Selma Finstein Transcript

BETSY FRIEDMAN ABRAMS: Today is September 30, 1997. I am Betsy Friedman Abrams, assisted by Roberta Burstein, in Waltham, and we are interviewing Selma Gross Finstein under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archive Temple Israel Oral History Project. Selma, it's so much fun to interview you, given the fact that you were you my religious school teacher.

SELMA GROSS FINSTEIN: Ya, there were a lot of people whom I was supposed to have been teaching at one time or another.

BA: Ya, well, so, I think it would be interesting to learn something about what you thought about teaching at the temple, given that I understand you grew up at Temple Israel.

SF: Ya, I did. What do you want to know about?

BA: [laughs]

SF: Teaching? Or how I got into Temple Israel? [chuckles]

BA: Well, both.

SF: Both.

BA: Both.

SF: Well, Temple Israel has been part of my life practically since I was 12 or 13 years old.

ROBERTA BURSTEIN: Why?

SF: I really don't know how we became affiliated with it. By the time I was able to know that I was going to Sunday school, we were already there. And I was confirmed at Temple Israel. I think about when—most of the time it takes place when you're—the service takes place when you're a sophomore in high school.

BA: Right.

SF: So that would have been about 1929 or something like that. I think we were the last class to be confirmed at the old temple. Or maybe it was the first class at the new temple. And that was 1926 when the new temple was built.

RB: On Commonwealth Avenue.

SF: No. Please!

RB: [laughs] Well, I didn't know which—

SF: I'm sorry. When I speak of the old temple, I mean the one on Commonwealth Avenue.

RB: Oh.

SF: When I speak of the new temple, I mean the one on Riverway.

RB: Oh. Well—

SF: That was 1926, I think

BA: The chapel—the auditorium was built in 1928.

SF: So then it was '28—

BA: Ya.

SF: Ya, that's the year I was confirmed. I know our class were invited—our classmates (I'll make it plural so that the verb will be correct) were invited to be in the group to show people around the new building when it was built. That's a long time ago, now that I think of it. It was quite different from what it is now. Then, let's see.

BA: Were the classes—

SF: There were—

BA: Where were they in—

SF: They were in the vestry of the chapel and they were there—we were confirmed the year that Dr. Liebman died. So we were all—more or less, everybody there was in a very sad mode. I think it was—I can't remember whether it was raining or the weather was inclement because we had it indoors.

BA: You mean when Dr. Levi died?

SF: No, no, I meant Dr. Liebman.

BA: Oh, because I was in the confirmation class the year Rabbi Liebman died; that was in '48.

SF: Oh, it couldn't have been there. Were they still having classes at the old temple?

BA: Ya.

SF: Well, then I must have—

BA: You must have been teaching in those days.

SF: Maybe. No, I didn't teach until after I became a—officially a member of a teaching study group. I mean, you know, I was trained as a teacher.

BA: Well, Joshua Loth Liebman became the rabbi in 1939.

SF: I remember him very easily. I was teaching but I don't remember whether it was that—maybe it was that year. I do remember that confirmation was a sad confirmation.

BA: Oh, it was five days later.

SF: Ya. You must have been—you didn't—I'll tell you who was a member of the class. Robert Levi; of course he's dead.

RB: Oh, no, Bob Levi would have been—it seems to me [chuckles] that you have—

SF: Ya—

RB: —that you were confirmed—

SF: Wait a second. Ya, it must have been his confirmation class that I was confirmed in. But I don't remember really. These things are now hazy. At one time, I had—Sy had pictures of all those classes.

BA: Well, we have now—

SF: I don't know.

BA: If you look in the—up on the first floor, we've put as many confirmation class pictures as we could find are now—

SF: Sy kept them all in a series, but anyway, those days are gone forever. But you're right, now that I've placed those days in context, I probably was teaching. I was probably teaching already. I happened to get into the teaching bit. I was training as a teacher in Boston anyway. And I was a specialist in music; that was my minor. So they were looking for someone. I don't remember who the principal was; I don't know if there was a principal at that time. But they were looking for someone to teach music to the school. I

remember I had to interview Rabbi Cohon in that one—was it one or two years that he was there? But he was the person who actually hired me to teach seventh grade music, and it was quite—experience. Then as I continued—I continued, you know, from the seventh to the ninth grade general teaching. When Rabbi Gittelsohn came, he changed my whole life. I thought he was just tremendous. I come of the school when Sunday school teachers were the old fashioned type, and they read from the children's Bibles. And we had to study what was in the Bible; we didn't know. And then Reubin Lurie was a teacher in Hebrew and he was just a joy. He was a great guy. And the relationship between him and his pupils was something that should be heralded or written up in all textbooks on teaching, because he was very free, very easy. I think he was at law school at the time; I don't know. But at any event, he had a very favorable effect on my life. And then, Rabbi Liebman came, I guess, after Cohon. Not—yes, it was two years or so. There was an interim. We had this guy from New York who came in and he was a darling too. He was—I've seen his name but I can't remember it because he wasn't one of the people who had a great effect on Temple Israel. He just was there. Then Rabbi Liebman came and he had some classes for the teachers because teaching was so dear to him. And I remember it was like a revelation, like one of these fundamentalist things, you see—you know. He opened up a whole new vista on Jewish life for me.

RB: This is Rabbi Gittelsohn that you're referring to?

SF: No, I'm talking of Rabbi Liebman.

RB: Oh.

SF: Because he had these few lectures with the classes, he didn't have time to go into any great relationship because he had so many other responsibilities and he died so young. But when Rabbi Gittelsohn came it was a whole different thing. It was an indescribable experience to have worked with him and I was very lucky because Sy Nemzoff and he were together, and the two of them brought us halcyon days, I call

them—the halcyon days.

RB: Yes, I've read that in your interview. I thought that was a marvelous word and a tremendous compliment to, you know, the school system that you would feel that way today.

SF: Well, it really was. It's an indescribable thing because the temple was burgeoning and Rabbi Gittelsohn came and he brought—he brought this new—shall I—shall I—[tape turned off/on] revitalized the temple—the membership, and all those who were affiliated with the temple, the people who worked there—Bessie Berman, I remember. It's quite different from today. I don't go there at all today because it's a whole different thing and it's understandable, because when I worked at Brandeis, which I did while I was teaching, I was the foreign student advisor in charge of the Wein Scholarship Program.

RB: You're going too fast. As a matter of fact, I really want to interrupt you right now.

SF: Sure, right.

RB: Because we got started on the religious school because that's what Betsy was so intrigued with.

SF: Well, I'll get to that pretty soon.

RB: But what I want to talk about is when you were a child. [chuckles]

SF: I'll have to think too far back for that. [laughter]

RB: Were you an only child in your family?

SF: No, I had a brother.

RB: Oh, yes, I think I read that in your interview. And where did you grow up?

SF: I grew up in Roslindale.

RB: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SF: There were two Jewish families. One was the Robbins family; they were florists, and we were the other one. She lived in Jamaica Plain in the swankier section; I lived in Roslindale. And it was—what is there to talk about?

RB: Did you have any problems—

SF: Yes.

RB: —because you were Jewish?

SF: Well, I was the only Jewish child in the whole—I would say the whole school except for Anna Robertson.

RB: And was that a problem to you—

SF: Yes.

RB: —with the other children?

SF: When I started to date non-Jewish boys, my parents became very upset so we moved.

BA: Which school? What was the name of the school you went to? Do you remember?

SF: You mean the public school?

BA: Ya.

SF: Francis Parkman School, and in order to get there we had to walk and go over a tall bridge and go by a cemetery and up a hill.

RB: And it was scary for a little girl.

SF: Ya, there were two of us; I used to go with a—and I'd meet a Swedish girl. They were recent immigrants. Didn't mean anything to me. I just knew she was Swedish because she was the only person who ever told me the reason nuns wore large habits was because they were pregnant by the priests.

RB: [laughs]

SF: [chuckles] So that's how I was brought up. We used to walk over the toll bridge and then we'd look at this Revolutionary cemetery, which is still there, on the way up to the school.

RB: Did you have much—was religion an emphasized thing in your home? Did your parents stress that?

SF: My grandmother was more or less observant. I don't remember her; she died when I was comparatively young, but when she used to come and visit I remember my mother would kosher the silverware by pouring hot water over it. Otherwise, we observed the holidays but not much else.

RB: I see.

BA: Where did you go to high school?

SF: I went to the Girls' Latin School in the days when it was a halcyon school. [chuckles]

RB: You were very fortunate; you had two halcyons there. [laughter]

SF: Well, my Jewish experience was a special one. I went to Latin School.

RB: That isn't where Sy Nemzoff was; he was at the Boys' Latin.

SF: He was at the Boston Latin—the Boys' Latin. It used to be called the Boy's Latin and we were called the Girls' Latin.

RB: But did you know Sy? I mean, was there a relationship?

SF: The reason I knew Sy was that the year before he took on the job, the summer before Sophie who of course—

RB: His wife.

SF: —Yes called me up to ask what it was like at Temple Israel, because he was the traditional background and they didn't know whether they were going to like Reformed Judaism.

RB: Oh, but you were members.

SF: But because I was trained there and I had gone to school there and I was at that time teaching, I guess Sophie wanted to find out whether they'd be happy.

RB: Mmm-hmm.

SF: This is the case with many people who don't know what the facts of Reformed Judaism are. I belong to a—I don't belong to a little temple but I attend sometimes the services at this temple down here in Waltham, which is a—one of the oldest congregations in New England—1906. At the turn of the century, many Jews moved out here and as they—they were mostly in mercantile work, you know, stores—meat stores—that kind of thing. The Waltham Supermarket was started by members of that congregation. And—I don't know what I was saying. Oh yeah, I tried to get them because people are very eager to become members of these days even if they belonged to other congregations. But they're not egalitarian. All these guys are the ones who inherited from their parents. And remember, Judaism is the Orthodox type, which they

brought with them from the Old Country. So they read a lot of Hebrew and which nobody understands anymore. And they—although they do have sermons and they recently, and they allow women on the platform on the bimah, they're still—we used to call them at Brandeis "Conservadox" [chuckles] They don't affiliate with anything. It's too bad because they're looking for [unclear].

RB: When you graduated from Girls' Latin School, where did you go to school then?

SF: I went to Boston Teacher's College. I didn't have enough money to go to Radcliffe, to which I was admitted.

RB: And where was Boston Teacher's College? I've never heard of it.

SF: Right next door to the Latin School.

RB: Oh.

SF: It went—the school now occupied by the Massachusetts College of Art.

RB: Oh.

SF: They took it over from us. They ruined the whole building. They took over the Latin School and the whole Teacher's College.

RB: And the purpose of that school was to train teachers?

SF: I feel it was English—English literature.

RB: And just women? Or men and women?

SF: It was a coeducational school and it was very difficult. We had to take separate examinations. They would not accept the college boards. So I had to take two sets of examinations—college boards and Teacher's College examinations.

RB: So before you went to that school you perhaps had made the decision that teaching was going—

SF: Honey, what else could a woman do at that time?

RB: [chuckles] Understood.

SF: Get married or go into teaching.

RB: Or both. [laughs]

SF: I didn't know any better.

RB: Or both.

SF: Ya. No, not in Boston. I was in the last class in which they did not allow married women to teach because they were still suffering from the—I would say, the belief or the union—I don't want to say the union, because there was no union. They were still adhering to the idea that women took away jobs from men who supported families.

RB: Ya.

SF: So, they—if you got married you were out, so many people lied—

RB: Right, and they used their maiden names—

SF: —but I didn't.

RB: —too.

SF: Ya.

RB: Right.

SF: But I didn't.

RB: How many years did it—

SF: Five years—I got my Master's Degree.

RB: Oh, five years and you had your Master's, oh.

BA: Were there many Jews in the—

SF: There was a Jewish—I call it a acultery. The girls who came from Roxbury and Mattapan and what else—Dorchester before we moved there when I was about 16. But I didn't have much to do with them, I'm sorry to say. I knew who they were but they used to meet after school and stuff. I worked in the Boston Public Library. I had a job. Fanny Goldstein, who was the librarian of the West End Public Library—you probably know—have heard of her. She was a member of Temple Israel. Fanny Goldstein was the first Jewish librarian appointed in Boston.

RB: You had to be appointed librarian?

SF: Oh yes, of course. And Civil Service was very strong. I got onto the Civil Service list when I took my examinations for teaching. And I took two sets, one for the high school, which I was trained for, because I have my Master's Degree, and one for the junior high school, because they thought that you might get a better—might have an opportunity to be appointed. Appointed means that you were permanently appointed.

RB: Oh, I see.

SF: Yeah. You—it was a very hard time. People didn't—in order to take the qualifying examinations for appointment, one had to have had 180 days of paid service. But no one stayed out at that time. Teachers came to school when they were sick because they were docked for loss of time. And substitutes were waiting in line to take their places.

[chuckles]

RB: So it could be many years before you'd ever get—

SF: Well, you know what they did? They, as a result of this, this difficulty in getting paid experience, the City of Boston instituted a system known as the "Cadet Work." These people who had qualified for work were given the opportunity to work at a nominal rate of pay which was 50 cents a day to cover your car fare and lunches. And we would—I was—carried almost a full course, a full block of teaching and the kids—the teachers who were appointed were supposed to be our supervisors by many of them just never showed—[chuckles] They came and then, you know, sat in the teacher's room. But I learned a great deal and then, of course, I had the experience that was very unusual. Of course they were trying to institute a union at that time and there was none. One woman appoint—came to me one time and asked me to talk about the system by which we were given this 50 cent deal and carried almost—we could carry a full program in order to qualify for further exams. And she said—her father had been part of the police strike in—what was it—1919? Calvin Coolidge's time.

RB: Yes.

SF: They brought to fame and he broke it. And her father, who was an out and out Irishman (her name was very Irish), had been—had lost his job as a result of participating in the attempt to institute the union. So she inherited this desire to unionize the thing. So she came to me and asked if I would appear before a hearing on this "Cadet" system. So I was afraid; I couldn't do it. I mean, I would never have a job if I had done it. I couldn't take the examinations. I couldn't do it. It was a very fearsome time to think about these things.

RB: And what year was this?

SF: I don't know. It must have been around—well, let's see, I graduated from school in 1935. So it must have been '35 to '38, something like that. But then, of course, they unionized and now they have a very powerful union.

BA: Oh, where did you do your Cadet?

SF: At Dorchester High School.

BA: Dorchester High School.

SF: Because theoretically it was the nearest place and I could get there for ten cents. It was a very difficult period but we were very glad to have the opportunity. So then I went to teach at Temple Israel, the music thing.

RB: Wait, I want to ask you something—

SF: Sure.

RB: —about your personal life at that time.

SF: Yes.

RB: And—

SF: I was not married.

RB: I—this is just in way of information, not to be nosy. Did you go out with Jewish boys at that point?

SF: At that time?

RB: Yes.

SF: At that time we—

RB: You mentioned that your parents—

SF: —moved to Dorchester—

RB: Ya.

SF: —to a place our family called Huban Street and I met some Jewish boys.

RB: And did you have Jewish girlfriends?

SF: Oh, yes. Most of my friends were Jewish.

RB: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you have any sort of interesting experiences at that time that you can remember—

SF: No.

RB: —that would be interesting to relate?

SF: No, no. I was involved, you know, in the teaching bit.

RB: You were just working.

SF: And working.

RB: Ya.

SF: And I worked at the Boston Public Library for Fanny Goldstein. Fanny was really a remarkable person. She instituted—no one ever gives her credit for it now—the Jewish Book Week. And she used to get into contact with the authors of Jewish—of books—Jewish authors of Jewish books, or Jewish authors of books. And every year she would have a display of the [unclear]—one of the first librarians whoever had the courage to do that kind of thing. But it took on and she—

BA: Which library was she in?

SF: West End Branch Library.

RB: The West End Branch down on Cambridge Street.

SF: Now, you have to remember that Civil Service was very dominant in that age, at that time. You took examinations and they had to follow the Civil Service. For example, when teachers were appointed to schools, they had—a principal was required to choose the first—somebody from the first three names on the list. And of course the Jewish girls were smart, so many people became appointed at that time. I didn't mean to imply that others weren't because some of them, of course, did get in. A lot of the Irish girls that we had studied with got in because they were smart too. But it was Civil Service. Even the library—I took a test in library in order to get to the library, and it was a standardized—not the kind that you get today, multiple choice. In those days you had to write essays. So—

RB: Difficult to correct.

SF: They were awful—awful. But anyway, I got on the list and Fanny wanted somebody who could type. While I was at the Latin School I spent one summer taking an accelerated course in typing and that's how—been a marvelous, marvelous skill to have. So she saw my name and she was entitled to choose someone so she chose me, and I used to go all the way in from Dorchester. [chuckles] We worked for 25 cents an hour and if we were lucky we would be allowed to come in on Sundays or holidays and we would get 50 cents an hour.

RB: Double time.

SF: And it was very good. That was the last of that kind of period. But—

RB: So at what point—at what point then did you get involved in teaching at Temple Israel?

SF: When I was with Fanny Goldstein, I was appointed, or I got that job teaching music.

RB: I see.

BA: Were you teaching—working, teaching music at Dorchester High or—

SF: No, no, no—English. English was my field.

BA: I was going to say, was that what you majored in?

SF: English composition and English literature.

RB: So you could probably tell us a thing or two about parsing a sentence.

SF: Oh, that I can tell you—grammar. I had a teacher when I was in the eighth grade and she was the typical caricature. Her name was Miss Joy and she had a little neck and little bosom and shake. And she said to us, "Children, I am going to teach you grammar and more grammar and more grammar." [laughter] "And one day you will be glad that I taught—" I was so frightened of her. Then one day she had to go home. She said she was—she wanted us to be on our best behavior because the principal would look in on us once in a while but we were to be on our best behavior because she had to go visit her mother who lived in Maine. Well Maine might have been the Soviet Union [chuckles] as far as I was concerned. I knew it was on the map and it was red or green or something. [laughs] But I had no idea that anybody lived there, let alone her mother. Well anyway, I could teach grammar. I still am a purist in grammar and I die when I hear all the mistakes. [laughs]

RB: I'll bet you do. [laughter]

SF: Ya.

RB: That's for sure.

BA: Okay, so Fanny was what? The librarian?

SF: She was the—no, no, she was the librarian at the West End Public Library.

BA: I know, but didn't she also at one point act as the librarian at the temple?

SF: I don't know.

BA: Or was she teaching at the temple?

SF: No, I think—well, I don't remember her having taught at the temple. That was Fanny Barnet Linsky.

BA: Ya.

SF: She was the very first teacher—

BA: Ya.

SF: —that we dedicated the "Torch Bearer" to. Ya, she was a remarkable person. She taught the first grade forever. Everybody remembered her. As they grew up, they all wanted to know about Fanny Barnet Linsky.

BA: No, the reason I asked is that last summer someone who is a colleague of Ann Abrams asked for information about Fanny Goldstein, and also we had seen some letters when we've been going through Rabbi Gittelsohn's papers.

SF: Really?

BA: She—congratulating her for some award she had won or something, and—

SF: That's right; she was a pioneer; she really was. In this field today, when we accept these kinds of observances regularly, you know, we don't even think anything of it. But she did it and she was very proud of it.

RB: Tell us about teaching at Temple Israel and also about the "Torch Bearer," which obviously you were very involved with.

SF: Ya. Well, teaching at Temple Israel isn't like teaching anywhere else, until I began with the confirmation class. You have to know something about the background of the times. It's not like today. Roland Gittelsohn, I think, revitalized the temple. Of course, after Liebman, anyone who would come had a great deal to do. But Gittelsohn already—he already had the reputation. He already had the prestige and he already had the power. So when he—when he enunciated something, I would say that it became anointed and the temple grew. We had a wonderful PTA. All the—I have to use that word because there's no other word to describe it. We had such a powerfully interested group of parents that you could do anything and they would come through for you. If—they were very active. They had meetings regularly. They planned things for the kids and did—it was a wonderful group. That was Ida Mae Kahn and Deeda Wharton, and her boys were in the confirmation class. And who else was there? That—she lives in the Prudential—

RB: Charlotte—

SF: Charlotte Doun, thank you. They were all leaders at the time. And there was no other place in Boston that had anything like that. So it was a wonderful time to be teaching there.

BA: We had to have—we had enough students that we had to have—

SF: Oh that's another—

BA: —it two days in a row, didn't we?

SF: Oh, yes.

BA: We had it both Saturday and Sunday.

SF: Yes. During the first years that Sy. Sy was a very easy man to get along with. From the point of view of teaching, he was very sympathetic, more than that. He was sympathetic because he himself was a teacher and had been on the front lines. And so he gave us, I would say, a free hand in developing anything that we wanted. The first year that I taught—I don't know whether the first or second or the third, but it was sometime like that—they introduced a course in the seventh grade, which I taught. It was called "Dorothy and David—Dorothy and David Visit New York," or something like that. Did you ever hear of it? You'll find it in the library. You know, today they talk about—I get this stuff from the union. They talk about these remarkable books! You would think that they were discovering the world right over again. Everybody discovers the wheel. We had this book which was the first time it was used—at which was used for the first time the year that I taught it. And it involved a group that was going—of young people and young children who followed the text of learning about New York, Jewish New York, by visiting the various places. Well, of course, nobody ever thought of taking a class out. When you came to class, you sat there and you tried to learn or you really with the next kid, or you got out of the class somehow. Well, we had this wonderful course. I had such a good time and the kids did too because it was free. They didn't have to, you know, tow the line all the time. We went—I took this group of seventh graders from a Reformed congregation and took them to Temple Mishkahn Tefila, which was, at the time—That's why I was so upset by that.

BA: Oh, you had to come—

SF: We came—we went to Temple Mishkahn Tefila, and—to see another temple, another kind of experience. We had the wonderful good fortune of being met by Mignon Rabinovitz, the rabbi's wife, whose pet project was the museum.

BA: Right.

SF: And she took us through that museum. And I can still see some of the kids. Their eyes were opening; they never thought that there was anything like this in Jewish life. It was a marvelous experience. And then, among the other things, we took—I took them to the Beth Israel Hospital where we had a doctor—I don't remember what position he held—who told them about the hospital. It was—they never had that kind of thing. They never thought that anything had to—

BA: [unclear]

SF: No, it wasn't that far back. [laughter] Anyway, that was—those were two of the places that we visited. We went around to the various Jewish locales and we would—you couldn't go all the time, of course, because it takes too much class time. But that was one of the highlights of my teaching experience.

RB: That must have been very—

BA: Were most of the teachers women, do you remember?

SF: No, they were not. Sy recruited a lot of the teachers from the Latin School and from the school system, and they were men. And I—Remember Dr. Satz? Dr. Satz lived on the other side of this. This is my apartment; his was on the other side. And we used to, you know, have these—this wonderful—not a fight, but what did we call it? Disagreement among the classes. I used to say. He used to tell his class that you could recognize a Jew anywhere. And I'd say, well, I'd say to the kids—I don't know if I did it for you—I'd say to them, "Well, I'll tell you what, if you go where I send you and you tell

me who's Jewish, if you could find out"— Then we had a running still all year long on this thing. And I said, "I'll give you a whole bunch of A's." So that was that. Anyway, then when school grew very, very large, we had sessions at the old temple and sessions at the new temple. And then it wasn't enough so they instituted Saturday sessions and Sunday sessions, and sessions still at the old place. And then when they sold it, of course, they had to get out. Let's see, what other questions did you want to ask?

RB: Have you met Mr. Finstein yet? I don't know Mr. Finstein, so I can't call him anything but—

SF: You can call him Joe.

RB: Okay.

SF: Everybody knew him as Joe. Well, when I met my husband, they thought it was an—when I married him, they thought it was an intermarriage [chuckles], because he came from a very traditional background and was a graduate at a Hebrew college and had read the—you know, they talk about these guys who read the Talmud.

RB: Ya.

SF: And they have the [unclear].

RB: Ya.

SF: They had read it because when he went to the Hebrew College everything was in Hebrew. I mean, their classes were in Hebrew.

RB: Was he studying to be a rabbi?

SF: No.

RB: Oh.

SF: No, no.

RB: Why else would you go to the Hebrew?

SF: The Hebrew College? It was just a place of higher Jewish learning.

RB: I see. I thought you meant the Hebrew Union College.

SF: Oh, no. No, no, no. This was the Hebrew Teachers College in Boston.

RB: Ya, ya.

SF: At that time it was called the Hebrew Teachers College. Now, because in order to teach at some of the Hebrew Schools, you had to have graduated from an accredited school and he earned his way through Harvard by teaching. He was making money when some of the other kids weren't. But anyway, he was very learned in Hebrew.

RB: And his family was not thrilled with you because you weren't Orthodox?

SF: No, they had nothing to do with it.

RB: Oh.

SF: No, I say it was just an aside.

RB: Oh.

SF: But he was always sympathetic to Reform Judaism. It—I say that because, of course, you know they come from this kind of—he came from this kind of background. And—but he was a confirmed Reformed Jew after that. I mean, if we have to affiliate a—and I think the reason was that Rabbi Gittelsohn made it so easy to be a Reformed Jew and still observe some of the customs. You remember, there was a great deal of—not a schism, but there were people who thought it was too Orthodox, too this, too

that—you know, introducing bar mitzvahs and stuff like that. We—these are part of our tradition and all he did was—remember that wonderful session? That wonderful book—I mean, chapter in the book that we used? "Little Lower Than the Angels." Why do we observe customs and this says they have to be a historical, they have to have beauty—all that kind of thing. And when he advanced that—all those ideas, they understood it. I mean, you can observe whatever it is that makes you—that vitalizes it, renews your religious faith.

RB: And what was your husband's subject? What did he teach?

SF: He went to Harvard Law School. Oh, and then when—

RB: So he went in the attorney.

SF: —in the Jewish—Ya. And then when he—became interested in Jewish life, he became the first consultant for Reform Judaism at the Bureau of Jewish Education.

RB: Oh, so he must have known Mr. Segal—Joe Segal.

SF: He certainly did.

RB: Ya.

SF: He knew his father.

RB: He knew his father?

SF: Dr. Segal was his doctor.

RB: Oh.

SF: But Roland and Joe were very close.

RB: Ya. You mean your Joe?

SF: My Joe.

RB: Oh. Of course, Roland was also very close with Mr. Joe Segal.

SF: That's right.

RB: [chuckles]

SF: He was—it was Roland who sponsored and who was adamant about having a representation for the Jewish—Reform Jewish community in the Bureau. Up until that time it was definitely slanted toward Orthodox conservative. And they, of course the Bureau got money from the Federation, so it all was part of the deal. You know do I talk that much?

RB: No, no. [chuckles]

SF: [unclear] I have my three year-old, four-year-old, some six year-olds on tape [unclear].

RB: [laughs]

BA: Was Joe practicing law or was he just with the Bureau of Jewish Education?

SF: After he—he had practiced law and then he gave it up in order to be with the Bureau.

BA: That's what I remember him doing and then ultimately he began teaching at Temple Israel.

SF: Well, he taught for awhile but then he became a consultant so he couldn't really teach. They used to—kids used to—he used to say that kids said, "Here's the

supervisor." [laughs] He'd come into a class and, "Hey, here's the supervisor." [laughs]

RB: And did you have a family?

SF: I have a son.

RB: Ya?

SF: Just one. I have three grandchildren.

RB: All right.

SF: They're right over there.

RB: Oh. [chuckles]

SF: Amy is a senior at Brandeis. She's the one at the end and Joshy is in the middle, and Joshy is a freshman. He was admitted several places but they gave him a very good grant at Brandeis. [laughs]

RB: Wonderful.

SF: And he's very happy; he loves it.

RB: Oh that's wonderful.

SF: And that's David. David is 11 years old. Then I say to David, "I can't do what you do. I'm getting older every day." He says, "Grandma, so am I." [laughter]

BA: Well, it's interesting because I know your son was involved with music.

SF: Yes.

BA: Yes, he created it because of you?

SF: No, I don't think so. I think—well, he might have. But—he might have been interested in it, but he had this feeling for it all the time. He wanted music—nothing else. Now he's the head of music at the Holliston High School. But—and he taught music for a couple of years at Temple Israel, but then I guess that they—the cantor took over or whatever. I don't know.

BA: I'm looking at what you said here which I didn't remember.

SF: I didn't remember that. I just filled it out because I thought you wanted an answer to that.

BA: We definitely did but you're saying that you also were affiliated in the temple. You worked as a secretary to Rabbi Jick and as assistant editor of the Temple Bulletin.

SF: Right. Well, that was all part of my typing experience. [chuckles]

BA: Ah-ha.

SF: You see, when I—Bessie Berman was in the office and when Rabbi Jick came, I adored him. Everybody does. He needed a secretary so Sy said did I want to? And I said, well, it was a part-time deal anyway. So it was very good. The first year he was there I was his secretary. And of course I met him again at Brandeis when he was there. And when he gave up his pulpit he became Head of the Institute for Jewish Life. The Jewish communities in Canada and in the United States were sure that Judaism was going to die because there was great increase in intermarriage and stuff like that. There were other things that were bothering them. So they all contributed three million dollars to the foundation of this Institute for Jewish Life was going to correct everything. And they appointed a—what's his name—Leon—Leon Jick director. And he came to me and asked if I would type. I was the Office Manager so that's what I did.

RB: Let's get—

SF: I did that for two years.

RB: Let's get back to the "Torch Bearer."

BA: Ya, I was going to ask you. I can't remember when the "Torch Bearer" was started.

SF: 1948.

BA: And who came up with the idea of doing it? You?

SF: I did. The idea was Roland Gittelsohn—was it Roland Gittelsohn? I don't remember. One of the rabbis or the guy who came in-between, whose name I cannot remember.

BA and RB: Klausner.

SF: No, no, no, not Klausner. By the way, I heard from him just about two—about a year ago. No. Well, I forgot about Klausner. No, that guy who was interim after Cohon left. They didn't appoint anybody. They had someone from New York.

RB: Oh, I don't know anything about that.

SF: Ya, ya.

RB: Well—

SF: Well anyway, they came in and the great thing—that great push at that time was participation—participation making everybody like everybody else. And a Jewish school could be like anything else. We should have something that told about the school, a newspaper or a book. So of course I was concentrating—I had concentrated in English so Sy Nemzoff said to me, "Why don't you take it over?" Well, I didn't care but I wanted to tell you something. If you look in the "Torch Bearer" today, I don't know where they are. I threw all my copies out. Isn't that awful? I had a whole set.

BA: There's a whole set in the library and we have a set in the archives.

SF: That's wonderful. If you look through there—

BA: And I think there are about ten years of them.

SF: I think so. You will find that the kids, either under duress or as part of their courses, wrote summaries of what they learned, and you have a whole picture (I don't know how many people realize this) of what was going on in the school at the time. You'll find people who talk about that seventh grade excursion and the places that they went. And the kids wrote it themselves. It was difficult to get them to write it. But we would—I'd always finds some guy—some kid in the school who was eager and make him editor or something or they'd elect it. Do you remember Danny Golden? Was he in your class? A brilliant boy. A brilliant boy, and always had time for everything. He was a graduate of the Latin School. I think he went to Harvard; I'm not sure. Or maybe it was Princeton; I don't know. Anyway, Danny was a strong right arm one year and a lot of that stuff came with him and when you look back on it, it's a phenomenal thing. I mean, the kids put together these photographs, and they brought in their cameras. They wrote up their experiences—class experiences. What we learned in grade one, a poem on [unclear] in grade three. And, you know, now I see that when I go to school I see it's on the side. We never gave it anything. [chuckles] They put it in [unclear]. That was—you know, I'm not fooling when I know that the kids got out of class. They wanted to get out of class so they came to a "Torch Bearer" meeting. But they worked. They had to write and then sometimes we sent out for lunch and we had fun. And we did that for ten years. And on the first year, just for the hell of it (I never thought anything of it) we submitted it to the competition for the Columbia Prize. Columbia School of Journalism gave a prize. We got first prize. [chuckles]

RB: I know. I remember that there were prizes for that type of thing.

SF: And the next year, Temple—what's the one on Beacon Street?

BA: Ohabai—

SF: Ohabai Shalom—

[end of side 1, tape 1]

BA: This is Side B of tape number one of Selma Finstein on September 30, 1997.

SF: So I say, we'll go back to Temple Ohabai Shalom.

BA: Ya.

SF: We must have had some influence on the Jewish community. [laughter]

BA: I think we had a lot of influence on the Jewish community.

SF: Well, they—it really—thinking back, not just because I was affiliated with it, but because I sometimes picked up a copy when I was cleaning out the attic or something, and I reread it. And I was amazed at some of the material that I had forgotten about completely. Now there was one other experience that I do want you to know. When I started to teach the confirmation class, Rabbi Gittelsohn did not have time to correct his papers. And as usual, Sy came to me on—and to Roland and asked if I would take on the responsibility of correcting his papers. So I did and it was the most wonderful experience I ever had because not only did I correct the papers that the kids did, but I learned as I went along, and it had a remarkable experience on my thinking.

BA: Really?

SF: That book I thought was terrific. They can have as many books as they want but I think “Little Lower Than the Angels” really was a pioneer effort in that direction. I think we were—you were very lucky to speak with—of course the kids all used to say, “We have to believe the way he does all the time. I know what the story is.” But the fact of the matter is, like teaching American History, I’d never thought that anything the United States could do was wrong. I never thought—I couldn’t understand how they behaved toward the Indians, but it was the United States.

RB: We all thought that up to a certain point.

SF: Exactly.

BA: Oh, ya.

SF: Well, that’s it. If you—you have to believe. Rabbi Gittelsohn said, “You have to believe.” The kids used to say it all the time. The fact remains that after they lived what he felt, they could change it as they want. And I remember you. [chuckles] You said to me—at a sisterhood meeting when I was so impressed with what you said. And I said that it’s a great tribute to the school that you do what you can, what you have at Temple Israel.

BA: That’s true.

SF: You said, “I hated the Sunday school.” [laughter] “I hated every minute of that Sunday school,” she said. I said, “What are you going to”—did your kids say that?

BA: [laughs] Not as much as I did, no. Definitely not as much. Were you teaching in confirmation class when—after Joshua Loth Liebman published “Piece of Mind?”

SF: Yes, I did.

BA: Because that, of course, I remember his teaching, you know, and he wasn't there—couldn't be there every week when we had the class.

SF: That's right. I think he came in once.

BA: We had—he'd come like about once a month—

SF: Ya.

BA: —as I vaguely remember.

SF: Ya.

BA: And of course that was a very profound book for—

SF: The confirmation class.

BA: —the confirmation class. So you—

RB: Was that in—I mean, could they understand it?

SF: No, I—he had written a book and he was famous.

RB: Ya.

SF: But just to have him there and whatever he was commenting on. I remember that Rabbi Gittelsohn came into my class one time and for some reason, I don't know why, I was so nervous—I think I was teaching something about Zionism and Hertzel. I can think at this time while I'm talking to you how dry my mouth became. And I was looking to the kids to answer one question with a specific answer, which of course you should never do, and Roland was such a marvelous teacher. Oh, he was a fantastic teacher. And I remember asking them about it and I couldn't get that answer from the kids. And the only comment Roland made on my class was, "You know, Selma, you don't always have to

get the book answer." I had asked them, I think, where was—something stupid like where was Hertzel born or what was he doing or something very inane. But it was important to me; I had to get that answer. [laughs] He says, "You don't have to have the answer." So I remember that. And then we used to confer. We would have conferences on the things that I corrected. If I felt that the student response demanded either further explanation or explanation, I asked to make an appointment. And then, I should have saved some of the funny answers I had. Oh, one of them was, "Nature is full of natural phenomena." [laughter] And you remember how Roland used to ask—make an 11th commandment? He would say, "Can you think of"—he would stimulate these kids to think and there was—he used to ask them about, in one of the tests that he gave, which did they think was the most important commandment? And some kid wrote he thought the one about adultery was very important, and he had to explain it. They'd say, "Why do you think it is?" He said, "Well, I think it's very important. It means that you shouldn't get into bed with your neighbor's wife." [laughs]

RB: Well, now we know what was on that kid's mind. [laughter]

SF: Some of the answers were great, but whenever I felt that there was a class inclination to misunderstand what I knew was his understanding, we would have a conference together, and I would read some of the answers and we would go over them. He was very much interested in teaching. It was, to him—well, you all know, I'm sure you've heard about the first day, the first week he was here the National Conference of Christians and Jews wanted to give him a prize or something—recognition. And it was on a Tuesday and he said he couldn't come because he had to teach his confirmation class. He thought that was teaching was an adjunct—an important adjunct of the service.

BA: Right. Did you—I know that Sy used to write the confirmation—

SF: Services?

BA: —services. Did you help him at all with that?

SF: No.

BA: Who did that?

SF: He did that pretty much on his own.

BA: I remember you're coaching him.

SF: Oh! [laughter] Funny, I don't remember that. I thought that Satz did that because he had a background in elocution or something like that and he fancied himself kind of an actor. Oh, Shakespeare, you know?

BA: Well, of course the confirmation classes were very large in those days.

SF: I do—Oh, yes, we had—as a matter of fact, if you—we used to have photograph days and some of them have six—four classes. Six classes, because they couldn't accommodate them all at one time. Then, after we had—they started to grow, [unclear] Bovay came in and she was remarkable to these children. Remarkable. Wonderful person.

BA: What did you do besides teaching at Temple Israel? Were you involved in other organizations?

SF: Well, I worked at Brandeis. I started as part-time work. But at the time that I came, which is pretty close I think to when it was organized, 1950—'48. I came in '52. At the time I came, Larry Wein had just established—given three million dollars for the establishment of an international students' program—scholarship program. Everybody—

BA: What did that mean?

SF: It means that they would recruit people from all over the world and give them scholarships to go. Mainly at that time the excuse was to internationalize the campus, to bring diversity to the campus. It did. So I came at that time. And the head—the person who had been chosen to head up the Wein program was named Dr. John Pierre Marichelli. I love saying it. It's so funny. He just died this year.

BA: Quite an international name.

SF: Ya. Actually, he was a—anyway, he was appointed to take over the program. And they were looking for someone to help and I had applied for a part-time job because when I moved to Waltham I was going coo-coo—crazy. So I worked for him and in doing that I learned to—Joey at that time—Joey had been a specialist in immigration. That was his field.

RB: Who's Joey?

SF: My husband.

RB: Oh! [laughs] Joe is who he was before.

SF: Nobody ever called him Joe.

RB: Oh.

SF: They all called him Joey. They—so I had no trouble. If I had any problem with Immigration and the necessary forms and things like that. I became kind of an expert on that. So I—when they went into full-time—well, Marichelli got a Fullbright to Norway for two years. So he was going. He was mad because of the fact that he had not gotten tenure. And that was stupid because he should have. Anyway, he went to Norway and while he was in Norway, California—the University of California school system recruited him at a very much larger salary than Brandeis was able to give. So he left. So I

became Director. [laughs]

BA: Oh.

SF: I inherited it.

RB: And what did that job entail?

SF: It entailed getting applications, giving applications, reading applications. It—sometimes being with the Admissions Committee. On applications I learned a lot about following educational systems, corresponding with Mrs. Roosevelt, who always had someone she wanted to send. [chuckles] She was a doll.

RB: How many scholarships were given out each year?

SF: Well, it depended on how many they thought were worthy of admission.

RB: On an average.

SF: On an average, about 60.

RB: Sixty? Oh, it's a great number.

SF: Well, they had plenty of money. Larry Wein was devoted to Brandeis and he was rich.

RB: Is it still going on?

SF: I believe it is. I don't have [unclear]—once I retired I—it's much more—it's—how shall I put it? I hate to use the term "formal," but perhaps that will cover it. What has happened to Bran—you know, when I was there it was a grand and glorious dream. I mean, we'd go along the corridor and Dr. Sacher would come along and he'd pass the time of day with us. And he'd call up and get them on the phone, [unclear] we proud of

them? And you knew everybody who was working there. Now it's a—

RB: I was going to say, it's a big—it's an institution.

SF: Now it's institutionalized, I mean.

RB: Ya.

SF: People are doing what they ordinarily would do and that's all. So I don't know if it's still in existence.

RB: Would there be—would it be necessary to have like, once these international students came to Brandeis, were there programs here specifically for them?

SF: No, they were supposed to be able to fit into whatever program they wanted. The only thing we did supply was English as a Second Language, because in spite of the fact that it was a prerequisite—knowledge of English was a prerequisite, we found that many of the students who came were inadequately prepared. We used to depend upon the American Consulate or the Embassy, most of whom had their own testing systems and would test the English for us. Then, of course, we would depend upon the records. Most of the European kids had had two years of what we called college. It's—when they got their graduation certificate. But they never could fit in so we would just place them in the freshman class. Or if, like in Sweden, English is a second language so the kids could speak English as well as I could.

RB: What country had the most—just if you can remember—what country supplied the most international students?

SF: We had a number of people from South America. We tried to place—to spread the idea. We had—let's see—we didn't have many—we had an Arab from Israel. [chuckles] Very interesting. Who is the guy who is—I should know—married the Heller girl. He was

a thorn in Dr. Sacher's side. The first day I reported for work he came in and he said, "Do you have any Arabs?" [laughs]

RB: Did he say what?

SF: "Do you have any Arabs under the Wein Program?"

RB: Okay.

SF: I didn't know my name at that time. [laughs] And when I reported that to the girl who appreciated me who is working now, at that time for Dr. Sacher. She said, "Don't you talk to him. He's a troublemaker." [laughs]

RB: [laughs]

SF: He was a freshman at the time and a part of the "Justice," which was a school newspaper and I was not even brand new and didn't know what he was talking about.

RB: [several words unclear]

BA: Did you have any contact with them once they came or was your job just—

SF: No, we saw them all the time. They came into the office. We had—the first time I—one of the Japanese kids had a party at the dormitory and I—raw eggs. [laughter] I almost died. Anyway—

RB: Do you remember maybe a year or two ago at Harvard there were these two girls. They were foreign girls where one murdered the other.

SF: Yes, I just—

RB: Were there any—

SF: Nothing. We had nothing like that.

RB: Not murder, thank God, but were there other psychological—

SF: Problems?

RB: —problems?

SF: If there were, I don't know of them. We do—we did have a boy who was a soccer player who had a brain injury which he had sustained in—I think he was in Sweden or Norway, I don't remember. And he was playing soccer up at one of the schools under the auspices of Brandeis. And he died because the ball hit him on the head and that particular thing. But his parents were unusual and said, "Don't worry about it."

RB: Don't worry about it?

SF: Ya.

RB: If I broke my fingernail I won't worry about it. If my son gets killed, I'd worry. [chuckles]

SF: Ya, well, evidently they had had that experience before and he had survived. Well, I think of this boy who just was killed.

RB: Oh.

SF: What's the matter with these places? They won't allow those things at Brandeis.

BA: Well, there aren't any—they don't have any fraternities.

SF: No, they don't. There were—evidently every year they tried putting the together to the junior council—school council. They won't—do not allow it.

RB: Can you think of anything else that you would like—

BA: Well, one of the things I noticed, it said that you also belonged to Hadassah. Were you involved with it or were you just a member?

SF: Ya, and once when Rose Feinberg was president she asked, “Would you give a study group?” But I haven’t talked to you about my musical affiliations.

RB: No, please do.

SF: I write the program notes for the New Philharmonia Orchestra. Before that, I wrote the program notes for the Newton Symphony.

RB: Oh, they’re doing very well—the Newton Symphony. I don’t know about the Philharmonia. Tell me about that.

SF: Oh, that’s—I don’t know if it has to do with Temple Israel.

RB and BA: It doesn’t have to.

BA: It’s you that we’re interested in. It’s just that your connection with Temple Israel was particularly interesting to me. And so I wanted to find out about that but we also want to know the other things that you did.

SF: Well, I have—since I have stopped, you know, participating in music in the schools and stuff like that, I have been interested in retaining my interests, my affiliations with orchestras. So I started in with the Newton Symphony, became a member of the board and then was asked to write the program notes. And they were so successful that I wrote them for 30 years—29—

BA: Has your connection with music just been in the—

SF: Did I play?

BA: —history and so forth or did you play any instruments?

SF: I did play the piano but I haven't—I had a grand piano here but I've given it to my son. I thought he'd just take the grand piano and dispose of his others, so now he has two. [laughs]

RB: Doesn't everyone need two?

SF: Absolutely! Especially with three kids, all of whom play. [laughter]

BA: Were you a singer also?

SF: No, no, no. I never did sing.

RB: What about the Philharmonia?

SF: Well, let me tell you about this. The Newton Symphony was very successful and about two years ago there was a personality difficulty (everything is political) between the Chairman of the Board and the conductor, whose name is Ron Knudson—K-n-u-d-s-o-n. He plays in the Boston Symphony, has been playing there for 30 years—conducts Pops once in a while, has all kinds of contact. And when this happened, the orchestra—about 70 percent of the orchestra, of Newton's Symphony—maybe not so much—left to go with Ron. And Ron started this other orchestra, which is called the New Philharmonia.

RB: Where do they meet?

SF: At the Pine Manor Junior College.

RB: Mmm-hmm.

SF: And every—and it's very successful, although we're always looking for new people. So I write the program notes for that. [chuckles]

RB: And what happened to the Newton Symphony after [unclear]?

SF: They're still going. They're doing very well. They survived the departure.

RB: Oh that's a great departure though.

SF: They survived the schism but that's it; they survived. So, there have been lots of editorials in the papers, in the Newton papers particularly.

RB: Well, I don't live in Newton; that's [unclear]

SF: Where do you live?

RB: Cambridge.

SF: Oh, you're a [unclear], huh? [several words unclear] Where abouts?

RB: Now. I used to live in Brookline. Now I live in Cambridge. But that's not interesting.

SF: Oh, but where are you living in Cambridge?

RB: [laughs] When we're through with the tape, I'll tell you, okay?

SF: Oh, she's going to be secretive. I have a very dear friend who lives on Longfellow Row. They've lived there forever.

RB: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us? That you would like to be on the tape?

SF: I'm sure that afterwards I'll think of things.

RB: Yes, in the middle of the night.

SF: Yes.

BA: Well, if you do we can come back and interview you again.

SF: Okay.

BA: The—my only other question is, were you involved with any other, you know, organizations? Women's organizations?

SF: Oh, the usual things. I [unclear]—

BA: You belonged to them but you weren't active.

SF: No, but I'm not active in any of them now.

BA: Ya. Ya, that was one of the things that we were interested in. You certainly kept busy.

SF: Let's see now. No, it's very dull now. My husband has died and I'm very lonely. Joey retained his contacts, of course. Everybody knew Joe, and he was in the Jewish community; he was of the Jewish community. He was interested in the Jewish community and he was educated and knew about it, so when there was a meeting he'd go. When there had to be something done, he'd do it. And it was—it happens to be a happy—very—having juxtaposition of events that our—fullness of our lives came with Roland. I can't tell you what an influence he has been on my life and what he has meant, what he did mean. And so—but things change. All the time they change.

RB: Well, that's a very positive note for us to end on.

SF: What is? What's the expression in French?

RB: There's nothing that—

RB: Ya, everything's the same; changes.

SF: [unclear] Right, right.

RB: Well, we both want to thank you very, very much for seeing us—

SF: Oh, don't thank me.

RB: And for agreeing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]