Ruth Steller Klein Transcript

FRANCES GODINE: I will say that today is Friday, May 30th 1997. And I'm Frances Godine, and I'm interviewing Ruth Klein in her home under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archive Temple Israel Oral History Project in Boston, Massachusetts. And I'm just going to ask Ruth to say good afternoon so I can check the volume.

RUTH STELLAR KLEIN: Hello everybody.

FG: I think we're in good shape. And I was just checking my time to--. I think I'll put my watch on the table so that I—at some point I will just give us a pause to flip the tape over. As we begin, I just was wondering--. We're so glad that you are doing this for us. And I was wondering if there was any particular reason why you felt willing to invite us in to tape the interview.

RK: Well, primarily I think it's because I've felt close to Temple Israel, and I was very active in PTA and Sisterhood when I was younger. My children went to Temple Israel through post-con. And my husband taught there for many, many years. And we considered that was our family temple, which it was at that time. Actually, I just received a certificate because I have been a member for over fifty years.

FG: Congratulations.

RK: And that really meant a lot to me. So I just feel close to the temple. That's all. Even though now I'm not able to go the way I used to. And I'm probably not as interested as I used to be either—one thing and another.

FG: What were your early interests there?

RK: Well primarily I—when my older daughter was born I was very interested in temple and--. And she went there from kindergarten up so that I became interested, because I was always interested in the public school projects, also.

FG: This is Elise?

RK: Elise. I did many, many things for the Cabot School down here—lunch program and a million and one--. And I always did Girl Scouts, Brownies and Girl Scouts. I did both things at the same time with both girls. You can't do it for one without the other. And I wouldn't anyway. So, I don't know how I've stayed so interested but I have.

FG: And how did you come to join Temple Israel?

RK: Well, because my husband taught there. He taught at Boston Latin School with Sy Nemzoff. And when Sy became principal of Temple Israel he asked Arthur to come and teach, which he did.

One thing Sy did, he had all bona fide teachers. He didn't have students. And he ran a very good school. And that was another thing that interested us, because we were very interested in the school.

And so that's how we became interested. And then little by little we became—I became more interested. Arthur didn't have time for a lot of the things that I had time for. Those days I wasn't working, and so forth.

FG: Well, what projects did you like at that point when you were drawn in, when Elise was a student? You had mentioned to me some—

RK: Well, I did gift shop, which was money-raising for PTA.

FG: What did it look like at that time?

RK: Well, we had a cabinet with a glass top in the corridor. That's where the gift shop was. And we would go in--. I did that with Jane Kleiman at the time. For about four years with her, and then I did it after she wasn't interested or didn't do it, or I did it before. I can't remember. I think it was about eight years, all told. And I was very active in that particular project, which I thought was a good one.

FG: What type of items did you sell at that time?

RK: Well, everything Judaica, everything. We didn't buy anything that didn't have a meaning or a content or an emblem or something from—that showed what we were doing for, you know, the Jewish things. We went to the gift shows, which were fun.

FG: Just the ones in Boston, or did you travel to any other cities or—?

RK: No, no, no. We didn't travel. [laughter] We didn't travel. Those days you didn't travel. I was secretary for a few terms, I suppose you'd call them. I was vice-president for a few terms.

FG: This is at the PTA?

RK: PTA. So I kept my hand in it, really.

FG: What kind of activities was the PTA doing at that point? Did they do the Purim carnival and—

RK: Oh yes. Oh yes. We did all those things. And I helped out with those things, too. But mainly I was just interested in PTA at that time, until I became interested in Sisterhood.

I've been on the board of Sisterhood for many terms. I never thought they'd include me again, but they did. So I'm on the board again. But I really can't say that I go the way that I used to, to any of the meetings. We don't even have them the way we used to.

FG: What were the meetings like?

RK: The meetings were the first--. Sisterhood meetings were the first Wednesday of every month. Not the summer, I don't remember that we had them then. And the third Wednesday of the month we had a board meeting in the morning. And then for quite a few years after the board meeting—we'd bring our own sandwich and they'd supply cookies and a drink—we would have a book review or somebody that we admired would talk.

FG: From the community? You might invite—

RK: Well, no, no, no. The cantor or the rabbi, or the assistant rabbi or somebody that we would feel appreciative of, you know. They would talk and it would be very good. But sometimes it was a book review that was very interesting too.

FG: And would women—

RK: You'd make a day and you know that you were going to go that day.

FG: And you'd be there all day, more or less?

RK: Well, it didn't last too late in the afternoon. But we would go. Most of us had children at school, so we would have to be home for them.

FG: You mentioned to me earlier what people wore at that point.

RK: Oh, well that was when we had the first Wednesday of the month meetings. And we had marvelous turnouts. We had--. They would serve coffee and pastries. And sometimes we'd have little rolls, you know, with sandwiches. And so we'd have—we'd call it a luncheon, which it was really. It was very nice. Everybody got very close.

FG: So these were daytime meetings in those years?

RK: Oh, daytime meetings. It wasn't until later when things began to fall off that we said, "Well, we've just got to include the people who were working or who were going to school." And so we had Sunday meetings, Sunday morning. But we didn't go to those. They had them for the people who might have been interested if they had the time during the week. They couldn't come to the Wednesday meetings.

FG: So you continued with the Wednesday meetings and added on Sunday?

RK: Yes. That's exactly right.

FG: And where were the hats and gloves? [Laughs]

RK: Well, at the meetings that we had in the Levi Auditorium before the new part was built, the new synagogue and all, we would have big meetings, big turnouts.

FG: About how many women?

RK: Well, I would say we very often would have two hundred and fifty to three hundred women.

FG: That's marvelous.

RK: And everybody would come dressed up with hats and gloves usually. I can remember the Strawberry Festivals we had. Every year we had a Strawberry Festival the last meeting of the year.

FG: What was that like?

RK: That was--. We had--. We served ice cream with strawberries and sponge cake or whatever they would have. I think we eventually didn't have a sponge cake as I remember it. But we had cookies or something. But we did have the strawberries. And that was very nice, I think. I remember it very well. We'd always have a good speaker or

entertainment of some sort. And everybody came. Everybody looked forward to it.

FG: Did that become the hub of your social life as a woman or did you have--? You mentioned sort of a parallel, some things at Temple Israel, some things at Cabot. I wondered if your life centered any place?

RK: Well no, Cabot was just something I did when my children went there, you know, down was here. But I always felt that you should be interested in what your children are doing.

FG: I'm from Newton, so I know what we're talking about. But just for the tape recorder I'll say that Cabot is the elementary school in Newton in the area that you live in.

RK: Oh yeah. But I wasn't--. I was friendly with the people there, some of them. We had a little bridge club. We went to a board meeting down there one night, and we went for ice cream afterwards. And we said, "Gee, why don't we have a bridge club?" And before you knew, it we had it for years. So as a matter of fact one couple I'm still friendly with—they live in Florida now. And we call each other every now and then. I felt really close to each other.

FG: And the men were involved in—

RK: No, no, no, not in the bridge club. Not in the bridge club and not on the board. But they maybe should have been. But, no, I don't remember they did that. But we were very good friends and stayed good friends for a long time.

FG: So the friendship grew from your friendship with the woman? For example, with this couple—

RK: No, no. The friendship grew from the board meetings that we went to at Cabot School. And we became friendly and we stayed friendly. They all lived in the area, you

know, so that we played bridge at night because you couldn't get out during the day. Heaven forbid, you left the kids.

FG: And in the evening you were able to get together.

RK: Well, the husbands were home, you know. So one night a week we did that.

FG: Ladies' night out?

RK: Yeah. Oh, I joined the League of Women Voters, too. And that was at night. Everything was--. We did things at night alone because, as I said, I don't think we planned anything much during the day. But when the children were at school we'd go to a meeting at the temple or something.

FG: Did you use babysitters at that time?

RK: Oh I definitely used babysitters. Sure. We had to. My folks would help out here and there. But we didn't leave the children for overnight with babysitters. But we did leave them for a few hours at night or during the day.

FG: Were your folks in the area?

RK: My folks lived in the Highlands here. And, oh yeah, we had babysitters. We had--. I had an older woman that I used to have from--. She lived in Brighton. And I used to use her. I'd have to go and get here and bring her here, you know. But I felt comfortable with her, knowing she was responsible.

FG: And how often would you be able to see your folks?

RK: Oh, I was there four times a day to make sure everything was all right, not like today! Today, it's altogether different. But, oh yeah, well my folks moved over here when they were much younger, too, of course, over to the Highlands.

FG: Is this where you grew up?

RK: And my father was--. No. I grew up in Somerville and in Roxbury. We moved to Roxbury when I was in the first grade. And I have three brothers—had three brothers, two are gone now—and a sister. And we all grew up together like everybody did when you lived in an area like Roxbury.

Not everybody was Jewish but we were very friendly with other people, too; Italian families and other people that lived in the area. We had good neighbors, people that grew up to be very good citizens, doctors and people, lawyers, people that—good business people, nice citizens, I would say. Nobody in the area turned out bad.

FG: So you felt like a safe community?

RK: It was very safe. Oh, at that time it was very safe. We had no concerns. When I was older I was friendly with young people, even when I was still at high school. And went to Memorial High School and—

FG: Which was in Roxbury?

RK: It was in Roxbury. And we used to go bowling down at Grove Hall. And we used to stand on the street corner instead of parting at ten o'clock or 9:30 or whatever. We'd stand and talk and reminisce. And we'd go to school together in the morning. So why did we have to stand and talk? But we weren't afraid. Really nothing to be afraid of. At least it didn't occur to us to be afraid. So, but, we were really good kids.

FG: Do you remember any other of your activities at that stage?

RK: At that stage we were busy studying and practicing. I practiced the piano. I gave my piano to my younger daughter for her daughter. Now she's not practicing either. But I did. And one of my brothers, also, played the piano.

The piano was going about four hours a day because I practiced at least two and he did, too. With all the schooling that we did we never even considered it was a burden. I guess we enjoyed it.

FG: How did you start to play? How old were you?

RK: Well I was nine, I think, or something like that. Excuse me. My eyes haven't been good, and I had some surgery on this before I had the heart attack. Anyway, so—

FG: You began piano as a young girl then, at nine or so?

RK: Oh yeah, young. Oh yes.

FG: Did you have one in your home?

RK: Oh, we had an upright piano, a very good one. And then the first thing we did when I got married and moved to a little apartment was get a piano.

FG: Did your parents play any instruments?

RK: No, no.

FG: So how is it that you even knew about piano?

RK: That was what all little girls did those days. You got your piano lessons. My brother, one of my brothers, took violin lessons. And my sister took violin lessons. And another brother took piano lessons. And another brother waited until I got old enough to teach him piano, because I taught, you know. And then I went on to Boston University School of Music.

FG: Oh, wonderful.

RK: And studied to be a supervisor of music in schools. At that time you could not get a job in Boston unless you had three years' experience. And where were you going to get the experience?

So we all decided, my folks and I, that not go to a place like Presque Isle, Maine or something, where I might have gotten a job. I don't know. But I didn't want to go and they didn't want me to go. And those days you didn't run away from your home. When you got married you got an apartment. But you didn't before that. Not that nobody did. But we didn't. And so I stayed at home until I got married. And that's what happened.

FG: Were you working anywhere between your degree and getting married?

RK: No, I taught privately.

FG: So you taught private piano?

RK: Piano. Either--. Well, of course, knowing harmony and counter-point and appreciation and all the things I had learned, I didn't only teach them to play. I taught them all the other things that had to go along. And of course I had to go by streetcar, because I didn't have a car. So that was a hardship, but I didn't think of it as a hardship. I went two days to Brookline and the rest of the time taught in Roxbury.

FG: How did you get your students?

RK: I don't know. One pulled the other one in, I guess. Do you know that I didn't even keep my recital programs? I don't know where they've gone. I don't even have one, not one. And I—

FG: Maybe some of the daughters do.

RK: In the moving I think I lost some of them or they disappeared or I didn't think they were important. I don't know. But I wish I had a few because I remember at one time I

had thirty-six students, which was a lot.

FG: Yeah. What type of recitals did you have?

RK: Well, one time I remember hiring a place above the piano stores on Boylston Street near Tremont. Oh, and it was lovely. They had a nice piano there. And—

FG: Chairs set up for the audience?

RK: Chairs set up for the audience. And I had a really nice recital.

FG: Each student would play a piece or—

RK: Yeah. And they had a program printed.

FG: With their names and the piece and—

RK: Everything. And I really feel badly. I don't even remember the kids' names, a couple of them I do, here and there. But not as many as I should. Anyway—

FG: And what ages did you teach?—the youngest to the oldest—

RK: Adults, too. There were a few adults. I don't remember whether they were in the recital or not. But I did have some adults, parents of the children, some of them who always wanted to play. My husband wanted to play the piano, but never had a piano and never had a chance.

FG: Here he was living with an expert teacher and—

RK: Well.

FG: Did you continue to play for pleasure?

RK: I continued to play for pleasure and I taught for about three years after I was married. But then when I became pregnant, I stopped.

And, anyway, my husband went into the service. He was a teacher at Boston Latin School and taught mathematics, of all things that I didn't know anything about. But he was born in Chelsea and did very well. He was very athletic. And he went to Harvard and his brothers did, too. My three brothers did, also.

And he came out first on the list and finally got a job. It wasn't easy those days to get a job, even to get some subbing. But he did get to Latin School and he was there for many years. So then he came to Newton High School. And he taught at Boston University and at Northeastern and at Newton Junior College when it was there, and at Temple Israel, of course. And we went to camp every summer.

FG: What did you do at camp?

RK: Well, when my children were little I didn't do a lot, because I was busy with them.

FG: What camp was this?

RK: Well, we went--. He was at Camp Brunonia for ten years.

FG: Is that New Hampshire?

RK: That was in Maine.

FG: Maine. Do you remember what town?

RK: I did know.

FG: That's okay.

RK: I haven't thought about it in years.

FG: I have heard of it, and I can't think of the town either. It's not important.

RK: I'll think of it before we—

FG: If you think of it you'll let me know, but don't worry about it.

RK: Because he went a few years without me, summers, because there was no place for me there. It was all boys. And I wasn't an office person and I wasn't a nurse. And those were the only two women besides Ann Michele, who she and her husband ran it. So I was home. But I did go up and stay a few weeks at a farmhouse nearby. That was fun.

FG: Was it? And you took the kids?

RK: No, no. I didn't have the children then.

FG: Oh, this was before the children?

RK: Before the children. And so—

FG: So you weren't able to really stay at the camp? They didn't want—

RK: No. There was no place for me there.

FG: Interesting.

RK: But he was in charge of the little children: five and six year old ones. He had about thirty-five of them with some junior counselors. And, of course, I became interested in camp, and he loved it. So then we went to the kiddy camp for one year together. And we had no children either yet. And then he—

FG: Where was that?

RK: The kiddy camp was in Plymouth then. It's moved then—since then. But it wasn't much of a site, really, as far as we were concerned. But we were there for six weeks in the summer. It was a good experience.

FG: And you were a regular counselor of little ones or--?

RK: No. I wasn't a counselor there either. Nope.

FG: They didn't make use of your talents?

RK: I don't know. Anyway, but I really wanted a rest in the summer. And then we went to Camp Young Judaea, which I was busy with my children at that time.

My youngest daughter was two months old when we went there with her. And the older was two, almost two. Yeah, she was two. So that was when we went first with her.

And then we went again. We kept--. Well we had a cottage of our own. And—

FG: Did the children like it?

RK: Well, my little ones they were only little at the time. But my older one soon got to know everybody and was running around in the arts and crafts particularly. She loved that. And I would take walks with them, and take them to the beach and just do things aside from the campers. But then after they started to go into the bunks and I started to become a little more active. And then we were at Camp Litchhaven in Litchfield, New Hampshire. And—

FG: Is that a Jewish culture camp or--?

RK: No. Jewish--. Young Judaea was very Jewish. And so we were there for all those years, which it was much more Jewish than we were accustomed to by that time because we had been to Temple Israel. We didn't care whether we had two refrigerators or two

sinks. But they did up there.

FG: So it was a kosher camp?

RK: Kosher camp. But we—I loved it. And he loved it. So we enjoyed that very much. We did a lot of new things: building and so forth there. It wasn't our camp, but we still took a great interest in it. And we were busy all year with it, too, because we're hiring counselors and kitchen people. And—

FG: Were you paid at this point or supported?

RK: Well, he was. Those days you didn't say, "I am part of this." You were part of it, but you didn't say it. So you didn't get--. As a matter of fact, at Camp Litchhaven we were hired together.

FG: One salary?

RK: I didn't get anything. Nothing. But I did love the children and I did--. All the homesick children came to me. [Laughter] And I made out the menus and I helped out in the infirmary when the nurses—or one nurse. We had one at first would have to leave or have to have a day off, and in the office when the same thing happened. So I was busy.

FG: They had a good deal.

RK: Yeah. They did. But I liked it so much that it was really part of me. We would leave here the day school ended, and we'd stay there until after camp. We always had a NFTY group come afterwards, a few days after camp closed, and we'd have to start again. The same kind of thing with activities for them and sort forth. And, as I said, it was my life. I loved it. And then we'd come home and we'd have to start with the yearbook.

FG: What was the yearbook?

RK: Well, get pictures and things about--. Like you have at your high school, at your schools, your college. They have these books at the end of the year.

FG: And you put it together?

RK: And then put it together. And then we used to go out every Sunday practically getting campers. We'd bring the books along, photographs to show what we were doing. And they wanted to see us and see what we were like. So that was what we did. We were pretty busy.

FG: Were you considered sort of head counselors or--?

RK: No. We were directors.

FG: You were the directors. These other people owned it?

RK: Other people owned it. So we were kind of busy people.

FG: And did all your children go through the camp?

RK: Our two children, yes. And the older one became--. Well, she was a counselor by the time we got to Camp Litchhaven. She was already at college. So—

FG: And Helaine?

RK: Helaine—

FG: Enjoyed it also?

RK: She loved it. She just loved it. She was very active in the drama part of it. She had a wonderful acting prowess and good singing voice. And she was more of an exhibitionist that way. Elise was very good in fencing and in the athletic part of camp, much more so than Helaine. Helaine wasn't so interested in that. You couldn't be both

things anyway, you know. Everybody has talent one way or another. But oh yeah, they loved camp. They loved camp.

FG: And when did you stop becoming involved with it?

RK: Well, Arthur had a heart attack at camp.

FG: I'm sorry.

RK: So he was at Nashua Hospital. And then we had him moved up here to Newton-Wellesley because my brother was our doctor. And he was special. And so he was up here.

But at first it was kind of tough. We had NFTY group there. And he got sick on the way back from home where we had come home to be home for a few days and get ourselves renovated. And he had an attack on the way up and insisted we go. So that day was before the NFTY people came up, we had to take him to the hospital. That was many years ago. So—

FG: So that was the turning point.

RK: That's when--. Well, we did go back one year. But he wasn't feeling that marvelous. And he decided that we were going to not go. And we felt it was a good decision.

FG: Would you take a guess at what year that might have been that you stopped?

RK: Oh yeah. That was early 1960. He passed away in 1967. So it was probably 1964 or five. I think 1964, we did go back one year. The yearbooks are upstairs and all the information is in that. But I didn't bring them down. They're camp, you know, so I didn't think this would have anything to do with Temple Israel.

FG: So you had actually from 1967 to 1997, you've had—

RK: Thirty years.

FG: A good chunk of time of your own.

RK: That's right. It isn't easy. But that's what we did. Had to do it.

FG: Yeah. Are there some activities that come to mind that have kept you afloat in that period of time? I'm sure there was a lot to cope with. You still had young children.

RK: A lot to cope with. Well, no. My older daughter by that time in 1967 had graduated from Mt. Holyoke, and had gotten a master's degree at Middlebury and was teaching.

FG: Fine student.

RK: Yeah. And my younger daughter went to Lesley in Cambridge. She wanted to teach, too. But she actually never did. Series of events that somehow happened at that time it was very hard to get a teaching job. So I suggested she go to Katherine Gibbs and she did. And Katherine Gibbs--. After that she got good jobs.

FG: Interesting.

RK: But not in the field that she thought she was interested in. But it didn't matter.

FG: She found some satisfaction.

RK: Evidently she did. But she was sort of tied up with a young man. Did that click or something?

FG: Not yet. I was just checking our tape and I'll turn it over in a minute.

RK: They were going to get married the day they both graduated from college. He went to Harvard. And then she told me some things and told me she wasn't going to marry him.

So she came back home to live for about three years until she met her present husband, who is a darling. And we're all thrilled that she didn't marry that same boy.

My older daughter's married, too. She has a daughter. I have a granddaughter who's twenty-four, just graduated from Smith two years ago.

FG: Congratulations.

RK: Thank you. And now she's leaving to go to Minnesota. She got all expenses paid to go there for two years to graduate school there. Her field is going to be Public Policy, Women's Issues.

FG: Good for her.

RK: And my little one is fifteen. She just won a few art prizes. My younger daughter was also very good in art. So that's my family's picture up there of the whole gang.

FG: Oh, that's lovely.

RK: Yeah.

FG: I'll take a look at it.

RK: Anyway—

FG: I think I will flip the tape for us. That way we won't worry about running out of time.

RK: I haven't stopped talking either.

FG: I'm continuing the tape. False alarm. Because as I took it out I see we do have a few more minutes on it. I was wondering if you have any stories that your parents might have told you about coming to this country or any grandparent stories that you might remember? Things that kind of—

RK: You know, we had a close life those years.

FG: It sounded like it.

RK: Yeah. And my grandparents were great. My grandfather was quite Orthodox. As a matter of fact, his brother was instrumental in getting the temples to have mikvahs. That he actually went around and collected money so that they would have them because he felt it very important.

He was even more Orthodox than the grandfather, very Orthodox. He wouldn't answer the phone on Saturday, you know, that kind of thing. My grandfather either had more of a liberal attitude. I don't know just what it was.

But he knew we came to visit him on Saturday. And he knew we had to come by car. We parked the car up the street so he wouldn't see it. But he never said to us, "You shouldn't come on Saturday," because he wanted us to come. And everybody did.

FG: Which generation came to the United States?

RK: It was the grandparents.

FG: Your grandparents?

RK: My grandparents.

FG: So you knew them in this country?

RK: Oh yes.

FG: And did they also live in Roxbury or--?

RK: They finally came to Roxbury. They lived in the South End. My grandfather came with the oldest—one of the oldest daughters, the second oldest daughter. The oldest one had gotten married there and she stayed there in Romania. That was my mother's family. Well, she came from Romania, and the oldest son. And they jobs and found an apartment and so forth. And then my mother at about age sixteen came with the rest of the brood. By that time--.

There had been eleven children originally. But there were seven that came with her. And they were down in the bottom of the ship all sick, all the trip. It was such a long trip. And nobody paid any attention. I don't know how they got food or anything. But I don't think they ever left there. And, of course, my grandmother was young enough to have another child when she came here. So it was probably six of them that came with her.

FG: They joined your grandfather and the others?

RK: They joined—yeah. They lived near where the Wang Center is, on a street called Broadway. I remember that very well.

FG: What was the house like?

RK: It was a brick building, red brick kind of high. And I remember my grandmother used to put fat—

FG: Chicken fat?

RK: Not always chicken, even beef fat, too, in a basket, let it down on a rope to a man who would then put soap—and the soap would come up that he made from the fat.

FG: And he did it right down on the street?

RK: She would do it right in the window. No. He'd have the soap all made from the time maybe before. I don't know.

FG: So he'd exchange it. He'd take the fat out, give her some soap in the basket and she'd pull it back up?

RK: Right. That's—

FG: And you remember seeing that?

RK: Yeah. Of course I remember the iceman, who used to come with the ice on his back with a pincher thing that he held used to come out. Of course, they had an icebox. They were lucky to have an icebox, I guess.

FG: So did they walk up to the apartment or walk up to the house?

RK: He walked up with the ice on his back with a shiny thing under it so he wouldn't get wet.

FG: Oil cloth or—?

RK: Oil cloth, probably. And I remember my grandmother always had a drawer, big drawer, in the kitchen table filled with yeast pastries that she made. And they had a pantry with green tomatoes, sauerkraut, pickles—

FG: In jars?

RK: No, in barrels. Yeah, of course. My mother had some of those, too. My mother used the jugs. I had two jugs out front here that were my mother's. It was a pair. Somebody stole them one night.

FG: Those big pottery crocks?

RK: Yeah, cream and brown on the top. Oh they were--. I've got pictures of those some place. I'll have to dig them up. And, but, I don't know who took them but I never will know. Years ago.

FG: Did these things have a smell when you'd walk into the pantry? Because you mentioned sauerkraut and pickles.

RK: No. They had covers. There were covers. Oh yes.

FG: And then you'd go in for a meal and put some in a dish, or how did it work?

RK: Oh yes, sure.

FG: Bring it to the table?

RK: And my brothers used to like to go in and take one and eat it. [Laughter] We didn't--. I don't think my sister and I did it. But one of brothers—

FG: They'd grab a pickle or—?

RK: Grab a pickle or a green tomato or something. But--. No, my mother used to use crocks rather than the barrels. And I remember my grandmother saying, "Speak English." She wanted to learn English.

FG: So she pushed the rest of your family?

RK: She pushed to have us talk English to her. My grandfather, I never heard him say that.

FG: Did they speak Romanian or Yiddish together?

RK: They probably did. But I don't remember whether they did or not. I picked up a few words here and there because the family, when they didn't want us to know somebody

was pregnant, they would talk secret, you know. And it was a--. But not too much. They really tried to be Americanized. That they tried. They were wonderful people.

FG: Did you learn any Yiddish?

RK: Well, they used to speak Yiddish, too. And my folks—my folks didn't. My father came from Russia at age sixteen all by himself. And he was a tailor and he built a wonderful business in Davis Square, Somerville. That's why we lived in Somerville at first. And that business evolved into a men's clothing, not haberdashery, but men's clothing.

FG: Haberdashery--? I'm ignorant. Refers to—?

RK: Haberdashery is ties and—

FG: Accessories with the hats and—

RK: No, no. He didn't do any of that. It was just suits, and coats and jackets and trousers, that kind of thing. He did very, very well.

FG: What name?

RK: Sent three of us at one time to college for ten years. And the boys all went to medical school.

FG: That's quite an accomplishment. What was the name of the business?

RK: Stellar, S-T-E-L-L-A-R.

FG: A good name.

RK: That was my maiden name.

FG: Yeah. A stellar business, too. [Laughter]

RK: He had ideas about having the boys, setting them up in stores, you know. But none of them wanted it. And our husbands didn't want it either. So there we were. It was fine. We all were happy with what we did, you know.

FG: You mentioned also that your mother had needle skills.

RK: My mother, wonderful, she was--. I didn't learn. I didn't learn how to do it because, you know, why would I bother with fixing something when she could do it?

Oh yes, I did fix the girls' hems on cotton dresses. We all wore dresses to school, you know. They didn't wear slacks. Never did they ever appear in slacks. It was years later when they would wear slacks for playing outdoors. They wore skirts.

FG: Even to play outdoors? They'd go to school in a dress and come home, and stay dressed or did they—?

RK: Mostly they stayed dressed. There was no such thing by that time of the day. Why change?

FG: So you had a lot of washing and ironing?

RK: Oh yes, and fixing. But somehow that's why you asked me before what I did besides Brownies, and Girl Scouts and PTA and temple; I think I was a little busy for a long time, and camp—camp, too. I mean, even though I really didn't do anything actively. But there were things to talk over and to do and to—

FG: And year round. It wasn't just the summer. It was year round.

RK: No, no. Had to get ready for it, plan ahead, oh yeah. But it was great.

FG: I think a full and busy life. I'm looking at a beautiful chair here that you mentioned to me was a wedding gift to you. I wonder if you could just—

RK: Not to me, my mother.

FG: A wedding gift to your mother?

RK: From my father. Yes.

FG: I was hoping you'd just describe it on the tape recorder. I have a—

RK: Can we call it a corner chair? And it's a rounded corner chair. We also had one that my sister has or had—I'm not sure it's—pointed corner with a leather seat. But this has--. My mother made the needlepoint. And I was lucky to be the oldest.

FG: Would you just describe the colors on the needlepoint? Because I know they're new colors.

RK: Yeah. Well it's plum color with a little rose and green flowers in the middle. Look at that, I've got to dust it.

FG: Oh, it's in beautiful condition.

RK: Well, it is. It's fairly comfortable, too.

FG: Do you remember who gave it to her?

RK: Oh no. I never knew who. My father always said that my grandfather invited the entire congregation of the little shul. Oh, my grandfather was a sexton in that little shul in South End where he--. That's where—

[end of tape 1, side A]

FG: Nineteen ninety-seven. And you were just telling me a little bit about your grandfather's position with the shul. What was the name of the shul?

RK: Oh, I don't know. I never did know.

FG: This was in the South End shul.

RK: South End.

FG: And he was the sexton?

RK: Yeah. It was near where the Wang Center is now. But because he used to walk, you know, they'd never live [far] away so you have to ride. But my father says that when my brother was born, all the men from the congregation with the beards walked to Somerville from Boston to come for the bris.

FG: That was quite a tribute.

RK: And I was born in my grandmother's house in Boston, though we lived in Somerville.

FG: People did that at that time, didn't they?

RK: Sure. In the house.

FG: The women went home to their parents to have their children and--.

RK: And that's what—that's--. Yeah. All the children were still home, except for a couple of the older ones that were married by that time. What else can I tell you?

[Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

FG: Back on. I'm just going to ask you a little bit about Somerville. We were just talking about that for a moment. So the address of the store was—

RK: 421 Highland Avenue. And—

FG: You said you were there until first grade?

RK: Until first grade, May of the first grade.

FG: And what prompted the move?

RK: Because there were no Jewish people there except the people that lived—that owned the house we lived in. And they lived in the same house upstairs. They had a little girl my age and an older boy. And a couple of my siblings were born there. My two brothers, I think. And I don't remember whether my sister was born there or not.

But, anyway, we moved to Roxbury. And was a mixed neighborhood but there were a lot of Jews there. And the family lived there. An older sister of my mother's lived there. She also had five children. And so we were very, very close as families.

We used to go to the beach every summer to Winthrop—to Beachmont first, and then to Winthrop. And we used to have houses next door to each other, you know, that kind of relationship. It was good. My cousin, Gertrude Brown, lives up the street here now. And she was one of the Steinberg girls, too. [Laughs]

FG: Steinberg was your mother's—

RK: Aunt's, aunt's married name.

FG: So your mother's sister?

RK: My mother's sister. So--.

FG: Do you remember any holidays that you did together?

RK: Oh, all holidays. We all went to our grandmother's house.

FG: What did she do?

RK: My grandmother's younger daughters used to dress us up for Purim. And then when my brothers got measles or chicken pox or scarlet fever or anything, they sent me. I didn't get any of these things.

FG: Good for you.

RK: They sent me to her house.

FG: To be—

RK: I remember being there--. Well, I don't know if I remember. I remember they telling me about five years old, when they sent me to my grandmother's house. And I got the chicken pox there. And at that age I didn't want to--. They sent me home in a cab. All the way to—all alone. And I wouldn't appear without a veil on my face.

FG: How old were you?

RK: About five. [Laughter]

FG: Sounds like a hot ticket.

RK: Oh, I was very egotistical, I guess, at that age. Anyway, it was fun. But I know that I got it, you know—

FG: They sent you there to protect you?

RK: Yeah.

FG: And you got it?

RK: That's right.

FG: So they sent you home?

RK: They sent me home.

FG: Did you do Passover seders or--?

RK: We did everything. I remember we used to have ice in the bathtub and put all the tonic in there, because when you had a big brood—and they had broods—you had a lot of tonic. I don't remember drinking much of it. But, anyway—

FG: So this would be at your grandmother's house, and she would have—

RK: The South End.

FG: All her children and all of—

RK: We all went by streetcar from Roxbury. Yeah.

FG: And did she prepare the usual things?

RK: She was a marvelous cook. She did everything. And just to plan on all of this, I don't know, I don't know how she did it. But she did it.

This was an arranged marriage, incidentally. My grandmother was fifteen when she met my grandfather, who was sixteen. So she had red hair, and a lot of the children have strawberry blonde. I have a redhead—used to be redheaded brother. And we had a lot of redheads in the family.

FG: And the arrangement was made by their parents?

RK: No. My grandmother lost her parents when she was little. And she was brought up by an aunt and uncle. Now I don't know who made the arrangement. But it wasn't her parents. And I don't know about my grandfather's family as much as I do about hers. I

don't really know as much about her—as much as I should have known. We didn't think it was important, but it is.

FG: It sounds like even though romance might not have been a part of the—

RK: Oh, they were very, very happy, very happy, I think. And she would not let them shave her head.

FG: An independent woman at that time.

RK: Yes. She was brought up Orthodox. And he was very much so. But that I heard. She had gorgeous red hair. And, of course, I don't remember her as a redhead. But she used to wear it piled high.

FG: And it was gray at that time?

RK: Oh yeah, sort of gray.

FG: Do you remember how your parents met each other?

RK: Oh, my father went to a dance and she was there. And he never left her alone after that. She was a pretty gorgeous woman, my mother, beautiful woman: blonde with brown eyes and slim, very lovely, very talented. And I guess they must have fallen for each other because--. Well, they were young. Probably he was twenty-one and she was twenty or something like that when they married. And, obviously, they were happy. There was a sixth child in there. We had a sixth one that died in the house. It was born in the house and didn't live for maybe two hours. A little girl.

FG: Do you remember that yourself or--?

RK: Oh, I don't know if I remember. See, there was like a year between all of us. So I was young. And I remember--. I don't know. I remember somehow. My aunt was there

helping out.

FG: Your mother's sister.

RK: My mother's sister. And gee, I haven't thought about any of this for such a long time.

FG: Thank you for speaking about it.

RK: Well, I mean, you know, it's funny how you don't think about it because it doesn't come up.

FG: Yeah. But you have the feeling that you remember there was some commotion in the house or something?

RK: Evidently. Evidently. But, I--. Yeah. I remember where we lived, too, in Roxbury for the years that we were young when we moved there.

FG: What was that like?

RK: Well it was a three-decker house. And I remember the neighbors' names and everything of the people in the neighborhood. They were people that I see and hear about.

FG: Would you mind saying a few of the names, just to give a flavor?

RK: Well, Paul, Paul Zoll, who developed the pacemaker. Actually he was in my husband's class at Harvard. And he is still living. And there was Aaron Levin who was an ophthalmologist. Manuel Kaufman who was a--. I don't know what kind of a, an M. D. anyway. I don't remember exactly what--.

The Di Pietro [sp?] family had a lot of children. And I remember being—marveling at the fact that his mother, Mrs. Di Pietro, could speak some Yiddish. She lived near, you

know, with us. And we were all very friendly. There was the Shrego family. And oh, the Nissons, the Nissons we were very friendly with them. So—

FG: We were talking about how the generations had met. Do you remember how you and your husband met?

RK: Oh, yes. He--. I knew him years and years before I started to see him. He knew me, too, I guess. But we never really went out together. But I went to a party at one of my friends' houses and that started the romance. He started to ask me, would I like to go to a movie or would I like to go down the street to bowl? We had a bowling alley not too far.

FG: This was in Roxbury?

RK: Um-hmm. We had moved by that time to a large apartment because we had everybody home. And we had a nine room, two-bathroom affair, which we needed because by that time we really needed the two bathrooms. And that's really when we started to see each other.

Oh, and then we had a hurricane in 1939. And my husband, who lived on Townsend Street, which was a little walk—but not that he couldn't do it. He walked up to where I lived, over all the branches and the wires and everything else. I didn't expect him and I had come home from teaching. And I was exhausted. And I had undressed into a robe, I remember. And he comes, rang the bell, and came walking up. And I wasn't so thrilled with that, but I was flattered. So that really started it. That was 1938. We got married in '39.

FG: Sounds like a lot of devotion.

RK: A handsome man. He's in all the yearbooks, I think, of Temple.

FG: Well, this is a question that you can just reflect on or not answer if you feel it's something that you don't relate to, but do you feel life would have been different for you if you had been born a man? Are there different turns that—

RK: Those days--. Well, I never wished I was a man or felt deprived because I was a woman. As a matter of fact, I personally think the women have done themselves a little disservice because not that they shouldn't be people unto themselves, that they shouldn't have equal everything. They de-feminized a little bit too much. I little more than I think. That's because I'm older, I guess. I don't know. The young people don't feel that way. I don't know about--. I never ask my daughters how they would feel about that particular item. I don't know about my grandchildren, how they'll feel. I don't know.

FG: That's why we value this perspective so much. I appreciate your saying that.

RK: I don't feel that--. We didn't know that we were deprived. I guess maybe we were. But I don't know that we were. We didn't feel it. We were discriminated against because we were Jewish.

FG: In what way do you remember that?

RK: Well, we felt that the teaching jobs weren't give to us because--. Not—I didn't feel that way so much as the people that went to, let's say, the Boston State. At that time it was Boston Teachers' College. They didn't get the subbing jobs.

FG: They just weren't called?

RK: They weren't called. They had to go every day into Beacon Street—

FG: And wait?

RK: And wait. They could ill afford the nickel, really. And the time it took. Then they somehow—I don't know how that came about, they were called. When my sister got

through there, at the Teachers' College, they were calling in the morning if they had a job. But who knew what the calls were and how many jobs were there? We didn't know that. Nobody would dare to say anything. But we all felt that the Jewish people were not called. At six dollars a day, that's what they got.

FG: Are there any world events that stand out in your mind that you remember experiencing either as a young girl or, you know, later?

RK: World experiences?

FG: You know, current events that just sort of really—

RK: Well—

FG: Came home to you?

RK: We were interested in politics to some degree. But not the way people are today, with television and everything. No, I don't think we were as interested. Of course, I remember very well World War II. My brothers and my husband were in it. And my sister's husband—

FG: Were they out of the country or were they—?

RK: My husband went to France, and England and Germany.

FG: In combat or—?

RK: Well, he was in the infantry, but he was also in a psychological unit where he tested the people for Air Force were going in. So he did a lot of the testing. Wasn't in combat, no. But he saw a lot. He got into France on the ship. He was in LeHavre for two days before they let him go in because he got—because that was VE Day.

FG: Oh my goodness. So he was there was VE Day.

RK: Well he was on a ship.

FG: In the ship waiting and—?

RK: Waiting to go in. And then from there they sent him to England. He was in Stone, England for weeks. And he went to the Riviera on his few days off.

FG: Did you get letters about this, or how did you—?

RK: Oh yes, of course. That was the only connection. Nobody used the phone then. Heaven forbid.

FG: Do you remember how you felt? Were you worried?

RK: Of course. I didn't hear from him for a whole month when he was on that boat. They didn't have any mail going out.

FG: Nobody informed the families what—

RK: No, no, no. Didn't know where they were until afterwards. And when he left I was pregnant, six months pregnant. And I had to leave my apartment, because they didn't want me to be alone. I didn't want to be either. And who could afford it? And went to my folks' to live. And they had to take me into the hospital. My brother, actually, was a doctor by then.

FG: Was that Elliot?

RK: No. That was Lawrence. The old—he was next to me. Elliot was the baby. He died three years ago. That was Lawrence. And I remember it was snowing. He took--. Would you be more comfortable in that other chair?

FG: No. I'm fine, thank you.

RK: And he--. That was on a Monday morning. And she was born Tuesday at five thirty in the afternoon. Everything was war-connected. I was supposed to have a private room. But I was in a room with six or eight other ladies. So it wasn't good. And she was premature, three pounds, twelve ounces.

FG: Oh my.

RK: She was in an incubator for a whole month until she was five [pounds] two [ounces]. I had to come home without her. Those days--. Yeah, they kept you in the hospital for two weeks for two hundred dollars. They didn't let you dangle for ten days. Can you imagine? We were ready to keel over by the time they let us dangle. It was very bad.

FG: You wanted to go home sooner?

RK: Well, we didn't--. Nobody went home sooner. We didn't know that you could go home sooner.

FG: But I mean, you said you were ready to keel over.

RK: Because you're ready to faint if you don't get out of bed. They give you a bedpan and all that for ten days. Not walking. That wasn't until after the war that they realized that you do much better if you get up and move around. So five years later when I had my younger daughter that same day—she was born quarter to one in the morning—and the next morning I got up to the bathroom.

FG: You felt better with that experience?

RK: Oh, of course. I was in the hospital only five days. And I felt much, oh, much better, much, much. Walked around, you know. There's no such thing as staying in bed. It was ridiculous. But they didn't know that at that time.

FG: What was it like when you came home from the hospital with the girls?

RK: Well, I had a nurse show me how to bathe the baby and, you know. Even though I came home to my mother and father's house. And my mother certainly knew all those things. But she stayed with us, I think for a week or two. I think you had to get her for two weeks.

FG: Sleeping in the house?

RK: I think so. See I can't remember. I'll have to ask my sister. She remembers. I can't remember. Then my sister came home and had her little boy. Also from that house from--. It was six months after I had mine.

FG: So your mother had a little break.

RK: I don't know. We did the best--. It was lucky that my folks had a six-room apartment at that time. But anyway, then my husband came home from service, was released, because his mother was very sick. And so we continued until we could get an apartment. We went to Roxbury to live because it was the only apartment we could get. And my daughter was two at that time. So—

FG: And then where did you have your first married home?

RK: In Brighton. My folks had moved to Brighton.

FG: Oh.

RK: And so we were in Brighton anyway. So we moved to Commonwealth Avenue to an apartment. But then we only stayed there a short time because I was pregnant and he had to go into service. And so we didn't keep the apartment for too long. So anyway—

FG: So the house we're in right now is the home you've been in the longest.

RK: This is the longest time. We lived in Brighton, also. We had a very nice two-family house there, apartment there, that we rented. And then we bought this house. We're very happy here. Of course, when we bought this house it was like the country. But now it's all together different. But I still like it.

FG: Good for you. Where do your daughters live? Are they in this area?

RK: Elise lives in Wellesley. And they just bought a house in East Falmouth—West Falmouth, West Falmouth.

FG: Will they move there?

RK: No, no. But they go there often. And Helaine lives in Andover.

FG: Oh. So nobody's too far.

RK: Not too far. But Helaine is working with her husband. He's an attorney. And she works with him. So they are busy now, especially [since] Amy's older. And she was—these are her bat mitzvah pictures that are here. That's my piano.

FG: She's lovely.

RK: She is. She's a sweet little girl. She's fifteen now. So I saw them Monday. But I don't see them that often as I used to when Amy was little. But I don't expect it now. I know that you can't.

FG: Do one of your daughters do holidays now when the family gets together?

RK: Helaine does mostly holidays, because her husband's family used to have them all here. Oh, I had twenty-four and twenty-six at least every, every holiday. I had them here. I had all the anniversaries, all the birthdays. I--. Because I used to use the porch and the--. We're unlevel here with the outside. We'd put chairs on the outside. And we

really had some really good parties here.

FG: And you did all the cooking?

RK: I did all the cooking and all the preparing.

FG: And I just wanted to say for the tape recorder that you have some recipes in our Temple Israel Sisterhood cookbook.

RK: Yeah. I've got, I think, four of them.

FG: I'm going to take a look when I get home.

RK: You'll see them.

FG: Was cooking one of the things you've enjoyed?

RK: I loved it, of course. But--. And I like setting up and planning, and setting the table and all that. It was fun.

FG: That's great.

RK: But now my younger daughter seems to have taken it over. I don't know just whether that's because she likes it better or her husband likes it better. But a lot of his family are still involved in those get-togethers.

At this stage now with the way things are, you get sort of lonely. And I have formed a lot of friendships with quite a few women. And many of them are younger a little bit. And now I'm not driving so I'm entertaining them, you know, having them here a lot. That's why this is up. We play bridge a little.

FG: Terrific.

RK: And I always say my house is open. You're welcome to come. And they do.

FG: Well, it's very lovely and gracious. It feels very welcoming.

RK: Well I hope so, because that's what I strive for. But I enjoy it, you see, and that's the whole thing. And so I'm hoping I can stay here. That's my hope, you know. See my brother used to live two streets up here. My sister still lives in the Highlands. And she was left alone a year ago Thanksgiving.

FG: Oh, I'm sorry.

RK: So we keep track of each other. And she's very good about driving here or there or the next place. And my older daughter's been doing a lot of that now, too.

FG: Helping with marketing or whatever you—

RK: No, not--. No. My sister's been doing the marketing with me. I go with her. At first she did some of it alone. But—

FG: She'll drive and you'll—

RK: She'll take me. And she does some of it and I do some of it. And it works out well. You know, I'm here alone, and how much do I need?

FG: But it's amazing what we do need just to keep body and soul together.

RK: I know. I know. It really is amazing. How many children do you have?

FG: I have two. I have a twenty one-year-old son who has just graduated from college.

RK: Where'd he go?

FG: He went to Grinnell College in Iowa. It's a small liberal arts school there.

RK: Oh good.

FG: And I have—we have an eighteen-year old daughter who had graduated from high school last year. And she's done a program called City Year this year, which is a community service-type program in town. And next year she'll start at Brandeis.

RK: Good.

FG: Which I'm very excited about. I don't know if she is, but I am. So—

RK: No, no. I have a nephew whose son went to college, came back. He didn't like it. Not that he didn't like the college, or not that he didn't do well. But he's working now. And I don't know whether he's going back to college or not. So kids do different things. We never have changed our major. Heaven, never. You went, whatever you did, you stuck to it. You didn't dare.

FG: But it sounds like it was quite exceptionally--. You've got a college education, actually.

RK: Oh, girls didn't have that. But my folks felt that it was important, evidently. And, evidently, I wanted it. And oh, I wanted to get a master's degree in the worst way. But everybody else was coming along a year behind me, you know. And how much can one person do? Even though the tuitions, you know, at that time were three hundred dollars.

FG: Wow. Times have changed. Do you think you would have done things differently if you'd had the master's degree?

RK: Well, I don't know if it would have been different, really. I really don't know. But it was something that I wanted to pursue. But I always went on to school. I've been taking those RSVP courses.

FG: Wonderful.

RK: Not of late, because now they moved over to the community center. It's much further away. And I haven't been doing it. The last few years I've had one darned illness after another.

FG: Maybe it'll settle down and you'll—

RK: Yeah, well--. But I'm always interested in learning. So I'm hoping that I can maybe go back to some of the classes. I don't know. I always say that if--. Is that off now?

FG: It isn't actually. Would you like me to turn it off?

RK: Well I--. No, it's all right. If I ever have to go into a retirement home, the one that—the only one that would interest me is LaSalle, because you take courses there. I don't know how good the courses are. It's a junior college. But I'm sure that whatever I would do would be better than doing nothing.

FG: I think, actually, they've become a four-year program.

RK: Maybe. I think they call it LaSalle College now.

FG: Right.

RK: They do at Mt. Ida, too. But I don't know that it's, you know—

FG: You have high standards.

RK: Well, I mean, I don't know, you know, who it's for or what it's for. But it would be better than doing what I'm doing now, which is not much. But—

FG: Well, it sounds like this has been the theme of your whole life, you know, having this interest in education and intellectual stimulation, and teaching and being involved with young people.

RK: The young people. I love the young people. Even at camp the counselors used to--. You know, I used to be interested in them. Some of them became my babysitters, too.

FG: I can see how people would become very devoted to you, Ruth. You're very-

RK: Well, I did the best I know how, anyway. But then growing up in a big family, in a neighborhood where you became friendly with all the children in the neighborhood. Then you—there's a community feeling. I don't think now there is that much. People go to school, they come home you know, it's different.

FG: Yeah. I hear what you're saying. But not everyone would have developed the generosity of spirit that you did.

RK: Well, thank you. That's nice to hear.

FG: I'd just like to thank you so much for talking with us.

RK: Well, thank you for coming. And I hope it's going to help a little bit. If it helps, I'll be glad.

[END OF INTERVIEW]