until I got married.

MCF: Were you managing?

RSA: I managed the retail stores and the office bookkeeping. I'm a good bookkeeper, too. For the retail stores, I did the ordering. Libby had done it, and then I did it without a computer and depending on the weather. We always tried to guess the weather because it made a difference. If a snowstorm was expected, people shopped like mad, and if it was just a slight weather change, they shopped accordingly. So, we did the ordering, and the production line in the shop depended on our projections.

MCF: One thing I didn't ask you about – was there any kind of regional flavor to the bakery that made it a Baltimore place that was somehow different than it being a New York bakery or a Chicago bakery? Were there products or recipes that kind of gave it a sense of place?

RSA: Maybe the pecan buns might have done it.

MCF: Anything kind of Southern about?

RSA: The peach cake.

MCF: The peach cake.

RSA: Right. We made every kind of cake and bread; we made fruitcake, I have a couple tins still, and we made round bread for the Jewish holiday. I'm trying to think what else

we did – red cross buns for Easter time and fruitcake at Christmas. We had customers of every religion.

MCF: Yes. So, when did you go into nursing?

RSA: Oh, when I finished high school, I graduated.

MCF: You had gone to business college, business school.

RSA: I thought I was going to go to Goucher.

MCF: Didn't do that.

RSA: I told you my father said he had to send Sidney.

MCF: Right.

RSA: "Your brother is going to MIT next year."

MCF: Right.

RSA: How about that? I worked for about one year or so in law offices after high school for Judge Sherbow, and then I decided to go into training. I had graduated from high school in 1933 and went to Strayers that year. I went into nursing in 1935 and graduated in 1938.

MCF: Where did you go?

RSA: To Sinai Hospital.

MCF: How did you decide on nursing?

RSA: I really had decided on medicine. I wanted to be a doctor. My oldest brother, who is a pain in the neck sometimes, said, "Oh, you can't be a doctor. You can't even decide

…" – I don't know, something, what profession you are going to go after. I assumed he knew what he was talking about, right? [laughter] Years later, I realized otherwise. As it was, it worked out it was fine. I've had a good life and a good career.

MCF: So nursing school.

RSA: I went to nursing school. I graduated. I was top in my class. I was bright. As a matter of fact, somebody did IQs on everybody, and he said later, "I've often wondered what happened to you." He saw me years later. It was out of town. He said, "Because you were so bright, and you really didn't belong there." I said, "Well, as it happened, I enjoyed it." I liked nursing. I was a good nurse. I got an award and got a little scholarship to Columbia. I took courses at Hopkins in the evening school. Mostly Thursday night because I had a friend who used to go Thursdays. I got my degree mostly on the Thursday night courses, except that eventually I had to make up the rest. I've been going to school my whole life. Actually, I take courses now at Essex and Wergreen. I like it. I enjoy learning new things. I've forgotten, I went to Hopkins and got my master's in political science. I got married right before. [laughter]

MCF: Oh yes, there's that.

RSA: [laughter] I'm trying to figure out the time. I got married in 1953.

MCF: I can help you out here with dates.

RSA: 1953 I got married, I remember.

MCF: Okay. After you graduated from Zion or got your nursing experience at Zion Hospital, is that right?

RSA: Sinai. S-I-N-A-I.

MCF: Sinai. Then, were you working at Sinai?

RSA: Oh, I did work at Sinai. I was a head nurse for the men's ward. That's where I learned my Yiddish on the men's ward.

MCF: Right.

RSA: We used to sing them Jewish songs. Then I worked in the operating room. I was an operating room nurse. That I loved. After that, that was 19 – I can't remember now. I have to think of the years now. '38.

MCF: Did you say to yourself, "This is my career. I'm going to stay in nursing. That's where I'm headed"?

RSA: Never thought about it.

MCF: Just did it.

RSA: Just did it and enjoyed it. It was there, I did it, and I liked it. Then I thought, "Well, I'd like to do something different." I don't think it was just to do something different; it wasn't challenging enough, even though I was a very good nurse. One of the doctors commented on that. He asked me to bring him a CC of adrenaline, and I brought it, not like the other nurses, but I brought it ready to administer. He thought that was so wonderful, and I thought, "What is so wonderful about that?" [laughter] Do you know what I am saying? Yes, I was a good nurse.

MCF: So, what kind of change did you make?

RSA: Change? From what?

MCF: From nursing. You were getting tired of it and not feeling challenged.

RSA: What did I do?

MCF: Did you get married?

RSA: I got married somewhere in there. I was also a school nurse. Was that before I got married? Yes, I guess it was. I worked at Patterson Park High School. I worked in the operating room. Then, I did Public Health nursing. Eastern Health District. Then, they wanted a school nurse at Patterson, and I took that job. I guess after that, I got married and stopped working altogether.

MCF: Tell me about meeting your husband and tell me about him. William.

RSA: My husband and I had met, he says, many years before we got married, and I didn't particularly like him. But then I met him after the war.

MCF: And his name?

RSA: William Abrams.

MCF: How did you meet?

RSA: Actually, we were put together on a blind date. First time, nothing happened, and then about six years later, somebody introduced us to each other again. We had some mutual friends who had a summer place down on Magothy, and that's where we used to see each other.

MCF: What was the name of it?

RSA: The Magothy River.

MCF: How do you spell it?

RSA: M-A-G-O-T-H-Y.

[END OF TAPE 1 OF 2 SIDE 2. BEGIN TAPE 2 OF 2 SIDE 2]

RSA: Yes, our friends had a place on the Magothy, and we used to see each other there. We got married on the first Wednesday after the last Wednesday of his fishing club. [laughter] He ended the season, and the following Wednesday, we got married.

MCF: That was in 1953?

RSA: 1953.

MCF: What did he do?

RSA: He was retired from the clothing business.

MCF: When you met him?

RSA: He was already retired. He was how old? Will was seven years older than I.

MCF: So what did you like about him? What attracted you to him?

RSA: What attracted me to him? He was steady. He loved me. He was a very fine man, and he just made me feel very secure and safe, you know. He was a good person.

MCF: Were you ready to get married?

RSA: Yes, I was ready to get married.

MCF: What attracted you to marriage?

RSA: I'll tell you. I'll tell you something about myself. Because we haven't talked about that much, have we? Just things I did.

MCF: Right.

RSA: When did I start? I can't remember. My youngest brother is a psychiatrist, and I remember his saying to me one time – I got married in '54, about. Right after World War

II. He said to me, “Have you ever thought about getting therapy?” He said, “Because I see you getting off and on trains all the time. That’s my vision of you.”

MCF: What did that mean?

RSA: He was a therapist.

MCF: But what did that mean, the phrase getting on and off trains?

RA: I was constantly on the move, and I wasn’t growing any roots. I had three years of psychotherapy and then I got married. I had helped many candidates run for office and decided to run myself. That was in 1966. My daughter was twelve, and my husband agreed.

MF: So, what did therapy do for you at that period in your life? Tell me about therapy in the ‘50s and the ‘60s.

RA: Therapy in the ‘50s and the ‘60s was what they called Freudian analysis. Five days a week, you went in and lay down on the analyst’s couch and said whatever came to your mind.

MF: So what did that do for you? How did that change you? What was that like for you?

RA: What did it do for me? It gave me more confidence in myself. Some confidence in myself, some understanding of the impact of growing up with all my brothers, and, about the business, some insight into my reaction to what went on around me. Also, a recognition that I really was a very capable person. It gave me a better sense of myself and that I was bright. When you grow up around real bright people, you’re no different from everybody, so you don’t realize that. Most of the world, I have found, is not very bright. Don’t you find that so? Most of the world is not very bright. It was a big

revelation to me. Also, I could express my feelings and say things. I remember, as a child, living on Eager Street, where we had horses and wagons and a big open courtyard. I remember being very shy. Growing up with your parents busy in the bakery every minute of the day and busy with babies, you really do get lost unless you are able to work your way through it. My brother Sam was a rebel. He got into a fight every day. My brother Sidney, I think I took care of him more than anybody else, more than my mother and the younger ones. I took care of them from time to time.

MF: It sounds like therapy that was really the place where you could suddenly see what you had gone through.

RA: Oh, I could see what the impact was with all the family relationships. Not only that – my father was the patriarch of his family. He had brought all his brothers and sisters over from Europe, and we could see what was happening. I could see what was happening. I could see a little bit of myself in relation to all these outside influences, and I got a better picture of the impact on me.

MF: That's the kind of journey you can't take with a husband or a friend.

RA: Do what?

MF: That's the kind of experience, in therapy, that you never can have really with –

RA: People who don't need therapy have all that integrated into their personality. You know, it was like something was haunting me constantly. That's the only way I can describe it.

MF: So you find a lot of –

RA: Exorcise stuff.

MF: Yes.

RA: Yes, I got a lot of insight into why things were the way they were, why my parents behaved the way they did. I got an insight into family relationships. It does work. You have to stick with it, and you'll know. It works. I remember being at home – oh, I was still in bed. Lissa, my daughter, was there. She was about twelve years old. We were lolling around, and people were calling me to help them run for office. I turned to her and I said, "You know what? I think I'm going to run." "Oh, mommy," she said. I said, "Get dressed. We're going to go register." [laughter] I couldn't find my way. First, my friend told me I had to go to City Hall. I went down there, and they said, "Oh no, you have to register in Annapolis." When I got to Annapolis, I was told, "No, you have to go over to the Supervisor of Election." Then I came back, and I said, "They told me I have to register here." "Oh, yeah, I guess you do. Upstairs in the governor's office." Finally, I learned I had to file in Baltimore. Anyway, when I got elected, the guard at the Capitol said to me, "You won? I told my wife, 'She'll never make it. She can't even figure out where to file for office.'" [laughter]

MCF: So funny. So that first office you ran for was what?

RSA: House of Delegates. I was on a slate of seven people.

MCF: What year was that?

RSA: 1966. There were seven delegates on my ticket and two Senators. There were thirty-eight running for delegate, and seven people were elected.

MCF: Is that really how you decided to run?

RSA: That's how I decided to run.

MCF: Were you really interested?

RSA: Oh, of course, I was interested.

MCF: Had been.

RSA: Had been.

MCF: You think the therapy got you to a place where you said, “I could do this”?

RSA: I could. My therapist said when I told him I was going to do it, “Oh, you have to be prepared to lose. That will be a great experience.” Sure, I was going to lose.

MCF: Were you working at that point, or you were home taking care of the home?

RSA: I was home. I wasn’t working in 1966.

MCF: So when was your child born, Lissa?

RSA: My child was born in 1954.

MCF: So you got married in ’53? Had baby in ’54?

RSA: Yes. I got married in October of ’53, and she was born in October of ’54. So, she was twelve years old, almost twelve, yes.

MCF: So let’s move back a little bit and do her birth and her childhood. Let’s talk a little bit about your marriage and what that was like. I don’t want to give it that short shrift.

RSA: Everybody was shocked when my husband got married at all because he was one of those people that had a lot of friends, and none of them expected him to marry, but he did. We got married on a Wednesday.

MCF: What was the wedding like?

RSA: We eloped. Yes, we went down to Virginia.

MCF: Why did you elope?

RSA: I don't know. We just decided to get married; the first Wednesday, he wasn't fishing.

MCF: Right.

RSA: When we went back to his house to tell his parents, his mother acted like she was sitting shiva. She was so jealous. Incidentally, during our marriage, my husband bought me a lot of jewelry. Once, when he bought me a little diamond heart, I showed it to my mother-in-law, and do you know what she said when I showed it to her? She said, "I'd like one of those." [laughter]

MCF: Awful.

RSA: Yes, it was. Will had bought her jewelry before we married. Will was a very kind man and very much in love with me. Put up with whatever I did. I realize, looking back – I mean, I didn't realize it at the time, how great it was with him to put up with his half-crazy wife, right? I'll tell you something interesting about me.

MCF: Passionate.

RSA: I've always functioned well in whatever occupation I have had. No matter what my personal life was like. My personal life might have been a mess, but I always functioned well in whatever I was doing. I was a good bookkeeper. I was a good supervisor. I trained the salesgirls. I wrote schedules. When I was in the Legislature I was extremely effective. I didn't realize it at the time. My first year in the House of Delegates one of the men said to me, "You know, when you get up to speak we forget you are a woman." Did I tell you that? I said, "You don't like the way I dress, huh?" He said, "You know what I mean." They weren't used to women. I was very effective, even the first year. I mean I remember changing the redistricting lines we were working on, and I didn't realize how

effective I was until just last year. They invited me to a special session of the Legislature; they invited me to the Senate on a Monday without telling me why, and I got a special award. Did I tell you that earlier? I told somebody about it in just the last day or two. I got a special award and it was an award they give rarely. It was the First Citizen Award. It was first started by Charles Carroll [of] Carrolton, and it isn't given regularly. Dr. Papenfuse, the historian, was there, and he heard me say that I had gotten almost three hundred bills enacted. His ears perked up, and he said to me later, "I don't think anybody else anywhere has ever done that." I was a very good legislator, very effective and aggressive. I was appointed Majority Leader of the Senate, I was elected Chairman of the Democratic Party, and I was Chairman of the Finance Committee. My last years there, that's what I did. All of that. That was one of the reasons I left the Legislature – because I found myself working three hundred and sixty-five days a year.

MCF: When did you run for the Senate?

RSA: I ran for the Senate in 1970 after Paul Dorf had been appointed a judge, and Eddie Azrael was in his place. Paula Hollinger, incidentally, was my campaign manager. She's now in the Senate.

MCF: How long were you in the Senate?

RSA: 1970 until 1983.

MCF: So, what did Will think of this when you decided to run for office?

RSA: Well, he really put up with a lot because my workers used to come to our house to do the campaign work. One time he said to me, "I can't stand half those people you bring in here," and I said, "Well, I'll get an office." Which I did. It was hard on him, and I didn't realize it at the time. He was very, very supportive. A really nice guy. I didn't appreciate him. I was so busy with myself at the time.

MCF: Well, so when you had Elizabeth –

RSA: Lissa, I call her.

MCF: What was that like? Tell me about childbirth, motherhood, and early married years.

RSA: Early years. I actually nursed her for a while because I didn't run off, and I nursed her –

MCF: Where did you have her?

RSA: At Sinai Hospital.

MCF: At Sinai.

RSA: We lived on the Wirt Avenue at the time. Not our first home – when we first got married, my husband and I lived in my apartment at the Marylander. I nursed her, and I took care of her first few years. She was born in 1954. Actually, during that time, I guess I went to school, and I didn't do much else.

MCF: How was that being a mom and being at home?

RSA: Well, I like it. She was a sweet little baby and a beautiful girl. Still is. I liked it for several years, but then I began to feel restless. Didn't have enough to do; I wasn't challenged enough, and I need to be challenged.

MCF: She was about twelve when you decided to run for office?

RSA: Yes. Because she went with me to file for office. [laughter].

MCF: Did you ever think about having other children?

RSA: Indeed, yes. However, I became sterile because women in Northwest Baltimore made egg salad for an event and passed out a deadly organism, Streptococcus. It sterilized me. The doctor told me my Fallopian tubes closed up. He said, "Have you ever had an infection?" I said, "Well, just this one time." He said, "That's why." They were doing any other kinds of pregnancy then. So yes, I really would love to have had more children, but I couldn't. She is a very bright girl, very sweet. Actually, my husband was wealthy at that time. I had a cook, a housekeeper, and a babysitter, but it did the trick. It took me from being very afraid – my personal life was in shambles. Do you really want to know why I went into therapy? I realized as soon as a man got serious about me – this was my insight finally – I realized I picked a fight with him. Broke up with him. I remember one man came over with a friend of his and a diamond ring for me, and I remember I got so flustered, and actually, we had been away for a weekend. I had three other boyfriends, too. I became so flustered I didn't know what to do, and they left. Took the ring with them and I never saw him again. Because he had taken me seriously. I got scared whenever anybody took me seriously. I realized that after a while. So, I had a little insight into the fact that something was wrong. Something was wrong. Something was askew in my perception.

MCF: Right.

RSA: And the way I acted.

MCF: What about your Jewish family life once you were married and a mother and had a child?

RSA: I light candles.

MCF: Did you celebrate holidays still with your family?

RSA: Yes, we celebrated holidays. Yes, when my mother was alive. My mother-in-law was not very religious, very observant. My father-in-law was very fond of Lissa, and I guess she was of him, too. In fact, the great shock to Lissa was when she was left out of his will. I had warned her about it because Will and his father were in business together.

MCF: Were you involved in Jewish organizational activity?

RSA: Yes, I was actually. The B'nai B'rith. Isn't that funny? I was just looking at something. Yes, I did volunteer work mostly. Don't ask me what; I can't remember.

MCF: Did your father participate in organizations too? Jewish organizations? Or your mother?

RSA: Jewish organizations? My father was a member of the Big Brother League and the Bakers' organization. He was on the Board of Directors of Synagogue, and he had a fund for young athletes – Jewish athletes. He gave money to Jewish athletes, young and old. He was a great friend of a lot of rabbis. He was a very interesting man, and he would debate with them on various issues. I remember listening to him. The rabbis regarded him very highly. When he died – I think I told you this – and a couple of the rabbis, everybody wanted to come to his funeral. My Uncle Jake, my father's brother, said, "Let them come. It can't hurt." [inaudible] A car full of rabbis going in special limousine to my father's funeral. [laughter]. My father was a very unusual man, and I didn't realize it until many, many years later. I referred to him one time when my friend Senator Harry McGuirk died, and his daughter asked me to do a eulogy. I said there had been two men in my life who had given to others and who never expected to be repaid. One was Harry, and the other was my father. Harry was the least likely man you would think of as being charitable. They called him "soft-shoes" and thought he was a

manipulator.

MCF: How do you spell his last name?

RSA: M-C-capital G-U-I-R-K. We became very good friends, and I knew that about him. After his funeral, a couple of people came up to me and said, “Senator, I’m one of those people you were talking about.”

MCF: I’m jumping around a little bit.

RSA: That’s okay.

MCF: So, you were married and you had help. You had a cook. Were these Black women that usually were helping you out at home?

RSA: Gradually, I let them go.

MCF: Did you? What was family life like?

RSA: I’ll tell you something. When I was in analysis, I told you, I was scared to death to give a dinner party. I was scared to death to invite anybody over.

MCF: Did you cook dinner at night?

RSA: I did sometimes. Yes. Or sometimes Emma cooked.

MCF: Right. What scared you about the dinner party?

RSA: I don’t know.

MCF: Performance?

RSA: Just performance and to get it ready. I remember I worked this through with Dr. Sam Novey. It was a major project. It took me about four months of therapy to get

myself to invite people [laughter] and to serve them. It was a major breakthrough. Funny, I mean, most people wouldn't believe this because, at the same time, I was – what was I doing? I guess I was going to graduate school. Incidentally, when I wanted to go to graduate school, I went to see the dean to ask him if they would recommend me, and he said, "You have one of the highest averages we have ever graduated anybody with" out of McCoy College Evening School. I was a good student, a very good student. The only time I studied in my life was when I was in graduate school. I just didn't have to study – like my brothers.

MCF: That graduate degree was in what?

RSA: Political Science.

MCF: And that was at?

RSA: At Johns Hopkins University.

MCF: Let's move on and talk about elected life and running for office. What did that do for you?

RSA: Running for office was great fun. First of all, there were thirty-eight people running for seven seats in the House of Delegates. We campaigned with seven people. I remember one time going to pick up extra cards to hand out. We had put in five hundred dollars each for cards. Then I needed extra cards because I gave out cards in the supermarket; I gave cards out as I walked; I gave them out in front of the bakery; I gave them out everywhere. It's interesting, I lost some of my reticence while doing this. But I remember one time going to pick up some cards, and one of the women who was running for judge of the Circuit Court said to me, "Smart girl like you, you should have hooked up with Jack Pollack, and then you would have a chance of winning." This was before the election, Jack Pollack was the big political boss at that time. [laughter] She lost, and I won. William Donald Schaefer was our campaign manager. One time, my

brother Sam put a sign in all the bakery stores – “Please vote for my sister” – on the counter. Oh my God, when my colleagues saw it, they hit the ceiling. I hadn’t seen them yet. I said, “Oh my goodness, I’ll have them taken down.” I told Don Schaefer, our campaign manager. He said, “Leave them up. You’re going to win anyway. Don’t take them down.” I didn’t. I did win. I came in third after Marvin Mandel, who was Speaker, and Alan Resnick, who would have been elected three times, and then Rosalie Abrams, and then Saul Freedman, who had been in the House sixteen years and had followed me about forty votes. He was so angry with me the whole time we were in the Legislature. [laughter]

MCF: Mrs. Abrams, tell about two things: about running as a woman in that period and running as a Jewish woman.

RSA: Was I the first? It was very unusual because the Jewish Women’s Organizations didn’t know quite what to do with me when I was running for office. Some of them let me come to a meeting. Some of them let me come, and some of them wouldn’t. The idea of a Jewish woman running—they really didn’t know what to make of it. One of my cousins was asked, “What makes her think she is qualified?” I remember saying to somebody, “I don’t know if I’m qualified for this job I’m running for.” He said to me, “You look to me like you have good common sense, and that’s the commodity we’re in shortest supply of.” [laughter]. That’s true; the commodity we’re in the shortest supply of. That’s when Elmo Walters got up and said, “We forget you’re a woman.” That’s what he meant. I got up to speak on an issue almost as soon as I was elected.

MCF: Where did that come from?

RSA: That ability to do that? It came from inner determination. I mean, I was conscious that it was going to be difficult.

MCF: Were you nervous about getting up and speaking?

RSA: Yes, but I got up early on – actually, I got up at the wrong time. It was after the vote had been cast, and I got up to speak against the bill. Alan Resnick, who was sitting next to me, said, "Explain your vote." I should have gotten up earlier. I got up at the wrong time. I was nervous. But I got up. The first time I ever got up to make a speech, I lost my voice, and I couldn't speak. I think that was in junior high school. I went home and put myself through something they later called cybernetics. I pictured myself getting up from my seat and walking to the front and looking at these people, and I realized they were all my friends and then speaking. That's the way I did it. The next time I got up, I was fine. My first big speech I made from the stage of the family theatre. It was when I was President of the Nurses Alumnae Association, and we were conducting a fund-raiser. I got up on the stage and made a speech, and it was very hard for me to do. But I did it. After I made that first breakthrough, they heard from me a lot. They did. They heard from me a lot, and not always according to the rules. In fact, I met one of the men who was from the Eastern Shore; we were on a committee together, and he said to me later, "You got up to issue a minority report. You're not supposed to do that." [laughter] That's a no-no, I found out later.

MCF: Were there other women?

RSA: There were seven other women. I was one of eight. Mary Nock and Verda Welcome in the Senate, and then six of us in the House. Most of the women never spoke on the floor, but I was always introducing bills. Marvin Mandel was talking about it one day recently. He said, "Boy, I remember when you were in the House. You were introducing those health bills right and left." Yes, I was responsible for lots of landmark legislation: the Health Services Cost Review Commission, Hospital Commission, planning, and others. I rewrote the entire Mental Health Code with a committee that I myself appointed; we did it over seven years. I believed legislators are elected to solve problems, and thus all the legislation, but many legislators don't introduce a bill.

MCF: Were there any specific areas that you were really committed to or interested in?

RSA: Yes, I was interested in mental health issues. My first year in the Senate, I had a bill to regulate involuntary commitment, and I remember Judge Kaufman had a case before him – Anderson vs. Secretary Neil Solomon. He said to the attorney, "I'm not going to take any action on this case. We're going to wait to see what happens to Senator Abrams' bill." My bill passed. So, they had to release Doris Anderson, Anderson, et al. They used to admit people into mental hospitals and throw away the key. My bill changed that.

MCF: Were you the first woman Senator?

RSA: No. Verda Welcome, Peg Schweinhaut, and Mary Nock were Senators.

MCF: How do you spell their names?

RSA: Verda, V-E-R-D-A. Welcome, W-E-L-C-O-M-E; the first Black Senator. Mary Nock. Mary, N-O-C-K from the Eastern Shore. Peg Schweinhaut of the Senate, from Montgomery County.

MCF: Can you spell that?

RSA: S-C-H-W-E-I-N-H-A-U-T.

MCF: So what did that feel like when you became a Senator?

RSA: What did it feel like? It felt great. [laughter]

MCF: I mean, I just want to know about that moment. That had to be a pretty incredible moment.

RSA: It was when I won.

MCF: I would think that you kind of realized it had been a pretty long journey to that point.

RSA: Yes, I realized during the campaign that I was going to win. Irene Bacharach was running for clerk of a court. I remember her saying to me, "You should have joined with Jack Pollack; then you would have a good chance of winning." Jack Pollack was the big political boss in the Fifth District, which was the district I was running from.

MCF: How do you spell his last name?

RSA: P-O-L-L-A-C-K. Before that, nobody had won except through his ticket. Actually, he put good people up. We were the first ticket – Alan Resnick, Ben Cardin, and I – to win without Jack Pollack on an anti-Pollack ticket. We won in the Fifth District, which was a breakthrough in itself. Later, when I ran for the Senate, I ran against Senator Azrael, who was filling the rest of Senator Dorf's team since Dorf had been named to the bench. When I ran against Sen. Azrael, his wife said to me, "I thought you had to be a lawyer to run for the Senate." I said, "You know what? I'm not a lawyer. There are entirely too many lawyers in the Legislature now." [laughter]. I actually had a lot of self-confidence. I had been very successful in the House. I organized the House Democratic Study Group. I got to change the committee appointments. We got the Speaker to tell us in advance what bills were coming up. Originally, they brought bills out without any notice to anybody. So we corrected a lot of things. I was very active in the whole business of the House of Delegates. I got the Nurse Practice Act through the first year I was there. The association had been trying to change the Nurse Practice Act for years. When it passed, one of the delegates, Yank Dize, apologized to me. He said he had to vote against it because a nurse in his district didn't like it. What else did I get through the first year in the House? I've forgotten.

MCF: So, Lissa was growing up during this time.

RSA: Lissa was growing up, yes. I realized years later I should have been with her more.

MCF: How so?

RSA: I was too busy, but I think she learned something from me too.

MCF: Why do you feel you neglected her?

RSA: Because I spent so much time on my legislative stuff.

MCF: So you just feel like you weren't –

RSA: Well, she turned out very well, so I guess it didn't harm her, and my husband Will was a good father.

MCF: Where did she go to school?

RSA: She was born in 1954, and she went to nursery school in the neighborhood. Then she went to Cross Country Elementary School until the fourth or fifth grade, and then we bought a farm with money that my father had left me. [END OF TAPE 2 OF 2 SIDE 2. BEGIN TAPE 2 OF 2 SIDE 1] My husband and I were planning to move there. In fact, we had a house designed. So we took her out of public school and enrolled her in Park School. But after I was elected from the Fifth District, we decided not to move.

MCF: Then, did she go to college?

RSA: Oh yes, she went to Park School, and then she went to Tufts and graduated as an occupational therapist.

MCF: Wow.

RSA: She's very bright, very insightful, very sweet girl. She had a meeting with me about three weeks ago. She came to talk to me about the fact that my family and friends thought that I wasn't taking care of myself. She was right. I was still mourning my brother Sam. I really had not accepted his death, and I still mourn him.

MCF: You weren't feeling very well, either.

RSA: No. I wasn't.

MCF: Are you feeling better?

RSA: Yes, I do. I feel better.

MCF: So your daughter lives in Baltimore?

RSA: Yes. One time, Lissa had a job offer in California, and she didn't know whether to go or not to go. And I said to her – this was when she first graduated – I said, "Lissa, I want to say something to you." I said, "If I had an opportunity that would take me away from you, and it was important, I would do it. I would leave you." I said, "You go to California if that's where you want to go," even though I didn't want her to go. Fortunately, a day later she was offered a job at Sinai Hospital, and so she stayed in Baltimore. She lives not far from me, in Roland Park.

MCF: She is married?

RSA: She is divorced. She has one son.

MCF: Name?

RSA: Michael.

MCF: What is her married name?

RSA: Well, she goes by Abrams, because she is divorced. Her son's name is Michael Herlich.

MCF: How do you spell that?

RSA: H-E-R-L-I-C-H.

MCF: How old is he?

RSA: Michael will be thirteen in September.

MCF: Is he going to be bar mitzvahed?

RSA: Indeed, yes, he'll be bar mitzvah December 1, 2001. Indeed.

MCF: Do they go to temple? Or are they very involved in a synagogue here?

RSA: They belong to Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, to which I also belong.

MCF: Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. What do you think about being a grandmother?

RSA: Oh, I love it. I love it.

MCF: What do you like about it?

RSA: Michael is a very dear boy. I would do anything for him. He's very loving. Gives me a big hug and a kiss – "I love you, Grandma." He writes me notes. He is a very thoughtful child who takes care of little children. He's also a great athlete. He's the star of the baseball team, he's a pitcher, and he plays lacrosse as a cover point. My brother Sam was All-American lacrosse, so I know about that game too. No football, thank goodness.

MCF: How do you spend time together with Lissa and Michael?

RSA: Well, it's not easy. We go out to dinner together sometimes, and I pick Michael up for Hebrew school every Tuesday, so I see him then. Sometimes we go out to dinner or he comes over here. I have a place in Ocean City that I bought twenty-five years ago, and so I spend some time with them down there. I don't see them as much as I'd like, and he's getting old enough now that I'll probably being seeing him less. You know, kids that age don't want to be bothered with their grandma.

MCF: Do you have a good relationship with Lissa?

RSA: Excellent. I have an excellent relationship with Lissa. She knows she can talk with me about anything, and I don't pry. I think I'm part of the reason she has a good relationship with her ex-husband.

MCF: Yes.

RSA: After their divorce, he was driving down from Harrisburg to see Michael. I said, "Lissa, take your mother's advice and meet him halfway. It's too far. A four-hour drive to see his son." "Oh, Mother," she said, but she did meet him halfway. It was good advice. I rarely, rarely ever give her advice. But that time, I did. I said, "Maintain relations with him because it's good for your child," and it is. They have a good relationship, and she is on good terms with him.

MCF: That's good.

RSA: Yes, it's good.

MCF: When did your husband, Will, pass away?

RSA: My husband died, I can't even remember what year he died. Michael was just a year old. So, 19 –

MCF: 1989.

RSA: Yes.

MCF: Tell me about that time for you. Tell me a little bit about the time surrounding his death.

RSA: You know Will and I had been divorced.

MCF: No, I didn't know that.

RSA: I didn't tell you that?

MCF: No, missed that.

RSA: We were divorced. When were we divorced? I guess when I was in the Legislature.

MCF: How many years of marriage?

RSA: Just a minute, I'm trying to think. When did we get divorced? When did he die?

MCF: How long were you married?

RSA: I can't remember when he died. Michael was –

MCF: He died in '89. You were married in 1953.

RSA: 1989?

MCF: So you were married for over twenty-five years. Right? More than that?

RSA: I'm lost. We were married in '53. Is that right? '53.

MCF: Married in '53.

RSA: Lissa was born in ’54. When were we divorced? I can’t remember. Michael was a year old. Michael was born in 1988. Is that when he was born? He’ll be thirteen this year.

MCF: Hold on. Yes, he was born in 1988.

RSA: He died in ’89. Will died in 1989. My mother also died in 1989. They both died the same year. So what is that? Ten years ago.

MCF: You had divorced a few years before?

RSA: We had divorced before that. But you know what? I used to help take care of him anyway. I’ll tell you something interesting – it doesn’t make any difference in my history – but I used to go visit him. He had leukemia. Same thing my brother died of, and also my best friend. I used to visit Will at the Washington Hospital Center when he was there. He lived with Lissa for a while. Then he got his own little place on Belvedere Towers. I was in Ocean City with company, and I said, “I’m going to Baltimore to see Will.” My sister said, “What’s wrong with you? You’re going home Tuesday.” I said, “I’m going to go see him today.” He died the next day. Anyway, I did come to see him before he died. We were on good terms.

MCF: What had led to your divorce, Rosalie?

RSA: I don’t know.

MCF: Just years of –

RSA: I don’t know. I mean, I was spending so much time in the Legislature. I was riding high, and I didn’t think I needed a husband. No. He was very good, very kind, very considerate. Put up with a lot of stuff in our house. Finally, I got my own office away from home. My daughter is a very kind, soft-spoken person, like him.

MCF: Tell me about your life these days.

RSA: These days? I've got a tremendous amount of correspondence, for one thing, so I have a secretary that comes in. I love to sew. I always have. Will told somebody one time, "I've never seen anybody take apart a jacket and put it back together." I'm an excellent seamstress. What else do I do? I serve on the Jewish Community Relations Board. I'm on an interfaith group – Jewish-Christian Relations – on the Baltimore Jewish Council, and the City of Baltimore Commission on Aging. What else do I do? I don't know.

MCF: Social stuff? Activities?

RSA: Social activities? Well, you know, there are no men anymore. But I go to –

MCF: Had enough.

RSA: What?

MCF: Had enough of them.

RSA: [laughter] There are not many around. I used to have a young man who used to escort me, and then he moved to West Virginia. Actually, he used to just take me out.

MCF: Nice.

RSA: Which was nice. My social life? I go to meetings and things. I'm okay.

MCF: Tell me about women friends over the years.

RSA: I have two good women friends. Two, that's all. My best friend died last year.

MCF: Who was that?

RSA: Roz Sobel, Rosalind Sobel. Dr. Sobel. She died of leukemia. That was hard. I have, oh, I guess, three more.

MCF: Who are they?

RSA: Vera Nissenbaum, Betty David and Betty Davison.

MCF: What do they mean for you in this part of your life?

RSA: This part of my life? Well, they're company to go out with. I go to meetings with them or lunches, occasionally to the movies. I enjoy keeping up with people.

MCF: It sounds like you're still doing classes and courses?

RSA: Well, yes. This year, I missed so much because I had trouble with my legs. Usually, I take a course at Essex's. I had been going to Hopkins Evergreen, but because of Michael's Tuesdays, I switched to Essex's. I've taken course in ethics/ philosophy. Our philosophy teacher, every once in a while, in his lecture, he would say, "I don't know if Senator Abrams agrees with me on this?" Because he had been teaching at Hopkins and knew that philosophy was a special interest of mine.

MCF: So what do you find are the biggest challenges of these [inaudible]?

RSA: I want to tell you something that I—who was I talking to recently? I said somebody [inaudible] with the group, and they thought I said I want you to tutor somebody in mathematics. I said, "No. I want to be tutored in mathematics. I want to know what the new math is. I will find somebody." I'm going to either go to Hopkins and whatnot. I want to learn the new mathematics. I love to solve puzzles. When I was on the World War II Memorial Commission – we erected a memorial in Maryland to the World War II veterans – one of the things we got to talking about was how we broke the Japanese code. The Japanese could not break the American code; we used the Navajo language. It's recently

become public, but of course, we knew about it. To break the code, NSA, the National Security Agency, told me they had looked for people who solved puzzles, crossword puzzle affiliates. People who were interested in going through knotty problems. They appointed a committee to look through to help them solve the codes that the Germans were using. We broke the German code. But the Japanese never broke our code. So anyway. You asked me how they got interested in the codes. Is that what you were asking?

MCF: No. I was just curious –

RSA: What I do?

MCF: No, at this point in your life, I guess what are the biggest challenges that you feel like you face right now in this year?

RSA: Well, to remain mobile. That's the biggest. I use my cane. I've been using a cane because I have trouble with my heel. I'm going to see somebody. Yes, to be mobile – that's the biggest challenge.

MCF: Right. Right.

RSA: I'm eighty-five years old, I'm not young. But I've got two new hips. [laughter]. A pacemaker and what else? I'm fine.

MCF: It seems like you've had really good health.

RSA: I've been in excellent health. I'm telling you, my brother Bernard, who came East when I had my pacemaker put in, told my daughter, "I've never seen your mother lying down." I very rarely am sick. I tell you, I think it's all attitude. There are days—last week, I was not feeling well. I guess I might have spoken to you then. One day, I was going to spend the day in bed, and then I said to myself, "Don't do that." I said to myself,

"Get up and get dressed." Which I did, and I felt better.

MCF: What else have I –?

RSA: Let me tell you something else. I have a condition that's called Vasovagal Syndrome. I've been known to pass out. I thought everybody passed out from time to time, but we learned otherwise. The Vagus nerve affects everything. So one time when I had my hip done, and I remember the intern came in, and I said, "I don't feel well." Which meant, "I'm getting ready to pass out." Which I did. I passed out. When I came to, the room was full of people. I said to myself, "You were in code blue," which meant my heart had stopped. But I've had this problem since I was ten years old, sometimes my heart has stopped, but I'm aware of it now, so it hasn't happened for a couple years. Do you have time, listening to all this?

MCF: Sure.

RSA: One time, a man bought a horse very inexpensively, and he started riding away, and then he said, "How come you're asking so little for this horse?" He replied, "The horse has a peculiar trait: it sits on pineapple." "Pineapple? I'm not going to be near pineapple." So he starts riding the horse home, and in the middle of the stream, the horse sits down. Can't get him to move. Finally, he gets him up and goes back. He says, "No pineapple, but he sat down in the middle of the stream." The seller said, "I forgot to tell you; he sits on fish, too." [laughter] That's me. One time, I passed out because of strong emotion. One time because I had an upset stomach – food poisoning. One time, I was in pain. The horse sits on fish, too. I haven't done it for a couple years now. But it has happened.

MCF: Yeah, that's frightening.

RSA: So I live with it.

MCF: It's not a rapid heartbeat?

RSA: Actually, I have a pacemaker in because my heart is slow.

MCF: Okay.

RSA: It has nothing to do with it. My blood pressure is low, fortunately. So that doesn't set it off.

MCF: What haven't we talked about that you would like to talk about?

RSA: I don't know what else we haven't talked about.

MCF: I noticed that you had written on here about the Vietnam War and the women's rights movement.

RSA: Oh, yes. I was very much involved. I remember when Lissa came home for a vacation, we joined the March on Washington for Women's Rights. It was a hot, ninety-eight-degree day, but we were right up-front marching for equal rights. I didn't realize, I told you, until I was in the Legislature that I had been discriminated against because I was a girl. I would have gone to college probably. I had already been enrolled at Goucher. My father was very blunt: "Your two older brothers need a college education, and your younger brother, Sidney, is going to MIT. next year." He hadn't even graduated.

MCF: What about Vietnam?

RSA: Vietnam. I don't think I did much about the Vietnam movement. I mean, I was aware of it but did not get involved in it.

MCF: You know, I didn't ask you really about the Holocaust and about—

RSA: The Holocaust.

MCF: Where you were and what you were doing?

RSA: The Holocaust. I'll tell you, we really did not know anything about it. I did not. I mean, I found out about it after the Americans invaded from Africa over to Cyprus up to the boot of Italy. Actually, I have a cousin who survived the Holocaust. Her name is Rose, named after the same Rose that we're all named after. So, you know, we were not aware of a great deal then.

MCF: Yes.

RSA: Although I've been involved with Jewish organizations, the Baltimore Jewish Council, and all that. It wasn't really until after the war that I was more aware of what was happening to the Japanese. My sister-in-law was a social worker at Manzanar, the Japanese "relocation" – actually a concentration camp on the West Coast.

MCF: Right.

RSA: She was there, and my brother Bernard actually went into a medical unit from California. He and my brother, I told you, were on Guadalcanal at the same time. Didn't know it at the time.

MCF: You said you were named after the same Rose?

RSA: Yes.

MCF: Who is that?

RSA: My father's mother was Rose Kandel. Actually, my grandfather and grandmother were first cousins. Sholem Silber. The other thing, when my father died, the rabbi gave the sermon in Yiddish. One thing he said that I had not known about my father, he said he was an "(Anakel tso dem Belser Rov?)." He was a descendant of a learned rabbi in Europe.

MCF: You said your mom died in 1989?

RSA: My mother died in 1989. My father died in 1945. My brother was killed in '44, and my father had a major heart attack on the anniversary of his death. The first yahrzeit.

MCF: Did you have a close relationship with your mother?

RSA: I had a close relationship with both of them.

MCF: Yes.

RSA: Yes, both of them. My father used to take me fishing, and my mother was close; she used to take me shopping. My sister and I always wore good clothes.

MCF: Did you like to shop?

RSA: In those days, you didn't do much shopping. I mean, this was before synthetics.

MCF: Right.

RSA: If you bought a couple of good outfits for a season, you paid a lot of money for them in those days, and they were well made. That's what you wore.

MCF: Did you shop at the downtown department stores?

RSA: I used to. Oh, yes. The Hochschild Kohn's, Hutsler's – the May Company were there.

MCF: How about when you went into office? Did you feel like you had to dress a certain way, or look a certain way?

RSA: When I went to office? Yes, actually, I guess I did wear more suits than anything else. When I went to the Senate, Senator Verda Welcome wore pants for the first

session. After that we all wore pantsuits. But, you know, that was a major event. You had to dress as if you were going to business.

MCF: Oh yes.

RSA: Yes. We wore suits more than anything. Occasionally a jacket, you know. I had a favorite yellow jacket. [laughter]. I still remember. It was fun. My first year in the Legislature, one of the delegates from Baltimore County asked me if I would come speak to a group of students. He was a teacher. He said, “We’ve had men, but we’ve never had a woman talk about a career.” So I came and spoke to three sixth-grade classes at once.

MCF: That is so great.

RSA: I asked them what they wanted to talk about, to pick a subject. They picked abortion, and I said, “If any of you have anything to say, raise your hand, and I’ll call on you.” Well, they did. I let them talk for about ten –

[END OF INTERVIEW