Martha Finn Transcript

ELLEN MEISEL: Let's see. Today is Monday, January 13th – I'm just saying something to the tape recorder.

MARTHA GOLDSTEIN FINN: That's right, 1997.

EM: Nineteen ninety-seven.

MF: The years run away fast, don't they?

EM: They sure do. I'm Ellen Meisel, interviewing Martha Goldstein Finn under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archive Temple Israel Oral History Project in Boston, Massachusetts.

MF: Sounds important.

EM: We're in Martha's home. I'm very glad that you're doing this. I'm wondering if there is any particular reason that you agreed to do this interview.

MF: Well, why not? After all, it's for archives. Who knows, I may say something that somebody will find interesting. I do think when you've lived as long as I have lived – I'm ninety – that sometimes you do learn something that might be of interest or importance to somebody else. And why not? You asked me, so I said yes.

EM: Good. Just starting to think about your – just looking way back at your childhood, reflections on your life, can you think how your childhood experiences shaped your adulthood? That's a big question.

MF: Well, I don't know. I had a good childhood, a happy childhood. I took it for granted. I had very good parents. My mother and father were very smart and very modern and

young. Mother was brought up in Chelsea. The oldest of nine children. Had eight younger brothers. The last of whom was born three weeks after she was married. He is the last one still left alive. My Uncle Morris is in a nursing home here in Brookline, and I try to see him once a week. He's always so happy to see me. I like to go there because he always tells me how beautiful I am. He remembers when I was little. You see, we're not so far apart in age. He's ninety-four, and I'm ninety. We all sort of grew up together with my young uncle. He remembers he used to take me out for an ice cream cone. He remembers that I had patent leather shoes and I wore little white socks. All these things because his sister was so much older, and a girl was something very strange and unusual and wonderful to him. I was born in Worcester, but then the family moved back to Dorchester.

EM: How old were you when they moved to Dorchester?

MF: How old was I when we moved back? I was almost five. My sister was born soon after.

EM: Right.

MF: My father was asked by his father, who was terminally ill, to take over the family business in the North End. So, we came back. We lived in Dorchester, which was a lovely, lovely suburb in those days. I had a very happy, normal childhood, I think, with an older brother, whose slave I was, of course, and a younger sister who I think I helped to bring up. I went to school and did all the things you're supposed to and played and all that.

EM: It was a public school, right?

MF: Yeah. We lived on Stratton Street in Dorchester for a while, and I went to the Roger Wolcott School. And then my father bought a house on Columbia Road, which was lovely, up near the park. From grammar school, I went to Latin school, Girls Latin. Took

the streetcar every morning. There was a special streetcar that went at 8:30, went by Cedar Street. All the kids who went to the schools down where it went piled on the streetcars. It was really good. That was a good thing. Got off at Mission Hill, and the boys went to Boys' Latin, and some of them went to English High School. We went to Girls' Latin. When my sister grew up to the seventh grade – I went four years, but she went six years to Latin school – she was eleven years old, but Mother felt that she could go because I was there, and I could take her by the hand, which I resented a little bit. So she went with me that first year. She always said that she had to wait on us. I was a senior, and she was a little one. She was in the first class. At lunchtime, she would have to run and save a table for us and keep others away so my friends and I could have a table. But I took care of her when she wasn't feeling well. Somebody of the little children would come up to the third floor, and they'd peek in the door. The teacher would say, "Oh, are you looking for Martha? Is there something –?" They knew – the little ones. They were only eleven or twelve years old. If she wasn't feeling well or something bothered her I'd have to go down and soothe her. She'd cry a little. And sometimes I'd take her home, and sometimes I just [inaudible].

EM: Took care of her.

MF: I was the big sister. It was all right. Of course, the next year, she was able to go by herself because I was through. I was in college. It was a very happy childhood, a very normal one.

EM: Do you remember rituals in your home?

MF: Hmm?

EM: Do you remember rituals in your home, Jewish rituals in synagogue or home?

MF: We belonged to Temple Mishkan Tefila, which was nearby in those days in Roxbury. I went to religious school there – Rabbi Rabinowitz. He was a very sweet man,

very nice. We'd sit around the table, and he would talk to us, and he would teach us. I don't know if I listened very much [or] paid too much attention. The girls weren't bar mitzvahed. We never thought of it. But I was confirmed there. In fact, I was confirmed twice. My father's family lived – I had lots of cousins living nearby. A brother and a sister lived in Dorchester, and we were all very close. It was very nice. One of my cousins and I were very friendly. She always said she spelled cousin with a capital F for friend. I would be invited to her parties where no other cousins were because we were very, very close friends.

When she was terminally ill in California, where she went to stay with her daughter, I went out there to say goodbye to her. In the nursing home, we were able to have an hour alone. Her daughter left us alone. We said goodbye to each other. This was about ten years ago, I think. It was very worthwhile to do that. Well, they belonged to a more orthodox synagogue on Fowler Street in Dorchester – Temple Beth El. We belonged to Mishkan Tefila, which was Conservative. When I was fifteen I was confirmed at Mishkan Tefila. The next year, my Cousin Sylvia's younger sister was to be confirmed at Beth El. Being the youngest in her family and rather spoiled, she didn't want to go. She said she would only go if her oldest sister went too. Well, Sylvia didn't want to go [inaudible]. So she said to me, "Come with me, and we'll go." My mother thought it was a good idea. What else did I have to do on a Sunday morning? So I went with them Sunday mornings to Temple Beth El. The rabbi asked no questions. He must have known I didn't belong. He didn't care. We were older. We knew the answers to his questions. We didn't bother him. So, I went all winter with the others, and in the spring, I was confirmed all over again. I got two Bibles. They gave us the Bible then.

EM: That's right.

MF: So I got two Bibles, one of which my daughter used when she went to Wellesley and took courses there. She said to me, "You got a Bible?" I said, "I've got several

Bibles." She took my old Bible and wrote her name in it, too, and used it.

EM: That's terrific.

MF: It was really falling apart. But she liked it, and she enjoyed it. She took a course in religion at Wellesley. She said to me one day, "Boy, they ask the darndest questions. They said to me, 'Don't you know the answer?'" It was something about the New Testament. And she said, "What do I know about the New Testament? I never studied it." Well, with the name Finn, they never knew what she was. She let them know right away that she was Jewish, and she knew nothing about the New Testament. And she really didn't care to know but she had to.

EM: Do you remember in your home celebrating holidays?

MF: Yeah.

EM: With your family at home? Shabbat or the holidays?

MF: My grandfather was very pious, very religious. See, my mother was one of these – we called her an expensive import. She was born in Riga. Her mother and father came here when she was a baby, maybe three or four years old. My grandfather was what they called, I suppose, a yeshiva bocher. He was a student, very pious. My grandmother came of a well-to-do family that lived in Riga. She was married very young. She must have been about fourteen, we figured out. They married very young in those days. She was probably sixteen when my mother was born. It was a good thing to take into the family a student, support him, and all that. My grandfather came from, I think, it must have been a small town. He married my grandmother, and they supported him. But he had what you call an itchy foot, and he wanted to travel.

EM: Your grandfather did?

MF: Hmm?

EM: Your grandfather wanted to travel.

MF: Yeah. So he said one day he'd like to go to Palestine and take his wife and the baby with him. Her parents said, "Fine. You want to go to Palestine" which was a barren land in those days with all the Arabs – "You go, but she'll stay. You're not going to take her and the baby there. Give her a get, a divorce, and you can go." They didn't care. So, of course, he didn't go. No. But then he said he wanted to go to America. Well, America was another story. It was the Golden Medina. It was the land where gold was in the streets, where everybody lived a wonderful life. And how could they say no? So they let them go. They put diamond earrings in my mother's ears, which were stolen when they got to this country, and sent them off. Can you imagine? Sending off a daughter and a grandchild you know you'll never see again. They did that. That did that all the time in those days. So they came to the United States. The story in the family is that as they sailed up New York Harbor, looking out at all these wonderful buildings and all that, they saw the Statue of Liberty. This must have been about 1886 because that's when the statue was put up, which means that my mother was then about four years old. She was little. She never remembered anything about her other life. My grandmother said, "What is that?" So, somebody explained that this was the Statue of Liberty and what it meant, and this was a free country, and there were no policemen to harass you, and nobody told you what to do, and it was very different from Russia, and people lived the way they wanted to in this country and so forth. So she looked at the statue and said, "If this is a free country and we can do what we want, then I will get rid of this." She pulled off her wig. You know married women had to wear a sheitel. She was young, and she hated it. She pulled it off, and she threw it over the side of the ship into the water. She said, "Then I am free of this, and I will be free." She never wore one. She had beautiful, beautiful hair. I remember her later years. It was white and long.

EM: And how did her husband react to that?

MF: Not a word, not a word. That's the first thing that everybody says when they hear the story: what did he say, what did he do?

EM: Sure.

MF: And the answer is he didn't say anything. She just did it. Well, she was a strong-minded person, I guess, and he was a smart man. So she got rid of that, and she was free. [laughter]

EM: That's wonderful.

MF: Isn't it? That's quite a story. And so they came to this country, and they settled in Chelsea, where the eight boys were born. When my mother married, my brother was born, and they were kind of disgusted – another boy. And then when I was born, wow, firecrackers went off, rockets went off. It was wonderful – a girl. They really spoiled me. They really did.

EM: How do you think your life would have been if you were a boy if you'd been born a boy?

MF: I never thought of that. I mean, I just accepted what I was. I don't know. I suppose it would have been the same. After all, my brother was kind of spoiled, too. I think he was very spoiled, very pesty sometimes.

EM: How about in the times that you grew up, how life was so different for boys and girls, and men and women?

MF: Well, I was very spoiled. In a way, I was. I was not supposed to be a very healthy child. I had some heart problems. I've had that all my life, which never really slowed me down except that it did slow me down. There were lots of things I was not allowed to do.

I was never athletic. I was never allowed to do a lot of things that others did. My sister was a great tattletale. Any time I did something that I wasn't supposed to do, she told my mother. But I had a good normal life.

My brother was very athletic. He played football, and he rowed on the crew and all that. My sister was very athletic. I was the one who wasn't. I read. I was a student. I didn't do much housework, which was very good. I still don't do much housework. But I helped my mother, and we were close. I didn't know any other life, so I thought it was a good normal life. When it came to college, they wouldn't let me go away from home. That was a big, big thing.

EM: Did you want to go?

MF: Oh, sure. I wanted to go to Wellesley. My mother had wanted me to go to Wellesley. That's where my daughter went finally. But they decided I was better off staying at home. They didn't want me to go away. So, I went to Boston University and lived at home, which was fine. I had good friends. I had, I think, a good education. It was fine.

EM: Did most of your friends go to college? Did many of them?

MF: They all went to college. When they say now that in those days girls didn't go to college, I always protest because I went to Girls' Latin School, which was a college prep school. I took it for granted. We all went to college.

EM: Right. And you all had the thought of having a career in your mind?

MF: I don't know. Most of them wanted to get married. The idea then was when you were a senior in college, you were supposed to get engaged, and then you got married.

EM: So, what were you studying in college?

MF: Oh, Liberal Arts. I worked in the library, and then I worked for the city. And I ended working in the library at Copley Square. I was a secretary to the Superintendent of Buildings, which was a great job. I had my own office. It was good. But girls didn't have so many opportunities. Then you were a teacher, or you were a librarian, or you got married. And most of them got married.

EM: When did you meet your husband? Did you meet him while you were in school?

MF: I met my husband – I don't know if they have these organizations now. Is there anything at Temple Israel for young men and women to meet each other and go together and all that sort of thing?

EM: We have groups for younger people.

MF: Yeah. Well, at Mishkan Tefila, there was a group of young people. Technically, I think we were supposed to do some kind of charity work. But actually, we met, and we had meetings, and had dances, and we did things. It was very good. I made lots of good friends – men and women there.

EM: That's nice.

MF: My sister used to complain later on, all these men that you're so friendly with. Well, I met them when we were young, and we stayed friends. And I met Bob there. We put on a show.

EM: When you were in college or high school?

MF: No, when I was through.

EM: Oh, you were finished, yeah.

MF: I was through with college. I was in my twenties by that time. We used to go together. When there'd be a meeting, a car would come with two or three fellows and two or three girls, whoever could pile in, and we'd all go together.

One year, we put on a show. I think it was No, No, Nanette. I went with one of my girlfriends to try out for the chorus. She didn't make it, but I did. So I was in the chorus. Bob said afterward that he went with somebody, and he saw me, so he decided that he would be in the chorus. My sister always said two left feet with rubbers on. He could not dance, although he danced all the time. So he was in it, too. And when it came to the show, and then there was a party afterward, he asked me if I would go with him, which was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. He was good, a good, good man. Excuse me one minute. I take a little pill.

[Recording paused.]

EM: Well, you're ninety years old, and you're doing great.

MF: I had heart surgery [inaudible] years ago. I'm lucky.

EM: Good. After you met your husband, how long before you knew that he was the man you were going to marry?

MF: Well he knew it right away. It took me a while to find out. And we got engaged – and this is in the early '30s. Of course, you're too young to remember the Depression, but it was terrible. It was very, very bad.

EM: How did that impact your life? What did you see around you? How would you describe to me to tell me it was bad?

MF: Well, people didn't have money. There were men on the street selling apples. There were people begging for money.

EM: In Dorchester? In Boston?

MF: Yeah. And the banks closed, so if you had money in the bank you couldn't get it. It was really very bad.

EM: What was your husband –? What type of work was he doing?

MF: My husband was a lawyer. He was the only man I ever knew who was educated completely at night. Now, I never knew that Boston had night schools, but it did. When he was about fourteen, he was ill for a while. He was diagnosed as having cancer. I always thought it was a mistake. It was a burst appendix. But he was in bed for about a year. His father nursed him and took care of him. When he was better, he was about sixteen years old or so. He'd been out of school for a long time. The family didn't have much money, so he had to go to work. His mother insisted that he go to school. So he went to night high school. I never knew there was a night high school. I found out later when I worked for the city, and I worked in that department – night high school and graduated. Then he went to Boston University at night, and then he went to law school at night and graduated at the top of his class and became a lawyer. I always admired that.

He was a very serious-minded man in some ways. In some ways, of course, he wasn't. But he had worked since he was nine or ten years old helping the family, and work was important to him. I think my daughter thinks that too now. She knows you have to work. Whether you have to financially or not, you have to do something. You just don't sit around.

EM: I agree.

MF: She's very busy. She does all kinds of things and works for a firm, too.

EM: So he was a lawyer. He was working as a lawyer.

MF: He was a lawyer in Boston. Lawyers had a hard time in those days. If you had a client, they probably couldn't pay you much of anything. So he did different things. He'd work wherever he could. And when it came to getting married in the early '30s, who could get married? I mean, who had anything [inaudible] I was working. But in the city of Boston in those days, if a woman got married, she had to quit her job. You don't know from that?

EM: No.

MF: No. A married woman with a husband couldn't work for the city because she was taking a job away from a single person who needed it. Her husband was supposed to support her. This was the rule. This was the law. Her husband was supposed to support her. She had to quit her job. So I kept working. Around about 19 – we were engaged in 1933, '34. Bob had a client who paid him a good fee. He said if we wait forever, we will never get married, so we were married in 1935. We struggled, and we managed. I had to quit my job. It was a civil service job, but there was this law. So I took the civil service exam over again, and I went to work for the Boston Public Library, which though it was in Boston, is an autonomous unit. They didn't care whether you were married or not. When I went to interview, my boss – we became very close, very friendly. He said to me, "I don't care whether you're pink, green, or polka-dotted if you can do the job." I was married, and I worked there for ten years. But other places in the city – and teachers – my sister couldn't work. She was engaged, and she was getting married. She had a hard time, too. This was the law in those days. Yeah.

EM: I didn't know that. I don't understand that.

MF: It's hard to understand now, isn't it? So many women are working, married or not. You could not work for the city.

EM: Working until you're pregnant. I worked until the day I had my baby. I was in a meeting. They sure wouldn't let you do that.

MF: That's pretty brave.

EM: I didn't mean to. [laughter]

MF: Well, and so I worked at the library, and Bob persevered. He had a good practice. He did well.

EM: Where did he work in later years? He kept his own practice?

MF: His own practice. He was at 18 Tremont Street. He was by himself but he was in an office with three or four other men. And they did things together. But, actually, each one – I mean, they never formed a firm.

EM: Right. But he had company?

MF: Yeah. Bob died in 1985. It's almost twelve years now. I miss him every day. We had a good, good marriage. And he was a very good man, came from a very nice family. My father-in-law never introduced me as his daughter-in-law. It was always, "This is my daughter, Bob's wife." A sweet, sweet man, good as gold. I still use my family. Now, my husband's sister's boy, Richie, is a CPA. He has a good firm, and he is my accountant. My sister's little boy, David, is my lawyer and takes good care of us. One of my mother's family is a stockbroker – investments – and he helps me with what I have. So, I have the family around me, and they look after me and take care of me, which is very nice. It gives me a good feeling.

EM: That's great.

MF: Yeah. So my mother grew up in Chelsea. When she got through school – how she got through school, I don't know because every time my grandmother had a baby, she

had to stay home and help take care of it. But she got a job at a hardware store on Salem Street in the North End, where my father had grown up. The North End was not all Italian in those days. There were Jews, and there still are. There were lots of Irish and Polish.

EM: A whole mix.

MF: A little League of Nations. I suppose you want to know about my father's family.

EM: Sure. Well, actually, I was just thinking about moving into your adulthood when you and Bob were married. What did you do with friends and your social circle?

MF: Well, like everybody else, we had our friends. We worked, and we entertained frugally.

EM: Did you like to cook?

MF: Yeah. I was a cook. I can cook. I don't cook much now. But I was a good cook. My daughter's a fantastic cook, a fabulous gourmet cook. So she does most of the cooking now. And she brings me all sorts of things. We got a small apartment up in Brighton where lots of people had small apartments.

EM: Right.

MF: We moved to Commonwealth Avenue, and we had to decide whether to take an apartment, which did not have cross-ventilation. It was forty dollars a month. Or the one at the end, which was a nicer apartment, was forty-two fifty a month. So, we splurged and took the more expensive apartment. We can laugh at that now. But every dollar was very, very important in those days, very important. So we lived on Commonwealth Avenue.

EM: Did you ever have any pets?

MF: What?

EM: Did you ever have any pets in this apartment or growing up?

MF: How could we in a small apartment? We were both working.

EM: Right.

MF: No.

EM: And speaking of every dollar – right.

MF: Ellie has two dogs now, which is fine. And she brings them every once in a while. But, no, no, we never thought of it, really didn't. We lived there until Ellie was born. Had a crib in the bedroom that was so small.

EM: When was she born?

MF: And then we moved.

EM: When was she born?

MF: 1950. We were married fifteen years before she was born. We adopted her because I couldn't have children. Adopted her, which was the best thing we ever did.

EM: Was that hard coming to that decision?

MF: Hmm?

EM: Was it difficult coming to that decision?

MF: No. My mother pushed me. My mother pushed me. My sister married a doctor. And when the war came, of course, he went into the Army. In 1940 – it must have been about '43 – well, he was sent to different places. Each one of her children was born in a

different state. Leonard was born in Boston, and then he was sent to Newport, Rhode Island. And Mimi was born there. And then he was sent to Camp Ethan Allen in Maine, and David was born in Maine. I think there's less than three years between the three of them. Three babies she had. And when David was six weeks old, (Julie?), my brother-in-law, was sent to India for a year.

He was an ophthalmologist. We were sending planes to China, I found out later. And when there were accidents or burns or whatever, the pilots would be flown to – where was he? – Calcutta, I think, India. There was lots of work for him to do as an ophthalmologist. He said he got more work – learned more in one year there than he would have here and did plastic surgery.

EM: Now, was there any concern that Bob would have to go?

MF: Oh, Bob's eyes were very bad. They said to him, "Come around in case of an invasion." Bob couldn't. So he got a defense job. He went to work for General Electric making jet engines, which is what the ones who couldn't enlist or be taken.

EM: Where was that? Where was the plant?

MF: In Lynn, they had a big – General Electric still has a big place in Lynn. And every time after the war that he wanted to leave, they'd give him a raise and a promotion, so he stayed there until he retired. He worked nights until eleven o'clock at night. And in the morning, he had his law office.

EM: Right.

MF: And so he did all right. When David was six weeks old, and the others were one and a half and three, or a little less, their father was sent to India, and she came home to mother and father in a five-room apartment. Drove down from [inaudible]. And they had quite a time there. Finally, Bob and I owned the house when my mother and father lived

in an apartment. And as another apartment became available they moved into it, which was right downstairs. But she had quite a time. So every day after work, I would go down there and I would help with the children.

EM: So you had that – as if you were raising children, your children, right? Your niece and nephew?

MF: Yeah. My nephew Leonard, who was my godson, still calls me his other mother. If he started to cry or if something happened, he never knew whose hand would come down to him: his mother or my mother or my hand. We became very close. But my mother said to me, "Remember, they're not your children. [They are] your niece and your nephew. When they grow up, they'll love you. You'll be an aunt. But they won't be yours." And she said to me, "You want a child, you get your own." And she really pushed me. She really, really did. My father-in-law was not much in favor of adoption. A lot of people aren't. I don't know why they think that a child will inherit all their good qualities and has to be of their blood because we inherit from all our ancestors. He said he wasn't much in favor. But my sister-in-law said to him, "Martha is looking for a baby." He said, "Well, if she wants one, it must be all right." He was really very good.

EM: And did your husband want a –?

MF: Well, whatever I wanted was fine with him. Of course, once Ellie was born, he was ecstatic. He was a wonderful father. She quotes him to this day.

EM: So you adopted her when she was just a newborn?

MF: Five days old, we brought her home from the hospital, and it was wonderful.

EM: How did you find –?

MF: It was wonderful.

EM: Through an adoption service or agency or how did you –?

MF: We had a very hard time. The Jewish adoption service – well, I don't know what they call them now.

EM: Jewish Family and Children Service.

MF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The woman who ran it was not very helpful. And she said to us once – in those days, they tried to give babies to people of the same religion. She said to me once, "Whatever faults Jewish girls have, this isn't one of them." There were not many Jewish babies. But finally, through the agency, the SPCC out of town a little bit that we registered with found us a baby. Nobody ever asked what religion she was. She came home, and she was Jewish. That's the way it ought to be. She was a beautiful baby, and she's still beautiful. We had a good time with her. We were used to traveling and doing what we wanted. Wherever we went we took her with us. People thought we were crazy, thought it was terrible. They complained bitterly. But we put her in the back seat of our car and went traveling, went all over the United States. We've been to every state, I think, except the state of Washington, maybe. She still remembers all the places that we went. We took her everywhere, which was fine. People didn't complain. They loved having her there. And when we would go, we would stay, not in a hotel. We would find these – what do they call them now –? Bed and Breakfast probably, people who opened their homes [inaudible] find them. If we wanted to go out in the evening, whoever was in the house would babysit. It was okay. It was fine.

My father was born in Chicago. His family had been here for a while. We always understood that his father came here as a young boy to whom we never – there must have been some family – to get away from – they used to conscript the boys and put them in the Army. The story was that when the Civil War broke out, he tried to enlist. He was told, "You can't enlist." "The Army's no place for a Jewish boy," he was told. So he

didn't. But he married a [inaudible] woman named Martha in New York at an early age. My father was born in Chicago. And his father – I think they traveled. He was looking for someplace to settle and finally came to Boston and settled in the North End and opened a grocery and fish store, which became very well known – Goldstein's. People came from all over to buy there. When my mother got this job across the street from where they lived – they owned the building and had the store – my uncle [inaudible –

EM: What type of job was it?

MF: It was in the office.

EM: Right.

MF: And whatever she did there, she never said.

EM: Right.

MF: But it was in the office there. My father's older brother saw her and was smitten right away. He always said the worst mistake he ever made in his life was introducing her to his brother, Mike, my father. Because when they saw each other, they didn't look at anybody else, and he knew that he was out of it. But he always loved my mother, and everybody knew it. Even after he married somebody else, there was no question that he still loved my mother. Accepted her marriage, she accepted, and all that, but they had a very special feeling for each other.

EM: Did she know that he loved her?

MF: Oh, yes. Oh yes. He used to call her the Duchess of Chelsea. She was beautiful. She and my father got married. She was twenty, and he was twenty-two. They were adults, and they were perfectly capable of running their lives. He was working and making a living. She had plenty of experience in household arts and taking care of

children.

EM: Right.

MF: She was a young mother and a young grandmother, and it was wonderful. It really was.

EM: That's terrific. I want to just make sure that the tape – let me turn it over.

[END OF SIDE A]

EM: This is side B of the tape. So let's start from –

MF: So where are we?

EM: Hello, hello, hello.

MF: I was talking about my father, who was born in Chicago.

EM: That was a wonderful story.

MF: My grandmother became pregnant with her – I think it must have been her seventh child – when they were in Boston. My grandfather said to her, "Now, we've lived in different parts of the country, and you've had your children with midwives. But here we're in Boston, and you can have a real doctor take care of you." Turned out this doctor was a dirty old man. She was poisoned with toxemia or something. And the baby was born, my Uncle Hy. She was very ill. So finally, my grandfather called in a midwife, and he said, "See what you can do." She looked at my grandmother, and she said, "Whoever you had was dirty, and he poisoned her." Whatever it was, she died. So you see the doctors in those days, some of them weren't all that great.

EM: Was that at a hospital, or was it at home?

MF: No, they didn't [go] to hospitals in those days. She was at home. When the baby was ten days old, she died. She was thirty-four years old. They waited until she died – they knew she was dying – for the bris. Then they had the bris, and they named him Chaim for life, Hyman. So, my grandfather was left with seven children. The oldest was maybe eleven or twelve or thereabouts, and the baby was ten days old. Now he had hired – he had a housekeeper. He was good. He was very good. I have one memory of him, just one.

EM: What was it?

MF: When we moved to Dorchester, my mother was eight months pregnant with my sister. I sat on the porch steps while he directed the movers what to do and all that. He had hired this woman to be a housekeeper. She was English. She came with one little boy. She came from England. She said she was a widow and had this little boy. He said, "Well, what's another child?" So, he took her in. She helped and took care, and three months later, he married her. He had to, really. He couldn't live in a house with this woman and not. He needed somebody to take care of the children and run the house. So she really brought up the baby, and she took care of him. Well, once they were married, she produced two more boys.

EM: Seven, eight. That's ten in the house, right?

MF: Well, coming from England, she knew very well where could she get a job with three sons. So she put the two older ones in an orphanage. They took them in those days. She kept the younger one with her. But once she was married, she took out two more. So there were ten children in this house, and it was a very unhappy house.

EM: Really?

MF: Thinking back now, it must have been too much for her, besides which, as we got the story, her children were not the good ones, the God-fearing ones or whatever they

were. They were always being picked up. One was in reform school, and one ran away from home, and one was a prizefighter, which was not very well looked upon in those days. So they grew up in a not-very-happy home.

My grandfather did the very best he could. But it wasn't the best. My oldest aunt, as I understood it, kept running away from home and going to relatives. And he'd have to go and bring her back. I never met this woman. I still remember – well, she lived [with] my youngest uncle; after all, she'd been the only mother he ever knew, and she took care of him. He took care of her. In later years, she brought over a niece from England who married my uncle, so that was their family. But when she died, my father and his oldest brother had quite a discussion about whether they should go to the funeral or not. I remember we talked about it. If she'd been different in the way she brought them up, they wouldn't have had such a discussion, and she would have had a better life with the whole family. But they never paid any attention to her. I don't remember whether he went to the funeral or not. I really don't remember.

EM: But that they had that discussion –?

MF: Because they had no – he didn't like her, and that's sad. They didn't have a happy life with her.

EM: Right. The way that she was brought in the family and all was very sad, too.

MF: And brought the other two boys suddenly.

EM: That's right.

MF: Suddenly, there they were, and they never got along. An anecdote? Would you like to hear?

EM: I'd love it.

MF: Some years ago, I was going to a meeting with some other women. And I don't remember where it was, but we went by car.

EM: Like volunteer kind of work or –?

MF: Yeah. I've been a professional volunteer all these years. I was sitting in the back seat. The woman who was sitting in the front seat turned around and said, "I'm friendly with a cousin of yours." I said, "Oh, great. Who's the cousin?" And she said her name, (Mollie?). And I said to her, "I don't have any cousins named (Mollie?)." I had lots of cousins. And I knew them, of course. I said, "I don't have any cousin named (Mollie?)." She said, "Oh well, you must have. She knows you." I found out afterward that these people kept tabs on us and knew all of our part of the family. I said, "Some mistake somewhere. I don't have a cousin named (Mollie?)." But she persisted. She said, "She knows you. And when I said, I gave your name that you were coming. This is [inaudible]. She knew who you were and all that – a cousin", which was a little bit strange. So, we talked a little bit further. I said to her, "Now, what is her name?" She said, "(Mollie Rosenberg?)." That was her name. And I said, "(Rosenberg? Rosenberg?)" I said, "What does her husband do?" And she said, "Well, he was a prizefighter." And I said, "Oh, I know who that is. He would be my father's stepbrother. And we really don't know that family. We really have not had anything to do with them." I didn't want to say too much because there were strangers in the car. But I had to tell her. She said to me, "That's right. She did tell me that they weren't very close to the other side of the family. But she knows all about you and considers herself your cousin." I said, "I'm sorry, she's not my cousin. Her husband was my father's stepbrother. We really don't know anything about that part of the family." Another time, my sister came home one day – this was at the beach. In the summertime, she'd been on the beach. She said to my mother, "Some girl came up to me and said she's my cousin." My mother said, "It's somebody you don't know?" She said, "Yes. Her name is (Elda Rosenberg?)." And my mother said to her, "This would be the other part of your father's

family, the stepbrothers." "She said she knew all about me and knew who I was." They kept tabs on us.

EM: They kept up with you guys. They sure did.

MF: I have no idea now where any of them are. We knew them. We never met them. Well, the family said they never had any inclination to. Now, my grandmother's name was Martha. And as my father's family grew up and married, each one named the first daughter Martha. If they had a son, they named him Matthew because it was a name and it was like Martha. So I have several cousins [named] Martha. I always was very proud of the name. I hear of people who don't like their names. But I was always very –

EM: That's wonderful.

MF: – proud of it.

EM: What types of things did you volunteer? What were your volunteer organizations?

MF: Mostly ORT. I did a lot for ORT. I always believed in education. And ORT does so much in Israel with the blue-collar jobs, the mechanics, and the people. When they talk about airplanes and pilots and all, we have to remember there are people who take care of the planes and service them and do all those things. And the plumbers, and the electricians and all those. ORT is very good, and it's still very important to me. Of course, I've been working at Temple Israel and doing –

EM: What type of volunteer things there?

MF: Well, when Ellie was little, and she had to – we had to join a temple because I said she had to go to religious school. Bob didn't care much. He remembered being rapped on the knuckles by a teacher, and he didn't care. But we did. We joined Temple Israel and put her in the school. They had a meeting of the PTA there, and I went to the

meeting. I sat down, somebody sat beside me, we talked, and the next thing I knew, I was on the board of the PTA. A stranger came – they were delighted to have me come.

EM: It still works like that.

MF: Not so long ago, somebody said that she remembered that first meeting that I went to. And she remembered me from it. And I said, “Why did you?” She said, “Because of what you did and what you said.” I have no memory of it, but it must be true. Some young woman got up, and she said – his is the story that came back to me, and it’s probably true. I probably did. Her little girl didn’t want to go to religious school, and she said, “What can I do? She says no, and she didn’t want to come.” I got up, and I said, “How old is she?” And she said, “Six.” I said, “And a six-year-old runs your home and tells you what to do?”

EM: Right.

MF: They all sat up and looked around. According to the story, I said, “I told my daughter that we were coming here this morning, and she would go to school and would meet other children, and she would make friends and have a good time. And she came. And you let yours tell you what to do, and she’s six years old?”

So this woman, I think it was (Lillian Bouvet?), who is now very ill, was then the head of the religious school, and she said she never forgot that.

EM: That’s right.

MF: There are some parents who do that.

EM: Absolutely.

MF: Ellie was, at times, not too happy with the school. Well, she was dyslexic, and she had a great deal of trouble learning to read and write.

EM: Did they know about dyslexia then?

MF: No.

EM: No. What did you think? Now you call it dyslexic, but what did you think?

MF: I thought there was something wrong. I took her to the eye doctor, and I took her to the pediatrician. They couldn't find anything wrong. But finally, my sister at that time was tutoring in Newton. Of course, she hadn't been able to work as a teacher in Boston. So when she got married, she did private tutoring. And one day, when Ellie was in the second grade or so, she brought home a spelling paper that was marked all wrong. She was crying because she said, "I tried so hard, Mother, but I can't seem to do these." The teachers were saying that she was lazy, and they put her in the back of the class. I was really having a very hard time.

EM: Because you knew she was studying?

MF: I looked at the paper, and I could see that there was something very wrong. It was supposed to be alphabetical. So, there was a first word, which was A, and a second word was supposed to be best, B-E-S-T. She had written D-E-T-S. The other words were equally wrong like that. My sister happened to be in the house. And Ellie was sitting at the table hunched over. I showed this paper to my sister. I said to her, "There's something very wrong here. Look at this." She looked at it, and she said, "Oh my God. She's dyslexic." Because she was tutoring dyslexic children in Newton, and so she recognized immediately.

EM: That was probably in the '60s or something that she knew?

MF: Well, ’50 –

EM: 1950.

MF: Well, in the ’50s. Ellie was born in 1950, so it was probably ’57, ’58. She knew by then. But in Brookline, they didn’t know from anything. So I said to her, “What is this?” She explained it to me. She said, “She needs special tutoring. She’s very smart, but this is something that happens in the brain.” So, I went back to the school, and I tried to explain to the teacher and the principal. They were listening to nothing. I took her to Children’s Hospital to have her tested. There was a doctor there, Dr. Osgood – some name like that. He was an expert in this.

He tested her, and he gave me a paper saying what the story was and all that. We got a tutor for her, which Brookline would not allow in the school. She had to come to my house after school when the child was tired and all that. In Newton, they took children out of the classes for this, but in Brookline, they didn’t. She was tutored. She still has problems. She said to me the other day, “When I’m working and I start writing letters backward, I know it’s time for me to stop and rest.” This is not one of my good days, it seems.

EM: Oh, I know. I understand.

MF: I’ll be back. I’ll be right back. [Recording paused.] Anyway, she got through high school. She’s done very well. Now, they understand more about this.

EM: That’s right.

MF: They didn’t really know with her because she’s evidently rather slight and she’s extremely well-coordinated and very athletic. That sometimes doesn’t go with dyslexia.

EM: Right. If you can just think about reflections of your whole life, the question that's written down here is – most important things in life personally and professionally – how would you like to be remembered? It's a big question, I know. It's too big of a question to ask, maybe.

MF: Well, sometimes, when I realize that I have lived what is considered a fairly long life now, I wonder why. I don't think I've done anything. Well, I've tried to be a good mother. My daughter loves me, I know. I've tried to be a good friend. I have done a couple of things. I've worked hard for ORT. And at Temple Israel, I think I've made a difference to some people. There are a couple of people I know who have joined the temple on my account. There was a man who came in one day, a perfect stranger. He had moved here from California with his twelve-year-old son. He was just divorced. He wanted the boy to be tutored and trained for bar mitzvah and to join the temple. So he came into Temple Israel one day, and it was the day of the sisterhood luncheon. We had boutiques up in the lobby, and the place was – well, you know what it was like. Here's everybody running around and a lot of noise and all this. In came this man who had never been there before. He stood inside the door, looking around like this. So, I went up to him – and I felt sorry for the poor man – and asked what I could do and all that. He explained to me. So, I directed him to the executive director. I think it was Bernie Pincus then. He got him settled, and he never forgot it. He always said he joined the temple because I came up to him.

EM: Right.

MF: When his son was bar mitzvahed, he had nobody here. He asked my husband and me to be honorary grandparents and sit at the head table and be grandparents to his son. He's never forgotten it.

EM: Wonderful.

MF: The boy, Bernie, graduated from college last year. He and his father invited me to lunch, and we had a long talk, and we're still friendly. Richie always says he joined because I came up to him. He tells that wherever he goes and all that.

EM: That's great.

MF: Recently, I've been like a mentor, a friend to somebody who's just been converted and been her friend. She has said it was very important to her. There've been a couple of other people, too, that have been referred to me. Some woman moved here from Pittsburgh last year and had been very active in the temple there and wanted to be here. Her daughter went looking for somebody who would take her to temple and introduce her around. They found me, and I did. I think she has joined the temple. I haven't seen her lately. But things like that make me feel good. I've been active, I told you, in the PTA, and then I joined Sisterhood. I was secretary in Sisterhood and on the board. I'm an honorary now. After you've been there a certain number of years, you become an honorary. So I think I've done a couple of good things, not earth-shattering or anything like that. But if you try to do the best you can and be a good relative and be a good friend. I sit here sometimes, and I wonder why I have been granted this privilege of living to the age of ninety. What have I done? I haven't done anything earth-shattering. But if you do the best you can, what else can you say?

EM: Do you have any other advice if you're thinking about talking to younger people? Any advice for future generations?

MF: I don't have advice for people. Who am I to give advice to people? You try to be a good person. You try to do the best you can, and that's about it. I do think you should enjoy life and see all the good things around. When I was – let's see, it was in 1953 that I was misdiagnosed and almost died.

EM: What were you misdiagnosed with?

MF: With my heart. I always had this problem with the heart, which really never bothered me, except that I never took gym in school. People always thought, "Oh, she's getting away with something," that sort of thing. I had an abscessed tooth, which had to be extracted. The dentist did not give me Penicillin, so I became ill. I went to the doctor, and he misdiagnosed me. He finally said I had consumption or something. But before I got to the cardiologist, I was very, very ill. I really almost died. I practically did. I had surgery. I must have been strong otherwise because I recovered with a good husband, a good family. But I was sick for a long time. But I recovered, and here I am after all these years. And I sometimes wonder, why? I don't have any answers for you. But you do the best you can, and you try to be a good person. I think my daughter feels I do good things for her. I try to anyway.

EM: She's at Wellesley, you said? What's she doing?

MF: She is a determined person. When she got through with high school she'd had a really tough time there all those years. But she finally graduated. She was a cheerleader, a baton twirler.

EM: At Brookline High?

MF: At Brookline High, yeah. Where is that picture? I'll show you. [Recording paused.] I have pictures here.

EM: Good. I'm going to talk into this and look at the pictures so that we'll know what we're looking at.

MF: This is Ellie.

EM: We're looking at a picture of Ellie.

MF: This is my daughter [unclear]. This is when she was three years old.

EM: Tell me who this is.

MF: That's Bob and me at temple. Somebody took our picture.

EM: That's wonderful.

MF: Wasn't she cute?

EM: Adorable, adorable.

MF: She was a cute child. That's [inaudible] for her father. As you can tell, she's my only one, so I have lots of pictures of her.

EM: They're wonderful pictures.

MF: This is my mother with one of her great-grandchildren.

EM: That's your grandma.

MF: My mother.

EM: Your mother.

MF: My mother. When I look in the mirror sometimes I see my mother. I think I've gotten to look more like her. But I don't see the picture I was looking for. Oh, here it is. Isn't that a great picture?

EM: This is a picture of Ellie on the field at Brookline High.

MF: On the field from Brookline High.

EM: Twirling a baton.

MF: Yeah. Wasn't she something?

EM: That's wonderful. Who took the picture?

MF: I don't know. Some friend of hers, I guess. And there was the band in the back.

EM: Oh, that's fabulous.

MF: So she finally graduated.

EM: Who is this?

MF: My mother and my father.

EM: Oh.

MF: In Florida. Somebody took their picture.

EM: That's terrific.

MF: He was handsome, a handsome man.

EM: Very handsome.

MF: Isn't that a nice picture?

EM: That's wonderful. Do you mind if I take your picture for the –?

MF: What?

EM: Do you mind if I take your picture?

MF: [inaudible]

EM: They gave me a camera to take your picture.

MF: All right. If that's what you want to do. If that's what you're supposed to do.

[Recording paused.] So she went to work at the bank, worked at the Fleet Bank. But it was then the Brookline – they had lots of different names. She worked there for a long time as a teller and did very well. They liked her. But she got tired of counting other people's money, she said. She had an opportunity to work at Fisher Junior College. One of our tenants upstairs, with whom we were very friendly, worked there, and they needed somebody – a receptionist. We always said that Ellie was born with a telephone at her ear. That was a good job for her at the telephone. So she went to work there as a receptionist and telephone operator. And within a couple of years, she was secretary to the president, a very good job. They were such nice people, and she had a great job there and was doing very well.

The only problem was – a big problem was that her shorthand and typing was not all that great. So the president there suggested to her that she take a couple of courses there at night when she got through with work – take courses in typing and shorthand and all that. So she did and got a degree, an Associate Degree in Business, in Business Management, Accounting, and all that. And did very, very well and enjoyed it. So she had an associate degree. So one day, she was helping with the catalog brochure. She said to me, "You know, all those people there, the teachers and all, they all have these degrees after their name, B.A., M.A. What's an A.A? I don't have any degrees, and I really should." So without saying anything to us, she investigated colleges around, and she said she walked down to the campus of Wellesley and fell in love with it right away. They accepted her. They took her as a student.

EM: Did she know that you had wanted to go there?

MF: I don't know whether she – it wasn't me. It was my mother who had wanted me to go.

EM: Right.

MF: They wouldn't let me go because it was away from home, and they didn't want me away from home. Well, Ellie went as an older student. By that time, she was in an apartment of her own in Concord. So, it was no problem. She came home to us, and she said to us that she had been accepted at Wellesley College and would like to go there and expected us, of course, to pay for it. Well, my husband said to her, "Well, it's a lot more expensive than when you got out of college, you know. And if we don't pay for it, what will you do?" She said, "Well, I'll get loans. I can get loans and go." He said, "No. I don't want you to get through college and be saddled with loans. It would take years to pay them off." So we paid her way through college. We didn't take as many trips as we had. It didn't matter. We were very pleased to do it. She did extremely well at Wellesley. She was president of her class in her junior and senior year. She was on the president's student committee, student council. She was very active there and did extremely well. She feels now that it was one of the best things that she could ever do. She learned a great, great deal there and made friends, too.

EM: She did it in her own time.

MF: And did it in her own time and loved it, loved every bit of it. So when she got through Wellesley, she was doing something, clipping the hedges or something in her garden, and a man next door, who was a construction [inaudible] started to talk to her. They were talking and offered her a job in construction. She became the construction project manager of a building in Marblehead with four hundred and fifty men working for her.

EM: Wow.

MF: She loved it. It was great. It was a good job, and it paid well, too. But when it was over, she didn't want to do it anymore. She went back to working at the bank. These

people that she works for now – they come into the bank, saw her, and they decided they'd like her to work for them. So they chased her for a couple of years. And finally, she became disgusted with the way the people who run the Fleet Bank, the owners – Murray his name is, I think.

EM: Murray [inaudible] or something –

MF: She didn't like the way he was running. And she said, "What right does he have to have a board of directors meeting" –

EM: Terrence Murray.

MF: – "down at the Breakers in Palm Beach, and the bank pays for all of that." So she quit her job. She wouldn't work for anybody like that. She is like that.

EM: Right.

MF: And so now she works for this accounting firm in Brookline and does very well and loves it and all that. She has an apartment at 121 Longwood and has other things that she does. She's very busy with all sorts of things and does very well and does my shopping and does my cooking. She's good. I feel that I'm very, very fortunate to have found her. I couldn't have done better.

EM: That's wonderful.

MF: Yeah. She's a good daughter and a good person. What else can I tell you?

EM: This has been wonderful. Thank you. Thank you.

MF: So some strangers will know my whole personal life history. Alright, let them. I have nothing to hide.

EM: Wonderful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]