

Barbara Cole Transcript

RACHEL ALEXANDER: It's August 20th, 1997. I'm Rachel Alexander interviewing Barbara Cole in her apartment in Lexington under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archives Temple Israel Oral History Project. So I read over your questionnaire and it was very exciting to me, first of all, that you went to Smith College.

BARBARA COLE: Did you?

RA: My mother did.

BC: Oh, no. What class was she?

RA: She was in '68. [laughter] And it was also very exciting to me – I read about your rich family growing up and how you used to spend a lot of time with your family. So I thought maybe we could start the interview if you could tell me a little bit about your early childhood memories.

BC: Yes. My mother was the oldest child in the family. And I was born in Dorchester in a two-family house. My grandmother and grandfather lived upstairs with their three unmarried, younger unmarried daughters at the time. And my mother and father and there were four of us who lived downstairs, so that there was great interplay.

My mother loved to take—go to lectures and so forth. And when we would go to school we'd go upstairs to my grandmother's house, and for lunch. And another aunt, another sister and a brother, lived within walking distance. So that it was—it was--. When I think of it today it's unbelievable. It's literally unbelievable. The interplay.

My aunts when they would go to work would never use their staircase. They would walk down the back stairs, would come in our kitchen where we were usually having

breakfast. And one of them would always say, “Good morning, Mary Sunshine.” And then she’d go out our front door to go to work. I don’t think their front entrance was used practically never, maybe when they had some guests. But most people they knew would come through our house and go upstairs. And—

RA: How old were your grandparents when they came to this country?

BC: Oh, I don’t know how old they were.

RA: But it was in the late 1800s.

BC: Oh yes because my three younger aunts were all born here. And they were born in the 1890s so that they must have come in the 1880s. And it was the usual procedure. I mean they came to this country and their house became an open house for all the other relatives that came before they got settled.

Before you leave I want to show you something that we discovered about my grandfather when he died. A eulogy was written about him in Yiddish.

RA: Yeah, I think I have that.

BC: Oh did I send it to you?

RA: Yeah.

BC: Oh then I did, yeah. I sent that to you. And he was—he was a fascinating figure. He had run--. Do you want to know about his background?

RA: Sure.

BC: He had run away from home because his family were very, very orthodox and wanted him to go to school in a Yeshiva. And he ran away from home. And this is a true story.

He got to a town where there was a parade. And there was a little girl standing on her toes trying to see what was going on. And he lifted her up. Well, she became my grandmother. [Laughter] That's true. Yeah. And she was religious. My grandfather was not. He was an agnostic, I think. I would call him an agnostic. But he always went to services on the high holidays out of respect for her.

And they had very little money. My mother never graduated from high school. But when she--. I've been told that when the girls would help their mother and she would have to wash the kitchen floor, she would have a book propped up against the pail. And as she scrubbed the floor she would read in the thing.

And I remember waking up as a little girl and I thought it was the middle of the night. The light was on in the kitchen. And I went into the kitchen. And my mother was ironing and a book was propped up on the ironing board. And I said, "What's that?" She said, "It's a play. It's called 'Macbeth'." So it's funny how these little things, you know—

RA: Why didn't she finish high school.

BC: She had to go to work. She literally--. You know there wasn't enough money.

RA: Did she have any siblings?

BC: Oh yes. There were the three younger sisters and there was one older sister, and one brother. And two had died. One had died at the age of two in Russia of dysentery. And one had died here. She was twelve years old and she died of measles.

And my sister and I often say, "Oh we wonder what Rosa would have been like? Who would she have married? What cousins would we have had?" I don't think—

RA: So did all of them drop out of school to work?

BC: No. The youngest three did not. They went to Dorchester High School and went to work after high school. None of them went to college.

My mother would have really, I think, benefited from a college education because my brother, who was a real intellectual, said to her once, "Mother, you're not an intellectual but you have intellectual interests." And they would have been cultivated because all her life she was.

When she--. She died of lung cancer. She never smoked. The last day I saw her alive—I had a key to her apartment—and I walked in and I said, "How are you feeling today?" And she said, "Never mind how I'm feeling. Sit down." And I sat down and she said, "What do you know about Kierkegaard?" Yeah.

And I—that always struck me very funny because in later years we went—we didn't belong to Temple Israel. But Joshua Loth Liebman had just come as the rabbi. And I said to Aaron, "Let's go and hear him." And when he spoke about Kierkegaard that night. And I said to myself, "Here is a rabbi who really has intellect."

And I never did this before but I went up to him afterwards in the receiving line and told him how much I enjoyed it. And we joined the temple. That was why we joined the temple. Even though when my son was six years old and we decided to send him to Sunday school my mother looked at me and said, "What for?"

RA: Wow.

BC: So that--. And our experiences at the temple, by and large, have been—I'm a little bit disillusioned with organized religion, which was what my--. My parents were very conscious of being Jewish and were--.

My mother was active in Jewish things. She was the first secretary of the Boston chapter of Hadassah. And oh I can remember her going off to conventions with--. He was a

judge, Louie Goldberg, with his wife and all the other things. But she wasn't much for organized religion.

Anyway, Jimmy went to Temple Israel. He was very bright. And the day of his confirmation turned out to be the day of his final history exam at a very good private school in Boston. We didn't know what to do. So we went up to see Cy Nemzoff who was the head of the Sunday school. And he listened and he said, "You know, the only thing that he would miss is having his picture taken with the rest of the class. But there's a door that goes on to the, you know, the bimah, yeah, at the temple in the auditorium—and he could slide in and he would not miss the blessing or any of the rest of the service." We thanked him a million times.

Three days later he called up. He was so embarrassed he could hardly talk. He said, "I talked to Rabbi Gittelsohn about this. And Rabbi Gittelsohn said, 'He will either be there from the beginning or he will not be there at all.'" So I told that to Jim. And I said, "Dad and I want to go up and speak to the history professor and see what—whether we can make some arrangement."

Well he was so angry he punched his fist through a lampshade in his bedroom. And he said, "I've had the cake, the confirmation exercise is the frosting. I can do without it." I said, "Never mind, we're going."

So my husband and I went up and spoke to the history professor. And he said, "I have confidence in you and in Jim." He said, "If Mr. Cole will come the night before I will give him the exam. Jim can take the exam at home. The only thing that I ask is that Mr. Cole immediately bring the exam to me after he has completed it." He said, "And the other thing is, please don't mention this because I am making an exception."

Well my parents were dead then. But my aunts were still alive. And my husband drove us to the temple. And he immediately drove off and said, "Save me a seat." So my aunt

said, "Where is he going?" I said, "He's going for a haircut." [Laughter] "What? Who ever heard of going for a haircut?"

Anyway, the impression that this left on us was here is a temple, a rabbi that should have shown compassion and understanding. Where did we get the understanding and compassion? From a Yankee, Protestant, primarily Protestant, school. I can't tell you how that has bothered me all these years.

RA: Yeah. I can see why that would bother you.

BC: Yeah. It really did. But that—but we have never resigned even though now we practically never go because it's hard for us now to drive at night. And it's a long way.

We lived in Newton, you see, for so many years. And it was close and convenient. But that's that. We—

RA: How did your mother become active in Hadassah?

BC: You know I really don't--. I think maybe it was Gussie Wyner. Gussie Wyner, yeah, I think it was Gussie Wyner. She—her sons owned the Ritz Carlton. You're too--. Are you a native Bostonian?

RA: My parents are.

BC: Oh. Well I don't know whether they would know. But this goes way back. They used to own the Ritz Carlton Hotel and they were very wealthy people. And Gussie took a tremendous liking to my mother. And I think that's how--.

They had a summer home in Nantasket. And she would send--. I'll never forget. We lived in Dorchester. She sent her car and limousine to pick my mother and my younger sister and I up to take us out there for lunch. And Geneieve Wyner, I think, who was, you know--. I told her that story. She couldn't get over the fact that I remembered the name

of the chauffeur. So that's how I think my mother got interested in it.

RA: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your father?

BC: My father was a very quiet--. He wasn't--. He was shy I would say. My mother was the more active one than my father. But he was a very stabilizing influence in our family.

You know, my mother had charge accounts. And my aunt upstairs, the single aunts, would always charge things to my mother's accounts. And my father was very methodical. He was a bookkeeper. Actually, he—well he--. That's where he and my mother met, I think, was--. I think it was the Boston Tea Company that they worked for.

But he would go upstairs and he would—they would check off and they would give him the money. I remember that so careful those--.

And he was not an ambitious man. I mean from the point of view of worldly. We never had a car. But it never occurred to us. I think it never occurred to me that we never had any money. We always had enough to eat. We had very good clothes because my mother's theory was you buy the least expensive thing in the best shop. You do not buy the best thing in the cheaper shop. So we always had good clothes.

And we did have a wonderful family life. I can't remember a seder or a Thanksgiving at my mother's because it was always at my grandmother's. And the whole family would be there. And when my grandmother died—grandfather died first and my grandmother died—my youngest aunt always took it over.

RA: What was seder like at your grandmother's house?

BC: It was not a long drawn out thing. I know that. Because when I was in college I was invited, I remember, several times to a seder at a friend of mine I thought I'd never get through. I mean, it was, you know--. The important thing about the seders that I

remember is that it brought the whole family together. They would come from far and wide to come.

RA: So who would come?

BC: Cousins. All—anyone who was connected with the family would come. Her house was a—well it was a focus. It really was a focus. And now I'm very close to her daughter, one of my cousins, because Miriam had a tremendous influence on me.

This is a story that she was-- I know she never had formal education. But she was head of what was called the children's bureau in Boston placing Jewish children for adoption. And I remember her boss was Maurice Hexter. And he was a very well known figure in Boston. And because of that she had access to tickets and things.

And Colleen Moore, who was an actress, had an enormous dollhouse. And it was on—going around the country. And she said, "I have extra tickets and I can take you and Margie and Bernice—another cousin—to see it." And I, who always have had a negative attitude, said, "I don't think I want to go. I don't think so." She said, "All right." Well the day before I said, "I've changed my mind. I want to go." She said, "I'm sorry. I gave your ticket away." I learned something from that.

RA: For the seder how far away were people coming in from?

BC: Oh—

RA: Were they all in Massachusetts?

BC: No. Some came from New York. Some came from New York. They just-- Some came from Washington. Some came from Philadelphia. And it was a-- The seder and Thanksgiving were the two really big holidays.

RA: Who would lead the seder?

BC: Who would lead it?

RA: Yeah.

BC: Namin, my uncle, would lead it when he was alive. And after that Betty's husband would lead it. And I can remember Jimmy reading the four questions, you know, doing the four questions. And we have lots of pictures of it, you know, of the table and the whole thing.

And when they became old and too ill to do it, I remember I would—there was a place in Brookline I've forgotten where you could buy, you know—and we would bring it there so that we would try to keep that.

RA: So what types of things did you have every year at the seder on the seder table?

BC: Oh they had the whole bit. It was--. What's the soup? Not soup, it was supposed cold and bitter. I've forgotten.

RA: Maror, the bitter herb.

BC: Yes. But there was a soup. Not the—before the chicken soup and knaidlach.

RA: Was it an egg soup?

BC: Something like that. There was another soup. And there was, of course, gefilte fish. But there was always on the seder plate the bitter herbs and the haroset, is that it? And it was really--. For me, it was more of the fact that there was such unity in the family than a religious, you know, thing.

RA: Did your family have any special customs that you did?

BC: No.

RA: Did—

BC: Oh course they always hid the—what is it—

RA: Afikomen.

BC: Afikomen, yeah. And they left the door open for Elijah. I remember all that. Yeah. That they did. That they did.

RA: And what was your grandmother's role at the seder?

BC: I can't--. My grandmother was--. She wasn't--. I can't remember really that she did anything other than being the hostess. She was—she was quite a woman. She really was.

My mother said to me once, “My mother used to say ‘no’ on general principles. And I made up my mind that when I had children if I said ‘no’ I would give them a reason as to why I said ‘no.’”

And there's one story that I was told about my grandmother. She heard that a friend of one of her daughter's was expecting a second child. And her husband was out of a job and she was absolutely frantic. And that she was going to have an abortion. When my grandmother heard it my aunt said, “She put on her hat and her gloves and she marched over to this woman's house and convinced her that she mustn't do it.”

Well it turned out that this second child was the love and the support of their life. And their disappointment in the first child was very great. But this second one, whom my grandmother literally saved. And this woman never forgot it.

RA: Why did your grandmother save—or why did she think it was not right to have the abortion?

BC: Maybe from a religious point of view. I don't know. I really don't know. But she--.

I have wonderful memories of her. She loved the movies. And she would go on Saturday afternoon to the Capital in Allston. It's no longer there. And very often would see her. She was--. She didn't begin to have the intellect that my grandfather had.

My brother was very, very bright. And I can remember when he was at MIT and I would wake up in the middle of the night just when I—like when I saw my mother. And my grandfather and my brother would be having these long discussions about everything. I think that they played a very important part in our lives, my aunts and my grandparents.

I never knew my father's parents because he came to this country and they came from Lebow in Latvia. And so I never met them. He had one sister—a sister and a brother who came here. And the only one who met them was my brother. Went to Germany to study for a year and when he was there he went to Latvia and met my grandmother and another sister, both of whom were lost in the Holocaust. So I didn't know them at all.

RA: What language did your grandparents speak?

BC: They spoke English but they spoke a lot of Yiddish. And the interesting thing is that I never thought that I knew Yiddish. But it seems as if now I can think of so many expressions. And I'm constantly using them. And I know that's where it came from.

RA: Did your parents also know Yiddish?

BC: Oh, they knew Yiddish but they never spoke it to us at all ever. No. My mother--. It's interesting. My mother always felt that it was very important for girls to go to college. Maybe it was because she had missed it. But I remember her reason. She said, "It is the woman who sets the cultural tone of the home. She is the one who has the real influence because she's with her children so constantly. And it's very important."

RA: Did your siblings also go to college?

BC: Yes. One didn't. She wasn't—she really wasn't college material particularly. But she went to Washington. She had a very good--. She's still living there. Had a very good job in the Department of Agriculture. My brother became head of the physics department at MIT. And my other sister went to Wellesley and she's very bright.

RA: And she's older than you?

BC: No. She's younger. She's eighteen months younger. My oldest sister will be ninety in January. My brother died when he was—one month before his eighty-first birthday. And he—he was a tremendous influence on me. I really worshipped him.

RA: How did he influence you?

BC: I don't know. Maybe a love of learning or maybe he could--. He could say about me what he said to my mother, "You're not an intellectual but you have intellectual interests."

And in the summer the aunts would all have cottages, you know, rent cottages together so that there always way a compound in—well in the beginning it was in a place called Maunpasit near Halifax, and then in Sharie.

And there's a very interesting story. My aunts—the two who never married—when my grandfather died and my youngest aunt married, they thought that they would get an apartment, the two aunts and my grandmother so that would free my other aunt. And her husband wouldn't hear of it. He said, "No. We'll all live together." And they did.

And the aunt who married had two children. And, of course, they had three mothers. They had--. And one of them went to--. She was seven years old and she went to visit another aunt. And there was a woman there visiting. And she said, "Tillie, do you have a mother?" And Tillie said, "No, I don't." And she said, "Do you have an Aunt Jennie?"

And she said, “No.” And she said, “What? You don’t have an Aunt Jennie?” And that’s what Aunt Jennie was for me, and for Betty and for everyone else.

RA: She was the mother.

BC: No. She was one aunt. She was not the mother. Aunt Jennie was one of the aunts.

When I graduated from Smith and I thought I’d go on to graduate school and there was no money. And I applied for a fellowship and I didn’t get it.

It’s funny I’ve never forgotten the girl who got it. Her father was a professor at Smith. And I often wondered whether that had something to do with it.

But anyway, Jennie offered to lend me the money. And she said, “When you get a job,” she said, “you’ll pay me back.” I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t, you know. But that’s the kind of person she was.

RA: Where did you go to school when you were growing up?

BC: We moved to Brookline when I entered the eighth grade. So I went to the Devotion School in Brookline and then I went to Brookline High. And that was an experience.

I remember my mother coming with me to school in the eighth grade. And Mr. Taylor, the principal, said to me, “You know, the Brookline schools are very different from Boston.”

They had a terrible thing in those days. They divided children according to ability: 8-A, 8-B, 8-C, and 8-D. Can you imagine what it did to kids?

He said, “I think that Barbara should go into 8-B. And then if she does well we’ll put her in 8-A.” And my mother, who was never at a loss for words, said, “Why don’t you do it this way? Put her in 8-A and if she can’t do it, then put her in 8-B.”

She did the same thing to the dean of MIT. My brother graduated from Boston Latin and was so young when he was ready for MIT that the dean said to my mother and father, "We're not sure he would adjust socially. Perhaps he should take a year off and then we will accept him." And my mother said, "I would be afraid of what outside influences might do in a year. Why don't you accept him and if he can't make it then--." And, of course, he never left MIT. He was there for the rest of his life.

RA: How did you end up doing in grade 8-A?

BC: Oh I was all right. Yeah. I was all right. I had the most fantastic teacher. You know when you talk about a teacher who would influence you, Ms. Fitzhenry, was absolutely fabulous. I'll never forget her. She went around the room and she'd say, "Now what book are you doing on your next book review?" And one of the boys got up and said, "I'm going to do Elmer Gantry." And she said, "Oh no, you're not." I don't know if you know what--. Elmer Gantry was a book by Sinclair Lewis about a minister that was not very complimentary. Anyway—

RA: And then after you graduated how did you decide to go on?

BC: To Smith?

RA: Um-hmm.

BC: Well everyone was going to Radcliffe. I did not want to live at home. I just felt I wanted the experience of going away. And one of my mother's friends, her daughter was at Smith then. And I spoke to her and I decided I would go. And I did get scholarships. Not the first year I didn't get a complete scholarship but I got partial.

And I was so homesick that I called my mother, I remember, and saying, "I don't think I can stay. I just don't think I can stay." And she said, "Why don't you wait until Christmas. And if you feel the same way at Christmas, then we'll talk about

transferring.” Well, by Christmas I wouldn’t have left for anything. I loved it. They were four very happy years.

RA: What did you study there?

BC: Well I studied what was called a—it was a--. I’ve forgotten what they called it. It was sociology. But it was a combination of courses to prepare you for school and social work. Actually that’s what it was because I thought that’s what I would do. But I had the most fantastic professors and I made a lot of good friends. And it was—it was a wonderful experience. It really was. So I--.

And then when I didn’t get the fellowship and I didn’t want to borrow the money because my sister was then going to Wellesley. And she never--. I don’t think she’s every forgiven me for being able to live at school and she had to live at home. To the point where one day my mother said, “I can’t help it if Barbara was born first.”

RA: What was so great about not living at home?

BC: Oh I think it was such a broadening experience. I mean, it would have been like a glorified--. I think it would--. Going to college and living at home to me would be like a glorified high school experience. I don’t know because I haven’t done it.

But after I graduated and I didn’t get it--. I mean I didn’t get the fellowship. Two very attractive women from Filene’s came to Smith to try to recruit people into their training squad. And I thought, “That’s what I’ll do.” So I did. I went to work at Filene’s. I’m not sorry. It was good business training.

I’ll never forget how embarrassed I was when the mother of one of my friends’ at Smith walked through and saw me on the floor of the store. And in a senatorian voice she said, “What are you doing here? You belong in graduate school.” But I’ve never been sorry that I worked there. It was a very interesting experience.

RA: Did you find it challenging?

BC: No. I don't think I found it challenging. But it opened a completely new world to me. I mean, traveling to New York and buying, it just was a completely different experience than anything that I had ever had. I won't say that it wasn't, in many respects, disillusioning about the way business was conducted or could be conducted.

But then I got married and my husband said I gave it up before I said I would. But I did. It was enough. I didn't want to be a career woman. Well in those days there was no such thing. There were very few women who would do that.

RA: Why didn't you want to be a career woman?

BC: I didn't want to make it the hub of my life. I really didn't.

RA: What were some of your friends like at Smith?

BC: It's interesting. They weren't Jewish. My close friends there. One came from a family who ran a farm in down toward the Cape. And she—she was—they had no education, her parents. But she was a wonderful person. She had two feet on the ground. She went after what she wanted. She ended up by being dean of Bryn Mawr. She's dead now.

RA: What's her name?

BC: Her name was—her maiden name was Dorothy Nepper. And then she married, her name was Marshall. And another one of my friends who I still am in touch with came from New York. Her grandfather, I think, had been president of Jack Frost Sugar Company. There were girls that I had—completely different from my friends in high school. And Helen was a wonderful girl. I was very, very fond of her. And then there was Ruth Neeley and oh, there were so many of them. And they're all dead, you know,

most of them. That's the sad thing about being in your eighties. You lose not only the family is decimated. But you do lose a lot of friends.

RA: Had you been in touch with them?

BC: With Helen, I am in touch. But the others are gone now. I am still in touch with—my two oldest friends have long been dead. But I am still close to a friend whom I met the first day I entered the eighth grade in Brookline when the teacher showed me where to hang my coat. And this redhead girl with flaming red hair came in and the teacher introduced me to her. And we're still very close friends. She's—

RA: What's her name?

BC: Her name is Agatha, Agatha Dorfman. It was Agatha Baron at the time. And—

RA: What were your friends like at Brookline High School? You said they were different.

BC: Well Agatha was one and Maxine was another. She was a very close friend of mine. And I don't know. It's just that we were on the same wavelength, you know. We just were on the same wavelength.

RA: Were your friends in high school Jewish?

BC: They were Jewish, oh yeah. I didn't have any Gentile friends in high school. I mean I knew a lot of people there. But my close friends were all Jewish in high school.

RA: You said that the class was divided by 8-A—

BC: That was—not high school. This was at the Devotion School. Yeah.

RA: Did you notice that in the upper levels were there more Jews in any of the levels?

BC: Not in 8-A--. No. I think it was pretty evenly divided. I think it was pretty evenly divided.

We had a wonderful experience a couple of years ago. We went on a cruise. And I looked at the passenger list and I saw the name of a boy. And I said, "Oh, he was in my room in the eighth grade at Devotion School." And my husband said, "Oh that's a common name." Anyway I wrote him a note and it was. And we met him and his wife. And that was a wonderful experience. It was very interesting.

RA: How did you meet your husband?

BC: How did I meet my husband? My husband was traveling in his father's business and stayed overnight one night with a friend of his from college in Portland, Maine. And the next morning he was having breakfast with his friend's mother who told him about her very good friend who lived very close to him. And she had two daughters. And they were lovely girls. And she wrote their names down. And my husband put it in his pocket.

And when he got home he asked his mother if she would send his suit to the cleaners. And he went through the pockets and found this. And so he called me. Well he didn't call me. I answered the phone. I don't know what would have happened if my younger sister had answered the phone because he had both names. But that's how I met him.

RA: Where was he in school?

BC: He was at Boston University. No, but he was through with school then. We both were. Oh sure, because I was working at Filene's and he was in his father's business. They manufacture type metal for newspapers. That was before offset, you know, when they used printing. I mean metal for printing.

RA: Was he working for a specific newspaper?

BC: No, no. It was sold to newspapers. The Boston Globe was their biggest customer. And after we were married I used to say, "What if you lost the Boston Globe? What would happen?" But they didn't.

RA: Were your parents happy with your choice?

BC: Oh they were delighted. Yeah. Yeah. And Aaron loved our family, too, because he sensed, you know, the minute he came into it. It was such a close, cohesive, warm family. Yeah. They were very happy with him.

RA: So as soon as you got married you stopped working?

BC: I stopped working. And then Jimmy was born. And when he was about seven years old--. My husband left his father's business. When his father died he did not particularly enjoy being with his uncle so he got out of the business. And he started his own business. It wasn't related to that.

But he called up one day and he was very upset because the young man who was working for Aaron didn't come in that day. And Aaron opened up the door of the desk and found checks that had never been opened, orders that had never been opened. And he said, "You've got to come in and help." And so I did. And I never left. I didn't work full-time. But I did work halftime.

And then when the business grew and grew and we built a building in Newton it was only a couple of miles, not even that, from where we lived. So I did go in every morning.

RA: And did you still go home for lunch?

BC: No. We used to have lunch in the lunchroom in the business.

RA: So did—when you got married where did you move to?

BC: When we got married we lived in Brighton in a very attractive apartment. I think it was. Then when my husband—

[end of tape 1, side A]

RA: OK, so you were gonna tell me about Filene's

BC: Oh [unclear]. I worked as a clerical and this--. She was the head of the department. This was inexpensive clothes: \$7.95 was the—

[Unknown male – voice unclear]

BC: And believe me there were people who would bring back dresses after they wore them and say, "It's all wrong, doesn't fit right." And they would expect their money back. The assistant buyer used to keep track, write down in a little book, some of the expressions that the buyer would use. She would come in in the morning and she'd say, "Today we're all going to put our teeth to the grindstone." [Laughs] It was an interesting experience. I certainly wouldn't want a career of it. Filene's in those days, though, was a really top notch store. I don't know if the name Louie Kerstein means anything to you.

RA: No.

BC: Well, Louie Kerstein was the head of Filene's. And he ran it. In fact there's a business library called the Kerstein Library, which is a business library. And his daughter was a professor at Smith at one time, Minna Kerstein. I've forgotten her last name. And his son, Lincoln Kerstein, was famous as sponsoring, bringing the Russian ballet and the arts to Boston.

RA: Did you ever meet Louie Kerstein?

BC: I had met him, yeah, but just very casually. His assistant, Sam Segal, was—had been a very good friend of my brother's. My brother, of course, went to MIT. Sam went to Harvard. But Sam was Louie's protégé. You know, what has happened to retailing now is, in a sense, what has happened to medicine, you know. It's degenerated. It's—

RA: What was it like then?

BC: Oh it had integrity. It had--. I don't know. It had class. It really did.

But I will remember, do remember, one woman who was head of the infants and children's wear. And I was having--. My best friend also went into the training squad. And her father had a chauffeur and a car who used to pick us up and bring us to work. And when we would get off at the employees' entrance with a chauffeur driven car, you can imagine the looks we got.

Anyway, this woman we had lunch with her one day. And she said--. She had never married. And she said to us, "Now don't you forget this. A caress is better than a career." [Laughter] So—

RA: Who told you that?

BC: This was a woman who was a very successful buyer of children's wear in Filene's. I've forgotten her name. But—

RA: So what did she think was more important?

BC: She thought that a caress was more important than a career. I don't know how she would have fitted with today's environment.

I think a lot of people, a lot of women in my generation, they either became schoolteachers and some of them became social workers. But there was no such thing as really going ahead in a career.

I remember the Yale—representatives from the Yale School of Nursing came to Smith. And they were—said, “You simply don’t realize now that this is the future. People are not—girls are not going to be nurses. But they are going to be executives. And the nursing profession is going to just zoom.” And that’s actually what did happen.

But, oh, my husband mentioned about when Roosevelt closed the banks and all the girls in the house--. I don’t know if you know the dormitories. I lived in Talbert.

RA: Okay.

BC: Did your mother live in the quad?

RA: I don’t know.

BC: Oh, you don’t know where she lived. Well, anyway, they had no money because they all had checking accounts and couldn’t use it. But I never had a checking account. I used to get five dollars a week as an allowance. And then I worked in one of the bookstores run by the college. It wasn’t downtown. So I had some money from that. I was the most popular girl in the house because I had cash.

RA: So why were you working?

BC: Because I needed the money. You see my parents had no money to send me. And I did get a scholarship. I can’t remember the first year. I think--. Well, the tuition was \$400 and the board and room was \$400. So it was \$800 a year. And I did get a \$200 scholarship the first year toward things. But then there was the board and room. But after my freshman year I got full scholarships after that.

RA: Because of your grades you got—

BC: Because of my grades.

RA: And then you were Phi Beta Kappa your junior year.

BC: I was in my junior year, yeah. And I really loved those years at Smith. I really did.

But it's interesting. You know there are so many kinds of girls there. During spring break so many of them would go to Bermuda. Well the thought of my going to Bermuda for a week when I was a student was just beyond the pale. I mean it was just unbelievable. Well then in their senior year when they could have their own cars, you know, it was a different ball game.

RA: And what did you do during your spring break?

BC: I went home.

RA: Did you work?

BC: No. I don't remember working. I remember once taking the bus home for a weekend because it was so important for me to see Eugene O'Neil's "Morning Becomes Electra". My mother couldn't get over it that I had saved my money and I came home and I wanted to see it. The theatre was always very, very important. And when I was working I saw everything in town for fifty-five cents. And those are some of the great experiences.

RA: So after college you worked at Filene's and you got married and you moved to Brighton.

BC: Yes.

RA: Okay.

BC: And then--. Oh then after--. Then my husband's father died and he left the business. He didn't want any part of it. And he went into business with someone—I

guess he was from Ohio. But they were in—we moved to Brockton. And that was a very unhappy time and it turned out to be disastrous. It wasn't a good business move.

And this man turned out to be--. Oh I don't know whether he was dishonest or unethical. But he just didn't conduct business the way we would do it. So we came back to Boston and we lived with my parents for a short time.

And then my very good friend, Agatha—the redhead who I had met when I was twelve years old—her brother, her sister and brother-in-law owned apartments in Newton. And so when one was available we got it. So we started there. So we lived there. And that was in Newton Highlands. And then we bought this—the house in Newton Center. And we were very happy there, as I say.

In fact, we still feel more at home in Newton than we do in Lexington because it's where your children grow up and where your, you know, your associations are. And we still are in Newton very, very often.

RA: Where did you have your son? Where were you living?

BC: We were living in--. Jimmy was born in Brockton. Yes, I came from the hospital to Brockton. That's right. I came—

UM: He was born

BC: He was born in Boston at the Boston Lying Inn, wasn't it. I've forgotten. It was part of the Mass General. And then he was in—we lived in Brockton. And then we moved to Brookline. I mean to, yeah, to Brookline. We went to live with my mother and father until we got the apartment in Newton.

And I can remember he was four months old and I was bathing him. And the radio was on and they announced that President Roosevelt had died. And that night at dinner

Eleanor Roosevelt got on the radio and said something about the moon, the sun and the stars had descended on Harry Truman. And my father burst into tears.

I had never seen him cry except once before. My younger sister had a baby while her husband who was a pediatrician was in the Army. It was during the Second World War. And the baby died two days after he was born. And my father cried then. And I remember his saying, "How could this happen to us?" And I said, "How are we different from anybody else?" And then when Roosevelt died, it was the second time I'd ever seen him cry.

And then we were lucky enough to get this apartment in Newton Highlands. And then after several years there we bought the house in Newton, in Newton Center, up in Oak Hill. We loved that house.

RA: It seems like you volunteered a lot in those days.

BC: I was--. I'll tell you, I'm really not a joiner. I loved being on the board of the League of Women Voters. But one of the reasons was I was the recording secretary. I was responsible only for myself.

When I took the chairmanship of a committee in the PTA when my son was in elementary school I almost went out of my mind because women would volunteer but wouldn't show up at meetings, wouldn't call. And it was at that point that I said I don't want any part of that. I will do what I can on my own when I am responsible. But I just couldn't cope with that. And that's been the way I've been ever since. I haven't been able to--. I'm not good on committees. I mean, on that type of thing.

RA: What's your involvement with the New Israel Fund?

BC: The New Israel Fund? Now how did we--? I'm not active in that. We support it.

But I think we went to a—went to the temple here at—in Lexington, Isaiah. There were two temples here Emunah, which is a conservative, and Isaiah, which is--. We went to both. I wanted to see what they were like. And there was a table there set up about the New Israel Fund. And we read it. And I felt this is something that should absolutely be supported. And we have supported it ever since. And there were lots of things. We support a lot of things.

But it's very distressing because the minute you contribute once to something you are on their mailing list forever. And even when you contribute in memory of someone because they are interested in it. I'm a great believer in contributing in memory of someone to what they're interested in, not in what I'm interested in. But then the organization assumes--.

There's one now called Americans for Peace Now, which I contributed because a friend of ours here died and wanted that. That was what she wanted. But you just can't contribute to everything. You just can't, so you have to be discriminating, at least we try.

RA: What else were you active with when you were raising your son?

BC: Mostly in the PTA. I was interested in that. And, also, I belonged to a book club. And that was in existence for a long time and we were very--.

They were close personal friends. And we were—we did a lot of reading and--. But it was organized but it wasn't super organized, you know. We all read the book and the discussion was wonderful. And, also, the--. It was a place where you would read something and you would bring it, you know you'd know

But since we've come here both my husband and I have been interested and active in poetry groups because--. That has been a wonderful experience, absolutely wonderful. We take courses at the senior center in Lexington and the Unitarian church in Wellesley that have had very good courses in poetry. And it's been a wonderful experience for us.

There's a very good poetry group here but the time isn't convenient for us. And that's something that I have really enjoyed.

In fact, I have a very wonderful, new contemporary poet. She isn't that young. And at Newman--. If you're interested at all you see the name Mary Oliver and you read her. She is marvelous. I think she's marvelous. And that gives us a great deal of pleasure.

RA: You also seem to travel a lot.

BC: We did travel a great deal. It isn't easy now. My husband hasn't been well. He had a spinal fusion in April and it's icky. But all the things you see here are from our travels.

RA: Where did you go?

BC: Well, we've seen quite a bit of the United States and the Caribbean and Mexico and Canada. We've been to the Far East.

My son got a fellowship to study in Taiwan one year. That was before China was open. And that was good excuse for us to go. So we went to Taiwan. And we went to Hong Kong and we went to Japan. And we saw a great deal there. And we've done a great deal of traveling in Europe.

And then a few years ago—and I'm so glad we did it because we never could do it now. We went to Australia and New Zealand. And believe me, don't ever miss it. It is an experience that is just unbelievable.

RA: How long were you there for?

BC: Six weeks. Six weeks. We took the ship—we took the QEII from San Francisco to Auckland, New Zealand. And then we joined a very small group, just six--. No, there were eight of us: four couples and a private guide. And traveled in New Zealand.

And then in Australia we did the same thing but with an Australian guide. And oh, we fell in love with Melbourne. You know, Sydney is the New York of Australia. Melbourne is the Boston. And it's a wonderful city. And the people are wonderful.

And it's an interesting thing, we've never--. As I say, I don't consider myself a religious person at all. Sometimes I think I am secular humanist. But we have always gone to Jewish synagogues and the Jewish quarters wherever we have visited. And that's very interesting. It's fascinating.

RA: Where did you go in Australia?

BC: Well, in Australia we couldn't--. The temple was closed then. Melbourne has a big Jewish community. But we didn't get to the synagogue in Melbourne. Why I can't remember now why.

Oh, I know why. We had--. My husband is interested—has worked with the blind for many, many years. And the Carol Center for the Blind in Newton has an international program. And every summer people from all over the world come to learn their techniques.

And one summer, the summer before we went, there was a woman from Melbourne there. And she took us to a meeting of women in a church that must have been what the United States was like a hundred years ago. It was fascinating. And then she took us to the university.

My son had faxed us. He wanted a certain book that was published by the University of Melbourne press that he couldn't get in New York. So she took us to the bookstore there. And we saw it.

But the people are unbelievable. I had a dental emergency in Auckland, New Zealand. And you cannot imagine the attention that I got.

We called a couple whom we had met on the ship from Auckland. And he said, "I'll call my dentist right away." I said, "It's Sunday at nine thirty. Never mind." I called the dentist and he said, "My secretary will call you at eight o'clock in the morning and tell you when to come in."

No sooner had she called and hung up there was a knock on the door. "Mrs. Cole, I understand that you have to go to the dentist. I work for the hotel and our limousine will take you."

RA: Wow.

BC: My husband was in Australia--. Was it Melbourne? No. Canberra, I guess it was. Anyway, he had an ear infection. And the--. It's always on a weekend. And I said to the guide, "There's an ear, nose and throat hospital across the street. We're going to have to go because my husband has an ear problem." She said, "You can't." She said, "It's just like the United States. You go into the emergency and you'll sit there all night long before they take you." She said, "Let me make a telephone call."

And she got a doctor to come to the hotel. And he examined Aaron and he said, "I don't have a pain killer strong enough for you. I'm going back to the hospital. I'll be back in a half hour." Came back with the painkiller, left us his home phone in case we needed it. Now where in the United States today would you get anything like that? Just [unclear]. I think our traveling has really been wonderful.

RA: What were some Jewish things you saw in Hong Kong and those areas?

BC: Well we--. Would you believe there's a Jewish synagogue in Tahiti?

RA: No.

BC: Yeah. In Tahiti we passed a Jewish synagogue. There was a wonderful-- Of course the Jewish synagogue in Rome and the Jewish synagogue in Copenhagen, and of course, London—the Portuguese, I mean, Amsterdam, the Portuguese-- And it's interesting, in London it's mostly orthodox, you know, the--

France, we went to a Jewish restaurant and to the synagogue in Paris. And in Greece, oh that was so sad. Aaron, I remember, had left some money because it was just falling on it—it was just in Athens, this was. And we—and we went to-- We did go to Israel years and years ago. I have no desire to go back. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

RA: What happened?

BC: I have never met such arrogant people. I have-- My husband has a cousin whose house—whose house in Brookline was open house for all the Israeli doctors who were coming here to study and everything. And when we left, she said, "I'm going to give you the name of these people. You must look them up. They're good friends of ours." So I said, "What can I bring?" And she said-- Well this was in the days when it was—you could do this. She said, "Oh they love American cigarettes."

So they invited us over and I brought American cigarettes. And she opened the package and she—she didn't throw it but she pushed it across the table and said, "We have cigarettes here." That's what she said to me.

And we had another experience. My husband took ill and I had to cancel a trip to Sofad. So I walked up to the tourist agency. And on the way back I got off the curb to wait to cross the street. And a man on a-- I had no—a sleeveless dress on. It was hot. And a man on a bicycle came by and pinched me like this, very hard. It was such a shock that I started to cry. And I walked back upstairs and a woman came over to me. And she said, "Do you know why he did that?" And I said, "No." She said, "Because you were standing on the street instead of on the curb." She said, "And that is absolutely forbidden for a

pedestrian to get off the curb until they have to go.” So I said, “Well that’s some way to show me”, you know. And that’s--.

I found the people very arrogant. I--. This was long before the Six Day War, you know. And I literally when the taxi--. We were waiting for the taxi to take us to the airport. I had a nightmare of what if it doesn’t show up and we’re stuck here. I don’t know. And, of course, the situation there now I think is just terrible. [Pause]

There’s a very good group at Temple Israel that I would have liked to have joined but it’s too far away. Ann—you know Ann Alberts? She’s--. I think that’s her name. She’s the librarian.

RA: Ann Abrams.

BC: Ann Abrams. And they have a group that meets. And the few times I went when we first moved here I was younger and I could go easily. I went to that and I thought they were doing a good job. That I enjoyed.

RA: What other things were you active in at Temple Israel?

BC: I never was—I never joined the Sisterhood. I’m—I just--. Organized women’s groups don’t--. The League was very important to me, the League of Women Voters. But I never did--. But we have gone to some of the--. When they have interesting meetings we have gone.

Now we used to go south every winter. And the temple--. We used to go to the temple there, the reformed temple. They had the most marvelous scholars and residents for a weekend. And they were very good.

They had Gunther Plout one year. Gunter Plout is a very famous reformed rabbi from Toronto. And he has done commentary on the Torah and so forth.

And I'll never forget when he was introduced one night at the temple he started to laugh. He said, "I'm so glad that I was introduced this way." He said, "The last time I gave a speech in a temple I was introduced as 'Gunther Plout, the author of the Torah'."

[Laughter] So I think we're very—

We're very fond of elder hostels. We aren't able to go now but we have gone. I don't know if you know what they are. You know, the elder hostel—

RA: That's where you stay when you're traveling?

BC: No. That's not it. Elderhostel was a group that was formed for retired schoolteachers who could go to a vacation place and study and take courses at a minimal fee. It's grown to be an enormous worldwide organization. And we've gone to many of them and loved them. And we've gone to many that have been sponsored by Jewish organizations. And you get all kinds of interesting things there.

We've just had to cancel one in Brewster, New York. It's run by the Educational Alliance from the East Side of New York. And they concentrate on Jewish music, Jewish theatre. They're wonderful. They really are a wonderful organization.

I'll tell you what's making us very sad is that we have been members of the Jewish Historical Society for years. And that's set at Brandeis, or it has been. And now it's all moving to New York. And that's, to me, is a sad thing because they've had wonderful speakers and wonderful things there, you know. And now that'll—that's—that'll all be gone. So I'm sorry about that. I really am. We've supported them. [Pause]

RA: What other places are you supporting?

BC: Well, let's see. We're supporting the Beth Israel Hospital. We're supporting the CJP. We're supporting American Civil Liberties Union. We're supporting, oh that-- It's-- . I've forgotten the name of it but it's very important. I know Barry Lynn is the director.

It's the Separation—Americans for Separation of Church and State. It's fighting the churches trying to take over the public school system. That is one of our big things that we support, and Civil Liberties. We support the Boston Symphony. We support the MFA, fine arts. And a lot of the—a lot of things to protect the environment: the wildlife sanctuary and--. I suppose we would be called liberal. You know, Jesse Helms would call us ultra-liberal. We're--.

The only Republican I've ever voted for was Weld. And that was because I just despised John Silva, you know. Weld graduated from Harvard in the same class as Jim, as our son. And he gave the speech in Latin. He's a--. Yeah. So--.

I guess as a representative of a Jewish woman maybe I haven't been--. I have been a member of Hadassah for years. I would never, never resign from that because I mean I think that's very important. And—but I'm not—I'm not really a devotee of organized religion. You know I think there's so much hypocrisy in it. There really is.

RA: What did your parents teach you about religion?

BC: My parents wanted us to know about Jewish history. But they did not particularly believe in organized religion.

I want to give you another—give you a contrasting experience I had with the Gittelsohn with my son you know that I told you about was so negative. When I applied for Smith one of the things you had to get was a letter from your clergyman. We did not belong to Temple Israel. We didn't belong to any temple. My brother had been confirmed at Temple Israel. In those days you didn't have to be a member to go through, you know, confirmation. He had been confirmed. Harry Levi—I don't know if you know.

Well, Rabbi Harry Levi was one of the great rabbis at Temple Israel. My mother called him and told him that her son had been confirmed there but we were not members and that I needed a letter to get into college. And he said, "I cannot give you a letter without

meeting your daughter. If she is willing to come to my home I will meet her and then I will decide whether I give her the letter.” So I went up.

He spent between a half an hour and an hour with me talking to me. And then gave me a letter. Now, I mean, there was--. Here was a--. I think of those two incidences as the difference, you know, in handling people.

RA: So you liked that he spent that much time with you.

BC: Yes. I thought he was a--. Of course, people, a lot of people thought he was more like a Unitarian minister than a Jewish rabbi. Services were on Sunday mornings when he was the rabbi. And there were loads of non-Jews in the congregation at that time.

RA: Why would they come?

BC: Because he was a wise and understanding man. I don't know. Maybe things were simpler then. But we've had some funny experiences at the temple. I've got to tell you one.

You know it was founded by Germans, you know. And you know what—how the German Jews felt about the Russian Jews when they came. Maybe you're too young to know that.

But anyway, there was a meeting and [unclear] this person to the temple asked if there were any questions or anything. A little old lady got up and she said, “Mr. Strauss, where have all the German Jews gone?” That was so funny. I don't know what she'd say today if she came and saw all the Russian Jews. “Where have all the German Jews gone?” That was very, very funny.

RA: How was Chanukah celebrated?

BC: We never celebrated Chanukah, never.

RA: Did you celebrate—

BC: No. And you know something? I remember so many Jewish families, their children hung up stockings or there were Christmas trees. My mother would have no part of it. She wouldn't celebrate Christmas. She wouldn't celebrate Chanukah. No. She never did.

RA: What about Rosh Hashanah?

BC: No. We--. Well we would go to temple on it. When we joined the temple we went to it, not growing up. It was Passover that was the big celebration. But we never went to school on Yom Kippur and we never went to school on Rosh Hashanah.

RA: Was that a problem?

BC: No. It was no problem. The second day of Rosh Hashanah we always went to school because if we had any formal religion it was reformed certainly not--. But you know it's interesting as close as the family was Chanukah didn't—somehow didn't figure in at all.

RA: What about with your own son, did you do anything?

BC: My son does not--. What shall I say? He did not marry a Jewish girl. She's a wonderful girl and we are crazy about her. But he is not the slightest bit religious. And he's a fine decent kid, not kid anymore. But he really is. But he is not at all religious, not at all.

He did a very good job. He wrote a poem that was published in the temple bulletin when he was at the Sunday school about Jews wandering and not having a homeland that was really very, very good.

I'm not sorry that he went through those years, believe me, of the temple. I don't feel any particular regret. I don't know. Maybe I should. That he isn't at all, not only religious, I don't think he's even interested though he does—we do still have a seder for whoever's left and they come.

RA: And you have that here?

BC: Well my cousins had it. And we were in Philadelphia last year. My cousin's daughter is a rabbi, a reformed rabbi.

RA: And your son doesn't have any children?

BC: No. No, they were married quite late, in their forties. No. But he's a good kid. And it's been a pretty good life. I really can say that.

RA: What do you mean by that?

BC: Well, we've had a--. I was going to say a fairly good. We've had a very good marriage. It's fifty-seven years. That's a long time. We've never really had to worry about money. We've had a lot of traveling. And we've been able to--. Until now when we're not—where we have to learn to accept old age gracefully, which we are having a hard time doing. It's hard to us to realize we just can't travel the way we used to, you know.

And we had some wonderful trips, some wonderful experiences. And in the early days I never used a travel agent. I always did the research and the hotel reservations and everything. And then as we got older it was harder.

But my husband says, and he's right, "When you travel it's three-fold: the planning and then you're there. And then after--. Then you live off of it when you're home." And when I look around and I see all these things they're all things that I've got traveling and, you

know, so forth.

Anyway, that belonged—some of them belonged to my father's mother, my grandmother. And his sister went back in 1910 and that was sent. She came back with that as a present for my mother.

RA: That lamp?

BC: No. The samovar. And the—that is a bread box, the upper one. That belonged to my brother's first wife. She was German. And during the First World War they went from house to house collecting copper to make ammunition. And they didn't want to give that up so they buried it in the ground. And after the war was over they dug it up. And she died before my brother. And when my brother died I got it. And that's it.

RA: What else would you like to tell me about?

BC: We just wish we could take old age gracefully. That's our big problem now. I think we both have to learn to accept the restrictions that health and lack of health impose on you and just be grateful for what you've had and do what you can gracefully. That's it.

RA: Are there any questions I'm forgetting to ask

BC: Well you have many more interesting people than we are, I'm sure.

RA: I wouldn't say that. You're very interesting.

BC: But you know, we—even when I look around and I see--. You know we bought that in Kyoto, the screen. And I look at the painting and what they--. This we got in Denmark. That's--. Yeah, that's a copy of a Van Gogh in Denmark. And I don't know. Everything--. This we got in Venice. It brings back a whole, you know, travel.

RA: Okay.

BC: You've got your whole life ahead of you. There's nothing more rewarding because when you come back and you read and you've seen these places it means so much more to you than just a, you know.

UM: Our experiences in England, villages and the place that we visited [unclear] and so forth. And-

BC: We are the original Anglophiles. And it got to the point where my husband would—my husband would say to me, “Only every other trip to England.” And we had a regular routine. We would spend about ten days in London and then we'd spend two weeks in a very small portion of England. You know, we'd go to the Cotswald—

[END OF INTERVIEW]