Ida Mae Kahn Transcript

BOBBIE BURSTEIN: This is July 11, 1997. Betsy Abram and Bobbie Burstein are at Ida Mae Kahn's home in Chestnut Hill. Very cool and delightful here. I expect to be comfortable. The first thing I want to ask you, Ida Mae – ever since the first day I ever met you, it was very clear to me that you had had elocution lessons.

IDA MAE KAHN: Never in all my life.

BB: I have never heard anyone who spoke so beautifully and every word pronounced just so than you.

IK: I have to confess, I did go to Emerson College.

BB: Well, when I read that, I thought, "Aha."

IK: Never in my life did I have an elocution lesson.

BB: Well, you could have fooled me.

IK: My mother always felt that that was an affectation.

BB: Really?

IK: Music lessons were more important. Tutoring, if you needed it for school, was important.

BB: Right.

IK: But elocution – well, I had dancing lessons. The usual things. But elocution was out of our realm.

BB: That shows what I know. [laughter] Well, I would like to start when you were a child growing up in New Jersey. How many siblings did you have?

IK: I had none. I was an only child. I was very lucky. I had a very, very dear friend, who was only two months older, who spent a great deal of her time at my house.

BB: Like a sister?

IK: Almost like a sister, really. I was very lucky. I really was not a lonesome child. I had many cousins. In those days, cousins intermingled much more than they seem to today. So I had a very well-adjusted and pleasant childhood.

BB: Good. And do you still see that woman?

IK: No, she has passed away.

BB: Oh. But had you kept up with her?

IK: Yes. I still see her children and her grandchildren.

BB: Isn't that nice?

IK: They are very thoughtful of me. As thoughtful as though I really were their aunt.

BB: Nice.

IK: They live in Florida. They're very attentive, and they've really made up for the fact that I had no siblings.

BETSY ABRAMS: And the cousins live near you?

IK: Not one. I have some cousins in New Jersey, many in Florida. But none nearby. When I came into the Kahn family as an only child, entering a family of eight, seven of

whom were already married and had spouses of one sex or the other, it was quite an adventure.

BB: I'm sure it was.

IK: Family life – completely.

BA: I didn't realize the Kahns were that large a family.

IK: George was the youngest of eight. And only one sister had not married. It was a big shock to me. [laughter]

BB: Let's get back to when you were a child living in New Jersey.

IK: Okay.

BB: Did your parents keep a very religious household?

IK: I would say that my father was probably the pillar of Temple Emanuel.

BB: Do you mean Temple Emanuel in New York?

IK: In Bayonne, New Jersey.

BB: Oh, okay.

IK: My mother was the foremost Sisterhood President ever, ever to – and the first woman ever to set foot on the bimah in temple.

BB: Oh, my.

BA: What denomination was this temple?

IK: Conservative. Very, very, very conservative. I can remember the night – I don't know what the occasion was, but my mother was invited to speak from the bimah on a Friday night. My father took me with him. I remember seeing her standing there, all five feet of her, saying, "If only my parents could see me now." [laughter] Even then, it was not trite. It was really very funny. It left a very deep influence.

BB: Obviously. [laughter]

IK: Yes. I think I turned out to be so much like my mother that I sometimes was very scared about it.

BB: Yes, I think that happens a lot of times.

IK: Yes. My mother died when she was fifty-two.

BB: Oh, my.

IK: I thought that I had concealed the fact from George or anyone else that I probably would have an early demise myself because I was so much like her in every other way. And the morning of my fifty-second birthday, George said to me, "I bet you thought you'd never make it." [laughter]

BB: You fooled him. [laughter]

IK: That was the first of many surprises.

BB: When you were a youngster growing up in New Jersey, did you have afternoon activities? You mentioned you did not have elocution lessons. [laughter]

IK: [laughter] No, but I had serious music lessons twice a week. No Hebrew lessons because it was unheard of then –

BB: For girls?

IK: Yes. However, when I was in high school, I tell you this for comic relief value, when I was in high school, we had a new, young rabbi, who was the picture of John Gilbert, the movie star. Handsome, personable, everything. Suddenly, Friday night services were the most important thing in the world in that town.

BB: [laughter]

IK: And one day, I called this very close friend of mine and said, "What do you say we take Hebrew lessons?" She said, "Are you crazy? Why?" I said, "Well, it would be nice to know what's going on." She said, "Don't be silly. I have no interest." About an hour later, she called up and said, "When are they going to start?" [laughter] So, as a junior in high school, I started beginner's Hebrew.

BB: With that rabbi?

IK: With that rabbi. And so, not surprisingly, he had a following of eligible young women and youngsters who really just hero-worshiped him. He married a young woman from the congregation.

BB: That was nice.

IK: Forthwith left for greener pastures, which was fine. But it was interesting. I would never have – I had no other motivation.

BB: By all accounts, very normal.

BA: There were a lot of girls in the Hebrew class?

IK: It was many more than you could have predicted. Many, many more. It was such a typical reaction, but it was terribly funny.

BB: What made you decide to go to Emerson College? I mean, for a girl, first of all, to go to another city was relatively –

IK: As a senior in high school, all the usual inquiries about college having been made, I made my application to Cornell. Being an only child – and I would say probably indulged, but not spoiled. If I said that was where I wanted to go, then my father said, "Fine." School may have been ready to start, say, September 7th. And perhaps, on August 27th, maybe, my father said one day, "You can't go."

BB: To Cornell or anyplace?

IK: To Cornell. I said, "What do you mean I can't go?" He said, "You can't go that far away." I said, "What can I do? My application is in. It's too late to apply anyplace else. And that's where I want to go." "No," said he. Since rebellion was not in my bones –

BB: Of course.

IK: I let myself be told that I couldn't go, and the only thing that I could figure out – I think I went back to my guidance counselor in high school – was to go to NYU [New York University] from which, if I wanted to, then I could transfer. So, I went to NYU, commuting, and I was miserable. To commute, I had to take a bus, walk up the street to take the bus to Jersey City, go down to the subway, [and] commute under the river into New York City.

BB: How long did that take, roughly?

IK: Oh, over an hour.

BB: Yeah?

IK: Over an hour. It was the most tedious, terrible trip. I did it as long as I could. I really hated every moment of it because going to NYU was like being in a factory, even though

it was Washington Square, which was quaint and charming and all of that. The result was – come Thanksgiving morning, I staged the first sit-down strike in history.

BB: [laughter]

IK: I refused to get out of bed.

BB: On Thanksgiving Day?

IK: On Thanksgiving morning. I stayed in bed, and I said, "I will not continue this. This is not going to college." I was spending three hours a day traveling, traveling with people who were going to work in New York, and [the] snob that I must have been. I just couldn't imagine. It embodied absolutely nothing of what I thought of as college life. By the time Thanksgiving dinner was served – by the end of that terrible day, my father, of course, had relented and said, "Okay, go where you want to go."

BB: [laughter]

IK: I went back to the same teacher in high school, who said that she had always had in mind that I might go to Emerson.

BB: You see, you must have spoken in this way that I have noticed, too.

IK: I think for some strange reason – maybe Betsy had it when she was growing up – I didn't know you when you were growing up – I had enough poise to be able to get up and make an announcement without trembling. And from announcements, you graduate to making a little speech. And by the time graduation from high school came, I guess I had a reputation as a speaker or whatever. But it really was extremely interesting because this woman had taken summer courses at Emerson and was very impressed. I did spend four very, very happy years there. It was a totally different experience, certainly not to be compared to NYU.

BB: Did you start in the winter, or did you wait?

IK: I started in – one thing that was fortunate was that they would accept my first semester marks. I think with the exception of – I think I had to make up maybe one course.

BB: What courses did you take there? Were they like drama?

IK: Quite different from what it is today. Today it's geared really to communications in every form.

BB: Yes.

IK: Every media, every possible method. In those days, it was largely drama and some correction of speech impediment – corrective work. That sort of thing. I thought that really would interest me.

BA: In other words, teaching you how to help the people who need help?

IK: How to teach. To my chagrin, when I graduated from Emerson, I discovered that the State of New Jersey did not recognize Emerson's degree.

BB: Oh, my.

IK: By that time, I had sort of changed my interest, too, and communications seemed to be where I belonged. And because the decision or the discovery came sort of a last-minute kind of thing, I did – oh, I guess it was that summer – I did work at Macy's in New York with a friend of mine for the summer.

BA: That same friend?

IK: A different friend who had graduated from NYU the year before. A whole different story. But the interesting thing was that while I was working there, I really became

interested in the whole retailing idea, and communications fell into it very nicely. So, I applied for the training program and was accepted. However, the summer between my junior and senior years, this friend that I just mentioned – and two sisters who were friends of both of ours – we then cut the umbilical cords of our respective mothers, and we went on a vacation on our own without parents.

BB: Was that an unusual sort of a thing? I don't mean for you – but for young women of that time.

IK: We had friends who had done it. But for our parents, it was –

BB: Oh, I'm sure – horrendous.

IK: Unspeakable. What would people say? Anyway, we did. We arrived on a Sunday, and Sunday afternoon, we met a group of young men from Boston, which included Dr. George Kahn.

BB: [laughter] Oh, that's where you met him. Not when you were in Boston. [laughter]

IK: The whole thing was really fate. It's a wonderful thing. We met there.

BB: You didn't say where 'there' was.

IK: I'm sure you've never heard of it – Forest & Stream Club.

BB: Oh, it's like a resort area?

IK: It's a resort. In those days, called an adult camp.

BB: Yes.

BA: Where was this?

IK: For the moment, I can't think of the town, but it's in Vermont. Beautiful location. Lovely, lovely – everything about it. God knows what went on. The morals were nobody's business but your own, I'm sure. We were very safe. We were four girls together. We had a wonderful attitude. And these young men – as we discovered later – were very, very responsible people. So, I came back to Boston for my last year of school, at that point, seeing George. By the time May came around and exams were over, we had just gone home, and he met my parents for the first time. This is the story that I always tell. It's so funny. We took the train to New York, and my folks picked us up at Grand Central Station. We went back to New Jersey through the new tunnel which had just been opened. Very exciting. And that day, he met my grandmother, my aunt and uncle, and two little cousins – youngsters, period. That was on Sunday. On Monday, the arrangement was that I was to go with him to meet his parents, who lived in Roxbury on Hutchins Street, next door to a school that everybody seemed to have gone to. And he said, "It will be my mother and father and sisters and brothers." We came. We walked up the steps – a big porch with a big window in the front door. I could see through the window, and I saw chairs with people around three walls.

BB: [laughter]

IK: I couldn't believe this. I turned around, and I said, "I thought you said …". He said, "I did. It's my mother and father and my sisters and brothers and their husbands and wives." [laughter] It made for a few people. Which then made me understand why earlier in the day, I had had a telephone call from a niece of his, whom I had met casually once during the winter, at a party or a dance – I don't remember where it was – and she said, "I heard wonderful news and so on. Are you nervous?" I said, "Am I nervous? Should I be?" All of a sudden, I didn't realize I should be. Then I got nervous. [laughter]

BB: [laughter] Was he very much protected as the baby in the family?

IK: Oh, he was, of course, as the baby. As the youngest boy, as the doctor in the family, he was very much the kingpin. Everybody bowed to him. [laughter]

BB: Were any of his siblings or his parents – were they physicians?

IK: No.

BB: He was the first one?

IK: Yes. Well, you know Milton. Milton was the only other one in the family who had gone to college. When it came to George, he went to English High because Milton went to English High. When it was time to choose colleges, he went to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] because Milton did. It wasn't until his second year at MIT that he decided he really wanted to be a doctor. He didn't have any German, and he was really in left-field at that point. He was the first – he was really the first doctor on his mother's side or his father's side of the family. Yes, they did kowtow to him.

BB: [laughter] And he didn't mind a bit.

IK: It was very easy.

BB: But that must have put a difficult burden on you to measure up – in their estimation – to their little king. [laughter]

BB: [laughter]

IK: Very astute of you. Yes. Very astute of you to understand that. Especially since I was accustomed to having everyone dancing around my whims.

BA: Oh, the clash of the two. [laughter] That's interesting.

IK: It was no clash. It was just as smooth a transition as it could be.

BB: When you were married, had he already finished his medical training?

IK: When you talk about the right place at the right moment. He was thirty-two years old. He had been in practice – he had finished his residency at the Boston City Hospital several years before and had been to Philadelphia, where he had finished his internship. He had gone to Pennsylvania for his residency, and he had then been in practice for two years. He had already paid for a car, so that was launching the future. We really didn't go through the terrible, terrible struggles of newlywed professional people at the time.

BA: Where did you live?

IK: It's still a very attractive building at 220 Jamaicaway, on the corner of Bynner Street and the Jamaicaway. We were there for three years, and we moved to Moraine Street, the street that Mayor [James Michael] Curley's house was on.

BB: Oh, yeah.

IK: Do you remember – I can't think of their first name – Loeb, Aunt Charlotte's mother. Oh, dear. At any rate, there were several Jewish families on the street. It was very pleasant. Much more like Bayonne was, a mixed neighborhood, well-balanced –

BB: I have to get back and ask you – what were your parents' reaction when you were going to come up to Boston –you were leaving New Jersey?

IK: My mother's reaction was very interesting. My father, having done all his exploding when he did, had nothing more to say. My mother had looked forward to my coming home because my mother was way ahead of her time. She had not only fulfilled all her responsibilities to the Jewish community as President of Council – not of Hadassah. My parents were not Zionists. My mother always said, "You have to have a strong community at home before you can reach out." They were not Zionists. Most of her activity was in the temple, and the rest of her activity was for the city. She was the first

Jewish woman on the board of the Bayonne Hospital.

BB: Oh, my.

IK: And every new commission that came along – she was really, interestingly enough, very active in the women's branch of Masonry, Eastern Star, which was unheard of for a Jewish woman. She really became the matron, the grand matron of the State of New Jersey, which was very, very formidable.

BB: What did your father do? What was his business?

IK: My father was what was really known as a peddler. A commissioned merchant. A dollar down and a dollar every week. He sold the best furniture, the best clothing – men's and women's. I don't remember if there were children's clothing. Jewelry.

BB: Oh, many things.

IK: Only fine quality. His best customers were two Irish Catholic – not monasteries. What's the word?

BB: Convents, nunneries?

IK: The masculine.

BB: Priests? Monasteries, maybe?

IK: That's not the word. That's what it is, but that's not the word. I can't come up with it. It always irritated my mother because, for the priests, he bought Irish linen sheets.

BA: Parishes, I'll bet, is what you're thinking of.

IK: Thank you. We lived in St. Henry's Parish. When anyone said, "Where do you live," you identified it by the parish. The church was the important figure. So that

discrimination reared its ugly head very early on. The priests had Irish linen handkerchiefs. Irish linen – the best of everything. [laughter] The nuns, not. Enough said.

BB: So, now we're in Boston and Jamaica Plain.

IK: Right.

BB: Was your husband a pediatrician?

BA: He always was a pediatrician?

IK: Yes. Yes, he had wonderful training.

BA: At what point in your marriage did you have children? I have to get my friend in there after all. [laughter]

IK: Two years after we were married, Elaine was born. Two years and nine months after that, Elsa was born. From there on, we went to the temple, and that was the end of everything else. [laughter] It really became home away from home, without any question. And I still call it the Golden Age. We were there at the very best of times.

BB: Who was the rabbi?

IK: Rabbi Levi was dying at that point, but his influence was very, very strong. Joshua Loth Liebman came. He created the revolution of revolutions. Of course, we were his blind followers. He was just so marvelous. And he made everything so logical and so desirable. He made your whole outlook change. He changed the whole focus of the temple so completely, followed by Rabbi –

BA: Klausner.

IK: I won't pursue it, which was a very difficult – everybody knew it was going to be very difficult.

BB: Right.

IK: You could not find anyone that could step into his shoes. That was out of the question. But when Roland did arrive, he enhanced what Josh Liebman had started, and he made it so that you would have had to bury your head in the sand if you didn't feel that it was wonderful to be Jewish and to be able to take part and make whatever contribution you could to this wonderful movement.

BA: When did you start getting really involved in the temple? I mean, I remember you were on so many committees and the PTA [Parent Teacher Association].

IK: Almost immediately. We joined the temple. Elaine was born in '32. We must have joined the temple – maybe in '33 or '34. And very soon thereafter – well, whenever it was – immediately following the time that we joined the temple. The telephone rang one morning, and the voice said, "Good morning, my dear. This is Mrs. …" – can't think. Mrs. Levi's dear friend, a convert. An early, early, early convert. We met her that summer, and that was it. She called, and she said, "My dear, I hear you've joined the temple. Congratulations," etc. I thanked her very much for calling. That was very sweet. She said, "My dear, I expect you to meet me in the kitchen on Wednesday morning."

BB: [laughter]

IK: "And we will cut up the chicken for the chicken salad for the Sisterhood luncheon." I said, "Mrs. So-and-So, you sound like my mother." [laughter]

BB: [laughter]

IK: "She was always in the kitchen, cutting up the chicken for chicken salad."

BB: [laughter]

IK: And that was my introduction to Temple.

BB: Chicken salad.

IK: Chicken salad with this former convert, who was the most marvelous woman. She was alive when the remodeling was done – when the new kitchen was made. She was old – she was very old. I'll think of the name.

BA: Eventually, one or the other of us will think of who it was.

IK: It goes way, way, way back. Anyway, from there, I skipped a number of classes because somebody called me and said, "Please go and sit on the PTA board." I said, "But my kids aren't even in school." Well, needless to say, I did. That was the best thing that ever happened because I was there the year that Josh Liebman came, the year that Sy Nemzoff came, and the year that Frank Kozol was Chairman of the School Committee.

BA: 1939.

IK: I was President of the PTA. That was really the most wholesale cleaning out that ever took place. Every kid that ever voiced even the thought – "You know who I am? You know who my father is? You know who my uncle is? I can do whatever I want to" – got out. Was literally lifted out by the seat of his pants.

BB: I hope so. [laughter]

IK: It's only a fact that all these people were involved who said, "You must do it." And poor Sy – that gentle soul – he did it. And the whole school was – and the whole institution was shaken.

BA: It improved greatly.

IK: Oh, no question about it. No question. It was exciting.

BB: Yes. You were on the forefront.

IK: And that's why I say it was the Golden Age of the temple. It finally found its proper place. I think one of the most interesting observations was when I came to Emerson in January of 1927; a professor spoke of the number of outstanding speakers in the city. He mentioned the names of four or five ministers in the city, plus Rabbi Harry Levi of Temple Israel. It would behoove every one of you to go on a Sunday morning to hear this man speak. "Oh," I thought to myself. "I better get there fast. Who could this man be when he included with the ministers of Old South Church and Trinity?" This was really high company to be in. We all went. There was no doubt about it.

BA: Did Rabbi Liebman make you become interested in Zionism?

IK: Of course. No question. No question. I said that nobody – I'm sure that my mother and my father would probably have responded as well. But there was no question – if you had any contact with him, you couldn't just stand by. You had to be part of this movement. It filled you with pride. It filled you with je ne sais quoi. It was just such an exciting thing.

BB: I noticed when you filled out 'Volunteer Activities,' the space that they allotted for that isn't quite big enough for you. And you really did quite a few volunteer activities.

IK: Well, I did because I didn't mention what I call my crowning glory. It was my public welfare experience.

BB: Tell us something about that. That had nothing to do with the Jewish agencies?

IK: No, no.

BB: Tell us about the public welfare.

IK: In the community, I had a very interesting phone call again from Selma Bernkopf. That name you do know. Selma's father was the first Jewish Judge in the State of Massachusetts. As Aryan a Jewish family as you could ever find. And I would call them really secular Jews. But she called me one day and said – I didn't know her; I knew the name – "We are about to start a women's organization attached to Jewish Child Welfare. We're going to have a meeting at Ohabei Shalom on such and such a day. Can you get twelve ushers?" I said, "Sure." I got the twelve ushers. It was a very interesting meeting. One thing grew out of that. I mean, more things grew out of that. Eventually, I was President of the Women's Committee that emerged. The Organization of Jewish Child Welfare and Jewish Family Society.

BA: That was originally two organizations?

IK: It was two separate organizations and many, many years. George Michaelson, George Markel – lots of very well-known names headed those lists. Eventually, those two groups merged very successfully. CJP came along, and Selma Bernkopf, who really was, by this time, the doyenne of Jewish women – perfectly at home in any situation. Always conscious of the fact that she was Jewish. There was no doubt about it. I was still living in Jamaica Plain. We did work on the campaign – yes, of course. Worked on the campaign. Moved to Brookline, and Sam Markel was the Chairman of the drive that year. I introduced him, and he made some sort of report. As he left the platform, he said, "You're the next chairman." I said to him, "Don't be silly. I'm a newcomer, and I'm too young." He said, "I pick you." Well, it was wonderful. I really had a growing up that was quick. No time wasted. I got as much out of it as I put into it, which was a very – it was very rewarding. At the same time, you never know how far those ripples go when you drop that stone in the pond. One morning, I had a telephone call. A voice said, "I'm calling you for Mayor [John] Hynes' office." And in my mind, I said, "What would Mayor

Hynes be calling me about?" I thought it was somebody playing a joke. [laughter]

BB: [laughter]

IK: "The Mayor would like you to serve on the Offices of Public Welfare." I said, "Oh, I'm not sure about that. Will you let me think it over? I'll call you in the morning." I hung up. My father was living with us at that time. My mother had died then. I heard my father coming in the back door. I called to him, and I said, "I just had the funniest telephone call." I told him. His remark was, "I hope you didn't say 'No.'" I said, "Why do you say that?" He said, "Because once your mother said no, and she regretted it."

BB: Oh.

IK: I said, "I thought you would say, 'What do you want that for – full of politics?'" "No," he said. "I don't think so." When George came home, we discussed it. And George, of course, was very practical. He said, "Look, everything you've got done for the community has been along those lines. Somebody else can do what you're doing. But if they've asked you as a Jewish woman to go on that Board when the only other Jew who has ever been on that Board was Elsie Freidman –

BA: Lee Friedman's sister?

IK: Lee Friedman's sister. He said, "I think maybe you should take it." I said, "Well, maybe I'll call." In the morning, George went down to get the paper. He calls upstairs to me, and he says, "Too late. It's published already. You've taken it." [laughter]

BB: [laughter]

BA: [laughter] Here's the newspaper.

IK: Showing how much you can believe. [laughter] Which was very funny. And that, probably, was the most gratifying thing that I have ever, ever done.

BB: Why do you say that?

IK: It put me in the position – I served on the board for over twenty years. And I served –

[End Of Side One]

IK: It put me in the position of being really on the board of what was probably the largest family agency, with the exception of New York City, probably – the largest on the East Coast.

BB: Really?

IK: And it was a revelation as to what the government really did to help people in need.

BB: This was during the Roosevelt years?

IK: This was in the ‘40s.

BB: In the ‘40s?

BA: During the war.

IK: It brought me into contact with people that I never dreamed I would associate with. One of the people on the Board – newly appointed, as I was – was Katharine D. Hardwick, who had just retired as Dean of the School of Social Work at Simmons.

BB: Oh, my.

IK: A most fabulous Eleanor Roosevelt-type of person. These are names that I keep looking at Betsy for because they go back so far. Frank Vorenberg was Chairman of United Way at that point. For a Jew to be the Chairman of United Way was not to be believed. And he called me and said – oh, I had called him to say that there was a big gap somewhere along the lines, and I thought we needed to discuss public versus private

agencies. He said he'd think about it. He called me back, and he said, "I think you're right, and I think that you should be Chairman." I said, "Oh, don't be silly. I can't be Chairman. I'm absolutely untrained, and I would ask stupid questions." He said, "That's just the point. You can ask all those questions that you think are stupid, but they will have to answer you. And that's what's needed." So, I became Chairman of this committee with all these professionals of the family society and – well, three or four other well-known constituencies. So, it was, for me, a broadening experience without any question.

BB: You seem like you were the right person at the right time in the right place.

IK: I seemed to have found my place in the community that was fairly new to me. Of course, by this time, I had been married more than twenty years. So, I really was part of the community. But when I should have said, "How did they get my name? Why did they call me?" The mayor had come into office and said that he was going to fire the whole Board. Even though they were not paid, he was going to fire them. He felt it was a completely ineffectual group. The mayor spoke to Henry Foley, who was then the senior partner of –

BB: Foley, Hoag & Elliott.

IK: Yes. That's what I was going to say. He said to him, "I would like on that Board to have a Jewish woman who lives in Boston. Do you know a Jewish woman who lives in Boston who would be interested?" And Henry Foley said, "No, I don't. But I think my partner probably does." His partner being Lew Weinstein. He went back to the office, got hold of Lew, and said, "This is what I want. Do you know such a person?" Lew said, "Yes, I do," and he gave them my name. Because I'd known him through CJP and JF & CS. So it was very interesting. It all fit in very definitely.

BB: Yes.

IK: Subsequently, I remember being on a panel that was held at the public library. The chairman of the panel was a chairman of one of the big city institutions – I can't remember – one of the first women CEO kind of people. She listened to me and said, "Where have you been all of these years? I could have used you." [laughter] I said, "You know what? I don't think I would have liked what you do." And I couldn't have. It had nothing to do with people. It had nothing to do with anything you might hope to improve or be helpful in. It was very interesting. So, I think that public welfare proved to be my crowning touch.

BB: And how many years were you on that Board?

IK: About twenty-five.

BB: Oh, my. [laughter]

IK: Because they would not let me retire. In the meantime, I had had a coronary, and I had given up everything. But I said the two things that I would try not to give up were Temple and Public Welfare. And so every time – by this time, I was Chairman of the Board, and every time I would say to the Director, a wonderful Irishman, "Bill, I really can't do it anymore." "Why? What's the problem?" "Well, I really hate driving down Storrow Drive and driving home after five o'clock." "You don't have to drive. We'll send a car for you."

BB: [laughter] They made it possible.

IK: They made everything … but whatever I came up with – well, the only thing they couldn't do anything about – when Elaine was to be married, I said, "I really have to take the summer off. I really must." "Okay." Elaine was married in July. I expected at that point that Elsa would be married in December. Right after Elaine's wedding, Elsa and Jerry announced they wanted to be married in September.

BB: [laughter]

IK: I said, "Bill, I simply can't be in three places at once." So, we did have to eventually have a compromise, and they let me off with all sorts of easing out kind of things. But it was a very exciting time, and I felt that Elsie Friedman and Mr. Green – the only person that the mayor did not fire in that group was Irving Green from the G&G Delicatessen.

BB: Oh.

IK: On Blue Hill Avenue. Why? G&G was a political headquarters, really.

BB: Yeah.

IK: And he didn't dare fool around with that. And what do you suppose Mr. Green did?

BB: He brought pastrami sandwiches to the meetings. [laughter]

IK: He gave the men's shelter the thing that they needed the most.

BB: Food?

IK: An organ.

BB: [laughter] An organ.

BA: Oh, that's nice. So, there were shelters in those days.

IK: It was the first shelter I had ever heard of.

BA: And it was just for men?

IK: Just for men. Katharine Hardwick was appalled because men had to be sure to take their shoes off. They didn't want to take their shoes off because somebody would lift them and go off with them. But you couldn't think of getting that sheet dirty. That was

the shelter.

BA: Where was it? Do you remember?

IK: It was also on Chardon Street. The head of the Boston office is on Chardon Street, and it was in a few doors. The Chardon Street Home for Women and Children was the women's shelter, which was really a remarkable institution. If there were families – a broken home, a fire, a mother and children and no place to stay – they could come here. It was a limited length of time that they could stay, but at least it was an address, and the kids could go to school locally. And they were given three decent meals a day. The public didn't know anything about these very positive things that the government really was doing. I do think that we at least publicized some of the good.

BB: Would you say that there were Jewish families who were involved here?

IK: One day, Miss Hardwick said to me, "How well do you know Dora Margolis?" I said, "Intimately. Why?" "Well," she said. "Let's get together. I want to pick her brains." That's easily done. I called Dora and told her, and she said, "Of course, any time." We got together, and Miss Hardwick said to her, "Dora, I still don't know how you manage to do it. The other person that was there was the woman who was the Director of the Women's Chardon Street Home for Women and Children. She said, "I still don't understand how you manage not to have any Jewish people. We have no Jewish people on our roster." She said, "Because we work very hard to get there first. And we get them long before you get them. They get to you only as the very last resort." And that was the truth through the '50s and '60s, but that changed, and there was a great deal of interaction [and] unrest in the '60s with students' uprisings and all that sort of thing.

BB: Vietnam – yes.

IK: Yes. Changed the whole picture. But it was true that the Jewish agency for the longest time was very successful in getting there first. So, a few fell through the cracks –

there's no question about it. But on the whole, they never – Mrs. (Heffernan?), the Director of the home, always said to me, "I don't know where she operates from – where she gets them." She said, "I think we're on our toes. We know where these people are, we know when they've been to court, and we know when they need help. But by the time we get there, they've already been seen by the JF&CS worker.

BB: Yes. You mentioned before that you had a heart attack. Did your mother have that as a problem?

IK: No.

BB: How old were you when you had the heart attack?

IK: I think I was – I was born in 1909, and I had the heart attack in 1969, so I was sixty.

BB: Sixty years old. You were very young.

IK: Yes. And since then, of course, my health has been failing. It's been on a downslide ever since. So now I have no contact with the community at all. But I still read The Advocate even though I don't know a single name – recognize a picture anymore. [laughter]

BB: That's like a religion to read that.

IK: Absolutely. [laughter] I couldn't stop it.

BB: You were involved in CJP, as well.

IK: CJP was the love of my life – of course!

BA: You liked being a fundraiser.

IK: In those days. Do you remember the Gryzmishes?

BB: Sure.

IK: Do you remember Flossie?

BB: Sure.

IK: Flossie loved it when there was a war.

BB: Oh, really? [laughter]

IK: If there was a war, she could go out and raise money from a log. If things were peaceful, she had nothing to offer.

BB: [laughter]

IK: No, I hated fundraising. But I was Chairman of the campaign. The Women's Division for two years. I was President for two years. I watched – that's the one thing. The Hospital leadership – I did do my stint at the hospital, too. I did my stint at all the Jewish organizations. No one could have said that I haven't paid my dues.

BB: Oh, no.

IK: Before I left for other pastures.

BB: This was just not big enough for the likes of you. [laughter]

IK: Well, I said I didn't know whether you really wanted to know or not, but I guess so.

BA: Do you know when the CJP Women's Division was started? Was that really before you got there?

IK: Off hand, I really –

BA: Just roughly. I've never known.

BB: Wasn't that in that book, The Jews of Israel? Wouldn't that have been –?

BA: I don't think so. It was when the women's division started.

IK: That could be easily found out.

BA: I'm just curious.

IK: The first president was Theresa Whitman. The next President was Nan Siegal. The next President was Harriet Cohn, and Harriet called me and said, "I'm going into the hospital for a biopsy of my breast, and you must say that you will be the next president." I said, "Harriet, don't be silly. I have not had enough experience. I'm not ready." She said, "Don't try my patience. I have enough to worry about right now without this. Don't do this to me."

BB: [laughter]

IK: And she went through this whole thing. "All right. You tell me which one should be president." She goes through the list of vice presidents. I had to say, "Well, you're right." That's how I became President of the Women's Committee.

BB: So, you were the fourth president?

IK: Yes.

BB: And a president served how many terms?

IK: Usually two. Oh, there is some record of it.

BA: I just wondered how new it was when you became President. It obviously was not that old.

IK: I was in on the beginning.

BA: Yes.

IK: I was in on the very beginning. I can't think of the other woman's name at the moment. But it was always interesting. The same leadership at Beth Israel was the same leadership either just before or just after at CJP. And you could watch the same people going up the same ladder and, eventually, coming to the top of one and/or both.

BB: I think that's probably true to a certain degree now.

IK: It was very, very interesting. I belonged to Hadassah, but obviously, I had no time to be active in anything else. After all, I had two kids, and they had music lessons and dentists and all the other things to get to, and I had these seven sisters and brothers-in-law – adds spice. It was a very busy life. I didn't have a second, and nobody had a second car at that point. So, you made choices. You had to make choices.

BB: As Dr. Kahn's wife, were things expected of you as his wife, or was that not necessarily so?

IK: There was a time in our early married life when I found myself quite unhappy about what I was doing with my so-called leisure time. I was spending it with people who thought nothing of playing bridge, which, at that point, was a mystery to me, even though my mother played cards well, and my father played cards very well. But I found myself playing bridge, as it were, twice a week. There must have been something better than that to do. Once I said to George, "Is it important for us to continue to be friends with this particular group?" If he said, "Yes, I think it's a potential source of my future income," or whatever, that would have made a difference. He said, "No, that's not the way I see it." And so, I withdrew from that group, and I went to the hospital, and I said to Rose Harris and Jessie Goldsmith, "Here I am. No appendages. Give me a job." They said, "How many days a week can you come?" I said, "Oh, three days a week if you want me." "Okay." I worked on the outpatient until the day before Elaine was born. From there, I

made all my friends. I made all my friends among the women I met there, who were in the same position. Out of school quite recently and looking for something with some sort of structure or something constructive to do. So, that was – CJP was a very important part of my life.

BB: CJP is fortunate. [laughter]

IK: Well, CJP has been more than fortunate – it has really fostered leadership. I think the hospital has done the same. My kids tell me that now. They're not so young anymore. You don't have to identify them that way. But if you look at the kind of leadership the hospital has produced, and CJP, it's been on a parallel very – really outstanding.

BB: Well, I think she did some other things at the Temple that she should refer to.

IK: Other things I did at the temple were so much – so pleasurable. Such fun. The fact that I made charoset for Mrs. Linsky's first grade for maybe six or seven years –

BB: [laughter]

IK: – long after my kids had left her room was just one of the funny, wonderful things. And each year when she'd call me and say, "You will make the charoset." "Why should I? You've got plenty of mothers. My kids, they've left you long ago." She said, "Please make me the charoset." "Okay." The fact that we did – Phoebe and I did the hospitality at the time and the dedication of the new building – it was so fulfilling.

BB: I want to be sure this tape includes the fact that your great-grandchild is in Israel right now and is bringing some of his bar mitzvah money there to make a contribution to an organization in Israel called Yemin Orde, and I just wanted that to be on your tape.

IK: I didn't know that you knew all that detail.

BB: I do. Because I'm very interested in Yemin Orde myself.

IK: Well, that's what I heard just before they left.

BB: It's a school – a home – for homeless Ethiopian children, boys and girls.

IK: Oh, both?

BB: Yes. And I was very impressed that he wanted to do that.

IK: I thought that it was a most interesting tie-in.

BB: Yes.

IK: The fact that you knew about it –

BB: That gave me a special delight.

IK: I think that Myra Kraft mentioned it first when Amy was trying to find something that was really worthwhile and that wasn't going to be supported by hundreds of others. Something that really needed it.

BB: I have no other questions. Do you, Betsy?

BA: No. I think that it's very interesting. I happen to know that she also was on the Music Committee and the Sisterhood, and she did all sorts of things over the years. So, even though she was head of so many organizations in the community, she still did an awful lot for us at the Temple.

IK: Well, that's why I said – Temple was home away from home. You did Temple, where you did things for your own home. I can't tell you – if you wanted to make sure that the flowers were going to be right for Friday night, it didn't matter whether you were a Sisterhood President or a chairman of a committee. Anything you'd say, you called, and

you said it, and it was taken care of. And you had one marvelous display after another. I used to sit at home and say, "I'm so mad, why don't they say to me someday, 'Why don't you come over and hand me a rose or hand me scissors, or do something?'"

BB: You were better at charoset. [laughter]

IK: Or writing a speech alone, and they're having all the fun putting the flowers together.

BB: [laughter]

IK: The same thing would happen with JF&CS at camp letter time. Somebody said just to send out an appeal is silly. Unless you personalize the note to a friend, you won't get really the result that you're hoping for. So, they would meet in Henrietta Rubin's family room. In those days, the playroom room downstairs. And they would have lapboards and tables and God knows what. And everybody had lists. And they would write like crazy all morning long to personal friends. Somebody would sort, and somebody would get them ready. I would be home, writing a speech.

BB: [laughter]

IK: And finally, one day, I got really mad. I called up, spoke to Henrietta, and I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "Oh, we're getting ready to sort whatever." I said, "You make me so mad. I'm sitting here all alone in the breakfast room with all these notes all around me, and that's the only company I've got. And I'm writing a speech. I'm all alone. Why doesn't somebody come and keep me company?" Nobody ever came to keep me company.

BB: Well, there's your speechmaking expertise from beginning to end.

IK: Really, so terribly funny.

BB: [laughter] Well, I want to thank you very much, Ida Mae, for giving us the time.

IK: I'm sorry if we've taken too much time.

BB: Oh, not at all. Not at all. It was a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]