

Beatrice Biller Transcript

EMILY MEHLMAN: Today is Tuesday, February 25, 1997. I am Emily Mehlman interviewing Beatrice Biller in her home at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged, 1200 Center Street, Roslindale, Massachusetts, under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archive Temple Israel Oral History Project in Boston, Massachusetts. [tape turned off/on] Well, Bea, it's really great to be with you today.

BEATRICE BILLER: Thank you.

EM: I've been looking forward to this. I understand you celebrated your 90th birthday last week.

BB: It was very exciting.

EM: Tell me what you did. Why was it exciting?

BB: I loved every minute of it is all I can say because I love to reminisce, and I found that that's what I was doing, reminiscing about my entire family – grandfathers, grandmothers, right down to great grand nieces and nephews. So that was pretty good, don't you think?

EM: Wonderful. Did you have –?

BB: You'll have to speak a little louder.

EM: Yes, did you have people coming to see you that day?

BB: No, Judy – I went out – made this request a couple of weeks before my birthday. I finally got enough courage to call and tell Judy –

EM: [laughter]

BB: – there. I didn't know whether they were planning anything, but I was, and I just wanted no party. I have too many wonderful places that I would like to contribute to, and that would please me most. So that's what happened, and my family came through the way I think they should have. And friends have contributed to some of my pet organizations.

EM: Talking about your being ninety, maybe we can go back ninety years. I know you don't remember ninety years, but maybe you can tell me something about your parents when you were born, where you were born.

BB: I was born in Ipswich.

EM: Ipswich, Massachusetts?

BB: Massachusetts. Did you ever go to Ipswich?

EM: Yes, I have.

BB: Yeah, It's a lovely little town.

EM: How did it happen that your parents lived in Ipswich?

BB: My father came to this country from Russia, and he lived on a farm and was always interested in flowers and the necessary things of life there. He came here when he was 18 years old, alone. So he was on Ellis Island, and they gave him a ride to New York. He was very unhappy; he didn't like New York. Somebody else finally gave him a ride to Boston, and he felt the same way about it. On to Salem. He thought Salem was pretty good, but that was not what he was looking for. Somebody else gave him a ride to Ipswich, and the minute he put his feet down in Ipswich he knew that was going to be his life. I don't know how he knew it, but that's what happened.

EM: Now, where exactly did he come from?

BB: Pardon?

EM: Where did he come from?

BB: He came from Ashishook, a little bit of a town in Russia. Anyway, he didn't know English; however, there was a stocking mill-hosiery mill in Ipswich. Most of the people that worked there were Polish, and he became acquainted with them, and they liked him. They helped him, and they helped him with his English. He became a peddler, and later on, a few years – not a few years – many years, he opened a store, and that's where we were. So, I lived there in Ipswich until I was nine years old.

EM: Now, what about your mother? How did she come into the picture?

BB: My mother came from Boston and had many friends in Boston. In Ipswich, there were three Jewish families; that was all. But my mother became acquainted with them and, as far as I know, it was good.

EM: Was your mother born in this country?

BB: Yes. Until we moved to Salem, we went to school in Ipswich; everything was fine.

EM: What was your name?

BB: Bixby, but that was—

EM: B-I-X-B-Y.

BB: —and an aunt of mine didn't like that name.

EM: B-I-X-B-Y [unclear]

BB: Her name was really Duvitsky and they Anglicized it and my uncle and my father went into business together as Bixby and that's the way it was.

EM: What was the business?

BB: Clothing.

EM: In Ipswich or Salem?

BB: Men's clothing, in Ipswich.

EM: Yes.

BB: So that was part of it and then, of course, during the war, it was difficult because most of the young people who were his customers went into service.

EM: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BB: I had one sister four years older than myself. My brother was two years older.

EM: So you were the baby.

BB: Yes.

EM: And you say at the age of nine you left Ipswich—

BB: Yes

EM: Do you remember that?

BB: Oh, yes. I didn't want to leave. I remember I loved it. I don't know why, what made me feel that way—

EM: Beautiful town.

BB: However, my sister was ready to go to high school and my mother felt Ipswich wasn't for her and wasn't for us; we needed more friends. Anyway, that was that.

EM: So, where did you go? Where did you move to?

BB: Salem.

EM: Ah. And you stayed in Salem until you grew up?

BB: Until I was married. I was there and grew up, went to grammar school, and high school, and one of the most pleasant moments of my life in Salem, when I was 12 years old I became a Girl Scout and that was very important to me. It was the first organized group I belonged to. And I passed two tests, three tests and I was asked to help out some of the young people who were coming in. And so I did and a Miss Carfield, who was our leader, said, "Bea, you should be a teacher." And with that thought, I went along and I became a kindergarten teacher in Salem.

EM: What was your education to become a teacher?

BB: I went to Lesley.

EM: Lesley College.

BB: Lesley College in 1926. They didn't call it college then, you know. They called it kindergarten school or Normal School.

EM: Perhaps, Normal School, yes.

BB: Yes

EM: Did you commute from Salem or did you live there?

BB: Oh, no, I commuted.

EM: On the train?

BB: On the B&M. Many of us did; I mean, most of my friends did. The same, my sister worked in Filene's and that was our way of life. It was good.

EM: Was it a two-year program?

BB: Two years, yes.

EM: Can you tell me something about your experiences? Do you remember anything about going to Lesley Normal School?

BB: Yes, I enjoyed it and—

EM: All the students were women?

BB: Yes.

EM: Yes, and the teachers, obviously?

BB: And I think I did—I know I did well. Life is not always perfect or pleasant and, you know, you have things happen to you, and through no fault of your own. However, it was a good experience. I had a lot of young men friends who I knew and I enjoyed it. In those days, you had to go out into the country for two years and substitute—go out and teach. If you didn't want to do that, you would substitute, which I preferred to do. And I did; I substituted for two years in Salem and I—

EM: What was your age approximately at this time, do you remember?

BB: My age?

EM: Yes, so you were like about twenty, would you say?

BB: No, wait a minute; I'll tell you in a minute. I'd say about twenty-five—no, I think I'm wrong.

EM: Did you go to Lesley right after you finished high school?

BB: Yes.

EM: And you were there about two years?

BB: Yes.

EM: So you were younger than twenty-five when you finished.

BB: Yes, I was younger than twenty-five. I think I was 18 when I went to Lesley and twenty-one when I got through.

EM: And you did your substitute teaching mostly in Salem?

BB: In Salem, and at one time I had this teacher—well, they call it the—what is it? The Normal Arts School in Salem? Salem Normal Arts School. And the teacher became ill and was going to be out for six months, so that's the way I started. But the most exciting point was that I was elected to the Saltonstall School, my grammar school, and all the teachers that I thought were old then were still there and they were wonderful to me. It was really—I shall never forget it.

EM: How long did you stay there?

BB: Three years, and then I was married and moved to Somerville.

EM: Well, I want to just go back for a minute before we talk about your being married. When you were growing up in Ipswich and then in Salem, do you remember anything about the Jewish life in your home?

BB: My mother was very kosher.

EM: Very kosher. [laughter]

BB: Very! I mean, everything was right. There was nothing wrong and we grew up in that atmosphere, and it was good.

EM: And what about the synagogue? Was there a synagogue in Ipswich? [laughter]

BB: That's quite a story. Am I talking too much?

EM: Not at all!

BB: The synagogue was the Sons of Jacob. That was the name of it.

EM: Where was it?

BB: It was downtown—on Essex Street in Salem.

EM: In Salem, so you went from Ipswich to Salem to the synagogue.

BB: Yes, because we had nothing in Ipswich; that was the whole story.

EM: Just the beautiful view. [laughter]

BB: So we went and my father's family lived in Salem. They were all in Salem, my grandmother, and grandfather—all within walking distance of one another. The temple, the shul was interesting. The women naturally sat upstairs and they made no provisions for the children. So I can just picture the group of us going in, sitting on the steps for a while. Of course, we didn't know what it was all about anyway, so we finally walked up and went to the two museums, the Essex Museum and the Peabody Museum were right there. That was the way we celebrated as children. And our homes were beautiful.

EM: Describe them.

BB: Well, this was the house that was really built by an artist and there were several things about it that I liked then.

EM: Are you talking about your house in Ipswich or in Salem now?

BB: Salem.

EM: So exactly where were you in Salem? Were you near the historic area?

BB: What's that?

EM: Near the historic area where the big, beautiful ship captains' homes were, or were you in a different part?

BB: We were there. We were there and the houses that I had—we had to do some work once a week in a little kindergarten and could choose where you wanted to go, so I went to the House of Seven Gables. And that's where I did my work and we had a lovely little group there. Salem is a beautiful city. It has everything.

EM: What do you mean by that?

BB: I mean that we knew one another. I mean, we were like one big family. My mother had her dear friends. My brother had wonderful friends and I did too. Well, more than that, you can't wish for, and there were days—in June—there was a hospital for children and they had a Carnation Day. And downtown was called—what was it called?

Townhouse Square. One of the greatest things was to be old enough to—they had long baskets and all the carnations would be in baskets—and to be old enough to stand on the streets and sell carnations was terrific. So anyway, I liked Salem; I really did.

EM: Did you have any formal Jewish education outside the home?

BB: No.

EM: No. Everything you learned you learned from your parents?

BB: Right.

EM: Your mother and your father?

BB: Yes.

EM: Differently, I suppose?

BB: No, we didn't have any formal education for the girls. My brother, naturally, had a rabbi come to the house and he had his bar mitzvah. As far as we were concerned, nothing.

EM: So you learned about keeping kosher, of course.

BB: Oh, yes.

EM: And did you learn about Jewish history?

BB: My mother was very observant.

EM: What about your father?

BB: My father was too in a quiet way.

EM: Did he work on Saturday?

BB: No.

EM: No. He had a shop but it was closed on Saturday.

BB: Yes, sometimes. That was very early in his life but later on, it was different. I had a wonderful father and a wonderful mother. This is a picture of my father. He was the type of person that just—

EM: Very dapper, I can see that. He's well dressed.

BB: He couldn't do enough for us.

EM: Where was this picture taken? In front of your house in Salem?

BB: That was taken near the house, yes.

EM: You had a nice big porch.

BB: I just received that about two months ago from a cousin. I didn't even have that one. So I just put it in a little frame and I enjoy looking at it.

EM: I can see why. Do you have a photograph of your mother?

BB: Yes. Mother was a very lovely lady and very active. She was very active in the Salem Ladies' Aid Society. She and all her friends worked together.

EM: Was this a Jewish organization or a civic organization?

BB: This was a Jewish organization. They did a wonderful job.

EM: What kind of work did they do?

BB: Well, for instance, they would find out if anyone needed any help and they would go to the homes as social workers would do. My mother's best friend was Rosie Solomon and she could drive. My mother didn't drive. And there was this family; this woman had three girls—young girls. The father had left the house. The mother was sick in Dandus and my mother and Rose would see to it that they had food, all the necessary things.

EM: Were the women in this organization working mostly with other Jewish people or with all kinds of people?

BB: Jewish, this was a—

EM: Just strictly Jewish.

BB: Yes, Jewish—Salem Jewish Aid Society.

EM: Did your parents integrate themselves with people that were not Jewish in a social way?

BB: Yes, they did.

EM: They did. They had friends that were not Jewish.

BB: They had friends, yes and I did something. I lived in Ipswich and loved it and had a dear friend when I got—and my mother and father came to Salem so that we would have Jewish friends. But my best friend was Mary Shaughnessy, and I liked her; she was my friend. But I never remember it, wondering too much about, is Jewish or is she not Jewish?

EM: Were you aware of being Jewish when you were growing up?

BB: Always.

EM: Did you—

BB: It was a very important part of our life.

EM: Did you feel that you were different from the rest of the population?

BB: No.

EM: No.

BB: Because we had respect for all people.

EM: You never experienced any antisemitism?

BB: No, never.

EM: Never.

BB: That's why I say it was really remarkable.

EM: Now, tell me how you met your husband.

BB: How did I meet Saul? There was an adult camp in New Hampshire so my sister and her—well, she wasn't married then. They were going—

EM: What was your sister's name?

BB: Sadie.

EM: And your brother?

BB: Abe. Abraham. Can't get a better name.

EM: Right.

BB: So anyway, two of my friends and my sister and my brother-in-law went to this camp and we had fun, and I met Saul. That was 1926. I was a counselor at a camp in Billerica—Pine Grove Camp. I was an arts and crafts counselor—loved it. Saul came to visit me and I don't know, it just—I never in my life expected to meet anyone like Saul. Our thoughts were the same; our values were the same and it was really wonderful. He was an elegant person.

EM: Where was he from?

BB: Somerville.

EM: Where was the camp? In New Hampshire? Do you remember the name of the camp?

BB: The camp would have been in Billerica.

EM: Oh, he came to visit you, but you met him in New Hampshire.

BB: I met him in New Hampshire, yes.

EM: And how long after you met were you married? Did you court for a long time?

BB: Oh, about two and a half years, I think.

EM: What's your anniversary date?

BB: My anniversary date is July thirty-first.

EM: What year?

BB: 19—hmm, I know. '31? I was going to say '61—

EM: [laughter]

BB: '31. It was good.

EM: Where were you married?

BB: At the Beacon House.

EM: In Brookline.

BB: Brookline. There was no rabbi in Somerville at that time. They had a very nice temple there and so we were married.

EM: How come you weren't married in Salem?

BB: Because there was no synagogue and no type of catering in those days.

EM: Oh, because you were in Salem—to Brookline was quite a trip.

BB: Not for us.

EM: No. Did your father have a car?

BB: My father loved cars and I think he's one of the first people—he couldn't wait for Henry Ford—

EM: [laughs]

BB: —to invent the Ford. I wrote a little story about him recently. As I told you, he loved nature—anything beautiful, and after many years he and his brother took a trip to New Hampshire to the White Mountains and he just loved it. He just loved it. He couldn't wait to come back and take us to the White Mountains.

EM: In his car.

BB: Oh, yes. By that time, we naturally had a car. He kept saying, "You'll just love the wonders! You'll just love the wonders!" And sure enough, the first wonder was as we left at four o'clock in the morning from Salem, and it was a long journey in those days. And the first wonder was the sunrise and I remember we all got out of the car and waited, waited until this glorious thing was over. And then we went to Mount Washington. It was great and now, my children have a summer home in New Hampshire. They, too, feel that New Hampshire is for them, and my granddaughter feels the same. I think that was a nice thing for him to do.

EM: It was. Your father had a retail store, is that correct? He sold clothing—

BB: Clothing.

EM: —in Salem?

BB: No. At that time it was in Ipswich.

EM: I see.

BB: And then, as I said, he really suffered a lot because nobody was left in Ipswich—not nobody, but none of the young men were left and business wasn't good. So he did other things, started little stores, one in Lynn, one in Beverly, and finally, he got together with his brother in Salem—who had a store in Salem.

EM: What was the name of the store?

BB: Bixby's.

EM: And what did they sell, clothing for women and children?

BB: Clothing for women and men. Shoes. They were clothiers.

EM: From the way you're speaking, I guess he was somewhat successful.

BB: He was. He worked hard; he was successful. He liked what he did.

EM: Did your mother help out in the store?

BB: Yes.

EM: What did she do?

BB: Not every day.

EM: Yes.

BB: But weekends, Saturdays, yes.

EM: And what about the children?

BB: We were all part of the same.

EM: I want to get back to your father's cars. Do you remember the kinds of automobiles he bought and when he bought them?

BB: Well, when we went on a trip—

EM: To the White Mountains?

BB: I know the name of it; I can't think right this minute. Most important to him was his horse that he had. Kip was the name of our horse, and as I told you before, most all of the family lived in Salem. So on a Sunday, we would all get ready. We had a surrey with the fringe on top and we would go to Salem. And my father knew of many coves along the way where his horse could be refreshed, and I always remember, there was always a bottle of water just in case they couldn't find anything for Kip. Kip became part of our lives too.

EM: Did you have a barn behind your house for Kip?

BB: Well, we had a big, big garage, yes. It was very interesting.

EM: You were born in 1907.

BB: Seven.

EM: So what are we talking about now? Around the teen years? During the war?
Before the war?

BB: It was before the war.

EM: Before the war.

BB: Right.

EM: That's when he had the horse.

BB: Right, and Jeffrey was our first car.

EM: A Jeffrey?

BB: I don't know whether you've ever heard of it.

EM: No, I haven't. Did he have to crank it up?

BB: No, but when we got the Fords, my father had to. I got my first license on a Model T Ford.

EM: What year was that? Do you remember how old you were when you got your license?

BB: I'm sure sixteen.

EM: Wow!

BB: Yes, a Model T Ford, and I loved it. I still think it was a good car.

EM: You were sixteen when you got your license.

BB: Yes.

EM: So that was like 1923. Oh, no, I'm sorry, twenty-seven, fourteen.

BB: 1918, I think.

EM: 1918. Were there many girls driving in those days? [laughter]

BB: Well, not too many but eventually they all, you know, had a license.

EM: But your mother was never interested in learning to drive?

BB: No. My mother never did and my sister never did. My sister never drove.

EM: Now, did you drive to school? To work?

BB: No, that was the beauty of Salem. You went to high school. Nobody gave you a ride; you walked. So it took you over a half-hour. That was all.

EM: Better for you, though. [laughter]

BB: What is it?

EM: Better for you to walk.

BB: So we used to walk together as a group and it was fun. That was the fun part of going to school, and I think that children today miss that.

EM: Everybody is bused today. Now, I want to get back to your meeting with Saul. I know he was a dentist but when you met him, was he already a dentist or was he in school?

BB: He was a dentist. He had been a dentist for five years when we were married.

EM: How much older was he than you?

BB: Four years.

EM: And he practiced in Somerville?

BB: Somerville.

EM: So did you have to give up your teaching when you got married?

BB: Well, you couldn't teach in those days after you were married, anywhere—Boston, anywhere in New England. And I don't know when that—

EM: Let's talk about that a bit. I know that because I grew up in Boston myself but no married woman could teach.

BB: That's right.

EM: What about a married man?

BB: I don't think there were many men teachers in the public schools. I'm sure there weren't. It was different.

EM: Do you think there maybe were any women who concealed the fact that they were married so they could continue working?

BB: That I wouldn't know.

EM: You never knew anybody. I'm sure you missed giving up your teaching.

BB: Yes, I loved it but I was very fortunate because when I moved to Somerville they had a very nice temple—and conservative, so at least I knew what it was all about. I became very active in the temple—some lovely people who were women that were my friends—lifelong friends.

EM: So you became very active in the life of a temple.

BB: Yes.

EM: Were there any other organizations at that time, were you active in?

BB: Well then, shortly after that, I started to volunteer at Jewish Memorial.

EM: Now I know that you had a long career there.

BB: I had a long period—over thirty years, and one of the high points in my life—plus, at that time I was just going to the Jewish Memorial once a week or twice a week—then I became director of volunteers. I knew the field because I had been there. I knew the people. I knew what had to be done.

EM: Did you go every day?

BB: Oh, yes, I was working.

EM: It was really like a job.

BB: Yes, right. That was after Saul passed away.

EM: Oh, well, I want to go back a little bit because we skipped a lot of years here.

BB: Yes.

EM: So before we get to that, while you were younger—and first of all, how long after you were married was Judy born?

BB: Seven years. Here all my friends who were married at about the same time, everybody was having babies—two babies and three babies, and not me. However, after the seventh year, we were able to realize we, too, were going to have a daughter. It was exciting.

EM: Because you didn't know, in those days, that it was going to be a daughter.

BB: Oh, no!

EM: Not like today. [laughter]

BB: Being a mother was kind of a natural—I love children. That's why I—

EM: of course.

BB: —worked with the children. And you know the name Susan Estrich?

EM: Yes, I do.

BB: You do?

EM: I do. She was Governor Dukakis'—

BB: That's right.

EM: —campaign for Presidency.

BB: She was in my kindergarten.

EM: In Salem?

BB: In Salem.

EM: [laughter]

BB: There are several people that I know of that I remember. But it was a very sweet relationship. My sister was married to the Friedbergs and they were Friedbergs. And her brother—Susan's brother would come in, you know, to pick her up, take off her coat. I can just picture him with the hanger, put it on her very delicately, and they were both beautiful children. And I still love this. So it was an interesting part of my life.

EM: Now, in the seven years before you had Judy, how did you spend your days?

BB: I was busy.

EM: Doing what?

BB: Well, I was very busy at the temple and I was taking courses of all kinds.

EM: At the temple?

BB: No, no. Well, not at the temple, no. I just worked there.

EM: Where were you taking courses?

BB: But these were art courses that I liked and—

EM: Do you remember where you took them?

BB: Yes, there was a place in Jamaica Plain where we took metal craft and I can just picture a group of us in Temple Israel going there and walking home from there. I took art courses at the high school.

EM: In Somerville?

BB: No, Brookline, after our marriage.

EM: I went to go back a little bit. We'll get to that in a minute. When you were younger, do you remember what you did before you had Judy? Did you volunteer anywhere in those days? Did you help Saul at his dental office?

BB: Not really. No.

EM: Did you do the bookkeeping at home?

BB: He did everything.

EM: He did everything.

BB: Just the way he wanted to; the right way.

EM: Yes. Did you like to cook?

BB: I loved it.

EM: Did you spend a lot of time at home in the kitchen?

BB: Not a lot of time, but I enjoyed baking. I enjoyed being in my home. It took us a while, for we had a lot of our furniture made and it was exciting—you know, all that business. It was an exciting time in my life.

EM: You mentioned earlier that you were an arts and crafts counselor and then you said later you took courses in metal craft, so you must be very talented with your hands.

BB: When I was a little girl when I lived in Salem, there was Forest River Park and they had little classes for children in arts and crafts and I always wanted to go along with some of the girls. But nobody was interested. I was, and I was the type of person that I did what I wanted and I think that really started me off.

EM: What kind of artwork did you like to do?

BB: Do you know decoupage?

EM: I know what it is; let's describe it. What is it exactly?

BB: What, decoupage?

EM: Yes, how can you describe that?

BB: Well, you cut out the articles that you want—flowers, whatever it is, and then you apply about five or six different coats of shellac. It's a very interesting—

EM: What do you do with these things after you shellac them?

BB: Well, I gave several things away.

EM: Did you frame them?

BB: Did I frame them?

EM: Yes.

BB: No.

EM: Did you make lampshades?

BB: I didn't make lampshades but I know of many people that made lampshades.

EM: What did you make?

BB: I made trays and things. I have one here; I'll show it to you.

EM: I'd love to see it.

BB: But at night, I can just picture myself. We had a sunroom. Saul would do his work and I would do my cutting out. I'll show you this.

EM: Okay.

BB: I'll show it to you before you go.

EM: That's fine. So you made trays. Wastebaskets. Did you do wastebaskets?

BB: No.

EM: No.

BB: And picture frames. I don't know. They're all very precious memories.

EM: Does Judy have any of these things?

BB: Oh, she has them all.

EM: Oh, she does.

BB: She has a lot.

EM: Great! I'd love to see them.

BB: Yes

EM: And then, I know you did knitting and crocheting.

BB: Yes, lots of it. We started with the First World War.

EM: Did you do it in groups or by yourself?

BB: By myself.

EM: And then what happened after you finished the clothing?

BB: Well, at one time—then we did a lot of sewing for Hadassah, for Henrietta Szold.

Women used to come to my house and I'd put the pad on the dining room table. And at that time I thought it was very interesting. Henrietta Szold had all these children, but she didn't want anything that was handed down. She wanted new material. I loved the fact that she felt that way, so we made a lot of things.

EM: And did you give –

BB: I was busy.

EM: —things to send to Palestine?

BB: What is it?

EM: Were these things sent to Palestine?

BB: Oh, yes.

EM: Sweaters, you made? Socks? What kinds of clothing did you knit?

BB: Oh, let me think. Everything.

EM: Blankets?

BB: Yes.

EM: And you crocheted as well?

BB: I crocheted a spread, a bedspread.

EM: You must have kept that for yourself.

BB: I used it for, yes, about 30 years.

EM: Right.

BB: I liked it. I don't know where it is but that's all right. [laughter]

EM: Uh-huh. Now, after Judy was born, I guess you were home most of the time.

BB: Yes and no. I had help. In those days it was easy to get help and I had very nice young girls who helped, and I felt I could get out. And then, she decided to go back. She came from Canada. I put an ad in the paper in Somerville describing what I wanted and this lovely lady came, Mrs. Walsh, and she stayed with me for 25 years. When Laura was born she went and helped Judy take care of my granddaughter.

EM: Did she live with you or she just came during the day?

BB: No, she lived in Medford. She had three daughters and she was just looking for something to do. She was a lovely lady. So these were the things that I'm thankful for.

EM: So at that time you really began some of your more serious volunteer work because you could get out.

BB: Well, I think it was a little after that—after she grew up and out.

EM: Did you continue your involvement with the Somerville temple or did you go over to Temple Israel?

BB: That's another story.

EM: Well, let's talk about it.

BB: [laughter] The temple was lovely and at that one—

EM: Which temple are you referring to?

BB: The temple in Somerville.

EM: What was its name?

BB: Temple Bnai Brith.

EM: And that was conservative?

BB: Conservative. It really and truly was lovely but they didn't have a organized Sunday school or religious school. My husband and his brother, when they were little boys, would go from Somerville to Temple Israel on Commonwealth Avenue to be at the Sunday school. My father-in-law had joined them. Saul really felt Judy had to have the best, so every Sunday morning—this was about two years—he would take her to Temple Israel, and wait for her. So that when we moved to Brookline, she was all set at their uncle's school—seventh grade.

EM: You moved to Brookline when she was in the seventh grade?

BB: Yes.

EM: Let's see, so that was— it must have been about 1952 or so?

BB: Could be; I'm not very good at dates. I should mark them down.

EM: So your husband grew up in Temple Israel?

BB: My husband, and—with Rabbi Levi; Harry Levi. They thought of him as a god.

EM: Did Rabbi Levi marry you two?

BB: No, who was it? Somebody else was there. It was—they were having difficulty at the temple then.

EM: Rabbi Fleischer, was it?

BB: No. We had Rabbi Epstein from Kehilath Israel—married my sister, okay and to this day, I remember his words when he said, "You must make your home your tabernacle."
Good?

EM: Rabbi Epstein—

BB: Yes, he was Kehilath Israel.

EM: —is still remembered.

BB: Do you remember him?

EM: No, I don't remember him but he's still remembered. People still remember him.

BB: Yes, he was an elegant, elegant man, I think. Then when Judy was married, Rabbi Gittelsohn and Rabbi Kasis, from [unclear] Hillel, officiated. Ah, you got a good lot. I'm not complaining.

EM: Now, after you became involved in Temple Israel, that was really when Judy was ten or so years old, would you say? How old?

BB: She must have been twelve, I think.

EM: Did you join the Sisterhood at the Temple?

BB: Oh, sure, we were members before that because she was going to the Sunday school.

EM: From the early years?

BB: Yes.

EM: What kind of activities did you do with the Sisterhood at the Temple?

BB: What did I do? I wrote condolence notes for ten years. Isn't that something? I forget who the first President was that asked me if I would do it and I said, "Well, yes." I was unhappy with some of the notes that had been going out. I think that a note like that

has to be a good note and a personal note, and so I spent a lot of my time trying to do it.

EM: You wrote the notes on behalf of the Sisterhood?

BB: On behalf of the Sisterhood.

EM: Okay.

BB: As the new Presidents came, they asked me if I would continue, and I guess I did.

EM: What other activities do you recall doing with the Sisterhood?

BB: Oh, well, I had an interesting experience. There was Greta Fromholtz. She was one of the people who worked at the window shop in Cambridge. Saul and I enjoyed going there, and one Wednesday we went and she said to me, "I didn't see you at temple today." And I said, "No, I wasn't able to be there. Were you there?" She said, "Yes, but we haven't anything to do; we haven't anything to work on." She had been working with a very small group.

[End of tape 1, side 1]

EM: February 25, 1997, here at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged. Bea, you were talking about the Sisterhood of Temple Israel.

BB: Oh, yes.

EM: And you said that you were making lap robes for the Jewish Memorial Hospital while you were at the Sisterhood.

BB: Yes.

EM: So you combined both of your activities obviously.

BB: So I said immediately to Greta. I said, "I have a project then." From then on, I went to the sewing club and I felt that we were so near all these hospitals, why don't we do something for them? Lillian Parker—do you remember Lillian?

EM: Of course, of course.

BB: Lillian was working at Boston Line Inn and she said, "Gee, Bea, you should get over to the Boston Line Inn. So many churches bring materials there. They bring bonnets and sweaters and so forth." So—"I will." So I went and she showed me what they had. I said, "What would you like us to do?" So she said, "Well, little blankets, little flannel blankets." And I—"Well, I think we can do it." So with that, we made the flannel blankets. And the women embroidered a featherstitch around. They were lovely. I don't know. I had so many things poking at me. I don't know what to tell you first.

EM: Just keep going. It's all great.

BB: And, who else?

EM: Who else was in the sewing group at the temple, do you remember? Now, the sewing group was part of the Sisterhood, was that right?

BB: Was part of the Sisterhood. All older ladies.

EM: Well, they weren't older then. [laughter]

BB: Well, no, that's true.

EM: So Lillian Parker was there.

BB: Well, Lillian Parker wasn't in the sewing group but she was working at that time, I remember. But I remember—

EM: But she was with the Sisterhood.

BB: Yes.

EM: I see. But who was in the sewing group? Do you remember? The Guttentags? Were they in the sewing group?

BB: Well, they came a little bit after. They certainly did and they're very important, and a very interesting experience was, we had the flannel to make the lap robes for the Boston Line Inn. Here I was cutting out the right size and I was folding the corners down, and this lady came over to me and said, "What are you doing?" I told her. She said, "I think you should miter the corners." I said, "I don't know how to." It was Jessie.

EM: Jessie Guttentag.

BB: They had resigned from their positions and she thought it would be good for them to be with the Sisterhood. Well, I can't begin to tell you what she did and what a wonderful, wonderful lady she was.

EM: Was she really what you would call the spearhead of the sewing group? Jessie? Jessie Guttentag.

BB: She was after I got through. She did very well.

EM: And who else was there? Do you remember any of the other people?

BB: An aunt of Saul's, was there.

EM: What was her name?

BB: Mrs. Damond. Henry Damond.

EM: Gladys Damond?

BB: No, that was Gladys' aunt.

EM: Gladys' aunt.

BB: Yes.

EM: Right.

BB: Also a lovely lady.

EM: Oh, Gladys Damond's mother, you mean?

BB: Gladys Damond's mother. I think she belonged to the temple but not to the sewing group.

EM: The sewing group.

BB: But this other aunt did, a lovely lady who was a milliner in those days and was on Beacon Hill. Her store was on Beacon Hill and she was very sweet, and it was before I was married and she said, "I'd love to make you a wedding veil." "Oh," I said, "I'd love to have you." So she told me exactly where to go in the North End and she did it. Anyway, what were we talking about before that?

EM: Before the sewing group?

BB: Oh, the sewing group. Well, finally I went over to Beth Israel and we made bandages, oh, for a couple of years until they get them now from the manufacturer sterilized. They don't have to bother with the sterilization.

EM: Now, during the Second World War, was the sewing group very active in making bandages in those days?

BB: Yes, I think they were.

EM: For the hospital or for the army?

BB: For the hospital. I think they just worked for the hospital. I don't know about the other. That was before my time.

EM: Yes. Did you sit together as a group or did you work at home?

BB: No, we sat together as a group. We had a recreation room downstairs which was very lovely.

EM: Now where was that?

BB: The Garden Club was here and we were there.

EM: Where was this, at the meeting house?

BB: This was at the meeting house.

EM: And so the synagogue was on Commonwealth Avenue and the meeting house was on the River Way.

BB: Right.

EM: But all these activities were held at the meeting house.

BB: Yes.

EM: How often did you meet?

BB: Once a week, Wednesdays.

EM: You brought your lunch along?

BB: Right, and they served coffee. It was very nice. Everyone was together and I knew everyone. Now, I don't think I do.

EM: How large was the group at its height would you say? How many women were in the group?

BB: The sewing group?

EM: Yes.

BB: I would say 25, 30, and they enjoyed what they did.

EM: Did you trade recipes while you were there?

BB: I don't remember that exactly.

EM: No, no.

BB: But I do remember that we worked for the Veteran's Hospital and it was great. We made afghans; we made slipper socks and we received many letters from some of the boys thanking us. It was good. Then we worked for the Children's Hospital. I know her name; I can't even remember—one day, someone gave me a brown bag and said, "This is for you." I said, "What's in it?" She said, "Well, you look and see." And sure enough, she had made a little blanket and she thought that we could make them for the Children's Hospital. So I went down there and I spoke to the volunteers—the Director of Volunteers, and we got busy. We really became very busy.

EM: During these years that you were so active in the Sisterhood and the sewing group, did you attend services on a regular basis at the temple?

BB: Yes, still every Saturday morning.

EM: Sunday, as well, or just Saturday?

BB: Pardon?

EM: Did you go on Sunday morning too?

BB: No, no. Saturdays.

EM: Okay.

BB: It was good.

EM: Did your husband go with you?

BB: No, my husband worked on Saturdays.

EM: And did Judy go with you?

BB: No. Everybody has their own life to live, which is very important.

EM: Right. You were very independent.

BB: Well, I don't know whether you would call it independent. I just went with my friends.

EM: On Saturday morning.

BB: Yes.

EM: And then did you have lunch together after that?

BB: Not always.

EM: You came home.

BB: After the services sometimes we would bring lunch because we would have a program in the afternoon you know it was Shabbat. We were busy.

EM: And were you involved with the PTA when Judy was growing up at the temple?

BB: No.

EM: Did they have a PTA?

BB: Oh, yes.

EM: Yes. But that wasn't something of interest to you?

BB: Well, we used to make costumes once in a while for the different holidays.

EM: Purim

BB: But nothing more than that.

EM: Now, when did you become involved with Jewish Memorial, or how did you become involved with Jewish Memorial?

BB: Well, my sister was a Gray Lady and worked at the Bloodmobile, and then she decided to work at Jewish Memorial. I don't know how that happened. I thought it was such a good idea and I did the same. My mother was a patient there for two and a half years. My mother was the type of person who loved people, and I always felt that when anyone came to visit, which wasn't too often, she would be a different person. I decided that when the time came that she couldn't be with us any longer, I would like to work at Jewish Memorial and open doors for people who need a little help, and I did. And it became part of me. I met some wonderful people, met Helen Fine, whose mother was a patient—lots of people.

EM: You know, your mother, working for the Salem Aid Society, did this in another era and it sounds to me like you were almost filling in in her shoes, following in her footsteps, as they say.

BB: Well—

EM: In a different generation.

BB: That's right because she always felt it was important to help and I think, if you're here, that's what you're here for.

EM: You said that your sister was a Gray Lady.

BB: Yes.

EM: Now, why don't you tell me what a Gray Lady was?

BB: Okay, you went to the Red Cross Headquarters and there were courses given. And you took a course and if you passed, then you were a Gray Lady.

EM: Did you wear a gray dress? [laughter]

BB: Oh, you had uniforms and that was the thing I liked about it because it was a nice uniform. I knew the patients liked it; they really did. They just thought it was great. So when I became Director of Volunteers, I had several volunteers. I had about 30 volunteers and I suggested it would be good if they would take the course. So when I went to take the course myself, I said that I'm happy now that I will be able to work at my hospital. She said, "What's your hospital?" And I said, "Jewish Memorial." She said, "We don't have a service there," and I said, "Well if you don't have it I think you will have it." And with that, I don't know, about 10 or 12 of the girls went and took the Gray Lady course, and it added something very important for the patients.

EM: I understand you also worked with the Jewish Braille Society.

BB: Oh, yes.

EM: It was called the—what was actually the title of the group? The Boston Aid to the Blind.

BB: Yes.

EM: And did you—

BB: Well, one Sunday, in the Sunday paper there was an article requesting people to volunteer to take courses in Braille to help the blind. I'm trying to think—It was forty-five years ago. So I thought, "Gee, I'd like that." I went to St. Stevens Street in Boston to the National Braille Press and I took the first course, which was good. It was grade one; it had no contractions. The accepted Braille throughout the world is the second grade, which has a hundred contractions. The two people that went with me originally decided they weren't interested, so I went and I took the second course and I passed. They told me that I would receive a book from the Jewish National Application Society of New York to be Brailled. I thought that was fine, and came home, I was living at 101, I think, at that time. And I came home and there was a package; it was a book. And lo and behold, I looked and I don't ever remember being quite as excited. It was the story of Henrietta Szold. I had been President of Hadassah in Somerville when I was there, and to my mind, she was it. Even to this day, I can't think of anyone greater, and my Braille took me about a year, about 400 pages, four volumes. And I loved it. I loved it because there was no speed attached to it. It had to be perfect. There's only one way. So I—

EM: Can you describe to me how you did it? You had a Braille writer? You had a machine of some sort?

BB: Eventually I had a Braille writer. Now I've decided to do it again so I have the slate and I had the Braille writer, and I was stupid; I should never have given it back. However, I did.

EM: What, did you put paper in the Braille writer? How does it work?

BB: I have limited space around here as you can see.

EM: Are you trying to find—let me help you. Let me help you, Bea.

BB: That's all right. Do you know Braille? No?

EM: No, I do not.

BB: You do not.

EM: No, just what I see in an elevator sometimes.

BB: Yes.

EM: I see.

BB: All right, now.

EM: So you have like a—

BB: I did Henrietta Szold.

EM: —sharp

BB: “A Woman of Valor” was the name of the—

EM: Yes? Of the book?

BB: And it's in the library because when I finished it—

EM: Which library? The Temple library?

BB: Yes.

EM: Okay.

BB: I would suggest that you read it. I think it's great. I really do. You'll see a few markings for the different pages. This is the slate but I had the Brailier. That's all. And you punch, for instance, "a" is one—is here, "b" is here; it can't be any other place and this is "c." All right.

EM: You remember the entire alphabet?

BB: Oh, yes, and contractions.

EM: Now, in Braille, does each letter have a sign, or do words have Braille signs?

BB: Is this your pen?

EM: Yes.

BB: All right. Braille—

EM: Let's write the word—

BB: Braille is all enclosed into little cells. And there are six of them. Here's your one, two, three, four, five, six. And the whole alphabet is included in those six dots, and with your contractions it's even greater. I feel bad that I don't have the Brailier right now because it was like a little machine; you know, a typewriter.

EM: I see.

BB: But, I don't know; I have front-line friends when I felt maybe that would be good for me to do right now.

EM: When you finished your book, what did you do with it?

BB: With the book?

EM: "A Woman of Valor."

BB: Oh, yes. Okay. I finished it and then I was told to call up Mrs. Sadie Phelps in Cambridge. She is a blind proofreader. And so I took my four volumes and went to Sadie Phelps. I met an elegant little lady who was my dearest friend until she passed away. But she—and her husband was blind too—they were both blind. Joe Phelps was one of the most elegant men I've ever met. He was a social worker for the City of Boston. He would go to newly blinded people and tell them what was available, and Sadie Phelps lived in Roxbury and he went to her house, and then he went back again and he liked her. They finally got married. In those days, two blind people could not be married. I mean, that was the law in Massachusetts. So Joe, who was quite an elegant man, got—he had a cab waiting and her mother—she wanted to be married and her mother confirmed it. And they went to New Hampshire and the driver stood up for them. It's quite a story.

EM: I should say!

BB: I had to meet them. Anyway, he had a very nice apartment.

EM: Are they still alive?

BB: Pardon.

EM: Are they still alive?

BB: No, they're both gone.

EM: Did they have children?

BB: They had a son.

EM: And was he sighted?

BB: Yes. Well, they were both blind from, I think, glaucoma. However, I never met such wonderful people. I had a car and I had time so it was my pleasure to pick them up.

EM: Did she find any mistakes?

BB: Oh, yes there were mistakes.

EM: And you made corrections.

BB: So you'd do it over. You either can erase it. If it doesn't erase well, you can confuse the blind person.

EM: Of course.

BB: So it's better to do it over.

EM: Did you do another book after "A Woman of Valor?"

BB: Oh, yes. I did many.

EM: Do you remember the books that you did?

BB: Well, the one I do remember is "What is a Jew?" by Rabbi Morris Kertzer. I did a couple of children's books. And I also did recipe books because there were two—most of the women at Temple Israel were through Braille, but I wanted to do this recipe book for Sadie and for a couple of other people I know. So we picked out the recipes in our recipe book at Temple Israel that were easy or simple to take care of. I brought one to the temple, to the library. You can ask Ann. I don't know whether she still has it.

EM: You mean the Braille one?

BB: Yes.

EM: Oh, that would be wonderful to be able to see that.

BB: Wait a minute. Here it is.

EM: Oh, here's my pen. Thank you. The recipe book. And you're still really doing it.

BB: What did you say?

EM: You're still doing Braille.

BB: Well, I just started about a month ago. I didn't know where this thing was. I didn't know whether I had a board but Judy found it in her house, and I helped her do it. I have another friend who is blind and I speak to her and I thought, wouldn't it be nice if I could just send her a note?

EM: Well, I'm looking at this implement that you do the Braille with. It's sort of like an awl—a small awl. It's about half an inch long and it's just like a pin really. And it has a handle.

BB: Yes, I did have one that looked like a pencil but I can't find it, but that seems to do the job. Did you feel the—

EM: Yes, I did. I did.

BB: I don't know about your hands but, God, my hands are so callused.

EM: Well, that's because of the winter. You know, it's so dry now.

BB: I don't know what it is.

EM: Yes, you need a little lotion. [laughter]

BB: I do.

EM: I have some here in my purse. I'll leave it with you.

BB: This is good.

EM: I noticed on this paper that you had sent into the temple, a little paragraph that you wrote about Bashka Paeff.

BB: Bashka Paeff, my very, very dear—

EM: You pronounced it—

BB: P-A-E-F-F.

EM: P-A-E-F-F.

BB: Where did you get that information?

EM: You wrote it. [laughter] When you agreed to the interview you filled out this little questionnaire.

BB: Oh! Oh.

EM: On which you wrote, you know, where you came from and your parent's names and—

BB: Yes.

EM: —things like that.

BB: Oh, Bashka Paeff was a noted sculptor and these are replicas of her work. This one here—

EM: There are two children.

BB: No.

EM: No? They're not children?

BB: No. This one—yes. This one here is in the Boston Public Gardens. This is a picture a very dear friend of mine took for me and enlarged it.

EM: Oh, yes, that one of the fountains.

BB: Yes.

EM: I know exactly where this is.

BB: You know it?

EM: Of course.

BB: Okay, well.

EM: This is a child with her hand outstretched and a bird in her hand.

BB: Yes.

EM: And that, of course, in the center of the fountain.

BB: He took it in August when—

EM: All the flowers—

BB: —all the flowers were in full bloom.

EM: And this must be a model for it.

BB: No, that isn't the model. The model is in bronze. These are just little replicas of her work.

EM: Okay.

BB: I don't know. I feel as though I've talked so much.

EM: Oh.

BB: But one day, I picked up my sister and I picked up Sadie Phelps—now that you know Sadie Phelps.

EM: [laughter] Your sister was Sadie also.

BB: She is also Sadie.

EM: A popular name in your era, wasn't it?

BB: Oh, yes. Most of them should have been Sarah. It's a beautiful name.

EM: Well, they wanted to Anglicize it, I thought.

BB: Anyway, I picked up my sister and I picked up Sadie Phelps and then I picked up Bashka Paeff, the sculptor in Cambridge because I made an appointment at the Boston Aid. My little friends thought it would be nice if Bashka Paeff could show some of her work. And they were on Huntington Avenue then before they moved.

EM: How did you meet Bashka?

BB: Well, we talked about my aunt. Saul and I visited an aunt and Bashka Paeff was there. I never knew of her in my life but we became very, very good friends. I corresponded with her until—oh, she passed away about two years ago. But she really was a noted sculptor. As a matter of fact—

EM: The piece in the Public Garden is called the “Boy and the Bird Fountain.” Is that right?

BB: Yes, it’s the “Boy and the Bird Fountain.”

EM: I thought it was a girl but it’s a boy. Now, what about this piece here of the young boy who was reading a book with his dog?

BB: It is interesting. I was at Newbury Street one day and just, you know, going through some of the studios and I saw that. And I loved it and I had already met Bashka Paeff and I just loved it and I bought it. Big deal! I think it was \$50.

EM: This piece?

BB: Yes. So anyway, the story of that is this woman came with her son to have this sculptor work and Bashka, who loved dogs and did many famous dogs, said, “Do you have a dog?” And he said, “No,” and she said, “Well, I’m going to give you one.”

EM: [laughter]

BB: And this is the dog she gave him. Sorry, this is the dog.

EM: And she sculpted it.

BB: Yes. Oh, yes. And then she did a bronze of the family. Look at this—the hands, the head. Oh, I love the head and the ears, everything about it. So anyway, I found out recently that the Morris family—there’s a Mrs. Morris—I don’t know whether she’s alive or not. This is a model that was done for her son—Morris. And the Morris family—

EM: Do you remember which Morris?

BB: I don't. I looked up in the telephone—

EM: Was it Theresa and Allan?

BB: Do you know any of the names?

EM: Was it Theresa Morris and Allan Morris?

BB: What's the first name?

EM: Theresa.

BB: No. I don't know. I looked it up at one time but I didn't do anything about it. But I think it is terrific.

EM: Well, do you know what year this was done? This piece?

BB: No, I have no idea. But they've sort of been with me all these years, and it was really funny when Judy came with me when I arrived here, she said, "Oh, put it up there. You can put it up there." I said, "Oh, really? I'm going to put it down here."

EM: So you can really see it.

BB: Where I can really see it, and I love it.

EM: You've had a very, very interesting life.

BB: I've had—

EM: Very varied in terms of your activity, in terms of your participation. I just want to ask you a couple of more questions about your Jewish life. Were you observant as a Reformed Jew in your home after you were married and you and Saul were at Temple Israel?

BB: What?

EM: Did you light candles? Did you keep kosher?

BB: Always. Always.

EM: Did you keep kosher yourself?

BB: I didn't keep kosher—we did keep kosher at first but then I didn't. But lighting candles was very important in my life. My husband had a wonderful voice and to hear him—

EM: He sang the kiddish every Friday?

BB: The kiddish, yes.

EM: Yes?

BB: It was part of us. It was good.

EM: Was Judy confirmed at the temple?

BB: Yes.

EM: And I understand that your husband was confirmed at the temple. Is that true?

BB: My husband was confirmed at the temple?

EM: At Temple Israel? Was your husband—

BB: I don't know whether he was confirmed there or not. I know he went there as a child but I don't know if both he and Numan were confirmed—that I wouldn't know. But Saul was a very observant Jewish man who loved his religion and respected every single bit of it.

EM: Did you travel at all as a family? Did you travel? Did you take trips?

BB: Yes, we took a couple of cruises. We went to Mexico; we went to South America.

EM: Mmm-hmm. Have you been to Israel?

BB: No.

EM: Never, no?

BB: I feel bad. My children went after Saul died.

EM: When did he die? What year?

BB: 1964.

EM: So it's almost thirty-three years?

BB: He's gone thirty-two years.

EM: Did you stay in your house?

BB: I sold the house.

EM: After he died?

BB: Yes.

EM: Then where did you go?

BB: I went to Brighton, to a little condominium—very nice and then to 101.

EM: 101 Marmouth.

BB: Yes.

EM: But it seems to me that because you had so many interesting voluntary activities even after he died you were quite occupied. Did you continue with the Jewish Memorial?

BB: I certainly did.

EM: Did you continue at the sewing group?

BB: Yes.

EM: And you continued with the Braille?

BB: Yes, of course.

EM: Anything else, if that's not enough? [laughter]

BB: I don't know. All I know is I like to read. I love sincere people and I met the Guttentags which was really something. I never expected to meet women of that caliber.

EM: Oh, I agree. But then, of course, they met you and so it was mutual. [laughter]

BB: I don't know about that. The afghan here, the Guttentags made for me on a birthday. It's woven.

EM: Yes, I see that. It's in really earth-tone colors, as we would say—browns and oranges, yellows.

BB: Yes, it's very nice.

EM: Little squares. Immensely talented women.

BB: I remember when they gave it to me. I came home and I opened the box. I was flabbergasted.

EM: Right.

BB: It was good.

EM: So, maybe let's talk a little bit about your life in general before we close. You mentioned while the tape was off that you really had a wonderful life.

BB: Yes.

EM: You said that to me.

BB: What was that?

EM: You said that you had such a wonderful life.

BB: Yes.

EM: That you felt so good about your life. Have you had good health?

BB: No, not always. I've had many moments of not being good.

EM: Physically or emotionally, or both?

BB: Both.

EM: Okay.

BB: But, listen, these things happen and you just—I don't know what you do but you do the best you can. Every day is a new day; that is the way I feel right now.

EM: Well, I think you've done miraculously on this. Did you ever have regrets about not having another child?

BB: No. When you can have children you have them. If you can't, what are you going to do? But I happen to have a wonderful daughter.

EM: I know that.

BB: And gave us so much pleasure. As a matter of fact, my husband was so delighted with having a daughter and it was good. And Judy did give us a great deal of pleasure.

Ann. Ann. [tape turned off/on]

EM: Say that again.

BB: Not everyone has a hundred-year-old roommate. Is that right?

ANN GINSBERG: Everybody does not believe it.

EM: What's your last name, Ann?

AG: Even the doctors don't believe it.

EM: What is your last name?

AG: Ginsberg.

EM: Ann, your skin is much better than mine [laughter] and I'm half your age.

AG: Oh, no. No, it isn't.

EM: How long have you been here?

AG: I have been here—well, it'll be five years August. This August it will be five years.

EM: Would you like me to open the door for you?

AG: No, I can get it.

EM: Okay.

AG: I do everything for myself.

EM: Oh, very, very nice to meet you. Obviously, you have a wonderful relationship— the two of you; it's very nice.

AG: Yes, we get along beautifully.

EM: Yes, how long have you been here, Bea?

BB: A little over a year.

EM: Before that, you were at Heathwood?

BB: Yes.

EM: And were you happy there?

BB: Yes. They were very nice and they're very nice here and we're lucky when we meet good people. You see, I don't know about any of these contraptions.

AG: What kind of an interview are you doing?

EM: Well, we have a project at Temple Israel in conjunction with the Jewish Women's Archive and we are doing oral history interviews of women whose lives have spanned the 20th century. What year were you born, Ann?

AG: 1896.

EM: So you're even before the century.

AG: Four years.

EM: But Bea was born in 1907.

AG: Yes.

EM: And she's been a member of Temple Israel for how many years?

BB: We were members for about forty, or forty-five years.

EM: At least; maybe more. And we're doing this project to put women's stories on tape because, you know, years ago women's lives were not as noted as they are today. And we wanted to take down stories of women who lived, you know, in the '20s and '30s and '40s and '50s and the kind of things that they did. And we sent out questionnaires to all of the women at Temple Israel who were over 80 years old, and many people responded. And people who wanted to be interviewed will be interviewed for this project and so I'm here today interviewing Bea Biller.

AG: Ann Marie's husband is the rabbi at Temple Israel.

EM: And we made this appointment about two weeks ago.

AG: Yes, two weeks ago, yes.

EM: Actually, it was the day of Bea's 90th birthday that I happened to call her, which is coincidental. We made it for today, which is an absolutely glorious, cold but beautiful, sunny day.

AG: Yes.

EM: And I had no trouble getting here. There was no snow on the ground. [Laughter]

AG: February, you never can tell.

EM: That's right; that's right.

BB: Her life has been entirely different from mine—entirely different, I'm sure. From what I hear.

EM: Maybe you would like to be interviewed. You can think about it and Bea can let us know.

AG: The Jewish advocate interviewed me when I was going to be a hundred. A reporter took a picture of me and wrote a little something about me.

EM: When's your birthday?

AG: June. I'll be 101.

EM: 101?

AG: In June.

EM: You must have done something right, that's all I can say. [Laughter]

AG: Everybody says, "What's your secret?" There is no secret. Nature—just nature of the beast.

EM: How long did your parents live?

AG: Not long. My mother was seventy-two; my father died early—very early. I was four years old and my mother had seven children and she was the father. There was no man in our house at all. My life is entirely different than hers. I couldn't have the education. I

never went—I didn't graduate high school. And yet, I got married and I seem to remember every little thing that I learned in grammar school. I just remember it and I think I know more than some people that have gone to college. I mean, I can answer more questions in trivia.

EM: Well, what a double pleasure I'm having this morning. I've had this wonderful experience with Bea. I've been here for about an hour and a half now.

BB: Yes.

EM: Now you've just decided to get up and introduce yourself, and we're going to end this interview with a little extra added attraction of Bea's roommate, a hundred years old, telling me a little bit about herself. Thank you very much, Ann. Well, what are you showing?

BB: I'm going to give you this picture.

EM: Okay. Are you sure you don't want it?

BB: What? Oh, I have more.

EM: You have more?

BB: I'll get more. So this is of the "Boy and the Bird." I didn't even know I had it here. All right.

EM: Yes, it was taken in 1996.

BB: Right.

EM: Bashka Paeff.

BB: Now, I thought perhaps the rabbi would like to see that.

EM: I'll be happy to give it to him.

BB: This is a biography of Bashka Paeff.

EM: Is this a copy of it?

BB: I'm going to give it to you.

EM: Okay, I'll put it in your folder. Thank you very much. Now, we're almost finished. Is there anything else you want to tell me about before we close? I enjoyed our meeting extremely.

BB: I'll think of something—

EM: You'll think of something?

BB: —afterward. [laughter]

EM: Oh, think of something afterward. [laughter]

BB: So, now, these are my moments of bliss and happiness right here.

EM: Can you show me some photographs?

BB: That is —

EM: You know, someone once told me that your husband was a silversmith in his spare time. Did you participate in that activity as well?

BB: No, Saul used to go every Thursday night with some friends and his brother-in-law. And this man who was their instructor was tops in the field. This is a picture of Bashka Paeff.

EM: And where is this particular piece? This is a large piece.

BB: Now, that's the one I really pulled out to show you.

EM: This is where? It's a military piece.

BB: Do you know where "The Minuteman" is in Lexington?

EM: Yes, I do. This is right there?

BB: Right opposite. And that's her bronze.

EM: Magnificent!

BB: It is really terrific.

EM: She was really a heroine, wasn't she? Bashka? She was your heroine?

BB: Well, I have a few of them.

EM: Yes, who else.

BB: I don't know. She did a lot of children. I have loads of them.

EM: Did you ever try sculpting yourself?

BB: No.

EM: No.

BB: I wished I had. I would love it. So anyway, I think I told you that Bashka came. We went to the Boston Aid and she showed us all her work, and the next day, early in the morning I got a call from Sadie Phelps that Bashka Paeff came to her house and brought that replica to her.

EM: This one—

BB: Yes.

EM: —of the “Boy and the Bird.”

BB: And some modeling clay and modeling tools. She fell in love with her. It was quite a thing. It's a picture of Elizabeth Brandeis.

EM: That Bashka did?

BB: Yes, she did this.

EM: Yes, yes.

BB: She went to Italy to get the marble. That whole story hasn't ended yet and when it ends I'm going to call you. I'm waiting. We made some of the blankets at the Children's Hospital.

EM: And this is one of your trays.

BB: Yes.

EM: Oh, this is lovely. This has flowers.

BB: Sort of interesting.

EM: The tray is about—I would say about eight by ten.

BB: I went to—

EM: And all this gold leaf on the border, did you do that too? Is that all decoupage as well?

BB: You just put that on. You glue this on. Take it out and see it.

EM: I will take it out. Did you cut this with scissors?

BB: Yes, little bits of scissors.

EM: These little, teeny stems?

BB: Yes.

EM: I'm so glad you're showing this to me. It's a wonderful way to end our interview. Really, it is absolutely beautiful!

BB: I did that at the Women's Industrial Union.

EM: You went there for classes?

BB: They had classes. I imagine they still do; I don't know.

EM: You don't know. You know, we're going to have an exhibit at the temple in conjunction with these oral history interviews.

BB: I had that there once.

EM: And perhaps we could put this in the exhibit.

BB: I did have it there once.

EM: At the temple?

BB: Yes.

EM: Well, maybe you'll have it again.

BB: Years ago, when Francis Warman—I don't know what the story was. But I loved this piece. I was mad this came off.

EM: Thank you so much, Bea, for this really incredible experience. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have.

BB: I have. I thought it was pretty good and I think you did very well.

EM: Well, thank you very much.

BB: You asked me the right questions.

EM: When we have the exhibit at the temple I hope you'll be able to come and see it, of all the women that have been interviewed with their tapes and their artifacts. We're going to take an afghan from Marion, or perhaps some of her sweaters, because, you know, I interviewed Marion. She was the first person to be interviewed—Marion Guttentag.

BB: Yes.

EM: Many, many women have responded and it's been a very, very gratifying project.

BB: Good, good. I'm sure people have—we used to do things that—well, we had time. And we did things.

EM: Yes, life is much different today; it really is.

BB: What is it, dear?

EM: Life is much different today.

BB: I have this book—

EM: Of "Peterson's Poems," yes.

BB: Do you like poetry?

EM: Very much.

BB: Do you want to end with this?

[END OF INTERVIEW]