

Minna Shavitz Transcript

MCF: All right. I'll give this a second, just to run a little bit here and get going, and then, I'll stick an announcement on here so that they know that this is our tape. Okay, I think that should be enough. My name is Marcie Cohen Ferris. And I am conducting an oral history interview with Mina Shavitz. Did I pronounce it right?

MS: Right.

MCF: For the Weaving Women's Words Project for the Jewish Women's Archive. We're in Baltimore, Maryland, at Mrs. Shavitz's apartment. Today's date is Thursday, March 22nd, 2001. We're starting at about two o'clock. And that's that. So, let's talk generally, first of all, just about the origins of your family.

MS: All right.

MCF: I think probably, let's start with where and when you were born –

MS: Where I was born and everything? All right. I come from Gainesville, Georgia, which is a small community. But I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. My mother and father came from Russia. My uncle, who had a business down there, brought them all over here from Russia. He opened up a little ladies' ready-to-wear store in Gainesville, Georgia. I had three sisters. Two passed away. Two are living right now. They live in Atlanta, Georgia.

MCF: Now, is Gainesville spelled with –

MS: G-A-I-N-E-S-V-I-L-L-E.

MCF: So, why Georgia? What was the first family that came to –?

MS: Well, all my family lived down there. And on the weekends, even when I was a young little girl – my grandparents lived in Atlanta. My mother used to put me on the train by myself; I must have been fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen in those days. I'd go to spend the weekend so I could be with Jewish people. Because there was one other family of Jewish people that lived in our town. And they said that – my maiden name was Sacks, S-A-C-K-S. And they said, "Your family's different types of Jews." If you're familiar with the South, that's the way they put you. They're always doing things like that to you. We were all raised there, and all we did –

MCF: Say that one more time. They said you were a what? You were a different –?

MS: They said I was different. We were different kind of Jews.

MCF: What did that mean?

MS: That means that they accept us, but if you obey all the rules down there. And in those days, it was the – what was it called? The Klu Klux Klan was very popular there. And, if they didn't like you or want you, they would do [inaudible] things to you. They took some man out, and they really did beat him up terribly down there.

MCF: So, what kind of rules do you –?

MS: He was a Jewish boy. He didn't obey the laws. In those days, it was a – not an [inaudible] – what was it called? – that you had to close your business at certain times and do whatever they wanted you to do. They were the boss of the town. Because in those days – this is going back seventy years ago. They were very, very strict down there with you. I finally grew up. I went to [inaudible] school. Then, I went to a junior college. My mother, God bless her. May she rest in peace. She believed, and she was – never spoke plain English – used to say a broken Southern accent. She believed in girls going to school and getting an education. I went to Bristol, Virginia. I went there for junior college for two years.

MCF: Do you remember the name of it?

MS: Uh, Bristol, Virginia – Sullins. S-U-L-L-I-N-S. Sullins College. I had relatives in Chattanooga, which was not too far from there. And then, I had a boyfriend, and he used to come to see me, and I used to go to Chattanooga. That was part of my growing up.

MCF: Mrs. Shavitz – when?

MS: Min.

MCF: Do you mind if I call you Min?

MS: I want you to.

MCF: Why did the family first come to Georgia? Do you have any idea why the first Russian family ended up in the Deep South?

MS: I'm trying to remember. I was born in 1910. So, it had to be – I guess, eighteen-hundred and something.

MCF: Do you think they were coming to other families?

MS: That's right. They're here. Yes. Somebody had to bring them over and set them all up. Yes.

MCF: So you spent your whole young adulthood –

MS: Right.

MCF: – in Georgia?

MS: Yes.

MCF: Until you went to college in Virginia?

MS: Yes. Then, I came back. I met my husband. He passed away twenty-two years ago.

MCF: Let's just get back, just for a minute, back to your early childhood first. Then we'll get into your marriage too. But tell me a little bit about growing up Jewish in Gainesville.

MS: Well, it wasn't so easy.

MCF: The only family – what was that like?

MS: It wasn't easy at all. Some days, there was always one in a crowd that picked on you and called you "Paper Bag, Paper Sacks, Paper this."

MCF: Why that phrase?

MS: And they didn't want you to come. They would tell somebody else. I'd come home crying and feel very – oh, I didn't feel – I said, "I'm all alone." I used to tell my mother and father, "I just couldn't stand this. They're ostracizing me so bad around here." And, finally, I made one friend down there. I'll never forget. Her name was Sylvia-something – I don't remember it. She was absolutely wonderful to me. She took care of me. She was my best friend all the way through. She told me how to handle it. I did the best I could. But it wasn't easy growing up.

MCF: Do you think that – you were born in 1910?

MS: In Atlanta.

MCF: Yes. And then, the Leo Frank case –

MS: Yes, that's right.

MCF: – was just a few years later. [Editor's Note: The Leo Frank case was a notorious 20th-century legal case in the United States in which a Jewish factory manager, Leo

Frank, was wrongfully convicted of the murder of Mary Phagan, a 13-year-old girl, amidst antisemitic sentiment, leading to his lynching and subsequent outrage over the miscarriage of justice.]

MS: That's right. It was right around that period.

MCF: 1913.

MS: Yes.

MCF: So that was really a height of –

MS: Oh, that was a terrible thing, that Leo Frank – awful, yes.

MCF: Do you have remembrances of how that affected your family in any way?

MS: It did.

MCF: You were so young.

MS: It did. We were young, yes. But it affected us all terrible. Terrible. We didn't know how to – you don't really know how to handle it. It just makes you feel – I don't know – just didn't know how to handle it at all. There's been so many tragedies around.

MCF: Did you have any sense of why that occurred at that time?

MS: No, I really don't. I don't remember.

MCF: So, they called you "Paper Sack" to make fun of your name?

MS: Yes. That's right. Yes.

MCF: And so, what was your Jewish life like in that little town?

MS: In Atlanta?

MCF: Yeah. Oh, it was wonderful. On the weekends, I had made friends, and I'd go to the luncheons or go out to little parties with them, where I met the guys. They had a club called "The Progressive Club" in those days. We used to go to dances there. I loved it. It was just a wonderful social life. I'd come back on Sunday night, and I'd come back and go to school.

MCF: How old were you when your parents started sending you to Atlanta for the [inaudible]?

MS: Oh, gosh – well, I was in high school. Sixteen, seventeen.

MCF: So, when you were home, back in Gainesville, did you all have any kind of a Jewish life there?

MS: No. Nothing. My mother wanted to keep kosher. She tried so hard. They sent her food from Atlanta, Georgia. And my father was not a shochet, but he used to kill the chickens. And it made her feel [laughter] that that was more kosher. When I think back – isn't that silly? But she did. That's the way we did it. We never talked about it. But that's the way we were. We used to have our big meal at noontime, and then, we'd come from school and go back. That's what we'd do. On my off-times, I'd come back to the store, to my father's store. And I'd work in the store and help him out.

MCF: What kind of store was it?

MS: General store, ladies ready-to-wear, shoe store. I'd work the cash register, and I'd wait on people on [inaudible]. I liked it.

MCF: What was the name of the business?

MS: I like business. I liked it. From an early age, I always liked business.

MCF: What was the name of your father's store?

MS: It was Jake Sacks.

MCF: Tell me your parents' names.

MS: Annie Sacks was my mother.

MCF: Was that her maiden name, too?

MS: Saul was her maiden name. S-A-U-L

MCF: So, Annie Saul Sacks?

MS: In fact, there's a cousin of mine in Atlanta, who you should – if you ever go, her name is Dorothy Rosenblum. I'll give you her address, everything. She is absolutely wonderful in all of these things. If you contact her –

MCF: How do you spell her last name?

MS: R-O-S-E-N-B-L-O-O-M, I think it is. I have it in my book here. She lives in the same building where my sisters live.

MCF: Do you know where the family came from in Russia?

MS: No, I really don't. [inaudible] I never heard of that. I don't know. Some Jewish word it was. Whatever you call it around there.

MCF: And so, your father began the clothing store in about what year?

MS: Well, let me see. As I was saying, I was born in 1910. So, I guess –

MCF: So, before your birth?

MS: Not too much longer, because then they had children very quickly.

MCF: So, did your mother work in the store?

MS: Yes. Everyday.

MCF: And what did she do?

MS: She was a sales lady. Took care of everything. Buyer. She was a very, very good business lady. Loved business. I think she instilled it in me and my daughters – we all are – they seemed to be that way.

MCF: What kind of customers did you have?

MS: They were all from the farmers. Came from the farm. Pregnant. Some of them didn't feel well. We had a bench, and we used to make them sit down, relax, and rest [inaudible] they didn't want to get waited on right away. They used to have strings of stockings hanging. [laughter]

MCF: That's great.

MS: And you could pick your colors. [laughter] Isn't that silly?

MCF: Was Jake Sacks the only general store?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And did you have siblings?

MS: Have what?

MCF: You had sisters?

MS: Yes, I have two sisters right now. One passed away.

MCF: So you were one of four, originally?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And their names?

MS: One of them is Sarah Cohen in Atlanta. S-A-R-A-H. Sarah Cohen. And Gertrude Rose. Gertrude Rose. Yes.

MCF: And what was the other –?

MS: The other [is] deceased. Bessie Millner.

MCF: And how do you spell Millner?

MS: M-I-double L-N-E-R.

MCF: And which –?

MS: I'm the oldest. I'm the oldest. Gertrude is next. And Sarah's the baby. The one that passed away – deceased – was the next in line with me. We were always very, very close, all of us were. We grew up that way. The family came first. Whatever it was, if you needed anything, you would call on them. We have been very – we still are. I was down there before I got sick about two months ago. We weren't supposed to visit because my sisters are not well – neither one of them. One of them is bedridden.

MCF: One lives in Atlanta?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And the other one lives?

MS: They live together.

MCF: Oh.

MS: Together in Atlanta, Georgia. They have nurses around the clock now.

MCF: What did you think was going to happen – what your future was for the four of you when you were little girls? What were your dreams?

MS: My dreams [were] that I would move out of this town. [laughter] I never told anybody about it, but I wanted to get to a city or someplace where I was welcome and would enjoy my life. But I shouldn't complain because it was a darn good life when I think back at it.

My father made a very good living. In those days – oh, gosh, my mother used to – if she spent fifty dollars, she wouldn't tell anybody. She used to want to dress me to the best degree. In those days, I didn't lack of anything. I drove a car when I was – I don't even think I was sixteen. Down there, you didn't need a license. I used to drive all over.

MCF: You said you had one good friend, Sylvia?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And so that was a gentile?

MS: Oh, she was wonderful to me. Just wonderful. I wonder what happened to her. I wouldn't know.

MCF: Did you have other little girlfriends?

MS: No. No others. She was my only one. I never associated a great deal with the rest of them.

MCF: So you were –?

MS: In the city, it was called Brenau College – was down there, right near us, right near our house. As I was still in high school – and my mother always went over to the school to Brenau College.

MCF: How do you spell that?

MS: B-R-E-N-A-U. She would go over there and find out how many Jewish girls were there and invite her to come to our house and to come over any time – coffee, tea – and call us to see if we could do anything for each other. They had dates come over. When they'd be excused from college, many a time, they told little fibs. [laughter] My mother was a great believer in that. It was wonderful. In fact, I still remember one – (Minnie Crackawanna?). Did you ever in your life –? She lives in Tampa, Florida. I don't even know what her married name –I don't know what she looks like or what she is.

MCF: Minnie?

MS: (Crackawanna?). Did you ever –? Isn't that funny how you don't forget one person.

MCF: And she was a student at the –?

MS: At Brenau College.

MCF: That was in Gainesville?

MS: Yes. They had Riverside Military Academy. And I used to go – that I did used to go – all the dances at Riverside because they had a few Jewish boys there. I went to their dances because I used to love to go to all of that and all their parties. They used to invite me, and I was allowed to go there. The bus would pick me up and bring me back. That's how they used to manage it. The other man couldn't pick you up.

MCF: Now, would a gentile boy not have asked you on a date because you were Jewish?

MS: No, I never went with any gentile boys.

MCF: Because your parents said no.

MS: Yes. I had one sister that got involved. But my mother got – my sister Sarah – she got that out of her very quickly. After I was gone, and then Gertrude was gone – she was a baby. She immediately sent her to Atlanta to be with our grandmother more. Then she met somebody, and she got married. Because she was involved with a non-Jewish fellow, and she didn't want her to do it. So, she got her straightened out.

MCF: So, your sisters were really the core friends that you had growing up?

MS: Yes. We were all very close to one another.

MCF: But you went to grade school in Gainesville?

MS: Yes. Gainesville High.

MCF: So, tell me about Jewish life in your home, though. I know there wasn't a temple.

MS: No, we had nothing. We went to Atlanta for all the services.

MCF: What about Jewish celebrations in your home? Did you all do Shabbat or Passover?

MS: Passover, we kept. In fact, it was so bad for us – because in those days, my mother didn't have – she couldn't have dairy. Couldn't have but one thing. So we had meat. Oh, it was terrible that week. We used to suffer. We couldn't stand it because we could have no dairy products because they couldn't send it to her from Atlanta, Georgia.

MCF: To keep kosher supplies?

MS: Yes, kosher. That's what we had. That was a terrible week for us all. We suffered terrible for that week. [laughter]

MCF: Tell me how your mom was able to keep kosher.

MS: She tried very hard. It was very hard to do. Yes. Very hard to do. Since she went to business and she had help in the house that used to help us and take care of us.

MCF: Was that Black help?

MS: A Black woman.

MCF: And did she do the cooking?

MS: Yes. My mother never did the cooking.

MCF: So what kind of things did she cook?

MS: She showed her how to do different Jewish dishes.

MCF: Like what?

MS: Like meat rolled in cabbage, tzimmes, and things like that. Yes. And the briskets. We didn't know any better. That's the way we were.

MCF: What was her –? Do you remember her name?

MS: No, I don't remember her name. But my mother liked business so much, so she used to go to [the] business right after lunch and stay until six to seven o'clock at night. That was her pitch. She used to love that. In fact, she was really better than my father, may he rest in peace. He was a very sweet man. But not lazy – no. But more of a

homebody. He really didn't like that. In fact, he was very kind. He used to want – when we'd get sick, one of my sisters had scarlet fever. They put up the flag outside. I don't know if they still do that or not. And he said he didn't care; he was going to stay in there with her. He didn't care if he got it or not. He stayed with her. She was very, very sick. We weren't allowed to go out of the house. We were quarantined. In those days, they quarantined you for – oh, I don't know how many weeks it was. It was a number of weeks. Yes. I'm sure today it's a different thing. Everything's so different. Today's a jungle. [laughter] I hate to say it, but it is.

MCF: Tell me why you think your mom was such a good businesswoman. What made her?

MS: Why she was a businesswoman? I don't know who she took it from. Her brother was that way, though. She had a brother who was in another little town. He was the one who brought her over. My uncle Joe. He brought her over, and they were very close. I'm not sure how she learned it so fast.

MCF: Do you know how she met Jake?

MS: Yes. They made a match. Sure. They brought him over and brought her over, they met, and they got married. And that was it. That was it. They hardly knew each other.

MCF: Where were they married?

MS: I guess Atlanta. I guess so. I don't remember that's what it was.

MCF: So what about Southern foods? Did you have Southern foods in your house?

MS: No, I never liked it. I don't like that hush puppies or any of that stuff. I don't like any of that stuff.

MCF: So, on an average day, when you were growing up – it was usually some kind of a Jewish type of food?

MS: Yes.

MCF: Did you eat your main meal –?

MS: At home. Twelve o'clock.

MCF: At noon?

MS: Noontime. Yes.

MCF: What would you have for supper?

MS: Dairy foods, a lot of sour cream, cheese – all that kind of stuff. Yes. Yes. My sister, Sarah, played the piano. There was a beautiful [inaudible] on the table. I don't know what – I would love to have that [inaudible] now. It had fringe on it. She had a baby – we had a baby grand piano. After all, for anybody to have a baby grand piano in those days. My sister used to play. We'd all come around, and we'd sing songs. When these girls from Brenau College would come, they would just love coming over to hear her play. Then she gave it up. Did you ever? Oh, well, that's what happened.

MCF: What was the house –?

MS: And she gave it to her granddaughter, the piano. It's a shame that you don't keep up things when you're young.

MCF: What was the house like?

MS: Her health's not good now at all.

MCF: No. What was your house –?

MS: What did you say?

MCF: Do you have memories of your house?

MS: Oh, my house was wonderful. We had a wonderful house. Oh, it was wonderful. It was just lovely. It had a big porch. It was trees all around. And we had chickens in the backyard. [laughter]

MCF: Or did your mother ever cook in the evenings?

MS: No, very little. Very little. No, we were very independent. No.

MCF: What about Friday night? Did you do anything special on Friday nights?

MS: She used to light the candles, and that was about it. Yes. And we never learned too much about Judaism. I never learned it really until I got married.

MCF: So you didn't go to Sunday school?

MS: No.

MCF: In Atlanta?

MS: No. Oh, for our High Holidays – that's all. Just for the Holidays.

MCF: So, what synagogue did you all – or temple?

MS: It's the big one there in Atlanta. I don't know what it's called. I forgot what it's called. There's a big synagogue there. I don't know. It's still there.

MCF: The temple – I think it's called the Temple.

MS: No, it's not a temple. It's Conservative.

MCF: Okay.

MS: Conservative. Yes. And that's where we used to go.

MCF: And so, you would stay with your grandparents?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And was there other family that was there of yours?

MS: Yes, I had uncles and aunts and cousins. Oh my goodness. I had one cousin, especially – Ethel – oh my God, I'll never forget Ethel. She was just wonderful. Ethel. Then, after I got older, I used to visit with Ethel. She was a few years older than me. Naturally, I respected her. She taught me things that I didn't know a lot of things about. I had wonderful times – every weekend, I used to go to her.

MCF: What was her last name?

MS: Ethel – wait a minute. Let me see. Oh my God. Isn't that awful? All of a sudden, I can't think of the name I know so well.

MCF: Did she have a daughter?

MS: Her mother was – Joseph and Bertha. [inaudible]

MCF: It'll come back.

MS: Weiner or Weiner, whatever it is. That's who they were here.

MCF: So what did you learn from them?

MS: Oh, about the facts of life. [laughter] All about sex and menstrual period and how babies are born, and all that stuff.

MCF: Did your mom share those things with you?

MS: No. Really didn't. No, she didn't. No.

MCF: You never had conversations?

MS: No. I learned it all from Miss Ethel.

MCF: What about you and your sisters? You must have talked?

MS: Well, my sisters learned, too. We'd see each other. We told each other things. Yes. And they, too, started going to Atlanta after that. That's what they did. Yes.

MCF: What kind of aspirations do you think your parents had for you and for your other sisters?

MS: I think I was very spoiled. I was the first-born. And I believe she did, she spoiled me very badly. I didn't realize it until I got old about it. She always wanted me to have the best. She was very good to all the other girls too. But the girls used to always say, "You know what? Mom sure is partial to Min. You sure are today." They used to say that about her. She never said anything about it; she just let it drop.

MCF: What was the phrase she would say?

MS: She used to say, "Mom was partial to Min all the time."

MCF: What do you think she hoped for you? Did she hope that you would –?

MS: She was hoping that I'd get married and marry a Jewish fellow and do well and move into a big city or live in Atlanta, which I did when I first got married.

MCF: Well, tell me a little – let's move on to college. What were those –?

MS: Oh, they were wonderful days.

MCF: How did you pick going to school in Virginia?

MS: I don't know how I picked it, but I did. I was very friendly with – I don't know whether [inaudible] – no, she was a Christian girl. Her name was Sullivan. She was from Virginia. What was her first name? Sullivan? Afterward, she went into the movies, in fact. She was just wonderful to me at school. And on the weekends, I'd go to Chattanooga because I had a boyfriend there. And then, he'd come up to see me, and we'd sit in a parlor, and the chaperone would be over there. [laughter] I bet that sounds silly to you.

MCF: Well, tell me about college.

MS: You couldn't stay by yourself there. I loved it there. We used to go to the theater. Once in a while, we would go to the opera. I never cared for the opera. But I loved the plays. They let us go into town for dinners about once a week with everybody. We couldn't go alone for nothing. Nobody went alone.

MCF: Did you like your classes?

MS: Oh, I loved them.

MCF: What did you study?

MS: I just loved – it was just a general everything that I took – English, history, whatever. It was just a beautiful place. I can see it in my eyes now. It was on a hill. It was just – and the [inaudible] was so – it was small. And most of them were non-Jewish. But I got along well with all of them. Had no problems whatsoever.

MCF: You had good training.

MS: Just wonderful. It was a wonderful friendship and a wonderful time. Yes.

MCF: So, you finished college in what year? Generally?

MS: Well, let's see. I'll try to figure that out. 1910. I'm ninety-one now. I don't know what year – but I must have been about twenty-three when I finished – twenty-one or twenty – because I got married when I was twenty-two, so it must have been about twenty.

MCF: Yes.

MCF: And that was called Sullins?

MS: Yes.

MCF: So tell me, what happened after college?

MS: I came back home.

MCF: To Gainesville.

MS: I was there at Gainesville. I helped in the store. I was still going to Atlanta. I was going with a – I went with a young man there. But that didn't work out with me. Then, all of a sudden, I met a man that I married. He was from Baltimore.

MCF: Tell me his name?

MS: His name was Leon. He worked for a national millinery company, and he used to sell my father in the stores. He traveled. Traveling salesman. That's what they called them in those days. We started to meet. He'd make his visit. He came down so often to

see me. First thing I know, we decide to get married. Well, my mother wasn't so pleased at first. We didn't have a wedding. She and my father went, and that's all. Not that I ran away, but we went into Chattanooga. We got married, and we came back –

MCF: Who performed the ceremony?

MS: Huh?

MCF: Who performed the ceremony?

MS: I don't remember. Some rabbi. I don't remember. We stayed in Atlanta for a while. And then, he was transferred back up to Baltimore. When I came here, when I saw those white-stone steps, I thought, “My God, where am I?” I was miserable. Oh, that first year. Marcie, I tell you, I thought, “I don't think I'll live through this.” I didn't want to – I was ashamed. I didn't want my mother, in particular, to know. Because she'd been so kind and so good. I didn't want to worry her. She'd always say, “Do you need any money? Do you need anything?” And I'd say, “Oh no.” And [inaudible] did I need money? He was hardly making a living. I was having a hard, hard time with it. I was just so unhappy here. But I stood it out. And I finally went down – back to see them all and everything. My first child wasn't born until four years after I was married.

MCF: Well, Min, tell me, what neighborhood did you come to in Baltimore first?

MS: We lived at the – where did I live when I first came here? On Callow Avenue. No, no, what am I talking –? Edwards Apartments. Edwards. That's where my daughter Reta, the oldest – my daughter who's sixty-seven, she was born in – we lived there in Edwards Apartments on Whitelock Street.

MCF: Whitelock?

MS: Right here, in Baltimore. Yes.

MCF: And what part of town is that in?

MS: It's called Northwest Baltimore. Yes.

MCF: So you weren't downtown?

MS: No. No. The Jewish people were all around me. Yes.

MCF: So what year did you all come back to Baltimore then, as newlyweds? It was around 1920?

MS: Yes. Because we didn't stay in Atlanta that long.

MCF: But before the Depression?

MS: Oh, wait a minute. No, I think I was here for the Depression.

MCF: So you all –?

MS: When was the Depression?

MCF: 1929.

MS: I think I was here.

MCF: What year did you marry? Let's get that straight.

MS: I married in 1934.

MCF: Married in 1934. Okay, so if you married in 1934, and then you all came to Baltimore –

MS: Wait a minute. I'm wrong. I'm getting mixed up. My daughter was born in 1934. Reta was born.

MCF: I've got it right here.

MS: Sometimes, my memory gets a little bit confused.

MCF: It's hard to remember all this stuff.

MS: It's very hard. Yes, she was born in 1934. That I know. Yes. She's sixty-seven. Wouldn't that make it?

MCF: Yes.

MS: Yes. Then I must have married in 1900 – I mean, not 1900. What am I talking –?

MCF: 1930.

MS: Yes. That's it. That's it.

MCF: Got it.

MS: That's it.

MCF: And then you had –

MS: Reta Davis.

MCF: – four years later?

MS: Yes.

MCF: So, tell me a little bit about Leon. What was he like? What did you like about him?

MS: Well, he was very good-looking and very masculine. Well, I used to call him a womanizer because he liked women, and he liked well-dressed women. We had a good life.

MCF: Now, so when you moved to Baltimore –

MS: But I just didn't –

MCF: It was so hard because –

MS: His people lived here. His mother and father. And his sisters.

MCF: What were they like?

MS: One of his sisters was wonderful. I adored her – Hilda Edelman. This is my niece, Myrna Edelman's – Cardin's mother. Hilda Edelman.

MCF: How do you spell Edelman?

MS: E-D-E-L-M-A-N. She and I were like sisters. She absolutely treated me – I don't know what I'd done without Hilda. I really don't.

MCF: What kind of place did you live in when you first moved here?

MS: When we first came, we lived with my mother-in-law on the third floor, on Whittier Avenue. Yes.

MCF: What was that like?

MS: Not good.

MCF: Talk about that a little bit.

MS: I felt very secluded. It was so new to me. I wasn't very happy about it. I really wasn't. I couldn't find a place for myself. And I tried. My mother-in-law was very good. She was wonderful to me.

MCF: What was her name?

MS: Her name was Fanny. Fanny and Harry Shavitz.

MCF: What kind of business did they have?

MS: They didn't. What did Harry do? He was really retired when I got married, so I don't know what he did. He wasn't well. And my mother-in-law was very religious. That's where I learned most of my things. She observes everything very well. Kept kosher. She observed all the holidays. She really taught me everything that I never had in my background.

MCF: How was dealing with the difference between coming from the Deep South?

MS: It was very hard. Very hard. I couldn't get used to living up North from a Southern way of everything. People in the South lead an easier, slower life than here. It's harder. It was harder living here than in Georgia. Much harder to me.

MCF: Just the pace?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And what was it like being suddenly around such a large Jewish community?

MS: Well, that's what was so hard for me. I wasn't used to that. It was very difficult to get accustomed to these people around. I finally did, though, and I made a lot of friends. I soon learned to like it.

MCF: Was there a lot of Yiddish spoken?

MS: Oh, yes. My mother-in-law spoke very good English, though. She really did. Yes. She spoke very good English.

MCF: What synagogue did they belong to?

MS: They belonged to Beth Tfiloh here in town here. Beth Tfiloh. That's where we used to go.

MCF: How often would you go?

MS: But then, we changed. Oh, after my children got big, I changed to Oheb Shalom, which is right here, the temple around the corner. We go to temple. But as it happens today, we all three go to different places. My younger daughter Gail and Lenny Kaplan – they go to Beth Am, which is on Eutaw Place. I don't know if you ever heard of it. That's Conservative. They go there. Rabbi Kaplan was the original one. He married my children. He just passed away. He was a friend to us besides being a rabbi. I loved him. My daughter and I, Reta – we go to the temple, Oheb Shalom. We've been going there for – I don't know how many – many, many years there. That's where we go. Both of my children were bat mitzvahed there. That I did have them.

MCF: When you were a newlywed and you were adjusting to this new Jewish life, what did that feel like? Did you go to temple weekly? Did you eat together as a family?

MS: Well, I didn't go that often to temple. No. Really didn't, no.

MCF: When did you attend synagogue?

MS: I didn't really start to go until, I think, after Reta was born. We didn't go. No. I just didn't bother. They didn't go, so I didn't go, except for the holidays.

MCF: So, your Jewish education – how would you describe how you learned?

MS: Well, I learned from them. That's all I can [inaudible]. I was always sorry that I didn't have more of a background. Very sorry about it. I'm so glad today – my granddaughter, who is married, divorced, has three children. She is quite – her three children go to Beth Tfiloh, which has a private school there. She is so involved in it that she – I've learned a lot in the past – – I don't know how many years it was – more than I ever did, to tell you truthfully. Because I never was involved in it. I used to do some volunteer work around, but that didn't make a difference.

MCF: But as far as learning how to run a Jewish home?

MS: No, I never knew. Also, we went into business. That's when Nate's and Leon's came along.

MCF: Well, tell me – you did learn some things from your mother-in-law?

MS: Yes. A little bit. yeah. That's when I went to work, and I worked all my life.

MCF: Well, tell me how – did your husband switch from being the on-the-road salesman –

MS: He became –

MCF: – to having a business here in Baltimore.

MS: He came and worked in Nate's and Leon's. Yes.

MCF: How did that happen?

MS: Well, he didn't like his job. He was very friendly with a man, Nathan Herr. Nathan Herr was in business with somebody else. We got friendly. And they said, "Let's open up a delicatessen." He knew nothing about it, but he learned very quickly.

MCF: Why did he think there was a need for a delicatessen?

MS: Well, this Nathan Herr did. Leon thought he had nothing to lose. We opened here on North Avenue.

MCF: What did you think about that decision to go?

MS: Well, I liked it, I really did. Because I like being with people. I love being with people. So, I worked there every night [as a] cashier. In fact, in those days, I think I paid five dollars a week. I had somebody take care – that was after Reta was born. That's when I went there. She was a young baby. I don't know how old. I had help. I used to work the night shift. I wouldn't get home until three o'clock in the morning. They'd pick me up and take me home. That's all. If some of his friends were there – we were open all night long. We never closed – twenty-four hours. In fact, around one or two o'clock in the morning, we had a Black man – I won't say his name – he used to dance and sing for everybody that came up from the nightclubs here in town. We had a couple of nightclubs. And they'd all come up to – because we're the only people that stayed open. They'd come up, and they'd have quite a party. To tell you the truth, I didn't want to go home. You know, when you're young – I figured, "Why go home for? I might as well stay here and enjoy." I never went home until two. I used to sleep late in the mornings because I needed my rest.

MCF: And so you had Black help during the day?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And Reta was just a little girl.

MS: Yeah. Then we moved to Hillsdale Road. We bought a duplex out there on Hillsdale Road. It was wonderful.

MCF: Nate's and Leon's was begun in '37.

MS: Yes.

MCF: Where was it located?

MS: North Avenue, right across the street from the bank.

MCF: Did they build it brand new?

MS: They had to remodel it. I think that was what – if I remember correctly. There was somebody there, but they had to remodel the whole thing. It was very narrow, with a counter and booths and tables all the way in the back.

MCF: So what kind –?

MS: You could sit down and eat.

MCF: What kind of restaurant was it? What kind of food?

MS: I wish my son-in-law was here. He's got the menu and everything.

MCF: Just generally.

MS: Corned beef was ten cents a pound. Tongue was fifteen cents a sandwich. We had roast beef. We had chicken. We had everything around there then. And sour cream – white fish – oh, that was very popular. And his wife – Nathan's wife and I both worked there.

MCF: What was [her] name?

MS: Her name was Sophie Herr.

MCF: What did she do there?

MS: She worked behind the counter. She lived upstairs in the store.

MCF: And who were the chefs?

MS: We had one Black man that was wonderful. I don't remember. Frank-something. I don't remember his last [name]. He did all the cooking of the corned beef. Yes. I remember him.

MCF: Waiters and waitresses, you had?

MS: And the waitresses? Oh, I don't remember much of them.

MCF: Was it mainly Black help?

MS: No, it was all white.

MCF: All white?

MS: All white help.

MCF: Why was that?

MS: Why?

MCF: Yes.

MS: I don't know why. But that's what they had. Yes. The men always used to come in and flirt with them all the time. I don't have to tell you that. Business in the bar – oh, I'm going back too far. [inaudible] but they used to come. It was a good life. I enjoyed it.

The children knew that I had to work. They were starting to grow up. That's when we moved to Hillsdale Road. We were still in business at Nate's and Leon's. But then, Nate decided he wanted to sell out. So, my husband decided – and my daughter was already married – Reta. They decided to come up to this part of town and open up – The Pimlico

was on Park Heights Avenue. Yes, Park Heights Avenue. We had a bar, and I worked there. One of the girls and I worked a certain room. It was called the Leonate Room. And we used to have all private parties there.

MCF: The Leonate?

MS: Yes. L-E-O-N-A-T-E. Yes. We used to have – and I worked with this one girl. She just passed away not too long ago – (Reva Silverman?). Never forget (Reva?). She was a wonderful lady. Wonderful gal.

MCF: Silverman?

MS: Silverman, yes. She was married to a Jewish fellow.

MCF: Do you know how to spell that last name?

MS: S-I-L-V-E-R-M-A-N. When my daughters were very young, we both taught them – they could see that we had to work hard. We didn't make them, but we said, “You have to help us out.” One of them used to check coats. I bet you she wasn't more than thirteen or fourteen years old – checked the coats. She'd come over to me or her father and ask if she was doing a good job. But they both helped out. All over.

MCF: So, how do you think having a restaurant affected your family life?

MS: Well, it didn't hurt me. I mean, because I loved it. I really did. I like working. I liked being with people. I made a lot of friends in town. I was invited everywhere. But my husband – he never liked to bother to go where – I went to all the social programs. I love social life. I like to go. Right now, even today, I have to slow down, and I resent that I have to slow down. Nothing I can do about it. But I'm doing it. Excuse me. You don't want a soda or anything? You sure?

MCF: How about you?

MS: I don't want anything.

MCF: Do you want something to drink?

MS: Do you want something?

MCF: I'm fine.

MS: You sure?

MCF: Yes. So, was it good - did you feel that it was a good partnership between your husband and you?

MS: Yes. We had a business. That's what we did.

MCF: What made that work?

MS: Well, it worked all right. It was a little hard.

MCF: What was the hard part?

MS: Because he worked the night shift sometimes, and then there was a day shift. And we hardly could communicate. But in those days, it didn't matter to people. It really didn't. We had so many beautiful parties on Hillsdale Road in my house. We had a big basement. We used to have – we made a lot of friends through the restaurant. He did, and I met their wives. And then, we all became very sociable. In fact, to this – well, I lost two of them. One, I just lost recently. She was much younger than me, and she just – and I miss her terribly

.

MCF: What was her name?

MS: Jackie and Irv Kovens.

MCF: How do you spell that?

MS: And Lil and Dave Schwartz. And Lil and David Schwartz.

MCF: How did you spell Jackie's last name?

MS: J-A-C-[Q]-U-E-L-I-N-E – oh, you can just say Jackie. J-A-C-K-I-E.

MCF: What was her last name?

MS: Kovens. K-O-V-E-N-S. She was a Hoffberger here in town. I don't know if you're familiar, but it's a very known name here in town. She was one of my best friends. I met her through the business. We just kept friends with each other. That's what I did. Yes. And then, I met this Lil and (Tubby?) Schwartz. They were my constant friends. We used to talk every night on the phone. 11:00, 11:30 – she had a lot of problems with her son. He was gay, and the father couldn't accept it. It was a terrible thing. She did give more attention to that boy than she did to her daughter. That I know because once in a while, I'd talk to the daughter today, and there was always resentment. And his father – he didn't abuse him. But he was a very rough, tough man. He wasn't nice to him at all. Through her, he learned to sing. He had a beautiful – and he lives now in Australia. David Schwartz. He has a beautiful voice. He used to sing at the different synagogues here in town. He went to Australia. He had a boyfriend. He moved over there. He got connected with the jail. He did something about it. He wrote a book, in fact. He's a graduate of Emory University, with honors.

MCF: Wow.

MS: Well, I haven't to him now for quite a while. But some friends of mine were just over there, and they saw him, and he asked about me and how he's doing. He's very happy.

He lives alone. But that's his life. In those days, a gay person was behind the doors. In fact, his mother and I were – I never told my friends that he was gay. Never. She never told anybody but me. It was a hard, hard thing for her.

MCF: And that was in the '50s?

MS: Yes. He made a wonderful living. That he did for her. But they had a problem. Because he was too rough. She was sweet, kind, easy-going, and never said a word against people. He always wanted to be the master of all the grand finales around. She passed away about – I was over there every day. She used to live around the corner here. She's been gone about eight years. Eight or nine years. He just died recently. Well, three or four years ago. And we all were – Jackie, Irv – we used to go to Las Vegas. We used to go to California. I went to Europe with them. Leon wouldn't go. He wouldn't go anyplace. But I went forty years ago. We had an apartment in Florida. We used to spend – that was twenty-five years ago. Yes, twenty-five years ago. He's been gone twenty-two. I was down there for about thirty – and I was down there for the whole winter. I used to pack up the car, and somebody would take the car down, and I'd stay down there. He'd come down on weekends if he could. If he couldn't, he wouldn't do it. My friends were there, and that's how I got to there – this Lil and (Tubby?) and Jackie – they were all there. We had a wonderful, wonderful [inaudible] time.

MCF: You're such an independent woman. How did you decide that that was what you needed to do when –?

MS: Go to Florida?

MCF: Yes. And just to make the choices in your life when your husband wouldn't necessarily do the things that you'd want to do?

MS: I remembered thinking about it. I had a very good friend down there. He's still there. His wife passed away. We kept in touch with him. He was the one – Harry (Levine?) from Florida. I think he sort of encouraged it. We kept talking about it. He finally called and said, "Wait a minute, Min, there's an apartment on the ninth floor." I said, "Oh, I don't want to go that high. I'm afraid." [laughter] He said to me, "Min, what's wrong with you? Don't worry. If you go to the fourth – what's the difference in that?" I have a phobia of height. I was always scared of heights. I have claustrophobia-ness. I got used to it, though, and I went down. We had the most wonderful time down there. I used to go down in October and come home in May.

MCF: Where was it?

MS: Miami Beach, Florida. At the Eaton Hall. We have our holiday down there. He would bring the fish, and we'd all have our Seders down there – everything. It was wonderful years for me down there. Just wonderful. Prior to that, we used to entertain at the Pimlico. In this big room, we had all the Seders and everything there. We used to have fifty, sixty people there.

MCF: What was that like?

MS: We used to entertain a lot when I was young.

MCF: So you did some Jewish holidays?

MS: Oh, sure.

MCF: Kind of affairs?

MS: Yes.

MCF: At Pimlico?

MS: Yes, we really did. Dr. Louis Kaplan used to come down and help us with the services and everything. He was a wonderful man. He was the rabbi down at Beth Am originally. And then, he left because – well, he just passed away about three months ago. They moved him out to a – oh, I wouldn't say a nursing home. It is like a glorified really – you have your meals, you have an apartment, whatever you call it. Assisted Living, I guess.

MCF: What was the clientele like at Nate's and Leon's?

MS: All Jewish. All Jewish. We had some from the bank and the theaters, or somewhere, but most almost every – in fact, many a little couple, met there and got married. In fact, it was such a closeness, Marcie – they used to come to me, and they'd say – I don't remember their names much. They used to say, “So-and-so, the fellow I like, was he in today? Was he with another girl?” It was a very homey, family restaurant. That's the way the Pimlico was. Family-type thing we ran.

MCF: Did businesspeople come there for lunch, and then families more at dinner?

MS: Yes, yes. That's what it was. All families all the time.

MCF: And then, late in the evening, the bar crowd?

MS: They were coming after the movies. Nobody does that [anymore]. That's what they used to do. After the movies, 9:00, the place would fill up again. I remember the first one – when we first opened up, we couldn't make a living. We had a couple of couples that were very friendly with us. They were so sweet. They'd come every night and sit in the first booth to make it look like there was somebody in the place to pep us up. We walked around, walked around. Well, we finally made it, thank God, and everything proved out very well. Successful. Yes.

MCF: And tell me a little bit about those big seder celebrations.

MS: Oh, they were wonderful.

MCF: What kind of food?

MS: It was just wonderful in there. In fact – oh, well, you wouldn't remember. If I remember correctly, I think Marvin Mandell, who used to be the Governor of Maryland – as you know, he got in a lot of trouble and re-married. I don't know if you know all that. Anyway, he's now living in Annapolis. That's who he married. If I remember correctly, he and she were there at that party at that seder. We had all of the tables set up along – when we were in Florida, we did it in our hallway. We set up tables like – like this hall would be. We set up long tables. We had one girl that was a wonderful cook – Helen Simon. She used to make all the good Jewish dishes for us. She was a wonderful gal. In fact, I still keep in touch with her. We talk to each other.

MCF: But with the –?

MS: She was my Florida friend.

MCF: Helen Simon?

MS: Yes.

MCF: But would the Black chefs at the restaurant make all this Jewish food for the seders?

MS: No.

MCF: Who made the food?

MS: Oh, we made it – well, we did make soup. Yes, the matzo. Leon had somebody come in and fix it all for us. Yes.

MCF: Did it have to be kosher?

MS: No. It wasn't kosher.

MCF: So, the people that came to seder at the restaurant, was it a mix of Conservative and Reform?

MS: Yes, yes. All kinds of people. Yes. Different people from different lives. Yes.

MCF: So the restaurant was kosher-style?

MS: That's right. Yes, yes. .

MCF: What did your family think about the restaurant? Your Southern family?

MS: My sisters? My mother and father [inaudible] had passed away. But my sisters, they thought it was terrible. [laughter]

MCF: Tell me about that.

MS: They didn't like it one bit. They really didn't. They thought that that was – I don't know. They didn't think that was good enough for me, and they resented it. They thought I worked too hard. They didn't like the life I led. I made light of it. I tried to show them, "Look, everybody thinks differently. This is me, and I can't do anything about it. And this is my life." I used to go down to visit them very often. We had wonderful times together. Wonderful times together.

MCF: How did you resolve that kind of difference of feeling about –?

MS: It wasn't easy. It wasn't easy. But when you're young – I think you do things differently when you're young. You learn to adapt. You have to. Either you sink or you swim. You have to do it. That's all there is to it.

MCF: Did you have many other married women friends that worked as hard as you did here in Baltimore?

MS: No. I didn't know of anybody else that did it but me. No.

MCF: So that was unusual?

MS: It is, yeah. It was unusual.

MCF: What were most women doing?

MS: They just stayed home and took care of the children. They were home-bodies, that's all.

MCF: And then, were you active or able to be active in synagogue life?

MS: Not too much. No. And then, when I went to Florida – when I came that first year, I believe – or it was before that – I started to do volunteer work at the Baltimore County Hospital. Joan (Kandel?) or something – she was the one that ran it, and I worked in their mail department. And then, I worked in the department where you have to talk to people that just came out of surgery to help them. I was a volunteer there for a long time – at Baltimore County Hospital. I was there a long time, which I liked very much.

MCF: What were the challenges of being a working woman? What do you think were the –?

MS: I liked it because I like people. I love to talk to them. I like to hear about their family life. And I just loved it. When they put me on a shelf, [laughter] I didn't like it for

anything.

MCF: When did you stop working?

MS: When did I stop working? When the old New Pimlico opened up – the new one, I mean. The new one opened up. We had a big party. It was beautiful. I stayed on for a little while. I don't know how long. When was that? Both of my son-in-laws were in the business. It was after my – and then they decided that I'd been there long enough. I said, "Okay." So, I got out. I said, "Well, I still want to be taken care of financially," which they did send me a check every month and took care of me. I was very disheartened in the beginning. I really didn't like it one bit. Business is a terrible thing, Marcie. It causes a lot of friction in families and help, and this one don't get along with this one, and this one's having an affair with this one. There were a lot of things that were going on that I used to close my eyes, walk in the bar, and just couldn't think about it. I wouldn't even mention the names to you because of some of these – well, I shouldn't even talk about it. They took advantage of a lot of the women around, I would say. But the women liked it, and they encouraged it – these waitresses.

MCF: What about you, Min? Did you ever feel any discrimination as a working woman?

MS: No. No, I didn't. These two men – Irving Schwartz and Irving Kovens and Sam Stofberg – the three men were so wonderful to us. They really financed us. Pepsi-Cola, in fact, set us all up originally. They gave us all the credit. They did everything for us – the Pepsi-Cola people.

MCF: So, who were the three investors?

MS: Irving Schwartz. Irv Kovens.

MCF: Kovens?

MS: And Sam Stofberg.

MCF: Do you know how to spell –?

MS: S-T-O-F-B-E-R-G.

MCF: Stofberg?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And then, Koven? K-O –?

MS: V-E-N-S. I was very friendly with all the wives. Whenever I had time off, I'd – I met them through business, originally. That's how we all got to be friends around there. So, it was very good. I enjoyed it. But that's when I started to go to Florida, after I gave up working. I couldn't stand it. I was doing some charity work. I went to Sinai. I worked in the (florist?) stuff down there. I worked down there under (Mary Small?), I think her name is. She was so hard to get along with. She used to run me ragged. Run me from one floor to another. [laughter] But I never said a word. So, I finally went – I went to Florida and did volunteer work in Florida, also at Mt. Sinai Hospital there. I had another friend there. She and I used to go there and work one day a week. Because I felt like I wanted to do something else besides – I walked a lot. I loved walking. I walked on the beach every day. A mile at least, every day, up and down. Every day, I did a lot of walking. We had a lot of company always in the apartments. Small apartment. One bedroom with a sofa bed, but we managed. They'd all come down to stay. If they had to sleep on the floor, it didn't make any difference. It was just a wonderful life down there. That was [the best part] of my whole life – living in Florida. It really was, Marcie. I hate to say it, but it was.

MCF: Why do you say that?

MS: And then I've been a widow –

MCF: Why do you feel like you like that so much?

MS: Huh?

MCF: What were your favorite parts about Florida?

MS: About Florida?

MCF: Why was that such a good time in your life?

MS: Oh, God.

MCF: The friends?

MS: My friends. They were so wonderful to me. My husband was living then, see. He was very sick. Had a heart condition. They were very kind to him. We had a pool. He always got together with them to make the parties. In fact, when we left there – I went back after that. But when he got sick, the doctor down there told me that I couldn't keep him there anymore. He couldn't take care of him. And we flew back. My daughters came down to help me. Everybody came to say good-bye to him, packed him up, and they took him right to Sinai Hospital. He was there for about two months – very sick. Then, when he passed away – it will be twenty-three years in May.

MCF: '78?

MS: May the 16th, I think it was. His birthday was December the 16th. Because one of my great- grandchildren is named for him. He's eleven years old – Sammy.

MCF: Tell me a little bit about when you were raising your girls. How did you and your husband share responsibility in the marriage?

MS: They were absolutely wonderful. I have to say that, honey. Both of them were. Reta went to college –

MCF: Where did she go?

MS: – at the University of Miami. Gail went to the University of Alabama. She met her husband there, and she didn't finish. He did, but she didn't. When they came back to Baltimore, she went to Loyola and got her master's degree in speech therapy. And she taught school. They both are very smart girls. I'll say that. I don't know who they take after, but they really are very, very capable, both of them are. Always worked a lot all their lives. They're still working.

MCF: So, they got used to not ever having – did you all have supper at the restaurant?

MS: Yes. We used to eat there very often.

MCF: As a family?

MS: As a family, yes.

MCF: You would eat your supper altogether?

MS: Yes. But not too often. Not too often. It was hard. Very hard.

MCF: What about on the weekends? Did you have a chance to ever get together?

MS: No, that was our busiest time at the restaurant. We didn't have time for that. [laughter] No, indeed. We didn't. But the girls were wonderful. I have to tell you – I don't know what I did. I must have done something right in my lifetime because they've been absolutely wonderful. Even my great-grandchild – I'll let you read something – she's fourteen. I remember when Reta got married. Gail was cute. [laughter] She said, "Oh, I'm so glad she's married. Now, I can have a room to myself and a telephone by myself."

[laughter] Then, when she got married –

MCF: So how do you think –? What was the biggest difference in the way that you –?

MS: And they were both six years apart, by the way.

MCF: Wow.

MS: Five or six years. Gail is sixty-one, and Reta is going to be sixty-seven on April 16th.

MCF: What were the biggest differences between the way that you mothered your girls and the way your mother mothered you?

MS: Well, entirely different. Entirely. Different category entirely. The men were in business, and I don't want to talk about that part. We all got along as best we could. But there's always a little bit of friction, you know? But we got along. Thank goodness that was all. I remember when Gail – of course, I made them very independent. She used to make her own lunch, take it to school. I never got up – they both used to take care of themselves – I really was. I worked, and I couldn't do it. That's I mean, I did the best I can. I gave them a good home life. I had a wonderful maid. Oh, she was just divine.

MCF: What was her name?

MS: Oh, I wish I could remember. Was it Mary? Oh God, I had her for twenty-five, thirty years.

MCF: Now, did you have live-in help?

MS: No.

MCF: Or did they come in?

MS: No, just came in every day, and she'd leave. Oh, she used to stay at night when I needed her. In the early days, when Reta was just born and she was a young girl, I had a white woman that lived with me. And that's what I did with her.

MCF: Did the girls go away in the summer to camp or anything? Or did they stay?

MS: Yes. Reta did. Reta went and got sick. Went to Wohelo. I don't know if you ever heard of Wohelo.

MCF: How do you spell that?

MS: I think it's W-O-H-E-L-O. I think it is outside of Pennsylvania. She got sick. She got something in her lungs. We had to go get her. We brought her here. And Dr. Schwartz said she can't go back to camps anymore. That was too bad for her. She got some kind of disease in the throat. But Gail loved all – since she's been young, she was athletic, whereas Reta wasn't. She loved the ball-playing, and the tennis, and everything. She used to do all these kinds of things around here. She and her husband, both – even today, are both athletic. He was quite a tennis champion. She's exercising [inaudible] every day.

MCF: So, Gail and Reta both –

MS: Sisters.

MCF: Ended up coming back to Baltimore.

MS: Yes.

MCF: Did they marry Baltimore boys?

MS: Yes, Reta did. Alfred Davis. His family and mother lived here. I don't remember his father. Yes, Alfred was from Baltimore.

MCF: And his name is – Reta married who?

MS: Reta Davis.

MCF: What's her husband's name?

MS: Alfred. A-L-F-R-E-D. Yes.

MCF: And then, Gail married?

MS: Lenny Kaplan.

MCF: Where's he from?

MS: New York. She met him at school.

MCF: Tell me about what kind of businesses the girls – did both the husbands go into the –?

MS: Well, Reta's husband was a pharmacist when they first got married. Then, my husband urged him to come into business. Well, anyway, he did. And then when Lenny came up here, he wasn't – well, out of college. So, we encouraged him, and he went in with us. They were both with us all this time. When he passed away – well, that was awful – they both ran the business. But then, things didn't go so good. The rental was high. This was a conflict. And they decided to sell it. That's what happened. Now, Gail and Lenny – they are at the Polo Grill over at the Colonnade. They live there, upstairs, in their own beautiful apartment. And they have the restaurant there. And he's doing very nice. And they do a lot of catering. Lot of catering. She was connected with Classic Catering Company, and she still is on a certain percentage with them. Reta always worked too. And now, she works with two more women. They're called – let's see. What do you call them? They take care of – I call it the icing on the cake, but it's not. It's some other name. They take care of marriages, weddings, luncheons.

MCF: The party planners?

MS: That's it. Party planners. That's it. She's got a big wedding this Saturday night. Yes, they both have. Alfred went back to work as a pharmacist. He's working three days a week. Oh, I don't want to talk about his health because I don't think that's nice, do you?

MCF: It's okay.

MS: Well, he's not too well, that's all I'll say.

MCF: Oh, dear.

MS: He's had a heart condition for a long time. But he's – they're both wonderful guys. And they've been wonderful to me. At the drop of the hat, they're right here to do anything in the world for me, both of them.

MCF: Your girls must have been really strongly influenced by the model –

MS: Very strong girls. Strong-willed.

MCF: By the model of you.

MS: I guess so. I don't know. I guess so. Because I don't know where they got it from. I think both are that way to me. Every day they call me. Every day. Since I've been sick, somebody's here almost every day to see me. Gail picked me up this morning at 10:30, took me to the doctor, took me to the drugstore to get a few things. And she says, "You sure you don't need nothing else?" I said no. And Reta took me last week to another doctor – both of them. They don't like me going alone. I still drive the car.

MCF: That's great.

MS: But they want me to give it up. But I said, give me another year. [laughter] And it's not easy when you've been so independent.

MCF: How long have you lived in this building?

MS: I've been here thirty years.

MCF: Oh, wow.

MS: Yes. When I first came in, it wasn't a condominium; it was a rental. Then, it went condo. Oh gosh, it's been so long. Because I had a very dear friend that lived in here – (Selma Kanner?) and her husband. They were one of my best friends here. Her husband had died and passed away. And she said that she couldn't afford to pay the condo fees, and Leon said to her – he was living then. And he said to her, “I'll take care of you. I'll lend you the money for your condo.” We had to pay a certain amount down. And she said, “No, I won't take it. I'm going to move out.” And P.S., she moved down the street. It was called The Clubhouse. I miss her. I used to go down there when I was retired. I used to go down there every night and just to visit with her. She and I were like this. We had so much in common we talked about. She called a spade a spade. She was a wonderful gal. I used to take her out to dinner. We really had a wonderful relationship around here with everybody.

MCF: And how do you spell her last name? Kantor?

MS: Kanner. K-A-N-N-E-R.

MCF: Kantor? K-A-N-T-O-R?

MS: K-A-N-N-E-R, I guess. And now, of course, all the friends – I have friends here in the building here that I'll see, and I'll play cards once a week. I go to a lecture on Mondays at the senior citizens [center]. A man by the name of Mr. Goldstein lectures on

all kinds of topics. It can be Israel. It can be our community. It can be whatever he wants to. From 1:30 to three o'clock, every Monday, we go there. I went back to my old knitting – I'm knitting little baby caps now for a hospital. They taught me over there – to go back to it. I like it over there. I used to go over there quite often. I learned to play Mahjong back over there. I used to go over there quite frequently. But then, I didn't get away from it – because I'm there every week. I'm very fond of the girls that run it. I know them very well. And, my daughter Reta, she's on the board. Both of my daughters are very active and on every board in this city, from Johns Hopkins, House of Ruth –

MCF: So, mainly Jewish organizations?

MS: Yes. Jewish everything. They're both involved in everything. Yes. They're very active always.

MCF: Did you and your husband –? Did Leon and you have similar ways of parenting? Or did you –?

MS: No, we weren't –

MCF: Did you struggle?

MS: Not like these two girls are. We had to struggle. I guess Judaism wasn't so important in those years, that's all, until the children started to grow up, and that's when I learned more.

MCF: So, how is it different for your children's lives? For Reta and Gail's Jewish lives?

MS: Well, they were right away thrown into it, very well, both of them were. And they participated, both of them, in all Jewish activities.

MCF: Do you see a real change in the way that –?

MS: Yes.

MCF: That they've become more active?

MS: Oh, my goodness. Yes, they're both very active in everything, they really are.

MCF: Why do you think that is?

MS: They all take classes, and they do everything around.

MCF: Why is there that renewal now?

MS: I don't know what it is. I can't imagine, Marcie, why? I don't know. I know that one goes to a class at Beth Tfiloh and works, too. They both work, as I told you, every day, and they take – but it is very unusual. I don't know what it is. My niece, Myrna Cardin, who has been so wonderful – Myrna and Ben Cardin. Her mother and my husband were brother and sister. That was our relation. We have lived together – I mean, we go together. IT's been a wonderful relationship with the Cardins and with me and with my family. A wonderful relationship. She has one child. She lost another child, unfortunately. Well, we won't go into that. She has a new grandbaby that's just adorable. She was a year old. We keep in contact with one another. Every week, we try to see each other. It's a wonderful community here. And she is a very, very active girl in town. Very active, too – everything in Jewish respect.

MCF: Min, how old are your grandchildren? And what are their names?

MS: My oldest is fourteen. Her name is Sarah Flax. These are great-grandchildren. Yes. Sarah Flax is fourteen. Her brother is Samuel Flax.

MCF: Is that F-L-A-X?

MS: X, yes. Samuel. He's eleven. And then my Cathy has Samantha Flax – they were married to two brothers. They both divorced. Did you ever? Samantha Flax, who is ten. She has two brothers. Josh is seven. And Jared is five. And then I have some more in Chicago. I have Amy Kaplan – Amy and Eric. They have one son, Eli. He's going to be two years old. Eli. And then, I have a grandson that lives in Chicago – Jeffrey Kaplan and Julie, his wife, which are a beautiful, wonderful couple. Thank God they all are.

They have two wonderful children. Live in Glencoe, which is a suburb of Chicago. Have a beautiful home. They are very active in all activities around also with Judaism.

Involved in the club, and they have a of – and their names – the girl's name is Emily Kaplan. She just had a birthday this month. No, what am I talking about? Five and seven, they are – the Kaplans are a family in there. They always invite me, and I've been out to Chicago. I went for the brides. Any special occasions, I still go. I never will forget.

Not Eli, but for Jackson, who is five. Yes, he'll be six soon. We were out there, and it was a terrible snowstorm in Chicago. We were staying at the Marriott Hotel. Reta went out with us. We stayed at the hotel, the four of us. It was so bad. We were supposed to come home in three days, but we didn't. We stayed out there a week. And they dragged me up and down Michigan Boulevard. [laughter] Are you familiar with Chicago? We went from store to store, and I had a scarf and a long fur coat. Well, all of a sudden, when you have five or six younger, that makes a difference – from what I am now. I couldn't do it today. We had the best time, though. They were so good to us. They picked us up, and we went to dinners. I got boots and everything. [laughter] That was a wonderful time in Chicago. Even the snow didn't bother us at all. When I think about it.

MCF: [inaudible]

MS: Just wonderful. Wonderful times.

MCF: So how many grandchildren, total? Not great-grandchildren.

MS: Great?

MCF: No, how many grandchildren?

MS: Oh, just grandchildren? Let's see. Leslie, Cathy –

[END OF CD 1]

MCF: I'm beginning a second tape. This is Marcie Cohen Ferris. I'm beginning a second tape with Min Shavitz. It's March 22nd, 2001. We're beginning the second tape or disk, at 3:15 p.m. here in Baltimore, at Min's apartment.

MS: Because I know sometimes I must – in fact, I say often to them, I say, “You know what? Am I a burden? I don't want to take advantage of you. I want to be very independent myself. But you both have been so” – they really have. My son-in-law, both of them – just all of them. My grandchildren, my great-grandchildren – oh, they're absolutely – in fact, I just have to show you this.

MCF: Okay.

MS: I had a birthday, and she wrote this – she's the fourteen-year-old – to me.

MCF: That is so wonderful.

MS: And I think that's the most wonderful thing, how she worded it all. I'm very proud of that, of her.

MCF: What do they call you?

MS: Gigi. Yes.

MCF: That's wonderful. So, this is a poem from Sarah to you?

MS: Yes.

MCF: And on what birthday was it?

MS: 91st birthday. I just had it – the 29th.

MCF: Oh, that's so wonderful. Tell me about that party. What did you do?

MS: Oh, I had a big party for my 90th. Oh, it was gorgeous.

MCF: What was it like?

MS: Oh. Marcie, the two girls – wait a minute. I'll go bring you something – a picture.

MCF: Okay.

MS: Just a minute. [Recording paused] Graduated high school.

MCF: Oh, wow.

MS: In Gainesville, Georgia.

MCF: Oh, that's so beautiful.

MS: And that was my invitation. And they didn't – they said, “Mother, we're having a party. But we're telling you who we're having.” Well, they had everybody in my walks of life – anybody, everybody they met – even my dentist who had my picture framed, and this is what he wrote me.

MCF: Read what that says. Can you read that?

MS: A woman of great spirit, commitment, strength, wisdom, character, and Love.

Minna, you're a woman whose qualities flourish forever. [inaudible] come to those who love [inaudible] and cheerful as they can be. That's you.

MCF: That's so beautiful.

MS: My dentist was there, and he said that. This was the invitation that everybody got. This one.

MCF: And that was your high school graduation photograph?

MS: Yes, this was me.

MCF: From Gainesville?

MS: Georgia. They had music. They had flowers. They don't do that kind of – and they had all walks of – people that I haven't seen – they even went as far as to have – that's all right. You just put it down, honey. I put them away. I don't like to display myself out. They went to the point of having people that I haven't seen – oh, God – thirty years. They remembered everybody. I never saw anything – from my dentist to my gynecologist and my eye doctor –everybody. And friends that I haven't seen in I don't know when. My sister came up – one sister came up from Atlanta, and my two cousins. They came in for the party. It was at the Colonnade. It was a Saturday afternoon. It was magnificent. It was like a wedding, how the thing was set up. They had a piano [player] playing the piano. Taking pictures. I have a whole book of everything. Then, I sat and gave a speech. [laughter] I don't know what I said. I don't know. I had broken my foot here, and I was in the cast – a boot. I was with a cane, and I walked all around. I said, “I don't care.” I'll get around to everybody. I shook hands with everybody [who] was there. It was way over a hundred people there that day. It was the highlight of my life. It really was, that 90th birthday. They didn't leave anything out. The whole weekend was planned so beautiful, from one dinner to one lunch and this big party. And then, on Sunday, they all left – all the out-of-towners left. Everybody brought certain kinds of memories back to me of my relationship [with] certain people. And then you look around, and you think, it can't be this many – ninety years. Can you imagine? I said, “I can't believe it myself.” And then, when I had my 91st birthday – they all took me – the children and all of them – to a little restaurant round here. The men didn't go, just the

girls, all the girls. And that's when she gave me that poem. The others got up and made little speeches. They're a very warm group of people. They are so considerate, the children are, so thoughtful and so kind. And they call, and I call them.

MCF: So, how do you feel about this –?

MS: I have a wonderful relationship.

MCF: How do you feel about this young generation of women?

MS: Well, I love it. I said to my granddaughter, Leslie, who's Sarah's mother – and I said, "She's a teenager now." Before you know it, she'll be having boyfriends. She'll be menstruating. I said, "I hope you talked to her." I said, "You should talk to her." I'm sure she did. I like it. I like their lives. I like the way they live. I do. Yes. I go along with it. I know it's a jungle. It's a different life. But I go along with all these young people. I think they're smarter than we were.

MCF: Which parts do you like that are different than what –?

MS: I like the way that they handle their children. I think they've handled them wonderful. All of them. Yes, I really do. They know exactly the right thing to teach them – from right, from wrong. That's very important. Very important to me.

MCF: Tell me about some other special events that you remember in your lifetime?
What are real special times that you can remember?

MS: Oh, my special time was in Florida, as I've said before.

MCF: Right.

MS: That was the best time of my life.

MCF: Other occasions, like a special event or anything?

MS: Well, my husband loved parties. And he gave me a big party down in Florida. One of the restaurants there. It was a beautiful function. It really was. That was a very thrilling thing. Especially all of these old friends of mine were there.

MCF: What was the occasion?

MS: It was our anniversary.

MCF: Which one?

MS: I don't remember. [laughter]

MCF: A big one.

MS: I don't remember. [laughter]

MCF: It must have been a big one.

MS: It's a good thing I can laugh. I better laugh than cry. [laughter]

MCF: The numbers aren't important. It's remembering the times you had together.

MS: Yes. That's right. Yes, that's right. Exactly.

MCF: That's what's important. Well, when you became a grandmother, what was that like?

MS: Oh, it was so exciting.

MCF: What did you think it would be like? And then, what was it like?

MS: Well, it was so exciting, the first one. This girl's mother was my first grandchild. I love them all dearly. She is very devoted to me. All of them are, don't get me wrong. But she, in particular –

MCF: Sarah?

MS: Sarah. Not Sarah. No, her mother Leslie. Leslie Goldberg. She's the one that gives me a lot more – well, she has a lot of compassion. They've all been here whenever I need them. They call me every day. They call me right here. The other night, Gail's daughter brought the baby over here, who's eight months old, for an hour. They try to get over here every week. These are my dividends now. I just love every minute of seeing them and being with them.

MCF: What was it like when your girls had babies?

MS: Wonderful. That's what I'm saying. They're wonderful. Just wonderful.

MCF: Did you go to the hospital?

MS: When I had my babies?

MCF: No, for them? For Gail and Reta?

MS: Oh, yes. I should say so. Yes, I sure did. They had wonderful children. Wonderful.

MCF: So, what's it like being a grandmother? What kind of things do you do?

MS: Oh, you feel very important. How many ways of – I just feel like – I've had a special thing in my life to have raised two daughters and have all these wonderful great grandchildren.

MCF: Are there any –?

MS: They're very attentive. Like some people around here in the building always say, "I don't know what you did, Min, but you must have done something right." Because they do see me very often. We really do – I like to have fun with them. I'll put it that way. As

old as I am, I enjoy that. I will bring myself down to their level. Listen, after all, I'm an old lady. I try to do the best I can. They're smart [inaudible] outgoing.

MCF: Any problems being a grandma?

MS: No, no. No problems.

MCF: Just rewards.

MS: Just good things. No problems. No ma'am.

MCF: I want to ask you one question about – you grew up as a little girl in the Deep South.

MS: Yes.

MCF: And you understood what it meant to be Jewish there.

MS: Yes.

MCF: How would you describe the regional experience of being Jewish in Baltimore?

MS: When I first came here, you mean?

MCF: Well, when you meet Jews from other parts of the country, like New York Jews, how are Baltimore Jews different?

MS: Well, in the beginning, like I said – it was very hard. I soon turned to their side. I was sorry that I didn't have a better Jewish background like they did. And that's what made me – It was too late to do anything about it. I could have, I guess. But I just didn't do it. But I did want both of my daughters to have a good Jewish education, and they did. It worked out wonderful for me. I mean, I had nothing against – what do you say? – non-Christians, or do you say gentiles? What do you say? What do you say?

MCF: Gentile.

MS: I guess so. In fact, one of my grandchildren, Laurie, who's Gail's daughter, married a non-Jewish fellow. He's Italian. Catholic. He fits in, and I accepted it wholeheartedly. And I love him dearly. He's a wonderful guy. Listen, if they're happy, that's why I'm going to be happy. Listen, honey, I think religion is important, it's true, but you have to roll with the punches. Roll with the times. This is the way life is. It's a mixture of it now. If you read The Jewish Times every week or so, they talk about that all the time. And we have to learn to accept it. And that's the way it is.

MCF: Well, do you think that Baltimore Jews are different than Jews in any other part of the country?

MS: Yes. I sure do.

MCF: How so?

MS: Because they are like a ghetto. I never saw so many synagogues, and I've been to I don't know how many places. There's one on every corner. All kinds. And they are very, very – yes, [inaudible] they are phenomenal. They really are. I think they're one in a million Baltimore Jewish people. They're very closely knit. They do a lot of good work for all types of people. And bringing in everything. I don't care what you are or what you are, but they have done a wonderful job here in town. I have to say that for Baltimore. Yes. [inaudible] Well, I think I've talked enough. [laughter]

MCF: Well, there was one other thing I wanted to ask you about because you had marked it down in your survey. I know this is a really tragic thing that happened to Gail – was it Gail? – thirteen years ago.

MS: Yes.

MCF: And tell me how that affected your life.

MS: Oh, it was awful. Terrible.

MCF: Can you talk about it a little?

MS: It was terrible. My son-in-law – I was home here. He called me up on the phone – Lenny. He said, “Mother, Gail don't feel so good. I think you ought to come over. And I'm coming over to pick you up.” I thought nothing of it. Oh, I felt bad. I said, “Oh my goodness.” He said, “Wait, mother. When I get you in the car, I'll tell you more about it.” I go downstairs, and I meet him. Before we get to where she is – she was over [at] one of her friend's house. She wouldn't go back in that house. Never went back. While we're driving, he said, “I got to inform you where you're going to, what you're going to see.” He said, “In fact, Jeffrey's on his way in town.” That's our son from – he wasn't married – coming in from Chicago. She was very close with her daughter, but [him] in particular. He was coming in town. I don't know how I controlled myself. I really don't know. It was the worst episode that I ever remember. We went in. And they took me upstairs where she was. She was curled up. Such a beautiful – like a little child. She said, “Mother, I feel – I can't ...” I said, “Don't talk. I know how you feel.” She was at the hospital, and I never knew it, the night before. They took her to ER – Mercy Hospital. I stayed with her all day long. And then, every day, I'd come there, and then she went to another friend's house. She wouldn't come to me because she wanted to be with Jeffrey. And Jeffrey came in, and he was absolutely – I think – he was the one – her husband was wonderful.

MCF: So, Min, what had happened?

MS: They were both so wonderful to her.

MCF: What had happened?

MS: Well, how they took care of her. And how they made her feel important.

MCF: But, Min, was she –

MS: In fact, everybody in town knew about it.

MCF: Was there an intruder that came into the house?

MS: What?

MCF: Was there an intruder that came into her house?

MS: Two o'clock in the morning.

MCF: And she was alone?

MS: She'd just come from work. In Mt. Washington. She lived in Mt. Washington. And she never went back to that house.

MCF: And he raped her?

MS: Never went back there –

MCF: And so it was –

MS: Then they took an apartment downtown.

MCF: But it was a rape? Was that what happened?

MS: Yes.

MCF: So terrible.

MS: Yes.

MCF: But thank goodness you were there.

MS: And thank God, she's a strong girl. I mean, to overcome that – we never talk about it. But she belongs to this group that's called – something here in town, and she's very active. A sexual group – whatever. It's not that name. And it's called (Turnabout?).

She's very active with it. In fact, they honored her about two years ago – was it three years? – downtown. And had hundreds of people. And they honored her. And she gave – she speaks beautiful. Wonderful. And she spoke. You've got to be very strong to talk about that, and she did.

MCF: So, tell me, as a mother, how did you cope with it?

MS: Oh. I don't know how I went through it. I really don't. I really don't know how I went through it. I'll be honest with you. I don't know how. I just don't know how I went through it. I really don't, but I did.

MCF: Do you think that that –?

MS: I think about it. I sure do. Once in a while. It never dismisses from your mind. But thank God, things worked out. And her life's been beautiful. It's a beautiful marriage. Beautiful three children. And now she's a grandmother. We look at the good side of things.

MCF: Min, did they –

MS: She always finds something good about everybody. She does.

MCF: Did they –

MS: And Reta felt terrible. It was awful. She didn't know what to do for her. She was there every day.

MCF: Did they try who did it? Did they find out who did it?

MS: No. Never did. No. Never did.

MCF: It's really frightening.

MS: It was awful.

MCF: And I think there's something about that kind of experience that it certainly –

MS: You don't get over this. Alright, you get over to a certain point, naturally. But often, my mind wonders of all the tragedies I've been through around. I really do. When Myrna Cardin's son died. Myrna's son. I felt very bad. I was very broken up with that.

Wonderful family. Ben is a wonderful guy. He's a congressman. She's a wonderful girl.

She's now, of course, a grandmother and has a beautiful child. Her daughter's lovely.

So you just have to roll with the punches. That's the way life is. It can be beautiful, but it can be – oh, I wouldn't say that word. [laughter] But it's better to laugh and get along than cry. I hope I live for another few years to see some more wonderful, good things in life.

MCF: You will.

MS: I hope so.

MCF: You will.

MS: Oh, thank you.

MCF: You're doing great.

MS: Thank you.

MCF: You are the most beautiful woman. My goodness. You just got better every year.

MS: [laughter] Oh, thank you.

MCF: I think it's because of all that good work that you were right out there in public. You were working hard. You were loving it.

MS: [laughter] Well, thank God, that's what I say.

MCF: It's a good life.

MS: It's been a good life, thank God.

MCF: It's a good life.

MS: Yes. Because so many of my first friends have passed away, unfortunately. I just had two recently. It does something to you. You stop and think, "Oh, my God, Min, are you next?" It's very frightening. I don't want to show it, and I don't want to talk about it. [laughter] But I get sad, naturally. But I try to forget it. Watch the television. Read. I read a book – I love reading books every night and knitting a little bit in-between. Keeping busy.

MCF: And what makes you feel good these days?

MS: What makes me feel good? My family. My family. They are absolutely priceless. I mean it, Marcie. Every one of them have all brought joy to my life. In fact, I guess that's what's kept me going – the kindness, the thoughtfulness. And some people are not as fortunate as I am because they have – I can see it around that they don't get it like I've got it. It's just remarkable. I don't know what to do – I feel like, "Oh, what can I do for them?" But they keep saying, "Mother, you don't have to do anything." This is the life. But it does make me feel like, "Oh my goodness, what can I do to make this one happy, that one happy?" I love each and every one of them. It's been my life. That's it.

MCF: Really blessed with great kids.

MS: Yes, that's it.

MCF: I think we should probably stop.

MS: Yes, I don't think I can go on anymore.

MCF: I know you're tired. Well, I'm just going to put a little closing announcement that we're finishing at 3:45. This is the second disk that I've recorded with Mrs. Minna Shavitz on March the 22nd, 2001. We're finishing at about 3:45. Thank you so much –

MS: Oh, it was my pleasure.

MCF: – for participating in this.

MS: I think you're wonderful. You want me to sign this?

MCF: Yes, that'd be great. I'll give you that right there.

[END OF INTERVIEW]