Mildred Zanditon Transcript

ROVNER: This is Ellen Rovner on November 10th, 1997. I'm with Mildred Zanditon at her home. I'm interviewing her on behalf of the Jewish Women's Archive's Temple Israel Oral History Project. Mildred, the last time I was here, we talked a lot about your family and your mother in particular. I was really interested in exploring some more about your mother's legacy to you. Just before I turned the tape on you talked about your granddaughter in Costa Rica, that in turn what you've passed on to your daughter and your grandchildren.

ZANDITON: That granddaughter in Costa Rica is learning to make challah.

ER: That's great.

MZ: When she was home last spring she called and said, "When are you making challah? Will you teach me how to do it?", and I thought that was really exciting. She doesn't have to spend two years after I die figuring out how to do it.

ER: Did you not make challah before your mother died?

MZ: Well, I never really made it from start to finish. I would call my mother who lived alone in an apartment in Brookline, and I would say, "Mom, I'll pick you up at 2:00. We're going to have dinner." I would get there and she'd say, "Well dear, I was restless so I thought I'd make challah." Whatever stage she was at I would help her with, but I never went through the whole process. I helped her knead sometimes, and I watched her make a six braided loaf, but she did it so quickly that I couldn't figure it out. I'm not really very good with my hands, so I didn't really know how. I think I told you that when she died, there were a couple of loaves in the freezer because she died very quickly after she went into the hospital. We were eating Shabbos [unclear] eating her challah. My brother

said, “How many loaves of challah are there?” I said, “There are two more.” “Well, what are we going to do? Who’s going to make it?” Did I tell you the story?

ER: Yeah. Well, tell me again.

MZ: See the tea set over there on the sideboard?

ER: Yes.

MZ: That was my mother’s. My sister said, “You’re getting the tea set, so I think you should be the one to make the challah.” I said, “Okay” because I really enjoyed baking. I said okay without realizing that it’s a five-hour task when you’re making those. But anyway, I then set out to do it and I didn’t know how. That article was very helpful; it at least told me the steps and so forth.

ER: This must be the article in the Boston *Globe* in 1976.

MZ: The article had been in the *Globe* on my mother’s eightieth birthday. That was about four years before she died. The cookbook came out just after she died.

ER: This is Joan Nathan’s.

MZ: Joan Nathan’s cookbook, yes.

ER: And which one was this? Do you know?

MZ: It was the original one.

ER: The first one.

MZ: I don’t have the first one here. I have that down at the vineyard in our house there, but it’s been in succeeding issues. Each one tells the story about my mother and how she started making challah when she was a little kid. She started doing it when she was

little because her mother was completely paralyzed from disease. I don't know what it was.

ER: And this was in the U.S.?

MZ: Oh, yes. My mother was only about a year and a half when they came to America.

ER: This was at Dorchester.

MZ: That was in Boston, I guess. Oh, no. They lived in Malden when she was a little girl. So she stayed home. Her father decided she should leave school because she was the youngest. So she left school, and she stayed home, and made challah and all the other appropriate things that were required for the family. So she always made challah from the time she was a little kid. I told you that I had the notebook that she used when she was president of the sisterhood. I took it from my sister the other day. We were looking at it, at the quality of her handwriting, and the way she wrote. We were amazed that someone who had so little formal schooling was apparently not just self-educated, but she had an older sister who was really very intellectual and an avid reader of good literature and stuff. She sort of did the rest of the teaching, encouraged her to read good things.

ER: Oh, her oldest sister encouraged her.

MZ: Her older sister. But her older sister was at work, so she couldn't stay home and take care of her mother. My mother was the youngest, so it was okay for her to stay home because she was not yet old enough to be out earning money. So her father, of course, stayed home and studied the Talmud as men did in those days. [Laughter]

ER: So who supported the family?

MZ: I don't know – I mean there certainly wasn't any welfare in those days or any social security or anything. He must have had money from when he did work, I suppose. Then I suppose the older children, all of whom lived at home, probably contributed from their earnings.

ER: I see.

MZ: But, anyway, she was the one who didn't get to go to high school.

ER: Her role was to take care of the family.

MZ: To take care of her mother and to keep house, and she did. Anyway, I would pop in, as I said, at whatever point she was at, and I would learn the part, but never could coordinate the whole thing. So after she died my youngest daughter was maybe at graduate school. I can't remember. But maybe she was living in Cambridge. Maybe she was working by then. Whatever. She knew I was making challah, and she said, "How is it coming, Mum?" And I said, "Well, the dough seems to be okay, and now I've got the raising right, and now I can tell." At the beginning, I was making these lumps of lead because I didn't know how long, what it had to look like when it was ready. I said, "I'm having the worst time." I've tried. I've taken pieces of clothesline and I can braid the clothesline. But I can't seem to do it with the dough. She said, "Oh mum, I know how to do it. I used to watch Nana. She did it so fast." Well this girl took after that ability, that kind of fast moving skill. She said, "When you do it next time you call me and I'll come and I'll show you how to braid it." That's how I learned to do the braiding. Rebecca came from Cambridge and showed me how to braid it.

ER: That's great.

MZ: So, all things put together, I finally produced nice challah.

ER: Great. Do you remember your mother making it when you were growing up also?

MZ: Yes. She just always made it. What I remember vividly is -- my sister's nine and a half years younger than I am, so I remember vividly when she was born. My brothers were not much younger than I, so we all remember the night she was born or the day she was born. Because my mother was thirty years old and she thought if you were so old when you had a child you probably wouldn't survive, she'd better have it at home so she'd be with her children to the last possible moment. It was on a Friday that Betty was born. So, of course, mother made a big regular Shabbat dinner. And then in case it was a boy – perish forbid, because she had promised me a sister. The house was full of all kinds of goodies, cakes and stuff so that if there had to be a bris, all the supplies would be available. However, thank goodness it was a girl.

ER: And she survived.

MZ: And she survived.

ER: So do you remember the birth or were the children kept at—

MZ: Oh, no. I was the only one allowed to go in and see the baby after she was cleaned up and, you know, wrapped up and stuff. My brothers were furious at me. But it was a girl, so it was clearly a present for me. [Laughter] So it was okay for me to be there.

ER: That's great. When we were talking about your mother I started to think, "Do you know how she eventually got to leave the house to marry?". I mean, do you know anything about that transition for her?

MZ: I don't know about that. She was young. She was only twenty when I was born. So I don't know. Well, maybe by that time some of her older sisters were married and they weren't helping. I really don't know. I know there was a time when my grandmother lived with us when we used to help – we would stay with her when my parents went out and she would tell us stories. She would tell us the stories of Shalom Aleichem. She mostly spoke in Yiddish. That was how we learned what Yiddish we know.

ER: So, she lived with you until you were what age?

MZ: Well, my sister is named after her. So she died when we were little kids.

ER: And then your mother became very active in the community.

MZ: Yes. The Jewish Memorial Hospital was being established, and having my mother and aunt who lived in the same house – sometimes my grandmother would be taken upstairs to my aunt's for a respite from my mother. They would take turns taking care of her. They both felt very strongly that while they were lucky they had each other to help, surely there were many, many people who had no way to take care of their parents.

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ER: Actually, I had worked in human services in the seventies, so I'm familiar with institutionalization. I worked primarily with adolescents, so I know what you're speaking about.

MZ: Well, you know how it rises up out of the sidewalk.

ER: Right.

MZ: I mean there isn't any place to expand it. You had as many rooms and beds as you had, and that was it. We didn't know what to do with these people. We began to look at the people we had in the hospital and then a couple of the nurses went out to Boston to look at the people who they were proposing to send back to us, and they said, "You know, these people don't need to be in the hospital. They're institutionalized, but their behavior is in no way threatening anyone. Some of them could be in a nursing home." So at that time the fluid money that we have – I use that meaning that we had some say about how to use it. We would write these grants to the National Institute of

Mental Health, and we would get – I remember one was seven million dollars, and we would write the kinds of programs that we would develop with the money if they granted it to us. In one of the projects we said, “What the heck.” We suggested that we would develop a house out in the community and demonstrate that you could indeed move people into the community, so we did. We rented a house in Jamaica Plain that had room for twelve people on Gotlin Street in Jamaica Plain. Of course, at that time, people weren’t afraid to have our clients because it never occurred to them what would really happen. So I went over and found this place, and we had the money for the rent. The people who owned it were two very nice Irishmen. They were as nice as could be and they were very sympathetic. I don’t remember what they did that made them understanding. We did some remodeling of the house, and the neighbors didn’t pay much attention to that. Then my friend, who was Director of Nursing, and I went into Filene’s basement. The wonderful thing about the federal money was that you got the cash. You could go buy what you wanted. Nowadays you have to get everything with purchase orders and everything. We took the money. We went into Jordan’s basement, and we bought printed sheets for the beds and pretty coverings. We picked out furniture and dishes and everything that you needed in the house, and we bought it. We fixed the house up. I will never forget the night – we didn’t put in the first twelve people all at once. I think we brought in four people to start. We had the beds all made with the pretty sheets and blankets and everything. This man was standing beside the bed and he was stroking the bed, and he said, “This is for me?” And it was – it still can bring tears to my eyes because it was so touching. Then, of course, we bought a four-slice toaster for the kitchen. The next morning the staff person told us that he took them in the kitchen and he put four pieces of bread in. He said to them, “How do you like your toast?” They didn’t know what he was talking about. They didn’t understand because they got toast on a plate at the hospital. The whole plate with cold, wet toast. They didn’t know that that wetness was butter, so when they were given this crispy toast and the butter was passed to them they didn’t know what to do with it. You talk about institutionalization and you

don't think of that kind of detail of the impact on the commonalities of daily life. It is incredible to see how long it takes people to be really humanized, you know, brought back to the world that we all know and think of as the world. Anyway, they've done wonderfully. After a few years those two nice Irishmen moved to Florida. They decided to sell the house. We were in a panic. By an act of God, I think, it turned out that there had been a young man who lived in that house for a couple of years, and he had severe diabetes and he died. His parents who lived in the Midwest and he, like so many, many of our clients, especially at Mass Mental, had been a college student. For a very high percentage of people, the first psychotic break occurs in the late teens. So he was one of those kids. I think he was at BU or some place around Boston. He had a psychotic episode, and went to Mass. Mental and so forth. Anyway, his parents called Dr. Shore, and they said that their son had died, and the happiest days since he had become ill were the two and a half years that he spent in that house, and they would like to do something for the house. Did we need something? I was in his office, and Miles said, "Just a minute." He said, "Well could you give us some money so we could make a down payment on the house and buy it to make sure that we keep it?", and they gave us $25,000, which you know at that time was a sizable gift. So we made a down payment. Then, later on someone I knew had some other way we could get $22,000 – someone who worked in some state office. We got money so we could get it fixed up and repainted, so it's gone beautifully, and it's still in use.

ER: And you're still working in housing.

MZ: Yes. So then HUD came out finally with ways to do subsidized housing for low-income people with special needs, and boy, we had plenty of low-income people with special needs. So of course we applied on the very first round. That was probably around '75 or six, I think. So of course, we quickly wrote an application. What's the difference who you're writing for? Whether it's an NIMH or HUD, it's the same garbage that you write. I was pretty expert at it by this time, so we wrote the application. There

were seventy-five projects accepted throughout the United States and ours was one. Only fifty-four were completed. I'm really–

ER: Very knowledgeable about all this. It's great.

MZ: Pretty good. We've had ten projects accepted and funded, every one we've applied for because we completed the first one. That was our entrée to the second, you see. At the beginning, we would apply for one house at a time. That was what they did and that was what you thought. And then, I thought, "God, at this rate, I can't possibly live long enough to house enough people." So I asked them if you could possibly apply for more than one site. And they said, "Yes." So then we began a couple of them. We did three or four houses on one application. So you get thirty or forty people housed. Then we did a couple of apartments for people who could live by themselves with a staff person coming in occasionally to help them and see they were getting along all right. We did a parochial school on Market Street in Brighton. We have eighteen apartments there for eighteen people in their own apartment, and they're getting along wonderfully. The stuff with the neighbors really should be the subject of a book, I think. I don't know how you can really write it and not offend the whole world. But what happens is after you go through all this anguish and talking and doing all this stuff to satisfy people – we're just completing an apartment building on Mass. Avenue where there'll be fifteen apartments, and we have all kinds of problems, but it's built on filled land. When you start digging down to put in an elevator you find there's peat moss so you can't do it. I mean very complicated. But anyway, now that's a historic neighborhood. So it isn't offensive enough that you're bringing in people who are not popular in the neighborhood. But they want to be sure that you maintain the character of the building, but we are required by law to make it handicap accessible. We have to put a lift in because there's no way to make a ramp. So in order to camouflage the lift you have to do certain things. The windows, they insist, have to be designed in a certain way. You know, all of these things. I realize that I certainly have too much respect for the architecture of the

neighborhood to want to spoil it. On the other hand, there were some details on which certain people were insistent. We had the architect redesign this stuff and create the building as they wanted it. Then after it was done, they found some original pictures from I don't know when; stuff that no one else had been able to find that showed that, in fact, the way – I think it was the windows or the eaves or something – the way it was being done was in fact the original way and not what they thought, so they wanted us to go back. So you have to ease your way out of that. You just can't keep rebuilding buildings when you have a limited amount of money.

ER: Right. And this is your current project.

MZ: Yes. That will be finished, I pray, in four to six weeks.

ER: You're working three to four days a week.

MZ: I work just three days a week: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. That enables me to have long weekends. So anyway, when you apply to HUD you cannot do it as a state agency. You have to have an independent corporation.

ER: I see.

MZ: So we had to create an independent corporation. There's something at work I just wrote that the story of Vinfen was created. Mass. Mental's at the corner of Vining Street and Fenwood Road. It's on Fenwood Road, on the corner at the junction of Vining Street. Every week Miles and Sheldon Bycoff, who became the head of Vinfen, John Buderman, who went out to Wisconsin, and I would meet and talk about our problems and how we're going to address them and what we're going to do. The lawyer had told us you have to have a separate corporation to apply for this. "Oh, all right. Make us a corporation." And he said, "What are you going to call it?" We said, "Call it?" He said, "Oh we have to have a name, you know, to be on the record." So we sat there. We made all these dumb suggestions, you know, because none of us had thought about it at

all. And finally Sheldon looked out and he saw the two street signs. And he said, "How about Vinfen?" And we said, "What's that?" And he said, "Vining Street and Fenwood Road." So that was how it was created. And then the mental health programs – we needed to handle certain other program funds. So the only way to do that was yet another corporation. So after we got Vinfen created – it has to be separate – so it moved up the street to Brigham Circle. And, now of course, it has this huge beautiful building on Cambridge Street in Cambridge.

ER: Great. I keep thinking of the expression "tikun olam", which is, I think, a Hebrew expression about giving back to the community. We talked about how your mother did that, and how she, in a lot of ways, had a somewhat sheltered life the early part of her life because of her role as being caretaker at home. Yet as an adult, and as a young adult really, became very active. How you have continued with that and made a career of giving back and really helping the community and people around you is very striking in wonderful ways. Then you also talked a little bit about your daughter in London, about how she deals with issues of sexism, etcetera. Can you talk a little bit more about what you've done, how you see that passed on with your daughters about some of the work they're doing? We touched a little bit about your granddaughter in Costa Rica. But if you want to start with some of your daughters and then your grandchildren–

MZ: Well, actually, you know my sister's at Children's Hospital and works tremendously hard with all the difficult cases and complexities of family relationships. My oldest daughter is in charge of Family Support Services at Boston Children's Services, which is certainly put in the category of working hard to help with peoples' problems. The granddaughter in Costa Rica is her child. Her other daughter is in New Orleans. She's deeply interested in natural stuff. She's lived in the rainforest studying birds and stuff. But now she's intrigued with the education of little kids. What was the name of the school that she founded? Good heavens. This is a maddening thing to happen.

ER: She's in New Orleans in college.

MZ: Well, no, she's not in college anymore. She's in a program of this education system. What happened was she was at a nature camp teaching little kids about birds and bees and stuff, and there were some kids from one of these schools.

ER: Montessori?

MZ: A Montessori. Thank you.

ER: You're welcome.

MZ: So, Tess was intrigued at the difference between those children and the others she had taught. She began to find out about the Montessori system, and she spent some time working in a Montessori school in downtown Boston, and she liked it very much. They have some kind of an advanced teaching, training program. Since her fiancé, boyfriend is in New Orleans at graduate school, and they thought they'd like to be together. So she got into the training program there instead of here in Boston, so that she could get the same credit but do it there at school instead of Boston. So that's where she is. So there again is a repetition of the wish to help serve others. My brothers have always been involved. One of my brothers is president of the Boston chapter of the Technion in Israel. The kind of education he had was that he was interested in continuing. My brother Ted's been active at Beth Israel and Hebrew Home. My father's mother used to go to contribute. I remember when we were little kids she always had a Chanukah party for all her grandchildren. We would line up before we ate our dinner according to age, and everyone got two dollars. There was a box that she held. One dollar went into the box for her to take to what became the Jewish moshe z'kainim, the Home for Aged. So one dollar went into that box so you would know that you aren't entitled to everything you get. You must share it with the people. So a whole line of kids with two dollars and only one that you get to keep. So you're—

ER: That message started really early.

MZ: Um-hmm.

ER: That's great. Do you have anything else you want to add to this?

MZ: Oh good heavens, you must be weary of listening.

ER: No. I love listening to you. No, really, it's great.

MZ: No. I do want to give you those—

ER: Oh okay. Well, thank you very much and now we'll go through some of your things and we'll see.

[END OF INTERVIEW]