Marjorie Edenfeld Transcript

FRANCIS GODINE: I will say that today is Friday, October 31, 1997. I am Fran Godine, interviewing Marjorie Edenfeld in her home under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archive Temple Israel Oral History Project in Boston, Massachusetts. I'm just going to say good morning to Marjorie, and we'll just hear what your voice sounds like on the tape, be sure I have the volume correct.

MARJORIE EDENFELD: Good morning, Fran.

FG: Good morning. We're so appreciative that you're doing this, Marjorie. I'm wondering if there's a particular reason why you agreed to do this.

ME: I think it's the need to be a part of, I suppose, the temple and just a sense of belonging. I suppose that's it.

FG: That's lovely. Well, thank you.

ME: Oh, you're welcome.

FG: Is there anywhere you particularly wanted to begin? I know you've given this a little thought. Anything on your mind that you would like to just say?

ME: Well, I think, quickly, when I look back and I can look back a lot of years because I'm eighty-five and a half now. But when I do look back I seem to have done – I seem to have been a late bloomer, not because I wanted to be, but because that's the way it happened. I did things years after everybody else – ears. A bar mitzvah at seventy-five. Becoming a mother at – what did I say it was?

FG: Forty-five?

ME: Forty-five. Retiring from a full career in my early forties, something like that. Nobody else did it that way. I was later than everybody else and in some respects, that's good, and in other respects, there were times when I feel it's a little lonely. Well, no sense in dwelling on that. It's been interesting and there are a lot of good aspects to it. But that, in reflection, seems to be my summary of all these years of things that I did later than most people.

FG: When you say it was lonely, is it there weren't friends?

ME: Contemporaries. I was still working in Filene's when my contemporaries were wheeling their infants. And their kids were in high school and thinking of college and so forth when we welcomed Johnny into our home, a great thing for us, a wonderful thing for us, but after everybody else. So, there weren't many women wheeling along with me.

FG: [laughter] How were you related to by your friends?

ME: How was I –?

FG: How did your friends relate to you?

ME: Well, my friends have been in categories. I've had childhood growing up friends; I've had Filene friends; I've had temple friends; I've had friends from the Recuperative Center. So they've been in sections. Somehow or other, I look at friends who haven't had that kind of a compartmental – what am I trying to say? – type of life and have sort of gone from beginning right up to [inaudible], and they've lived pretty much the same type of thing, place. Their friends have grown with them and stayed with them. They've added to it, but there's been a continuity, a real continuity. I look back, and I see lots of bits and pieces, and they're all important to me. But I kind of wish that they were all in one long thread. It's the sort of thing like looking back at somebody years later and saying, "You were my friend when we were eleven, but what now?" So that, I think, is

kind of different. However, I think I've had a good perspective, and I've enjoyed that. I think I've been fortunate in my life. I wouldn't want to – I don't think I'd want to change things that happened. I think I might have handled – I know I would like to have had the wisdom to handle them better.

FG: Wouldn't we all?

ME: Wouldn't we all, that's true.

FG: [laughter]

ME: That's true, and there's no sense fussing about it. But I'm grateful. Felix and I are grateful at this stage. We're both in our eighties. We're a couple of old machines with broken parts, but we keep them in repair, and we don't run them too hard. We love our home, and we just are glad for every day that we have. That is about it. Our son John, who we adopted when he was four months old, and he was – what was he? – nine pounds, twelve ounces? He's six-foot-two now. And he's a great guy – a little balder now than he was when he was a baby, but he's a great fellow and our only child.

FG: Yes. Does he live nearby?

ME: He lives in Framingham, and he's not married. There's been a couple of nears, a couple of misses. Like any mother, I keep hoping, but I'm letting go now. I know this is his life, and I know that he'd like to get married and if there's the right girl and the right time –

FG: It'll happen.

ME: – he's ready.

FG: Great.

ME: But he's a darling. I always used to pray when he was growing up, all I want for him is for him to be a decent human being. I believe that my prayers have been answered in that regard.

FG: A wonderful thing for a parent to be able to say.

ME: And I think my other prayer when I much younger was I want to love and be loved. And that's happened too, so why aren't I a lucky woman and a grateful one? So, here we are, and I'm talking about nothing.

FG: [laughter] And everything.

ME: Well, my earliest memories were I was born in what was then Brookline and what became, I think, Allston. It was on a borderline, and as soon as it became that – I was five years old, and my brother was six years older. We moved from Marshall Terrace to Fuller Street in Brookline so that we'd be able to go to the Brookline schools where my brother was going until they changed the name of the town that we were living in.

FG: May I just ask who was in the family?

ME: Oh, mother, father, brother Joey and me.

FG: Joey was older?

ME: Six years older than I. When he was a great deal older, he took – he had a good sense of humor. He took great delight in introducing me as his older sister. It used to be devastating to me that a number of people believed him. However, he was six years older, and in childhood, that was almost a generation. He was a big boy, and I was a little kid. However, we moved to Fuller Street, and I would say that's where I had a lot of wonderful friends, childhood friends. That was one of the nicest apartments in Brookline. It was good living. It was lovely living. Esther Goldman Welling was my childhood friend

at five, and I talked to her last week. She lives in Dennis, and we're still best friends, but now it's over the telephone. Those years were happy years as a child, but they were the beginning of the years of anxiety that followed all our lives, and me mostly because I was so young. The first terrible thing that happened was that Joey, who was between thirteen and fourteen, was a healthy, fine boy who played football – came home from summer camp, played football one night in September, or evening, came home with a pain or something, a stiff neck, and was diagnosed the next day with poliomyelitis or infantile paralysis, whatever you wanted to call it in those days. He was paralyzed on one side for the rest of his life. He died when he was eighty-two. He had three wives, three daughters, four grandchildren, and he was so without self-pity and with such a wonderful smile and such a debonair manner that he just was a great, great guy. I miss him. I miss him very much. My mother and father were very close. My father – this was the number two thing. My father started a – he came from Frankfurt—from Germany, not from Frankfurt. He came from Southern Germany, Bavaria. I think he was probably mid-twenties. He met my mother, who was the daughter of Jewish, but German – her father had been, I think, born in Germany.

FG: Your father was not –? Sorry, was your father Jewish—

ME: Oh, yes.

FG: In Bavaria? He was Jewish, also.

ME: Yes. My mother was born in Boston, she was one of – she had four brothers, and she was the only girl. Because her father thought she was getting to be a tomboy and because he felt she wasn't being brought up in all the young lady talent and abilities and so forth, he took her to – he was going to take her to France to a boarding school, a finishing school, but he stopped on the way to visit his own relatives in Frankfurt, Germany. They just convinced him that she shouldn't go that far away alone, and there was a fine – what they called a pension in Frankfurt, where she went to boarding school

there for almost two years.

FG: About how old was she then?

ME: She was thirteen, fourteen. And so then she came back to Boston, and when she was about eighteen or nineteen, I think, she met my father, who was seven years older. She liked him. There was one other man that I think was interested in her, but she didn't care for him. So she married my father, and they had a good life. They used her so-called inheritance to buy the house in Marshall Terrace, but then they moved to Fuller Street to a lovely apartment and my father's business – he became a manufacturer of men's neckwear. He was something of a dreamer, and he had an artistic sense. He loved people, a good salesman. Things went fine until he went to France to corner the silk market for his neckties, and somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, the bottom fell out of the silk market. All of his capital – everything was in it and lost. When he came back, he had a son, his only son, who was crippled, and a business that was crippled. It was hard going. So I think that I ¬– and the family – my mother never believed in not sharing. She told me things, not in a hard sense, but she made me aware that things were tough. I know that I couldn't play with the other kids because of the quarantine. I knew that things were bad business-wise. Then there was another thing that had haunted me for years, and that was the fact that being German was a terrible thing because, after World War I, anyone who was German was an enemy. From first grade on, I felt that I was sorry I was German and tried to have that overlooked. That was strange for a little kid, and I never told anybody, so nobody ever realized that it was troublesome to me, but it was. And then my father first, and then my mother sought help. His background in Judaism was – I never heard much about it. I know that his parents were Jewish, but I never heard much about his bringing up. Actually, not too much from him because children were to be seen and not heard in that generation. My mother's Judaism and Jewishness – she went to Sunday school at Temple Israel. Her parents were very early – I don't believe they were founding members, but I think they perhaps

lived next door to the founding members because I think that they were members in – she went to Sunday school in 1890, and her brothers went earlier. And her parents were members before that. So they were early members. Betsy found something that I can't put my fingers on that mentioned my grandfather as one of the early members of the temple. However, there wasn't a lot of Jewishness – there wasn't tradition in our home. We didn't celebrate the holidays. We went to a club that my father belonged to, the Elysium Club at Channukah. The main thing about that is that we were given ice cream and cake and candles. And that was the holiday.

FG: That's a plus.

ME: Seder, I don't recall celebrating, although my mother knew how to make matzo balls, and that was all I knew about that. I went to my first real family Seder, I think after I was married, when friends invited us. Looking around me now at active younger members of our temple, I feel that they have got the traditional background that is so strong a part of Judaism. I think I tried to get some of it by going to adult ed courses. I tried to get academically what should have come from the appetite [laughter] and from the warmth and from the observance – all of these things. So I almost felt as though I was an outsider looking in and trying to get in. I tried for years and years and years. The bat mitzvah thing was incredible. I approached Helen Fine, who is a Temple Israel teacher, and I said to her, "Helen, I sit in temple like a bump on a log when they read Hebrew. I don't know a word of it." She said, "I'll teach you." Well, that grew into the first lesson when I went to her when she put the book down, and she said, "I think you should because bat mitzvah, and I will teach you. That will be my mitzvah." Every week I went to her home for a year, and she taught me, and I studied. I studied hard throughout the week, and I had my bat mitzvah service – my husband and my son – and it was a most uplifting experience. I think if I could have left everything and gone into it – if there was such a thing as a Jewish convent, I would have dropped everything and gone right into it and forgotten everything. I was so immersed and so uplifted and so elevated and so

dedicated and so everything. It was just wonderful. But what happened after that [was] I got sick, and my eyesight didn't work right. I had physical difficulties. I couldn't see and recognize Hebrew letters as well. I have to tell you that I can't read Hebrew now. I can't. But I want to learn again. And I have that – for a long time, this has been kind of a dormant thing. We've grown older and allowed the aging process to keep us away from temple because I didn't drive at night or Felix was tired after a long day. I worked at the Recuperative Center for a while and allowed things to interfere. I had reasons. It was too bad. Felix is Jewish. This is interesting, I think. He came from Frankfurt, Germany. He was about twenty-one when he came to Boston. He came through a wonderful man whom he met when he was immigrating. He stopped at Cuba to immigrate to Boston, and he met this fine lawyer, Mr. Strauss. There were two lawyers who kind of guided him. Mr. Strauss was a lovely man and helped Felix develop a lot of his innate taste. They had a kindred interest in photography and so forth. And then he met through a young woman in New York whom he had an introduction to – he met the Slater family in Boston, and John Slater was a lawyer here and one of the trustees at temple. They took Felix, a lone young man, under their wing a lot. He was in their home a great deal. He was an adopted son, and he went to temple with them and got to know Rabbi Josh Liebman and became very interested in it. He had never had Jewishness in Germany. The only thing he recalls is his father in a cut-away and a top hat going to a funeral, but that was it. So he didn't have any awareness, and the Slaters, I think, brought him into it. My father, with his business worries and his concerns over his son, didn't find any comfort anywhere until someone introduced him to Christian Science. That seemed to be his answer. I think young people now are getting into Buddhism or other kindred religions. They're looking for something. Young Jewish people without any religion will become Orthodox suddenly when they go to Israel and become immersed. They're looking for something, and he was looking for answers. He seemed to find them, and he brought us into it one by one, my mother first. And then I gradually, from the time I was about thirteen until I was fifteen. When I was fifteen, I was in confirmation class at

Temple Israel. I had gone through Sunday school, but I went to Rabbi Levi, who was a dear personal friend. I grew up with his son, who – they were neighbors when we were young. I went to him, and I said, “Dr. Levi, I don’t want to be confirmed. I don’t feel that I want to.” He listened to some of the things I had to say, which were probably quite childish and quite honest for the time. He said, “Marjorie, I honor you for your convictions. Now what I want you to do is continue the confirmation class until the end.” I think this was probably another four to six weeks more, maybe less. He said, “Stay with the class and then just quietly drop out,” which is what I did. I didn’t attend confirmation services, and I was never confirmed.

FG: Do you remember your reasons why?

ME: I didn’t like being Jewish. Suddenly, we were Christian Scientists.

FG: So there was a period of a couple of years when you were doing parallel learning in a way.

ME: Yes, right. As soon as that – oh, then when I was fifteen, and that happened, we moved to Mamaroneck, New York, in Westchester because my father thought that it would be better, instead of traveling, to have a New York office, have a factory in Boston but not have to go back and forth – open a New York office. We found a lovely apartment in Mamaroneck, and I went to Mamaroneck High School and became non-Jewish.

FG: And you began sort of a new life.

ME: The day that we arrived there, we went to the little house that was there, Christian Science Church. And Monday night was – Wednesday night was testimonial night. My father stood up and said he was so grateful to be among friends and to find a new home and so forth. They welcomed us, and the following Sunday, I enrolled in Sunday school. And I stopped being Jewish.

FG: So you introduced yourself at that point as—

ME: At that point, yes. It had been gradual. We had been going to services at Wednesday nights mostly at the Second Church in Roxbury, which is a lovely little building, and sometimes the Mother Church in Boston. I became completely – I passed and one of my close friends was a Jewish girl, mostly my friends were not in Mamaroneck. But she told me years later that her mother never knew that we were Jewish. She said, “I wish I’d known. Then I would have become friends with,” my mother. But that’s what happened. We didn’t observe any of the Jewish holidays, wore Easter hats with the best of them, exchanged Christmas gifts, made my own Christmas cards, and was completely out of it.

FG: Did you feel a sort of spiritual connection with –?

ME: Yes, because I could believe. I could believe that man was good. There was no evil, and everything was going to come out all right. It was a nice comfortable, cushiony feeling. It didn’t answer all my questions, but enough of them so that I didn’t seek anything further. That might have gone on endlessly. We moved back here. It might have gone on forever until I met Felix. And Felix adores medicine – the medical field. Somebody said he’s a frustrated doctor. I don’t think so. But he’s been a volunteer at the BI [Beth Israel] for fifty-five years and has been nicely honored as such. He adores the hospital; it’s his second home. For anybody to eschew medical treatment was beyond him. And gradually, we – well, it wasn’t at once, but it was gradual – we bought our house in West Newton. It was sometime there and then that we went to temple, and then we joined the temple that had been newly formed out in West Newton that was an offshoot of Temple Israel, Rabbi Mandell and his followers started that in the Unitarian Church. And I went to it. We tried, and I bought a book on Reform Judaism and started all over again, but it wasn’t a comfortable temple for us. I don’t think we ever felt right there. Again, Mr. Slater said, “Why don’t you belong to the temple that your family

always belonged to?" So, we did. We joined Temple Israel.

FG: About when was that would you say?

ME: Well, I thought I looked it up, and I think – did I give you some sort of a funny date on that? I thought I had looked it up.

FG: Well, by 1980, you were on Sisterhood committees.

ME: Yes.

FG: Vice President.

ME: Well, we were married in 1946, and we weren't temple members until a short time after that and a very short time after that.

FG: What was your wedding like?

ME: It was small. It was very small. Rabbi Liebman married us.

FG: You were not members of the temple then, but Rabbi Liebman officiated.

ME: No, but he married us partly because he knew Felix from having seen him in the front row every Friday night and because Mr. John Slater was a trustee and said, "Look, he's a young immigrant," and that's what happened. So, he did marry us. It was a very small wedding in a small hotel that became a BU [Boston University] dormitory on Bay State Road.

FG: Oh, yes. There's some lovely brick [inaudible].

ME: Yes, it was small; we had about seventeen people there, and they were just relatives and very few friends: the Slaters and this lawyer – his widow, and a couple of cousins, and so forth.

FG: And you were comfortable enough at that point to consider yourself Jewish, to have a Jewish ceremony.

ME: Oh, yes, absolutely. Yes, from then on, or even before that. Even before that. We had started going to temple and going to services and so forth. But it wasn't until Johnny was born that I really tried to have something of a Jewish home. [laughter] At one point, I had a stream across the living room that said, "Happy Hanukkah," until he noted that the letter had been made in Japan and it said, "Happy Haukkah," instead of Hanukkah.

FG: [laughter] This was Johnny?

ME: Yes, he noticed. So, we didn't use it after that, but we had used it for a few years. But we did the observances. I had a little book that told what to do. I went to classes at temple. I went to every one of Rabbi Gittelsohn's – every one that I could and loved them and felt a part of them and made friends, and they were a strong part of my life.

FG: In terms of a personal spiritual journey, do you feel that there's a balance between Christian Science and Judaism?

ME: Oh, that's out. That's out the window. That's out the window. The only thing about that is a scientific statement of being, and that's something I could recite by rote.

FG: What is that?

ME: What?

FG: What is that? The scientific statement of being.

ME: "There is no life, truth, intelligence, or substance in matter. All is infinite mind and its infinite manifestations. There is neither good nor evil; therefore, man is good." I don't know. Maybe there's something else. But that was it.

FG: But I meant, what role does that play?

ME: Oh, that was your creed. That was your whole –

FG: Like our Shema or something?

ME: Yes, that was your whole creed. That was your—

FG: The core.

ME: – pledge of allegiance. That was your constitution. That was it. Reciting it is just words; it has no meaning, and I haven't been to church, and I would not feel any interest in going.

FG: Ultimately, do you feel Judaism has provided a different kind of fulfillment?

ME: Judaism has played different roles, and I find I'm seeking more because I've never been a part of tradition. I find that I'm looking for it more in tradition. It's a little late now because Johnny isn't living with us, and Felix isn't a traditional kind of guy unless it's German. We go to services, and I think tradition.

FG: Do you do any regular observances at this point in your lives, Shabbat candles or –?

ME: Shabbat candles sometimes, yes. Not enough. Not enough.

FG: When you say not enough, it sounds as if –?

ME: Well, I can't push the – I gave it to Johnny when he was little. We had the observances then, and we had friends. We assigned parts in the seder service, and we did it all. But gradually, as he moved away, somehow or other, it didn't seem to hold onto the two of us. The few times we went to seder with – a lot of our friends seemed to have moved away – a lot of them. Our relatives seem to have gone in different directions – California, Florida, and some of our dearest ones back to their native Stockholm.

FG: Did your immediate family have any reaction to your return to Judaism? Were your parents alive at that point or –?

ME: My mother, I think, began to sense it because Rabbi Gittelsohn officiated at her funeral in 1961, and I think felt comfortable about it.

FG: And your brother? Did he take it –?

ME: He could take it or leave it, really.

FG: Did he pursue Christian Science [inaudible]?

ME: He never denied or – he was Jewish. He was confirmed, but he just never belonged to temple. He didn't marry Jewish girls until the last one, and then he was late seventies. So he never belonged to temple in his adult life. He was never a member. But I think he felt Jewish. It's not a kind of a Jewish membership that I would recommend. I look at young people, and they're belonging, their participating and being part of it and finding joy in it, and it's being a very strong part of their whole being. And to me and to us, it has been so much a compartment.

FG: Well, in hearing many people's journeys, there's such a range of how people relate to religion that it sounds as if you found a very personal way to make connections and for your family.

ME: Well, I feel that I'm more spiritual than I am religious, if that's possible, and I'm trying to get the two of them together.

FG: Could you explain that a little more? That's a lovely concept.

ME: You mean my beliefs? My spiritual beliefs?

FG: Whatever aspects you'd like to. I mean, just how you're making that distinction between spiritual and religious.

ME: I don't know how I'm going to tackle that. That's an awfully big subject. I feel that I'm a creation of God, just as much as my favorite tree, and I feel that I have the ability to think and to do good or not to do good. I think that's in my hands, and God put it there. I don't think I've ever asked God to do something for me in tangible forms. I've never said, "I want a new dress," or "Help me to get into this school," or "Get something done for me," or that sort. I've never been tangible in my requests of God. From the littlest – "Dear God, make me a good girl," and now, "Help us to have courage and strength and wisdom and faith." That's about it. That's about it. Now, whether that's religious or not, I don't know. But that, I think, is what I feel is my spirit.

FG: Thank you for [inaudible].

ME: Well, aren't you nice? Really. Really. Well, all right. They're good thoughts, and I can look at that tree, and it took an awful beating. I have a great feeling for that tree. It's over in the middle, and we planted it as part of our five-year estate plan of a little at a time, you know. So, that was a stripling when we put it in, and now I can't see the top. But I've related to it. It's grown as I have. The beginning of April this year, it took an awful beating.

FG: With the snow.

ME: With the storm and all. We lost a lot of limbs and so forth, and that tree lost a great deal. And I look out, and there's one special rather thin branch that's almost in my vision at the level of my bedroom upstairs. I look at it so often and think, "Well, look, you made it this far, and so did I, and we'll carry on. You're doing okay." And I can look in the mirror and say, "Alright, for an old girl, you're doing alright." And the tree is too. So, we're friends. [laughter] Silly.

FG: May we shift gears at this point –

ME: Sure, sure.

FG: – to talk a bit about your careers?

ME: That was a wonderful part of my life – Filene's. Wonderful! Now that's another compartment.

FG: Do you want to start with –?

ME: The hardest thing was my getting into Filene's because it was a time when they had closed ranks. Unemployment. It was after the Depression or maybe shortly after, and they had hired the cream of the crop of personnel. They'd taken college graduates who couldn't get jobs anywhere. They took sons and daughters of store presidents because Filene's had a wonderful training course or courses – executive training courses. Storeowners sent their kids from all over the country to be stock boys in Filene's to take their courses. One of the boys was John Roosevelt, President Franklin Roosevelt's son. He walked down to South Station with me once or twice to get the same train. It was a lovely kind of people and ,of course, the best looking they had in the toilet goods department, not cosmetics – toilet goods. They had the "Aisle of Beauty," and they had all the prettiest girls selling there. Sure enough, all these stage-door Johnny types with the carnation used to come in at noon and walk up and down. It was really quite something. They had their choice of people, and after they got them all, I knocked at the door. So, that was hard. That took a long time.

FG: Was this after high school for you or after –?

ME: It was after high school. It was after secretarial school. It was after living in New York. It was after coming here, and it was still Depression, and there was nothing. Three or four of my friends used to go to the department stores and take a day's work whenever

they had sales or whenever there was Christmas and so forth. We were paid by the hour, and if we got maybe two dollars or something or a dollar-eighty, then we bought a package of cigarettes for fifteen cents, and we were in the money. We played bridge on afternoons, and at four o'clock, we'd make telephone calls to the employment office to see if there would be anything the next day. Well, this went on for a long time. Finally, I did get my foot in selling in Filene's. And I think it was – I used any influence I could to get in, but it didn't seem to help. There was a secretary to Mr. Kirstein, who was head of the store and an advisor to President Roosevelt, a big man in every sense. Instead of one of my nice memories of him – he is a great hulking man in a camel's hair coat. He and I were alone in an elevator, and I was as gauche as you could be. And I finally, feeling I had to say something, said, "Mr. Kirstein, I like working in this store." And the doors opened, and he said, "So do I," and walked out. [laughter] But anyway, I finally got a job steady selling, and I sold for one day less than six months when I got a call from the employment office saying Mr. Lacy, Division Manager on the first floor, needed a secretary for the day because his girl was out. I was a rotten secretary. I went to secretarial school, hating it. My mother sent me because I wanted to go on the stage. She said, "I want you" – I cried all the way in to register for Packard. She said, "I'd rather have you cry now than later." At least you'll have something to fall back on if you need it. So I went to secretarial school, and I learned how to draw double lines without moving the ruler. And afternoons, once in a while, I would go try to apply for a part for Broadway. I was absolutely out of – I was square in a round hole or round in a square hole. It was crazy. But I was crazy about the theater. A lot of kids were at that time. So I was a rotten secretary, but I tried when I got into his office, and people were nice to me. He was the head of all the buyers.

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

FG: I will just say this is side two of Marjorie Edenfeld. Today is October 31, 1997, and we're just talking about the beginning of your Filene's career.

ME: Would you have some tea? It may be luke [warm] by now. I could reheat.

FG: That's fine. No, actually, the pot held it beautifully. May I offer you a little more?

ME: No. Thank you.

FG: I just wanted to repeat what we said because I'm not sure it was caught at the end of the tape that you began to work as the secretary for the buyer on the –

ME: Division manager.

FG: – division manager on the street floor because his secretary was out.

ME: She was out sick.

FG: And then she never came back.

ME: And she never came back because she was pregnant. So, they gave me the chance, and they never saw the number of papers I tore up for poor typing and so forth. I made wonderful friends and wonderful contacts. There was one particular buyer – and I will never know but always be grateful to – who took me under her wing and taught me so much. She was a good friend, and I think some of – I felt some of the glamour – a lot of the glamour of retail life through her. Buyers in those days were queens. They were divas. Oh, you just bowed down to them. Really. Lady buyers. I just felt so honored to be in the presence of one. So anyhow, I made a lot of good acquaintances and friends, and then I took all of the training courses. About six months after that, there was an opening for what they called a "merchandise clerical" in one of the departments, and that was the [inaudible] department. I was set to working with hair nets and hook and eyes and snappers.

FG: Buttons?

ME: Well, they didn't have buttons then.

FG: Oh, okay.

ME: And also, the buyer was a buyer of neckwear things, so I had an assortment of things there. That was interesting, but the buyer wasn't so great. She was let go. The next one was another wonderful woman who knew my family, and she too, took me under her wing. She was an outstanding buyer, hard-of-hearing, and she only heard the prices if they were favorable. But she was strong and harsh. She was the kind of a woman who would come down the department, and she'd see a saleswoman there with all the scarves neatly folded. She'd go over there, and she'd whoop them up with both hands. She said, "Make it look [inaudible]. Make it [inaudible]." So there were things – little vignettes that I remember, and I remember with love. I made friends of – I think I tried to make friends of every young person in the store. I had luncheon dates with everybody and had a wonderful time. There were parties and so forth. It was a great social life. It was my world.

FG: And this was before you were married.

ME: Yes. I stopped when I got married. No, I didn't. I stopped long after. I worked after I was married.

FG: I think you worked at Filene's from 1934 to '56.

ME: Yeah, and I got married in '46. It was '56 when Johnny came to us. '57, I guess. But I had a good, wonderful life with them, and I didn't know there was anything outside of Filene's. I had some trips. I went to New York very, very frequently and went to the West Coast and went to Chicago to buy furniture. I bought a lot of – oh, I became a buyer, and I bought a lot of different things, all in the children's division. And it was a good experience. It was a college of sorts. I think of Filene's as my alma mater. I think

of it with a great deal of gratitude because I think I owe common sense, planning ahead, and appreciation of other people's style – a lot of things that I learned.

FG: Was being a buyer your goal, do you feel, in terms of your career there?

ME: No, that was the ladder. That was on the ladder, and I went up. I went from one to another. As I say, the hardest thing was getting in. After that, I worked to it and progressed and grew up in it. After you were a buyer, your title was changed to division – no, department manager. And then they began to open branch stores. I'm so old that I was there when they opened a Filene's that is now that cinema in Chestnut Hill.

FG: That's right.

ME: I was there for the opening of that and moving stuff around.

FG: That used to be called the Filene's Mall, even when it expanded –

ME: I guess. I guess, yes.

FG: – because Filene's was the flagship store.

ME: Yes. But then retailing – I think I wrote that I felt that I worked through what I called, and maybe was the golden age of retail because it was real status, it was real elegant. It was something to be proud of, to be a part of. But then I was one of the first departments that saw the ravages of cut prices, of discounters. The infants' department was one of the first. Another thing was it was first in was open selling; no more of this business of a woman in a white outfit looking like a nurse but not being one to sell you your layette and giving you all the attention. You're sitting down with your mother and so forth. But now, open selling and all the cases there with the prices and everything. You helped yourself; you bought it yourself. Then I saw people I did business with, and I saw their merchandise being baby carriages or things like that. I saw them being sold. They

changed the number of spokes in a wheel for a discounter. Then that would be ten or twenty dollars off Filene's price. And it began to be such cutthroat and so heartbreaking and so difficult. Retailing, at best, was always competitive. You were competing with yourself; you were competing with Jordan's; you were competing with affiliated stores in Brooklyn. But at worst, it was competition with discounters. We couldn't hope to beat it. So I finally said to Felix, "I can't take it." He said, "Don't. Stay home." At that time, my mother needed our help. She never wanted it, but she needed it, so, in order to make a home for her, we moved to this house because it had a downstairs lav. We changed that room that's now a study into a downstairs bedroom. And she had her television and her wing chair, and she was comfortable there. I stayed home for that to be with her. She didn't need every minute care or anything. She could manage for herself. But when she did, I was there. And then we brought Johnny into the home, and that was great for her.

FG: May I ask a bit about that?

ME: What?

FG: Adoption at that time?

ME: I don't know how long. It wasn't a forever thing to think of adopting because the forever thing, I think, was that I would always be working. I always felt I would be. I never thought I'd get married, first, and then after that, I never thought I'd stop working. It just seemed my life. But then, when it got terrible and then there seemed to be a dimension that was needed. Somehow or other, that had to be it. And people discouraged us. A few people discouraged me because of age, but gradually, we began to get encouragement. I will be forever grateful to Roland Gittelsohn, who was a strong, encouraging force and immediately made a telephone call. Then from him and alongside his strength, we got help from other people who recognized that our age should be discounted in favor of what they felt was the prospect of giving a baby a good home and of being good parents. I think taking care of my mother and the fact that we had a little

dog, and I took care of that proved that I had a sense of responsibility. However, along came Johnny.

FG: Wonderful.

ME: With all my training in baby things and all that stuff, I knew from nothing. I really knew from nothing.

FG: How can we ever know until –?

ME: Yes. How he grew up, I don't know. But he did, and I've always – I have felt, especially in recent years, he's taught me. He brought us up.

FG: Oh.

ME: I think.

FG: That's a beautiful thing for a mother to say.

ME: Well, I'll say another beautiful thing because I feel it. I think he's a very fine man and I like him. Love him, sure. But we like him. So, my mother lived with us until he was three and a half, and then she died—oh, that was a terrible year. Johnny was in the hospital with peritonitis. He had appendicitis that wasn't – and Children's Hospital had him in and out and didn't diagnose it, and it ruptured. He he was there and dangerously sick, and my mother was in the BI across the parking lot with a heart attack. So, we parked in the middle. The thing I remember about it all – you cry yourself out. I remember Johnny coming home and our having to tell him when he was three and a half, Aimee—her name was A-I-M-E-E. "Aimee won't be with us, Johnny. Aimee was very sick, and she isn't coming home." He said, "Well, will Daddy get us a new Aimee?" So, he has a little child's memory that was warm and loving. She had three years of fun with him. I think she enjoyed him. She didn't have to care for him. She was worried in the

beginning that she wouldn't be able to take care of him. We assured her she wouldn't have to. It was good that she had that. My father died when he was only – he was sixty, and I was just getting into Filene's, and he was pleased with that. He didn't live long. He died, I think, from – he had a heart attack, and I think it was brought on by business decisions that were made for him and weren't right and things of that nature – tough for him. Tough for him. When you get old, your perspective is quite interesting because you see your parents as people, not as parents. I see my grandmother, one of nine children, and I think of her. Incidentally, it's funny. I was counting – if you can't get to sleep, you think of funny things, and I was trying to remember the names, nine of which I had met, maybe three, and I think either four or five of them had biblical names. My grandmother was Sarah. There was a Moses. There was a Rebecca. There was an Isaac who became a painter in Provincetown, who changed his name to – he had an Italian last name and his first name to Harry.

FG: They were fun people in those days. [laughter]

ME: But he was one of the founders of Provincetown Art Gallery.

FG: Really?

ME: Yes.

FG: Do you have any of his work?

ME: I don't think so. But he was the one—I was painting in those days for a year, I think. And he was the one – I painted a roof, and I showed it to him down there. And he said, "As a painter, you'd make a good bricklayer." That took care of that. [laughter] Yeah, that took care of that.

FG: Your mother's name seems French.

ME: My mother's name – my mother was named for a French actress, Aimee Florence. Her father loved the theater, and he named his sons after theatrical people. There was a son who was named Ruy, who was a character in a Bulwer Lytton novel, I think. Or was it Ruy Blas, the title of a Victor Hugo [book]? I've got my authors mixed. And Lester Montague was named – I don't know whether it's something to do with Romeo and Juliet with the Montagues. Lester Wallock, I think, was a theatrical acquaintance. Claude was Claude Melnot. And that was in "Lady of the Lions." So he had chosen theatrical names mostly.

FG: So your interest in the stage you came by rightly.

ME: Well, a little bit, yes. A little bit. I look back now and think of it as chutzpah. [laughter]

FG: I hope it was. [laughter]

ME: It was interesting.

FG: Do you remember being brought to plays by your grandfather at all?

ME: No, I never knew him. He died long before. But my mother loved the theater, and her brothers did. We went to plays, and we went to matinees in New York when we lived in Mamaroneck. Went every chance we got. When I worked, I went as often as I could.

FG: But it was one thing to be in the audience and another thing for you to go on stage.

ME: Yeah. Sure. It was a lovely thing to love.

FG: You had a time at Boston College.

ME: Oh, that was just by chance. I met a friend – I was doing work for the League of Women Voters when I began to get into organizations. I met a girl who had been a

member and whom I liked, and she said she was working at Boston College. She said she had a job there that, if I'd like, she thought maybe I could get part-time or something like that. And I did. I worked. Actually, I don't know how it happened. I worked for a few months for a Jewish rabbi who was teaching at Boston College. I'll tell you how terrible I was. He had a set of encyclopedias, Hebrew, of course, with the letters on the outside, and he wanted me to place them on the bookshelf alphabetically. And I couldn't. So I didn't last long with him. But I worked with her in the Nursing School office. That was a year, and that was interesting. The head of it was someone – a professor who had a grant in geriatrics. That was very interesting, and then I worked in the Nursing School office for maybe another year. Then, after that, a friend, who was the administrator of the Jewish Recuperative Center, was Leah Nataupsky Freedman. She was the first administrator and came out of Beth Israel to recoup. I better have a swallow. I've never talked so much and had so many – so much of a wonderful audience.

FG: This is entirely my pleasure.

ME: Nobody has ever listened to me like you. Anyway, we called her. She had been a nurse. We called her Topsy on account of her name. She said to me once, "Why don't you come over and see if there's anything here you'd like to do?" I went over and took a job from, I think, 8:30 or something like that until 1:00 or 1:30 every day, working in the office there doing medical records, posting stuff, entering medications, little paperwork things that I enjoyed. It was a fun office. In fact, I had a call today from one of the women whom I worked with, who said they were getting – she and another one were getting together for lunch on November 12th, could I come? So, it's nice. But that was a lovely period too.

FG: And that began in 1969.

ME: Yeah, and I stayed there for quite a long time.

FG: Until ’82, I think you mentioned.

ME: Yeah, and then they got a new administrator. In fact, it was the second one after Leah Freedman left – Topsy. He was anxious to cut out anybody who was over forty, forty-five, something like that. So, he did. That was all right because I wanted – I’d had enough of it. I had enough. We left, and we took our first cruise – no, not our first cruise, but we had started taking cruises occasionally. Our first one was taking Johnny our 25th, and after his bar mitzvah to the little village in Switzerland where Felix had gone with his parents on summer vacations. A tiny little village called Sils Maria, quite near St. Moritz. He planned the whole trip, and we stayed in the hotel –

FG: Where he had stayed.

ME: – the Edelweiss, where he had stayed with his parents. It was nostalgic – the meadow, the wildflowers beside it, and everything. You don’t change nature that much. So, it was a lovely time. We traveled from there and went to places like the Zermatt and went up in the mountains. Johnny learned to ski on the Fourth of July.

FG: Oh, how marvelous!

ME: It was the first trip, it was wonderful and it was the beginning. So after I left the Recuperative, I stopped being paid.

FG: I was going to say, your paid employment. [laughter]

ME: And got more active in organizations and temple and Sisterhood. I found what I was looking for there in the belonging, in the warmth and friendliness. And I liked the women, and I liked being part of it. They were good years.

FG: Is there a difference? Since you’ve had both experiences, paid employment and unpaid occupations, ss there a difference in satisfaction or any other distinctions you can

make between the two in your life?

ME: Well, I think being paid was fun because I used to play games with it. I'd put an envelope into a bag and just forget it. Then, I'd use that bag sometime later, and I'd find some money in it, and that was quite fun. But I don't think I ever noticed deprivation – a change in it. I don't think so because we're not lavish livers anyway.

FG: In terms of stimulation, was one more satisfying?

ME: No, because I left each time – Filene's and the Recuperative Center – on a downturn. I'd had the best of Filene's, and I'd had the best of the Recuperative Center. From then on, in my opinion, it went down and down and down. So I had the best of it, and when I left, it was on its way down. So no regrets at all. Starting at that stage, and I was [in my] fifties, something like that. A lot of my neighbors were a lot younger. We had parties together and dinners together, and it was a neighborly little group. It's an odd sort of arrangement, but I think it's worked.

FG: Is there anything in your education that you'd like to talk about? Do you have any early memories of what school was like for you?

ME: I loved school. If I have a regret, it's that I didn't go to college. It was Depression time. I could have gone to college. I had a crush on the Latin teacher at Mamaroneck High, and she went to New York State College for Teachers, which became a great state college and a big institution. I enrolled there, but I wanted to go on the stage and nothing – I could have gone to college if I'd worked, waited on tables, done something like that to help the expenses. I didn't want to. I felt that that was beneath me. I don't know. I didn't want to do it. So, I didn't. A rich relative would have sent me there, lent me money – I don't know. But I would have had to help in some way, and I didn't want any part of that. So I didn't go to college. I regret it. I regret it because I know I love to learn, but I think that college would have taught me how to learn, how to think, and how to get along

with people in a different sort of way. I think I missed something – a great deal out of not having gone to college. But a kindly cousin said, “Look, forget it. It isn’t everything. Go on with your life. Forget it.”

FG: At what point did that cousin say that?

ME: Oh, I don’t remember, but I think it was – I used to bring it up occasionally because everybody in the family who I think was less scholarly than I went to college – all my cousins. They had good colleges in back of them – Wellesley and Harvard and a few others. I think I was more studious than any of them, and I didn’t get to go. So there’s a little bit of a feeling of “I wish I had.” But an “Oh, forget it,” feeling too.

FG: It sounds like you’ve achieved the goals of college.

ME: I can’t measure it that way, but I feel that a need to learn has never been filled, and maybe that’s one of the good things about not having gone. I didn’t get it all.

FG: So you’ve retained your curiosity and your energy for doing that type of thing.

ME: Yes. When I was having cataract trouble, I had a great time with books on tape with a wonderful series on Shakespeare that was taught by a Dartmouth professor. That was great. I did take an adult ed course. I suppose you’d call it that in Wellesley on philosophy, and I got interested – well, I started with Plato. I never got too far beyond him. I even got a tape out this year – or this month – on him, but I’m trying to share the machine with my husband, whose eyes are in need of more help now than I. So there’s still a need for learning. That, I think, is a good result for not having it all answered in college – a little bit.

FG: Is there anything –?

ME: Nobody ever listened to me so much.

FG: Oh, it's such a pleasure.

ME: Really?

FG: Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you'd like to make sure we hear?

ME: Well, along with other people our age, we have health problems, and we're trying to handle them one day at a time. Felix is going to have a hernia operation this coming Tuesday. Then December 15th, he's set for cataract surgery. Neither of these is of itself a major thing. But he has an underlying blood disorder, and that is something to try to keep under good control. We've had some experiences with that sort of thing, and we just have to hope and pray everything goes well. And as far as myself, I've gotten some new parts, but the old parts aren't – they're not that dependable. However, again, I say, not bad for an old girl.

FG: [inaudible] if there was any sort of message you'd want another generation to have, any advice, so to speak, on how to live—

ME: I think I would wish and pray and urge young people to have a faith and a belief in good living and to share it – in giving their children something to hold on to going through life, giving them strength right from the beginning. Stay with it. I guess that's it – fairly simple. I guess I'm not that deep, but that's about the way I think about it. I can be grateful for an awful lot of things. I can stop in the middle of something and just hold my breath because it's been so beautiful, so wonderful. I can enjoy people almost from a spectator standpoint and look at them and admire them and wonder what makes them work, and how and why and that sort of thing, which is something I appreciate because I enjoy it.

FG: That's been a lifelong interest and satisfaction –

ME: Yeah, sure.

FG: – no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done. [inaudible]
ME: Yeah. I always enjoyed standing off a little bit. Maybe I've been more of a – I don't say loner because, but I do stand off a little bit; I know I do. I think it's for – I don't know why. Enough of that. But I admire and like to understand people and respect. I know that each one is different, and just because I think something's great doesn't mean that they have to.

FG: Very gracious thoughts.

ME: I can't say I've always had it, but today I do. [laughter]

FG: [laughter] Marjorie, it's been just an inspiring time with you. I can't thank you enough.

ME: I hope it hasn't been a lot of outpouring of unnecessary drivel.

FG: Oh, not at all. Not at all. It's been an absolute delight, and our project is really looking for some of the details in daily lives, and you've been most generous in sharing that. I think we are just very thankful to you for your time, your thoughts, and the life you've lived.

ME: Well, it's been quite a meaningful morning for me. I think I'll think of it quite a bit.

[END OF INTERVIEW]