Madeleine Kunin Transcript

Sandy Gartner: – Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum, meeting with Madeleine May Kunin to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is May 1, 2006, and we are at Madeline's home in Burlington, Vermont. Madeleine, do we have your permission to record this interview?

Madeleine May Kunin: Yes.

SG: That's a good way to start. Thank you. [laughter] We would like to talk to you about your early life in Switzerland. We were wondering how your family came to settle in Zurich. How did your parents meet each other?

MMK: Well, my mother was born in Zurich, and my father was born in Germany. I believe my parents met through my mother's parents. I don't know the details because my father died when I was almost three years old, not quite three. My mother never talked a great deal about him. I suspect that it was probably arranged through the Jewish community because people didn't marry outside of the religion in those days. My grandparents were middle class. I think they wanted – they had three daughters, and my mother was the youngest. I think they wanted to make sure that their daughters were well-established. But I don't know this for sure because my mother never talked about it.

SG: Did your mother remarry?

MMK: No, she never remarried.

SG: Well, you mentioned that your dad passed away when you were young. I was wondering, how did your mother manage to support you?

MM: Me and my brother. My father actually died very tragically; he committed suicide by drowning in Lake Zurich. This was obviously very traumatic for her. He had been a successful businessman. He was in the shoe business. He and my uncle and my grandfather actually made at least one and maybe more visits to the United States to import shoes from Mishawaka [Indiana]. There was a firm called Ball Band, which may still exist. One of the mementos I have somewhere is an invitation from that company for a dinner in honor of my grandfather and my father, who were visiting. He had branches of the stores in different parts of Europe, in Holland, Germany, and France. So there was some money, some inheritance, but we didn't ever have a lot of money. There was always some anxiety about money growing up, but I never felt poor. But there were a lot of things we didn't have. I tried to explain that to my children and grandchildren, which is very difficult. But she did things like we had a boarder. She did some sewing. I remember she put sequins on hat pins, sort of piecework. She did some babysitting. Later on, she became an Avon lady. So she did all these different kinds of jobs, none of which brought in a lot of money, but brought in some money.

SG: Was that when you were still in Zurich?

MMK: No, no. We left Zurich in 1940. We went to Genoa, and we arrived in New York City on June 10th. She did these jobs when we lived in New York. We first lived in Forest Hills. After a year, my mother decided to go to California because there were some relatives there, and she thought the streets were really paved with gold in California. That didn't work out because things went wrong. It was very difficult. She bought a little house. It was called a bungalow, which is probably worth millions now, but the cost of it – I recall five thousand dollars. We went to Hebrew school there. My brother got scarlet fever. In those days, you were quarantined. I remember being quite miserable because I couldn't play with anybody for six weeks. My mother had to have an operation, and she didn't drive, which even in those days in Beverly Hills was a real handicap. So then, my uncle, my father's brother, moved from Canada to New York. So

my mother thought life would be easier to go back to New York. We went back to Forest Hills. We lived in Forest Hills until I finished my sophomore year in high school.

SG: In Switzerland and also in the United States, what was the makeup of your neighborhood? Was it particularly Jewish? Were your friends Jewish? How was that?

MMK: In Switzerland, it wasn't particularly – the neighborhood wasn't Jewish. There weren't enough Jews to make it a neighborhood. But I think family and cousins and most of the people we knew were Jewish. Forest Hills, then as now, is a very Jewish neighborhood, right? So everybody took off the school holidays – I mean, the Jewish holidays from school. I didn't think about it very much. I just took that for granted, that that's the way it was. I remember we had some friends who were not Jewish. I was aware that they were not Jewish. One was a woman from Sweden and her mother, who were very nice to us. We didn't have a car. I don't know how my mother met them, but they would take us on Sunday drives out into the country. Then there was a couple, an older Swiss couple, Mr. And Mrs. (Mueller?), who we met at the pier. I was just writing this stuff down for my grandchildren yesterday. When you arrived at the pier, your luggage was placed alphabetically. So May was next to (Mueller?). He was in the furniture business. They used to invite us every Christmas to their house. They didn't have children. That friendship was nice. I remember they gave us, both me and my brother, a beautiful book every Christmas. In those days, that was a special present. But grew up basically in a Jewish neighborhood in Forest Hills. But then we moved to Pittsfield in 1950, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and that was much less of a Jewish neighborhood, though we belonged to the synagogue, and I belonged to a Jewish youth group. So most of the social life was around the Jewish youth group.

SG: You said you knew your grandparents or did not know them?

MMK: I did not know them. I think my grandfather died – I just found out the date recently – when I was about a year old. My grandmother had died before I was born. My

father's parents had died. So I didn't know my grandparents.

SG: When you were leaving the country to come to America, how aware were you of the political climate that was going on in Germany and Europe? How did that [inaudible] family?

MM: Well, I wasn't really aware of it. It was more of an adventure from a child's point of view. I think I realized there was some tension. My mother didn't sit down and explain it to me or anything. We went by train. I do remember a station, a train station in Zurich. Some people came to see us off. Everybody brought chocolates as a farewell gift. I was holding the bag of chocolates. I think I left them on the train, and I felt very badly about that. I remember the night train and somehow that we slept in a berth. One of the feelings I remember was the rough brown or green blankets on my skin. My brother remembers something that I had no idea of. He said there were some Nazis who got on the train and that they asked for identification or some German soldiers anyway. I assume they were Nazis. But the conductor of the train recognized my mother from a train in Switzerland – it seems an unlikely story, but that's what he remembers – and said something, "Don't worry about her." That's how we escaped scrutiny. Later, the Swiss required that Jews coming into Switzerland – not Swiss Jews, but Jews coming into Switzerland have what they called the "J" stamp, J for Jude. So the Swiss were pretty antisemitic. But to me, it was mostly a big adventure. I do remember being in Genoa and waiting for the boat to arrive and being in a hotel and looking out the window and seeing these Japanese soldiers there. On the day we arrived in the United States, Italy entered the war. So we considered ourselves lucky that we weren't stuck in Italy because we might have had a different outcome. But getting on the boat, the boat was called the SS Manhattan. It was a big boat. We were supposed to have a private cabin, but it was packed with people. We shared the cabin with two women and a baby. I don't know if there's somebody else, too, but it was quite different. So everybody was leaving who could leave. These women were headed for South America. I remember playing

shuffleboard.

SG: How old were you?

MMK: I was six and a half. Yes, six.

AB: All of the people on the boat, as far as you knew, were Jewish.

MMK: I don't know. Many of them.

AB: Many of them were.

MMK: Many of them were. I think most of them probably were. My brother found a manifest from the boat. For Jews, they did put your religion on the manifest, which seems odd to us today, but that was the way it was. I remember eating my first apple pie a la mode.

SG: On the boat?

MMK: Yes. Which seemed so unusual to us.

AB: Did your mother have relatives? Was she bringing you to meet relatives?

MMK: Yes, relatives met us at the boat. I write about this in the book. Relatives met us at the boat – Irene and Fred (Kahn?). Fred (Kahn?) had worked for my father in the shoe business in Germany. Fred had arrived earlier. He helped lots of relatives get over to the United States.

AB: To come over?

MMK: Yes. I remember them greeting us, and Irene was – we thought, "This is what America is." She wore a red hat, red gloves, and red shoes. I thought, "Wow, this is really different." This has become a family joke, but she said to me, "Madeleine, you got

to have coils."

AB: Coils?

MMK: "In America, all the girls have coils."

SG: That's so cute.

MMK: We used to joke about that.

SG: That's funny.

AB: Introduce you to the Brooklyn accent.

MMK: They were already very American. Yes, totally. Ironically, they later moved to Brattleboro, Vermont.

SG: That's funny.

MMK: Yes. And owned a restaurant and did very well. He was a waiter for years in New York and worked terribly hard. He always looked emaciated. He was very good to us and helped us get an apartment. In retrospect, my mother was incredibly brave. I don't think we appreciated it at the time [for her] to go by herself.

SG: Pick up a family and move.

MMK: Yes, with two children. She had some English but not a lot of English. But when I wrote my book, it dawned on me that she'd left partly because of fear of Hitler. At that time, you didn't really know about the Holocaust. You knew that Jews were being threatened. I think she also – and I don't know. I didn't discuss it with her, unfortunately. I think she probably also left because of the tragedy of my father's death. I think being there and being by the lake was a constant reminder. I think she wanted to start a new life, and she wanted something better for children. She also knew about America

because her parents had lived in Pittsburgh and Texas. My grandparents on my mother's side were also very enterprising. My grandparents took two trips to the United States at the turn of the century, which was not easy. The first trip, they were not married. They lived in Alsace. They came separately with their families. They lived in Alsace-Lorraine in France near Mulhouse. They got married in San Antonio. About twenty-five years ago, after my aunt died and left some letters, I looked them up and found them, and we've been in touch. I mean, those who stayed. My aunt's sisters stayed, but people left Alsace at that time because of the Franco-Prussian War, and they didn't want to be drafted into the German Army. A lot of immigration is spurned by draft evasion. But anyway, they got married, and my grandparents had a general store. Then they went to Laredo, which is right on the border, which is really wild. Other members of the family were there anyway. But the cowboy Texan mentality was too much for my grandfather. My mother didn't remember many stories. But one story she always told me that my aunt told me, too, was Bloch's horse. Evidently, my grandfather was (Gaston?) Bloch, B-L-O-C-H. [He] had a horse and wagon, and the horse would not cross a bridge. So I guess he must have held up the traffic with Bloch's horse. Some other cousins or members of the family owned a saloon, which I think is still there in Laredo; it was pointed out to me. The cowboys would come in just like in the Western movies and shoot down all the bottles. That was too much for my grandfather, [laughter] so they moved back to Europe. Instead of going back to Alsace – maybe the first time, they went back to Alsace. I wish I knew exactly. But then they took a second trip. My mother's oldest sister (inaudible) was born in Texas. Then they went back to Europe. They took another trip to Pittsburgh. I don't know what drew them to Pittsburgh. It must have been some business opportunity. My other aunt, Alice, was born in Pittsburgh. Then, I guess that didn't work out. He wasn't the best businessman, I guess. My grandmother, according to my mother, had the head for business. She would make clothes, and she was very clever. He was more of a philosopher, thinker, and intellectual. So then they moved to Zurich. They opened a store in Zurich, and my

mother was born in Zurich.

AB: So, the older sister was born in the United States.

MMK: In Texas.

SG: In Texas.

AB: In Texas. And then one in Pittsburgh?

MMK: Yes.

SG: Then your mom in Zurich?

AB: How interesting.

MMK: Yes.

AB: Very unusual.

SG: Did you know your dad's family at all or not too much?

MMK: Yes. My father actually encouraged most, not all, of his family to leave Germany and helped them get to England. One of his sisters, (Augusta?), died. She and her husband died in a concentration camp. Then I recently learned another – I think his brother-in-law and maybe his other sister died in the concentration camp. My daughter Julia spent time in fellowship in Germany, went to Frankfurt, and found their names on the memorial in Frankfurt. Then, other cousins on my mother's side died in France, but I don't have their names. I wish I did. Another cousin was hidden. She and her daughter were hidden just like Anne Frank. They went from Germany to Holland, which a lot of people did. I mean, Anne Frank was in [inaudible].

AB: That's right, yes.

MMK: Going back to your question, I've kept in touch with my father's relatives in England, though now, they're dying off too, and I'm not as close to their children and grandchildren. I stay in touch with a couple of them.

SG: Can you talk a little about your Jewish education and the kind of traditions that you had in your home and holidays?

MMK: Yes, we celebrated the holidays. In Forest Hills, my cousin (Eric?) and I would go to synagogue. He usually went when there was a bar mitzvah, and there was food.

AB: [laughter] That's cute.

SG: It hasn't changed. We know that, right? People still go because of the food.

MMK: Right. I went to a Hebrew school. It was called, I think, Habonim, H-A-B-O-N-I-M. The rabbi was Hugo Hahn. I read about him sometimes – big, portly man. I think a lot of German Jewish families were in that synagogue. But the education was pretty sporadic. I mean, I didn't learn a whole lot. I mean, I never learned totally to read Hebrew. But I was bat mitzvahed.

SG: Really?

MMK: But it was kind of a mass bat mitzvah. I think there were twelve of us. It was in Town Hall in New York. We wore long white dresses. I remember shopping for the dress. It was a big deal. I think we just recited brief passages. But it was a nice event. The fact that girls were bat mitzvahed then may have been unusual. I don't know. And then I remember my brother's bar mitzvah. My biggest concern was what I was wearing. I guess I was vain even then. I remember it was a silk dress with a little blue silk coat, which I thought was quite wonderful. My mother and I had our hair done at the beauty parlor around the corner the morning before. The reception was in our house.

SG: Was that in Forest Hills?

MMK: That was in Forest Hills, yes. My father was very religious. He was a soldier in World War I, ironically in the German Army. I found out more information from the sanatorium where he had been when he had suffered from depression. I found out that, at one point, he was left for dead. He probably suffered what we now call post-traumatic stress syndrome. I think the very fact that he emerged alive made him very religious. When they were married, my parents had a kosher home. My mother didn't keep a kosher home. We didn't have pork. We didn't have kosher meat, and we didn't separate milk and meat. She was much more relaxed about Judaism. She wanted us to have a Jewish education, obviously. She felt very strongly that I should marry somebody who was Jewish, which was the custom in those days. But she didn't talk much about the Holocaust. I discovered the Holocaust when I read a book, and I don't know where I got the book. Maybe it was from the Hebrew school or something called Blessed is the Match. It was for young adults. It was about the concentration camps. I remember how shocked and horrified I was, and you couldn't believe that those things happened. We were just amazed because people did not talk about it. In this letter I was writing to my grandchildren yesterday – one of our boarders was a young woman. I think she was fifteen at the time. I'm trying to remember her name. She had numbers on her arm. She had been at Bergen-Belsen. She was very troubled. She was overweight, and her father wanted her not only to have a place but to have a family. I remember it didn't work out. I don't know why it didn't work out. He either removed her, or something happened. But I also remember that she had a lot of books. She had one of those big, green Borzoi books.

AB: Yes, that's the publisher.

MMK: Yes. So I would read her books, and I was impressed that she read. But again, we didn't talk about her experience. All I knew from my mother was that bad things had

happened, but you shouldn't ask questions. So things were kept very secret.

SG: When you were so young, your dad died. How did she explain that to you?

MMK: She told me he had a heart attack. I was never told by her how he died. I found out from a cousin when I was in my twenties. I always suspected something. I'd ask more questions. But I didn't know.

AB: Your brother didn't know either.

MMK: Well, if he did know, we didn't talk about it either. Peculiar. Well, in retrospect, it was very traumatic for each of us. But after he died, there was a lot of – my mother went to England, thinking she might live near her sister. So we lived in England for some months, and then we came back to Switzerland. I shouldn't be as normal as I am because we moved almost constantly. Not constantly, but we moved a lot. But she was the steady force. As you say in the vernacular today, she was there for us.

AB: Well, she was very brave to leave.

SG: [inaudible]

MMK: Yes, she was.

AB: Perhaps because she had the experience of moving already, it was not as difficult.

MMK: Yes, and she knew stories from her parents about America. I think my grandmother would have liked to have stayed in America. She saw it as an adventurous place. She liked it. But my grandfather didn't. So I think my mother must have heard these stories and also from my father who had gone to America. I think that must have given her some courage that she thought there'd be some opportunity. But still, in wartime, it was such a different picture. We also moved from Zurich. When we lived in Zurich, we moved for a year to a small town called Hergiswil on the shores of Lake

Lucerne. I remember not liking that because I'd been looking forward to going to school, but they didn't start school until seven. My brother went to a Catholic school because that was the only school there was in that town. I remember that being a very lonely year. But there was a theory then in Switzerland that if the Germans came, it would be safe if people went away from the borders to central Switzerland. I only found this out when I was ambassador. I never knew this before. But piecing it together, I surmise that she probably left Zurich to go to Lucerne, thinking it would be safer.

SG: It would be a safer place for your family.

MMK: Yes. I think she was always anxious. I could see where her world had collapsed when my father died. She probably felt a lot of responsibility for us.

SG: As you were pursuing your education and your career goals, what was it like for you then? Did people take it seriously? Did you have any kind of obstacles being a woman or being Jewish?

MMK: Well, you're skipping way ahead.

AB: Then go back.

SG: Then go back. [laughter] Go back. Back me up.

MMK: No, it's all right. No, I don't think I had any obstacles being Jewish that I can think of. I mean, not real obstacles. Maybe some inner concerns, or sometimes anxieties. I was thinking about it when I heard Al Franken Friday night. He said, "I'm Jewish," and then he referred to some joke. I guess Rush Limbaugh had said that Americans who were gays and lesbians and feminists and everything else was at fault for 9/11; it was the sins of Americans coming to roost was the implication. He had heard him say something about the [inaudible] was by a Jewish male. So Al Franken said, "Well, I'm a Jewish male." He finally confronted Rush Limbaugh and said, "Well, Jesus was a Jewish man."

It was a ridiculous conversation. He talked about growing up as the only Jew in a small community in a small town in Minnesota. His business failed, so they moved to Minneapolis, where there were more Jews. Anyway, he refers to Jews very often. I found myself – an instinctive thing – people in my generation still getting a little nervous of being Jewish in public like that. Probably, you don't have that.

AB: Yes. I'll tell you later after the interview,

MK: Yes, so that was there. Not as an obstacle but as another level of awareness. When I ran for governor, I never – well, the truth of the matter probably is most people did not know I was Jewish. I mean, Kunin is a funny name, and it's a Russian name. Some people may have figured it out. My campaign manager, Liz Bankowski, told me that a reporter had called her and said, "We'd like to do a story on Madeleine Kunin's liabilities." She said, "Well, what are they?" He said, "Well, she's a Democrat, she's a woman, and she's Jewish." Liz's antennae went up and said, "Who told you that being Jewish is a liability? Has anybody said that?" He said, "Well, no." Well, she kind of worked and talked to the editors and convinced them to drop the story. But that's about the closest I got. My staff would tell me that they'd hear some antisemitism, but by then, people were already more or less politically correct. I mean, people would say, "I can't vote for you because you're a woman," but that didn't happen too often. But I know a couple of people who would say that. I'm sure that a lot of people thought it, but a lot of people, fortunately, thought otherwise. I was very proud at my inauguration to have Rabbi [Max] Wall. Of course, he'd been there for Dick Snelling, too, but it was different. Again, I think I wrote this in the book. One of the first things I did was go to synagogue after I was elected. I felt the need to have that strength. So I did never hide my Jewishness. I never did that. I always took the Jewish holidays off and all that so that people knew. But not everybody knew. It's just not an issue that comes up a whole lot unless the press makes an issue out of it. As I say, in school – I think by the time I got to college, I wanted to be very ecumenical. I wanted to find out about other religions.

There was a Jewish sorority at the University of Massachusetts. I didn't want to join the Jewish sorority. I didn't want to segregate myself. I dated people who were not Jewish. I was curious. I went to different churches to find out what it was like. I remember everybody was getting communion. I didn't know whether or not to get in line because the whole world went up to get communion, so I got communion. [laughter] I wondered about it.

SG: [inaudible]

MMK: I felt very connected to my Jewishness, but I didn't want to be ghettoized at all. I've spoken about this a lot. I felt, in the United States, you didn't have to be afraid, and you could be accepted outside the Jewish community. Now, when I was in Switzerland, it was a little different. European Jews are still much more cautious, much more insulated – those who stick to religion.

SG: To Judaism. You mean they keep it close to their home, kind of thing?

MMK: Yes. They're much more in their own community. And there's more antisemitism.

SG: Still?

MMK: Yes. Some of it arose because of the issues I dealt with as ambassador – the role of Switzerland during World War Two and the bank accounts, and the fact that Switzerland was not as neutral as they had claimed. My being Jewish there was a big issue as ambassador. I'd never been the Jewish Governor – ever referred to that way in any way, but I was the Jewish American ambassador. It was written in the paper. So it was quite different. And yet, I met a person when I came back for a visit a couple of years ago at a dinner party – a very nice woman who I'd been friendly with. In the conversation, [inaudible] she looked at me and said, "You're Jewish?" Then, her reaction made me think, "Why does she think it's such a big deal?" So I am. I was not too happy

with her reaction. Even after all the stuff in the press, she didn't know. So not everybody knows these things. But I was asked whether I could be objective as a Jew with these issues because they attacked Switzerland and really turned over some rocks that showed the dark side of the Swiss.

SG: What was that like for you?

MMK: Well, officially, I told everybody, including the State Department, I can keep my objectivity. I'm still going to write about this one day.

SG: I hope so.

MMK: But I haven't been able to find a publisher. But I haven't tried very hard either. Officially, I said I'm used to dealing with controversial issues and being objective; I'd done that as governor. But in reality, it was quite difficult and in a number of ways. I mean, first the Swiss – there were several issues. One is Jews had deposited money in Swiss banks, partly because of the numbered accounts, and it was punishable by death to take money out of Germany during the war, so they could have these secret accounts for safekeeping. Then other questions arose. The Swiss bought Nazi gold from the German Reich's banks. There was a question of whether the purchase of all that gold enabled the Germans to prolong the war, buying munitions. There's a question of turning back Jews at the border. Not only were they turned back at the border, but they were immediately turned into the hands of the Germans. We weren't so great either in many, many ways, but that's another story. None of that was discussed openly until about the year I arrived. It all came to a head. So there was lots of debate. People accused the United States of being the big, bad bully. A lot of Swiss questioned – "We didn't do anything wrong. We just had to defend ourselves against all these countries surrounding us." So it's very complicated. Some young people had a very different attitude. They were so glad this was the way it was opening up. I remember meeting a newspaperman who I'm so friendly with at a reception, and he said, "I'm glad this is happening. The

Swiss have lied long enough." So it ran the whole gamut." I felt very torn, and I felt disillusioned. We sort of romanticized our Swiss roots. To find out that the Swiss weren't very perfect, I even began to question whether I was really Swiss, whether I was accepted as a Swiss Jew. There were just openly things that we would consider – there's a German expression salon [inaudible], which means you can say certain things in the salon, in the living room, which you wouldn't say otherwise, like, "All the Jews want is money." There was an article in a magazine, which just blew me away, which talked about Jews in Switzerland and listed the names of the one Jew in Parliament, the two Jewish department stores, the hotels. I think they didn't [inaudible]. They didn't even know what they were doing. Anyway, emotionally, it was difficult. Politically, it was important. Some people thought that Bill Clinton had appointed me just for that reason, which is not true because the issue was just beginning then, and it got bigger and bigger. So I would play both good cop and bad cop because I had to maintain a good relationship. Also, prod the Swiss to come to terms with this issue, which they sort of did. You can't reconstruct history after fifty, sixty years, but it was an important experience. I'm glad I had it, and I learned a lot in the process. But it took an emotional toll on me at the time.

SG: To backtrack a little bit in the Clinton administration, what was it like to be in the Education Department? What do you think came out of that part of your life?

MMK: Well, it was a very good experience. It was a little frustrating, too, but on the whole, it was good. I mean, it was frustrating – I wasn't used to being number two as the deputy secretary. Governor kind of spoils you. But I did work with a very nice other governor, Dick Riley, who gave me a lot of responsibility and a lot of freedom. It was exciting to be part of the Clinton administration. I felt that I was doing something, again, important. As governor, education and the environment were my two issues. I traveled all over the country and tried to highlight what was good about education. The most shocking thing for me was the conditions of education in the United States. It's still

shocking.

SG: Shocking, in what way?

MMK: Terrible poverty. Terrible inequality. I went to Louisiana. I can't remember why I went to Louisiana, but I visited a high school. It must have been some grant they got or something. Going out, it was in a neighborhood called Desire, like the play. There is a streetcar named Desire because it goes to that neighborhood as well. Terrible irony in Desire, which is really a place not fit for human habitation. There was a housing project that we went by that looked like – at that time, the comparison was Beirut; now, we'd probably say Baghdad. You were shocked when you saw little kids running around there because the place was literally falling down. The high school was pockmarked with bullet blocks. Half the girls were pregnant; more than half never graduated. I came away so angry that conditions like that could exist in the United States of America. The rest of the country saw when these people crawled out of these [inaudible] for Katrina. Most people don't see this kind of poverty, but it's not limited to New Orleans, though New Orleans was the very worst. I did go to Henry Cisneros after that visit, who was head of HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] and said, "You got to shut this place down," and they did finally shut it down. But I know what they moved to. That was really eye-opening. There's poverty, obviously, in Vermont, some of it hidden and some of it's severe, but not on the scale. I went to Chicago, where there's this little struggling school, and the kids have to be careful on their way to school with the crime. The local hospital had donated a tiny chemistry lab for them. Then, that same day, I went to school outside of Chicago, where the technology center was bigger than the whole school was in the heart of Chicago. So there's no comparison. So while people complain about "No Child Left Behind," and there are many things wrong with it, the point of it, I think, is very valid, that we've got to create greater equality for African Americans.

AB: Let's stop just a second while I turn this over. [Recording paused.]

MMK: Anyway, No Child Left Behind – the purpose to bridge the inequalities is right on target because we do not have equal educational opportunity in elementary and high school in this country. We've got to do more about it, much more. The fact that half of African American boys don't graduate from high school. Some high schools, it's like seventy-five or eighty percent don't graduate. You know these kids are doomed from day one if they don't graduate. Another time I was terribly shocked was in Philadelphia, part of a [Newt] Gingrich "Contract with America" was to cut school lunches. So Clinton sent us out to prove the point of how bad that would be. I was sent to Philadelphia, and again in the car driving to the school, the greatest despair you can possibly imagine. Guys just hanging out. Garbage in the streets. People in a daze. You get to the school, and the school is the only little oasis. It's probably the only social institution that still functions. There was this roomful of – it seemed like hundreds of little kindergarteners – very overcrowded. But at least the school was there, and somebody was giving them lunch. I thought to myself, "These bastards, how could they dare take away this one thing these kids had?" I was really, really fired up by that. So the education experience was a good experience, even though I didn't have the status I had as governor, and I didn't get invited to the White House as often as if I'd been a secretary or EPA administrator, which was the position that I had wanted most. But I felt I was doing some important work. We were able to establish an Office of Education Technology. We established a position on girls' education opportunities, especially in science. Worked on Title IX. Worked on a lot of things. Gave a lot of speeches. I was able to use my own background because education had been my stepping-stone, every immigrant's stepping-stone, everybody's moved into the middle class. I could give impassioned speeches. I liked doing that. I hosted a cable television program, where I hosted it for the secretary. There were different topics on parent involvement, on technology, and that went very well. We did it, I think, once a month. So it was a good experience. But I was ready to also be my own boss again, which you're not completely, of course, as ambassador, but you are boss of the embassy. I had been given an opportunity after Clinton was elected. This is not

common knowledge, but there's no reason not to talk about it now – to be ambassador to Canada. I wondered sometimes what would have happened if I had been ambassador to Canada. It was a bigger country, a more important post. But I still wanted to be in Washington after Clinton was elected. I wanted to be part of the excitement of this democratic administration. So I said no to Canada, and I went to Washington, and then eventually, said yes to Switzerland.

SG: Can you talk a little bit – you said in the interview there were certain historical events that influenced you. You were talking about the Holocaust, the assassinations of the Kennedys, 9/11, Bush's reelection. I was wondering how that has affected the choices that you've made in your life or what you feel about it.

MMK: The Holocaust was very important, and I've written and talked about that. Yes. Maybe it's my generation, maybe being born in Europe, but I felt very connected – sometimes, my children and my former husband say, "You have a morbid interest in the Holocaust." I don't think I have a morbid interest. I think I just wanted to know more, and I wanted to connect with more. I think we have to say it's the seminal event of the twentieth century. Put very simply, I felt not really guilt but some guilt, some survival guilt, maybe. But more a sense of responsibility. I had to turn whatever guilt I felt into a creative force and to a productive force. It helped me become political. I wasn't fully conscious of that until a reporter from the Rutland Herald interviewed me, who later became my press secretary much later, (Louie Burney?), and he asked me a question –

SG: Oh, golly. I was [inaudible] Herald News.

MMK: He asked me a question, "Do you think there's some connection with the Holocaust?" I thought about it, and I said, "Yes." I began to think about it more and articulate it more, the sense that we have a responsibility to take action when you see injustice. I think the most recent manifestation of that, of course, has been this past weekend, when the Jewish community – many Jews marched in Washington and a rabbi

spoke. Probably, it was the most interracial demonstration in a long time.

SG: [inaudible]

MMK: And this whole thing about never again.

SG: We did that in Rutland as well.

MMK: You did? Oh, good.

SG: Yes.

MMK: I didn't think there was anything there.

SG: We had one.

MMK: Yes. So that's how I felt. I felt I am safe as a Jew in America. I have the excitement of being in the vanguard as a woman. Doors are opening up there. So I'm living in a time and place unlike my mother, my grandmother, and others, where I can step into the public arena. I almost felt like I should step into the public arena. Now, it was later – I mean, I knew that my grandfather in Zurich had been somewhat political. My mother would tell stories about him. He ran for the Zurich City Council, and he never got elected. [laughter] She said he had wonderful ideas that he previewed social security, health care. My big regret is that I could never meet and talk with my grandfather because I'm sure we'd have a lot to talk about. But then later, when I discovered these Texas relatives and discovered a great aunt – I guess she was the daughter of my grandmother's sister named (Jenny Goodman?). I think she was from Laredo, and she became a postmistress in Laredo County. In those days, as is probably true now in Texas, you didn't get there unless you had political connections. So she was a first-wave politician. She got the votes. So maybe some genes are on that side, too, on my grandmother's side as well as my grandfather's. But I didn't have real role

models. I mean, look at someone like Madeleine Albright; her father was involved in government. I didn't have real political role models, except those I created. I mean, Eleanor Roosevelt was a role model – people I read about. Chuck Bunting's mother, Polly Bunting, was actually somebody I read about who was married to a doctor and had five children and had a good job.

SG: Sounds familiar.

MMK: Yes. So I picked up role models here and there. My brother, as I write in the book, was a big influence. Even though I wasn't supposed to do the things he did, I eavesdropped and decided if he could do them, I could do them. It was a healthy dose of sibling rivalry. My mother had great dreams from my brother. He was supposed to be the Horatio Alger. Of course, he was, in a way. He was very enterprising even as a kid. He had his paper route, and he did all kinds of things – worked in a Jewish butcher delivering meat. He was always earning something. Interestingly enough, I ran – probably most people don't think it happened this way, but I ran for the legislature before he did. So I didn't follow him; he followed me. He probably had the idea first. He was a very powerful influence on me. But when I first debated whether to run for the legislature in '72, he discouraged me, which was surprising. He said, "It's not a good year. [Ronald] Reagan's going to be running." But other people encouraged me. He was both an important role model but also somebody I had to assert myself with because, the older brother – especially growing up without a father, the three of us were very tight-knit. As an older brother, he sometimes assumed the father role, which I had to rebel against. [laughter]

SG: How did you both end up in Vermont? How did that happen?

MMK: Well, Edgar came here before I did to work for a weekly newspaper called the Bellows Falls Times. When I was graduating from Columbia School of Journalism in '57, the common wisdom was you get started in a newspaper career by starting in a small-

time newspaper, and then you work your way up. So when I graduated from Columbia School of Journalism, it was hard for women to get newspaper jobs. I just got an award from Columbia for public service, something I thought I'd never get because I never thought of myself as one of the stars of Columbia, which produces many stars. Anyway, that's an aside. But he suggested I go to Vermont, again, as a stepping-stone – spend a year in Vermont. I was very torn about that because I had a boyfriend in New York. I took the Greyhound bus up to Burlington, got off the bus, and thought, "Oh, God, I can't live here."

SG: "It's me and the cows."

MMK: It's really a small town and very quiet. I really debated. I think first I turned it down, and then I accepted it. I thought after a year, I would apply for the Paris Herald Tribune of The New York Times. Then I met Arthur; I met my husband and didn't get married right away. We [inaudible] at the Brussels World's Fair for six months. But that's how I ended up in Vermont because I couldn't get a job anywhere else. Well, I could get a job on the women's page of a New Jersey newspaper. What's the town in New Jersey? I'll think about it in a minute. But I knew I didn't want to [inaudible] on the women's page.

AB: So, was the first job working for the Free Press?

MMK: Yes, David Howe interviewed me. He was the original publisher – not the original – but the publisher of the Free Press at the time. J. Warren McClure had just married the publisher's daughter – Lois.

AB: That's Lois McClure.

MMK: She was David Howe's daughter. They interviewed me in New York.

SG: What was it like for you and Arthur to raise your kids here?

MMK: It was a very good place to raise our children. [inaudible]

SG: And you affiliated with a synagogue?

MMK: Yes, they went to Hebrew School, which they didn't enjoy, but they went. We were married in the synagogue [inaudible] bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs; my mother's funeral was in the synagogue. So yes, Rabbi Wall was a big part of our lives.

SG: You had said in your book that a lot of people don't necessarily think about politics as being fun, but you see it as being fun. I'm wondering if you could talk about that.

MMK: Well, it's hard. It's not always fun. It depends on how you describe fun. I don't want to get into what "is" is, but it's rewarding. It's satisfying at its best. It can be very frustrating. It can be frightening. It can make you angry. But when you achieve something, there's nothing quite like it. You also experience life broadly. I loved meeting all the different kinds of people I met and stepping into their lives, if ever so briefly. I just love that connection. Looking at this [inaudible] remind me of when I went through the granite sheds. Most people don't know what real physical labor is because we're cut off from it. Just as we don't know what's going on in poor cities because we're cut off from it, we never see those places. As a politician, you do, and you're moved for it. I remember going to lumber mills in the Northeast Kingdom and the noise and the danger. When I saw how people worked in the factories, where somebody's just making widgets all day long [inaudible] standing there all day, I realized this is a very hard life. You realize why people just want to get out on their snowmobiles in winter and just be free and have a beer or want the best for their kids.

[END OF INTERVIEW]