Semah Unterman Transcript

Ann Buffum: I'm going to start over. This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum meeting with Semah Unterman to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is August 12, 2005, and we are at Semah's home in Belmont, Vermont. Semah, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

Semah Unterman: Yes.

AB: Okay. Well, Semah, let's start out talking about your grandparents. Can you tell us about when they came to the United States and where they came from, and perhaps why they decided to come here?

SU: Yeah, I have a lot. As a matter of fact, I have my grandfather's book in there and his picture too. My mother's family first: They came from a little village near Kyiv in Ukraine in the early 1900s, and then my father came from Romania, which is now Moldavia, from a little village near Chi?in?u [alt. Kishinev]. They didn't know each other in Europe. They came pretty close together, [in the] early 1900s, and Mother's family – both really, but Mother's family consisted of my grandfather and grandmother – she never made it here; she died early. My grandfather came here and was a tobacco farmer for a while. He had been kind of a rabbi abroad, and eventually, he wrote a number of books in Hebrew or in Yiddish. I have two of them that have been translated into English. One is called "The Days of Our Years," and that's very autobiographical, and it's all about his children and his wife and what they did. When he came, he was a tobacco farmer for a while. When he got on in years, he pretty much slowed down. He died in 1933. I know because it was my 13th birthday. He lived with us for a while. He was a very well-educated man, very dignified. He did observe, not rigidly, but for instance, he would not go to the

synagogue on the High Holidays in our locale because people had to buy their seats, and he was furious, particularly for Yom Kippur. So he did his praying at home. So we didn't get involved particularly; we fasted more or less, and we had all the wonderful foods. My mother's sister, one child – no, two children away from her was a wonderful cook, and we all went to her house for all the holiday food. My daughter calls herself a [inaudible] Jew because she loved all the food.

Sandy Gartner: [laughter]

SU: They were a wonderful family. One of my mother's brothers became the head of – well, a civil engineer, all self-educated, in New York City and head of sanitation in New York City. Another brother was a traveling salesman, and his wife could never bear children. She had been trampled by the – I'm having trouble with words – by the Cossacks, and really was quite a serious thing. The others had some children. Manny, the third son, was an insurance salesman. The women mainly were housekeepers, except for my mother's older sister, Miriam. She was a very interesting character. She was married three times. She was a revolutionary in Russia. Her first husband was a revolutionary, and he went kaput as they say in French, and she came here –

SG: [inaudible] what happened? [inaudible]

SU: [laughter] No, no. I think he was sent to prison and never seen again.

SG: Oh, really?

SU: Then she came here, and she married – I don't know the name of the second husband. But they had a child Rebecca, who lived until age six and died – some disease. Then she married George, who we called "(Grischa?);" that was the Russian name. Sweet, sweet man that worked in the garment district in New York. They had very little money. (Grischa?) would take cauliflower sandwiches to work, I can't forget it, because their income was so limited. He lived for quite a while. And that was Aunt

Miriam. The other brother married Aunt (Tekla?). She was the aristocrat of the Jews because she came from a Jewish German family, and the rest were [from] Eastern Europe, and she flaunted that. She was a real pain in the neck. [laughter] But anyway, then there was Aunt (Seidel?). She was married to the salesman, and she was alright.

AB: All in the family.

SU: All in the family. Aunt Sophie, the fabulous cook, was married to – am I going too fast?

AB: No.

SG: No, I just want to make sure because it's not showing up right here. I just want to make sure it's okay. Can we stop for a minute?

AB: Can we stop, just a second?

SG: I just want to check, just want to make sure.

SU: Sure.

[Recording paused.]

SU: – went to NYU [New York University], supported himself, had ten cents for milk and bread. He graduated in 1910; I know that. Aunt Francis never married until she was well into her fifties, and then she married an officer in the army, who was a real hard person. [laughter] She always insisted to us that she was the youngest of the family because she had these two other brothers. I think, maybe until she died, we all thought she was the youngest. She used to travel. She made a lot of cosmetics. Anyway, that was Aunt Francis. She ended up in California. Now, Uncle Hymie was different from his siblings. My father was sweet and reserved and did everything properly. Uncle Hymie was a real get-me-going person. When he got here and couldn't get a job – that was always a big

problem – he decided he wanted to be a cowboy. So he got himself to the West and was a cowboy for a while, but for some reason, he felt he wasn't being very well accepted. [laughter] You could understand why. Although he was very jovial, he didn't know anything about horses. So he came East again. At the beginning of the Depression, when everything was bad, my father had done well as a dentist, and then the Depression came, and he had invested in things that were not good. But Uncle Hymie, by that time, had three daughters, and my father had three daughters of comparable ages to my older sister, Rebecca, and me, and my younger sister, Jean. But my dad was able to get some money together for Uncle Hymie to buy a farm. There were a few other farmers, Jewish farmers – Jewish people that weren't farmers – from New York, that made up a little community in this town of East Schodack, which is outside of Albany.

SG: What's it called? How do you spell it?

SU: East Schodack, S-C-H-O-D-A-C-K. They were basically dairy farmers. Best sour cream I've ever had in my life, which is a long one, was the one Mr. Sternberg made from his milk. It was so nice and thick. I remember that. I remembered the shochet [kosher butcher] who cut chickens – he had chickens. We went over, and we saw him cutting their necks. I said to my mother, "I'm not coming back here again." [laughter]

AB: And what was that word again?

SU: Shochet. I don't know how to spell it. A rabbi –

AB: Oh, a ritual butcher.

SU: Butcher, yeah, yeah.

SG: [inaudible]

SU: What?

SG: [inaudible] I had a great uncle in Russia, and he was the ritual butcher. [inaudible]

SU: Yeah.

AB: I think I can spell that.

SU: Well, I can't really.

AB: That's okay.

SU: In my family, we were three girls. The first one was Rebecca, and she was four years older than I. A fabulous woman. I have something here to show you about her. She was an excellent student, loved science, loved by everybody all her life. She went to Brooklyn College, as I did later, and did enough undergraduate work to be admitted to a medical school. But she wanted to go to Yale. And that was in – she was born in 1916, and – well, late '20s, it must have been. Yes. At that time, Yale and some of the other colleges had quotas for Jews and quotas for women. So she has both to bear, and they took her. Her record was so great. So there were four women in the class and one Jewish woman. I don't know if there were any Jewish men, but I doubt it. Well, Rebecca became a very successful psychiatrist, highly respected, and President of the American Psychoanalytic Association. I have, which I will share with you – I'd like it back – one of her many articles that she wrote. This is Rebecca. She wrote many articles for the psychoanalytic journal. [Editor's Note: Ms. Unterman is likely referring to the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.] But you wouldn't know any of this. We had to prod her to get her to tell us these things, her achievements. She was so modest and so wonderful with people that – anyway, I miss her a lot. She died two months before my husband.

SG: Oh my goodness.

SU: Then they had me. My early years weren't – I'll give you a little of that, and then I'll go to my younger sister. I was a normal child. I did well in school. I skipped a grade. In those days, if you were a little bit ahead of anything, rather than try and meet your needs, they skipped you. I went to a four-room schoolhouse in Brooklyn, New York, way out in Brooklyn there.

AB: Do you remember what part of Brooklyn?

SU: Yes, Manhattan Beach.

AB: Okay.

SU: At the end of Manhattan Beach. Two grades on a level, first and second, third and fourth. It had a coal stove. At recess – I can see it – we had this big tree, where we all went to climb and so forth. When I reached third or fourth grade, I think they had built a new, big school closer to my home.

AB: So this would have been probably in the late ’20s, just before the Depression, right?

SU: Yes, yes.

AB: Because you were born in 1920.

SU: 1920, yeah. I went to this other school. Then my father lost a lot of money but property too. We had a nice home that he had built in Manhattan Beach. He also had invested in property near Prospect Park – you may know some of these places – a brownstone house. He couldn't handle both. So he rented the one in Manhattan Beach, and we moved into the one in Prospect Park, which was a flat that went through the whole floor there. The Knights of Columbus were right in back of us, and they had a bowling alley. I remember those bowling balls. Our bedroom was in the back. I had to share a bedroom with my younger sister, and Rebecca had her own bedroom. We

stayed there until my first year in high school. Then he was able to, I think, sell the house. My first year in high school was 1937. Yes. We went back to Manhattan Beach in 1938, after my first year, and lived in that area, which is very, very different. It was around Prospect Park, and we went to a place called – I went to a school called Manual Training, but it wasn't only manual training; it had all kinds of curricula there.

AB: Did you belong to a synagogue in that area at all?

SU: No, no, not there. I went to Ethical Culture Sunday School. My parents – come back a little – were part of the synagogue in Manhattan Beach, but they were not active. They would go on High Holidays sometimes. Rebecca went to Sunday school, and she was confirmed.

AB: That was a Reform synagogue?

SU: Oh, yes. Then, when we were around Prospect Park, the extent of our – you can't call it religion – was the Ethical Culture school.

SG: Is that the one in New York City?

SU: No, this is the one in Brooklyn.

AB: It is right near Prospect Park.

SU: Yes.

AB: It's on Prospect Park Southwest.

SU: Yes, yes. I don't know where I'm at. [laughter]

AB: You're talking about moving back to Manhattan Beach.

SU: Yes, we moved back to Manhattan Beach, but it was a two-story building. So they put in a kitchen on the second story and rented the downstairs, so it was not as lavish as what – not that it was ever lavish, but we lived there. I went to Abraham Lincoln High School, which was a wonderful school then. I walked there great distances. This is my sophomore year. There were very many students who were interesting to have as friends. I think I may have mentioned it there. I'm in touch with some of them still. One of them died last year. That's what's happening to a lot of friends. We called her "Tubby;" she was sort of round, and she never minded. She has a wonderful sense of humor. Even when I found out from her husband that she had died, he referred to her as "Tubby." But I went to Lincoln and had wonderful teachers, and I did very well. I remember two teachers, husband and wife. Mrs. (Finegold?) was my French teacher, and I was the worst student in her class. I could not learn foreign languages. I tried three different ones. But I had her husband for geometry, and I did perfectly well. [laughter] What happened, though, at Lincoln, was that I met this group of young people that were very concerned about the rise of fascism. You get involved, and one organization called the American Student Union developed nationally. I don't know how it grew from wherever it was; a lot of it [was] in New York. As a friend, you want to – your friends are doing this. So I became interested, to the extent that right through college – in college, I was the chairman of the High School Executive Board of the American Student Union, and it was an anti-fascist group. I think I may have told you this; the interesting thing that happened was that the ship the [S.S.] Bremen was coming into port in New York. [Editor's Note: The SS Bremen was a German luxury liner flying the Swastika.] The port was being picketed. They didn't want the Bremen to land there. So we were in school, juniors, and we decided, about ten of us – I don't even know it was that many – that we wanted to demonstrate, too. So we walked out of class – worst thing you can do in high school. The principal called us in when we came back in, and he said – and I remember his name and everything about him, Gabriel Mason – "I would give my right arm for peace. But what you children did," or students, "was the worst thing. You're

not allowed to leave the building when …" So we happened to all be in the honor society; it was called the Arista. He said, "What I'm going to do so that you learn a lesson, I'm removing all of you from the Arista, and you will not be able to return until you say you are sorry." None of us said we were sorry, so we graduated the next year without being in the Arista, and I never regretted it. [laughter]

AB: Well, I was in Arista, and I got a little pin. That's all I can remember about it, so I think it's okay. [laughter]

SU: So am I going on too much?

SG: No, no.

AB: This is very nice. Keep going.

SU: Go on?

SG: Just tell us when you want to take a break.

SU: Okay. Yeah, alright. I'm okay so far. So now, I'll go back to my sister Rebecca. Oh, I gave you that. Then it was me. I was six years older – I am six years older than my younger sister, who was very indulged. She hadn't been very well as a baby, but my father really indulged her. I had a lot of responsibility for her.

SG: What's her name again?

SU: Rebecca.

SG: No, this one.

AB: The younger one.

SU: Jean.

SG: Jean.

AB: Jean, okay.

SU: Yes. So that's our family. Maybe you want to ask something now?

AB: Well, you started just now to talk about how you started to become active, like in the American Student Union. What did your family think about this budding activism? Yes, tell us about that.

SU: Okay. My family was quite supportive about everything. But Aunt Miriam was thrilled. Oh, she thought it was so wonderful that I was active in this. Mother was not a very independent person. She had a real feeling for life, but when we talked about voting, she said, "Dad votes Democrat. If he votes Democrat, I vote Democrat." But she changed, and the family thinks I had a very big impact on her. She became quite independent and would read the literature and know why she was voting Democratic. Neither of them really objected to my activity. They had a problem with my husband. [laughter] I'll tell you a little story about that. I met Mickey – you know Mickey, yes? I met Mickey at a student meeting. He was eight years older than I, and he was out of college already, and his sister was with me in high school. She said, "Semah, want to come to my house. My brother's conducting a meeting?" I said, "Sure." [laughter] So I walk in, and I see this handsome man. I said to myself, "Oh, my God." I'm not quite – yeah, I'm past sixteen. That was a very deep crush. All summer, I pouted because he paid no attention to me. I'd see him for meetings and on occasion. Then one day in September – I have a diary now [inaudible] since he died – I remember meeting him on the steps to the headquarters on Brighton Beach Avenue. He was going up, and I was going down. I was just another person. He said, "Semah, would you like to go and have a soda with me?" I said, "Sure." [laughter] And everybody says that's when it began. So, we – I don't know what word to use – courted one another for – we had other "friends" in quotes, but we were a team until we married in 1940. Yes, we married in 1940. The only

thing my father and Mickey's father were a little upset about, and neither of them were really religious [was] we insisted on having a Justice of the Peace. It was a judge in New York. They said, "At least, can't you have a rabbi just do it or something?" We said no. We were very adamant, and they accepted it. They had a little trouble accepting Mickey. You didn't know him too well. Ask Alan about him. [laughter] He loved life, loved people, and he was a nonconformist. He came to my eighteenth birthday party at my parents' house with his shirt out. That was before it was a style. My mother was pretty much horrified. My mother was a fastidious housekeeper, and he would sit on the bed or somewhere, and you're not supposed to sit there, and the newspapers were on the floor, and your mother-in-law's come, and she would say, "You're wearing your dungarees?" Jeans, dungarees. But they finally accepted him because they knew how much I loved him. Their other two sons-in-law were very successful financially. One was a psychiatrist also, my sister's husband, and the other was in the advertising business. I think they were worried that I was going to starve, marrying this poor man. They didn't know that he didn't have a job when we got married. He had been working for WPA [Work Projects Administration], and he dug sewers for them. He was a college graduate. And he helped build parks. They had what they called youth clubs. They had youth clubs in their centers, and he would go down to the centers and work with the young people. He finally got a job as – where did his first job come? He was doing carpentry for my cousin. Then, he got a job at his father's perfume factory. There's a little nice story about that. Irving was his oldest brother, and Irving was making perfumes and shaving cream and that kind of stuff. And the war broke out. And the government needed tons of shaving cream, toothpaste, and condoms. So he and his partner started a condom factory.

SG: This is your father?

SU: No, my brother-in-law.

SG: Your brother-in-law?

SU: Yes, that's Mickey's brother. And you had to make – Mickey explained you could never turn the machines off because they would stick together. You had to keep the machines going twenty-four hours a day. So they made a lot of money during the war.

AB: That's a very wild story.

SU: [laughter] You want to know a little about his father too because he was another wild man.

AB: This is Mickey's father?

SU: Mickey's father. I'll tell you about his mother. She was the greatest mother-in-law a person could have. We virtually lived with her for nineteen years. We lived in a bungalow in Brighton Beach, but it was a little house, and she had an apartment in the back with her own kitchen. She was so marvelous. The children adored her. She never interfered, even if she disagreed. The only time – somebody was saying something about Spock, and she said to me, "You know that man you bring up your children about?" [laughter] Wonderful. I've written a short story about her because I was in a short story group in Brookline. Her husband was completely different. He came over. It was a matchmaker [who] planned the match. Mom was only seventeen; she met this man. No, they put them together. He spoke no English. She spoke no Yiddish. She had a mother who was a character who worked in the circus.

AB: In the circus?

SU: She had three husbands, too.

SG: This was Mickey's grandma?

SU: Grandma (Sarah?), yes. So Annie had quite an early part of a life. She went to live with a Catholic family for a while – very proper family. They didn't in any way make a Catholic out of her, but she was never religious, except on Yom Kippur. There was a Jewish synagogue across the street. We wanted to respect them, and Mom was fine. But when they were ready to break the fast, they'd send the kids for Chinese food. [laughter] But Papa had a pushcart on Orchard Street in New York.

SG: This is your grandfather?

SU: No, my husband's father.

SG: Your husband's father.

SU: My husband. Michael. Mike. Have you ever been to the Jewish Tenement Museum on Orchard Street?

SG: I have not.

SU: You should go. I've gone. I went with Mickey. It's fabulous. They've preserved the building and the apartments perfectly. Hard to believe that people could have lived there. Mike was two stores away. It's now a Chinese restaurant. And he had a pushcart. But he sold the things. He went to American Express – people didn't pick up their stuff, so they were able to buy their stuff cheap. Once he came home with a trunk full of powder, and he called his son Irving, who was helping him. He says, "Irving, I don't know what this powder is. Will you come over?" So Irving says, "Hold it, pop, call the police." It was cocaine or something. He was written up in the Daily News because of this. But he was a sweet guy. But that was one of the worst marriages one can conceive of. They hardly talked to one another. And I don't know how they conceived four children, but they did. It was just a very difficult marriage for both of them. It was a shidduch [arranged match]. You know what a shidduch is?

AB: Yes, an arranged marriage.

SU: Yeah, her mother said, and the other man's – she went to eat at their house, at the prospective husband. They had a bowl of food in the middle and no silverware or anything, and they would take the food out and eat it with their fingers. She was horrified. But she lived until she was ninety-six. We're not quite sure of her age, but we think we figured it out. And dearly beloved. So, where are we?

SG: Well, how about talking about the war years and what you and Milton were doing during the war?

SU: Okay, okay. Sandy was conceived in the spring of 1941. We were married in '40. We were living in Brighton Beach in his aunt's apartment, a twenty-five dollar a month rent apartment because he wasn't working and I was in school. I was a junior. I'd wanted to quit to see if I could get a job and help, and he said, "No. If you do that, we're not getting married." He was so right. Anyway, what happened is a cousin of his introduced them to a job at nightclubs in New York. Women came around and took your picture, and there was someone down in the darkroom, who developed it right away, and then you pay a dollar, and you got your picture. Mickey was the one that developed the pictures. We always used to say, "And he also developed the girls who were taking the pictures." [laughter] He teased us, so we teased him. Then in 19 – after we were married, we were still out of the war. Poland was invaded in – I know this – in September 1940. Because we were bombed – no. In '39.

AB: '39 was Poland.

SU: Yes. The boss from his jobs in New York – I think they were all gangsters. [laughter] There's a story about that. But anyway, they opened a business in Baltimore, doing the same thing. So Mickey's cousin, [who] was a sweet guy, said, "Well, you can go down there." I was already pregnant. I got pregnant in January of '41. So he went

down there. Then when I graduated from college in June of '41, I went down to join him. We stayed there until ‘45.

SG: In Baltimore?

SU: Baltimore, yes. He worked in the nightclub at night and then worked building houses for the aircraft workers, a lot of them coming from the South. When they got their first checks, they tore them up and went to the boss and said, “I want money, not this paper.” So they had to be – you can know the level. But he and our dearest friend, a very, very close friend, worked in the factory. He took a whole carload of people to work; it was out of town, and gas was very limited. They organized a union in that shop, a very big one, part of the United Auto Workers. She supplied them a lot, and they had to have a certain number of names to get permission to do a vote. He was very active in the union, and it was a hard struggle because a lot of the people had never even heard of unions or heard only in a derogatory way would make very nasty cracks about us being a Jew. But they won, and he made friends with them. Then he stayed there until the end of the war, and I became pregnant with Ronnie in '46, and then we went back to New York to Brighton Beach.

AB: So, during the war years in Baltimore, you were really focusing on being a mother.

SU: Well, not only. Yes, I was a mother; I had to be. Sandy was in the hospital for six months, my Sandy. Very, very sick. She was born in '41. I won't go into the details, but an epidemic of dysentery broke out, and babies were dying. So Mickey came to me one day, [and] says, "You're going home." They used to keep you ten days, even if it was a normal birth.

"That's ridiculous." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, the babies have dysentery, and Sandy looks fine." Anyway, we took her home, and she broke out with dysentery. She was on the verge of death when she was four months [old]. They said, "You can come and see

her," because we could only see her on Sundays, and it was a Wednesday. I can see it. "We don't think that the baby will live because we think it's her pancreas, and we cannot operate. She's very weak." She had pneumonia. Anyway, she did live – oh, you haven't seen her. This is a joke. They had to give her a blood transfusion every day. Oh, you didn't hear the sulfa part of this. So we come to the hospital, and there's a resident, I think, on the floor, and he says, "Look, I don't like to interfere, but I've been doing some research, and there's a new medicine called sulfa," which we had never heard of, "and they're using it on the soldiers for infections and babies." So I called my sister, who was a doctor, and her husband – they had been in touch with the doctors – said, "What should we do?" She said, "Go for it." So they gave her the sulfa. That started her on the road to recovery that [inaudible] three months at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

AB: This is really the beginning of antibiotics, right?

SU: Yes. But you asked me if –?

AB: Had they tried penicillin?

SU: I don't think there was any penicillin.

AB: Not yet.

SU: Penicillin came after sulfa. I'm quite sure. Yes, I think so. But you asked me if I just was – for the three months before she went to Johns Hopkins when she wasn't home, I got a job as a salesgirl in a photoshop in Baltimore because we could use the money, and I just had to – I ate a lot and gained a lot of weight. [laughter] Some people starve in those situations. I was twenty-one years old, and it was not easy. But it all came out well. He was active in the union and in the anti-war struggle, and I, too. And Sundays, we had meetings at our house. We always had spaghetti. You couldn't get canned tomatoes or any of that stuff, so we bought baskets of tomatoes, and we'd make the tomato sauce. We had a lot of friends, mainly from the union and the anti-fascist

movement. So I was busy with her too, because when she first came home, the doctor says, "You got to watch her very carefully, so she doesn't catch a cold." Her immune system wasn't that good. But it built up. And then we were there for the whole war and maintained a lot of – oh, I know what I wanted to tell you. At the beginning of the war, men, because there weren't any women in it – men with children, young children, got a 4-F, which is a deferment. He got a 4-A and had to take it to his company that he's working. They wrote a letter, and they said, “We can't do without him.” He was an inspector at the aircraft factory. They said, “We need him.” So they gave him a 4-F again, or something that he didn't have to serve. Really, he had conflicts about it. We had lots of friends in the Army, lots that we knew. We had friends that fought in the Spanish Civil War. I didn't tell you about all that. That was just before we were married; that’s ’38 and ’39, and a number of them died there. He was just feeling, but he went on, and he never served in the Army.

AB: Okay, I was going to ask you to clarify because you said you were active in the anti-war movement, but you meant anti-fascist, right?

SU: Yes, but went through a period when they first invaded Poland, the Nazis; we were still not clear on what our position was going to be, but we became very anti-fascist. Yes, yes.

AB: Yes, because [inaudible]. Okay.

SU: I'm very anti-war now. [laughter]

AB: Yes, I understand. Okay. So my questions don't necessarily fit your narrative yet, so give me a second here while I think about – well, let’s take a five-minute break or a two-minute break.

SG: Yes, I’m going to use the bathroom.

[Recording paused.]

SU: Okay. Sandy was our first, and she was born in 1941 in Baltimore, Maryland. I think I told you quite a bit about her. Just in her later years, she married. She also married young, had three sons, all married, all with children. She herself has quite a career. She was an alderman in the City of Milwaukee for many years, an elected official. And then she – [laughter] this is very funny. She's very tiny. She became commissioner or head of the Sanitation Department in Milwaukee for about two or three years. Her final job there was as a Director of Public Affairs for the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee campus. She had that job for quite a while. She loves to work with people, and she did quite well. She, somewhere along the line, divorced David, her husband. The children, two of them, were at college or out of college, and the other one was at home. When she decided after thirty-nine years or something to come back East, she thought she was going to retire, but she didn't. [laughter] She did retire for a short time. She came back to a hard time because her father died soon after that, so she was with me. I had a second knee replaced, so she stayed around for me. But currently, she's now Director of Public Affairs for Dartmouth College, and living in [Hanover] and enjoying it very much. She has friends there. She knew people. She had lived in Hanover for a while before. That's essentially it, and she's still working.

SG: So she lives in Norwich now?

SU: No, I didn't mean Norwich. I meant Hanover. Hanover. I always do that. She divorced. Well, I don't think you want to go into that; that's her private life. It's enough to go into mine. Then, Ronnie, he's the younger one. He was born in '46. I think you have that. He graduated from Haverford College, very interested in science. But he wanted to find his way. It was during the Vietnam War so he became a builder. He and a friend were building houses for a while, and then he said, "I don't think I want to work with a hammer and nails all my life." So he went back to school, and he went to Columbia and

got his Ph.D. in microbiology, focusing on toxic wastes using bioremediation to – and that's essentially what he's doing now.

AB: That's very interesting.

SG: Where's he living?

SU: He's living across the road, but he commutes because he has this very good job in Rhode Island that pays well and is very interesting. So I don't know. They miss each other during the week. He has a wonderful wife. I call her my second daughter with her permission, her mother's permission. She is like another daughter; she is just –

AB: And what's her name?

SU: Dottie. Dottie's very, very supportive. She came from a Catholic family [with] eleven children. Her father was very devout. We never met him. He had died before she and Ronnie met. Her mother is still Catholic, devout. She's eighty-nine, a wonderful woman, [and] has accepted Ronnie right away and the whole family. We have a wonderful relationship. She counts her beads, and she does it quietly. She's very upset about what happened with the Catholic Church and the pedophiles. So those are my kids. My kids. I can't get over that word. They have one son. He's twenty-five, and he's graduated from Vassar [College] in theater; that's his major, and [he is] looking to break into theater.

AB: Does your daughter Sandy have children?

SU: Three. Three sons. And now, what, five grandchildren? Yeah, five grandchildren.

AB: So that's the five great-grandchildren.

SU: That's right. Yeah.

SG: Very exciting. Congratulations.

SU: Yes, thank you. So that's that. You wanted to get back to me and my career. I started teaching with a substitute license in New York City in 19 – I've got to get these dates right. I think around 1950 or '51. I don't know if you women remember the McCarthy Era?

SG: Sure.

AB: Yes, we do.

SU: Okay. There was a committee in New York State very similar to the McCarthy committee; it was called the Rapp-Coudert Committee, named for two legislators [Herbert A. Rapp and Frederic René Coudert Jr.]. Mickey was called into the Dies Committee [alternate name for the House Committee on Un-American Activities, chaired by Martin Dies Jr.], which was national because of his work in the union in Baltimore. The purpose of that committee was to see if they could get people to talk. They would mention names, "Did you know this one? Do you know this one and this one?" Well, what they had decided with the lawyers that were helping them, they were told, and it's true, that all you'd have to do is give your name and maybe your address? I can't remember; I know it was the name. But don't answer any other questions; take the Fifth Amendment because if you answer one question, that opens the door to them, and they can ask you anything. If you refuse to answer, you are violating the law, and you can go to prison. That happened to The Hollywood Ten; it's very similar. [Editor's Note: The Hollywood Ten refers to ten screenwriters and directors who refused to answer questions and were cited for contempt of Congress and blacklisted.] Well, anyway, at that time, I was in the public school in Brooklyn. The Rapp-Coudert Committee, which was very similar, was going after teachers. Well, the Dies Committee went after teachers too, but particularly teachers. Four of my professors from Brooklyn College all lost their jobs the year I graduated because they refused to cooperate. They were wonderful teachers. I

remember them so vividly. And they came to me. [laughter] I came home from school once, and Ronnie says, "Mom, two insurance men were here." I said, "Uh-oh." [laughter] It was two FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] guys.

SG: Oh, my goodness.

SU: They tried to do the same thing to me. "Did you know this one? Did you know that one?" – because of my activities at college, I refused to answer, and I had a substitute license then because I had just gone back to work, and I lost my license. That's when I got into private education. I went to a school called The Brandeis School. It was an interesting kind of yeshiva because it was very Reform. In the mornings, the children learned English subjects, and in the afternoon – it wasn't integrated – they got their Hebrew. So I was the English – all the English language, English stuff in the morning for fifth and sixth grade, I think. I don't remember. I stayed there [for] three or four years. Then there was an opening at another school in Brooklyn, called the Woodward School. It was downtown. You would know it. Not far from the Eastern Parkway area. I don't know – yes, it was the Woodward School. I taught there until 1967 – I think it was – when an opening occurred at the Walden, a school in New York City, which is also a private school. It was an opening for the director of the Lower School, which were grades kindergarten, or maybe pre-kindergarten, through the seventh grade. I was interviewed for the job, and I got that one. It was very interesting. I enjoyed it very much. It's a hard job being an administrator, but I think I've made a contribution.

SG: Which is it? Walldorf?

SU: Walden.

SG: Galden.

SU: No, "Walden," with a W, dear.

AB: W-A-L –

SU: D-E-N.

SG: Oh, I thought –

AB: Not the "Waldorf," which is a particular philosophy.

SU: I know the Waldorf philosophy, yes. It was a very progressive school, very much like where Mickey was at the Elisabeth Irwin High School. Then we had bought this place – the cabin next door – in 1957. We were only here for vacations, which we had a lot of because of our profession, and then all the holidays, every summer. We didn't mind going back to work, but oh, summer went away so fast. So in 1970, that summer, Mickey and I said, "Look, the kids are out of college, and they're on their own." Well, it turned out not to be exactly so, but "they're on their own. And let's just tell our schools we're coming up and take a chance." We came up in '71, June of '71. We had to work. We had very little. We had, I think, twenty thousand dollars to our name, which we had saved. My mother had left me a little money included in that. We had the cabin. It wasn't like it is now. You saw it, but it's quite different, Sandy. He put on two rooms, and he built a garage. We're looking for jobs. And I'm scouring the newspapers. I had to have a job. And I had this resume with me as a principal. I called one school – this is quite a story. Okay, it'll come to me in a minute. You know the Rockefeller places? What's the town?

SG: Woodstock.

SU: Woodstock. Thank you, dear. Then there was another place that called me, or I called them. And I no sooner did – I got a secretary, and she said, "We're not interviewing any women for this job."

SG: This was in –?

SU: ’71, yes. I probably could have made an issue of it, but I don't regret it. [laughter] So I said, "Screw you." I got a call from Springfield Elementary School, very close to that time, or I called them. The difference – this time, she said, "Wait a minute, I'll let you speak to the superintendent," and (Syd?) got on the phone. He said, "Well, I have your resume, but I haven't looked at it. Give me a chance to look at it. If it looks like something we're interested in, I'll call you back." Well, to make a long story short, they had been having trouble with the administration there. They had a twenty-member community committee to help advise the school board on hiring, and I got the job. That was 1971. It was wonderful. Until some other people – we got another superintendent at one point; she turned out to be terrible. [laughter] I stayed there until 1982, and I retired. I would have stayed a little longer, I think, but Mickey had retired because he was older, and we wanted to travel. And we did. We had some wonderful trips. So I got active in the Principals Association and Delta Kappa Gamma, which was a teachers' – you've probably heard of it – teachers' organization. I wasn't very happy with that because it was restricted to women only. Some of us raised that question, and they said, "Well, this is how it's been." But I resigned from that because I was leaving the state for a while, and I didn't know for how long. So I'm not a member of that anymore.

AB: Well, when you first started teaching and then as you entered your career and you would work both at private schools and public schools, eventually, were there certain philosophical trends that you embraced early on and were able to carry through all along?

SU: Yes, even here in Vermont, in the public schools, I was very cautious because I feel an administrator has to really take his or her time to get to know the teachers and where they're coming from. When I got there, there were things that I didn't like at all that were philosophical. But I didn't make a fuss about it. I watched the teachers and worked. I went to a conference in Washington with somebody. We got involved in something called the Right to Read program. The superintendent said, "The state has gotten

money, and they can use it for one school, and we thought maybe this school would like to have those funds," and we got them. And from that grew other things. I got a staff by being careful to be very responsive. I was a very active principal. I spent lots of time in classrooms, and they wanted me. It took a little time for them to be comfortable. Every time I visited them, I had a conference after. And then, if I wanted to write something up in their file, I let them see it before. I still have some very good friends from there. And people tell me that I had quite an influence on the school system. It was very positive. After I retired, though, I got very active in this community. That's another part of my life. I was elected a select board member right after, running against somebody who was local, and he was very upset. [laughter] I served just one term because I got annoyed with some of the issues, like dogs that are not leashed and garbage. Anyway, I only ran for one term, but then I was on the Planning Commission and a Justice of the Peace for two different periods. Then I became president of our local library. I think I said it there. I had an education that was very special. The two men I worked with on the select board were born in this town. I learned a lot about the culture, the rural culture, and how to work with people like that. They're not around anymore. One of them died when I was in office, too. But that was my participation, pretty much. Mickey also got very involved in the community. He was on the local high school board for thirteen years. That's Ludlow; our children go to Ludlow. He was president of the fire department, which was very funny because [laughter] he knew nothing about fires, but he was president. He was president of the museum that was being built at the time. He had a very good relationship with the people. He became very good friends of four local people. He was the kind of person that was non-judgmental about people. So some of his good friends [were] Clyde [inaudible], farmer; Lloyd Pratt, the carpenter; (Buzzano?) – I forgot his first name – a wonderful mechanic, fixed cars; and the man that ran the dump; he was called (Ding Bully?). (Bully?) was his last name. But it was a kind of relationship; they'd come over and have lunch with us, or he'd see people looking around, and it was time for his cocktail hour or hours, and he'd invite them in. [laughter] We met quite a few people that

way. So we really, I've always felt a very strong connection to the community. The last thing I did was last week; they have every few years what they call "the Old-Timers' Night." The museum runs it. I got a call from the chairman of the museum, and she said, "Semah, would you participate?" I said, "Laurie, I'm not an old-timer. I came in, you know, in the '50s." She said, "That's okay. We have three others who lived here all their lives. But we also would like a perspective from somebody who moved into the community from a very different one." So I participated. I made it funny in parts, and they liked it, I think. I got a nice note from [inaudible], but that's a formality. So I think that's pretty much my life here.

SG: Can I go back just for a second? You were talking about your philosophy about education. I'm just kind of curious what you meant by that and how you [inaudible] people.

SU: Yeah, well, I was always very much a student of Dewey, John Dewey. [laughter] I didn't know him.

SG: No, I understand.

SU: I believed a lot of the things that he did. He said that everybody learns in different ways, whether you're bright or not, and good education has to understand that and work to fulfill that thing. That was some of the basic philosophy. Also, that all children could not – well, he didn't put it quite so strongly, but most children can learn. If there's the right – they can learn, if they're in the right atmosphere. I felt very strongly about, and still do, the need for small classes, for integrated classes, but – a big but – keep them small and help, getting help, which we did. We had children from the Vermont Achievement Association coming to our school, and we had teachers that just worked beautifully with them. And very handicapped children. There was a lot in the literature that I shared with the teachers all the time, things that were going on that were – when I came, it was [a] very big school, six hundred children, which sort of [laughter] wowed me, but I had a

wonderful secretary; she was so helpful. They had six classes in each grade. So, for instance –

AB: That's big for Vermont.

SU: Yeah, well, it's much smaller now because the population has decreased. So the sixth grade had six classes, and when the classes were set up before I got the job, they were set up by ability. So class six was all the supposedly smart kids. Class one was ones that were – and I thought to myself – but I didn't –

AB: You didn't change it [inaudible]

SU: Not right away. No, we changed the second year. But worked up to it. I have very close relationships with the retired – some are retired, but even some of the teachers that are still there. The superintendent and the elementary supervisor were very supportive of me. So that's about it.

AB: Let's stop right now.

[END OF TRACK ONE]

AB: Hello, this is Ann Buffum, testing this microphone. Is it working? [Recording paused.] A life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is September 2, 2005, and we are at Semah's home in Belmont, Vermont. Semah, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

SU: Yes, you do.

AB: Okay, good. Semah, when we were speaking the last time, you were telling us about your experience as a school principal in Springfield, Vermont. When we had ended, you had talked some about how the school in Springfield, how when you had become principal, you made changes, but not right away. You listened, you paid

attention, and you were careful about respecting what the people were doing to start with, and then during the second year, you were able to implement some of the changes that you felt were important. So if you'd like to pick up at that point and talk some more about that particular job that you were doing? Or, if you want to, you can go on and tell us about the educational system today, maybe speaking about your thoughts about it as you see it in Belmont or the state of Vermont? Please just take this question wherever you'd like and continue talking about education.

SU: Well, I'll go back a little bit to the early experience. I was always a very ardent student of the John Dewey school of education. And I recognize a lot of things, but one major thing is that people learn in different ways. That means children, of course. Schools have to be able to meet the needs of those children. It's not a question of one brighter than the other, but it even can be in different styles. Although John Dewey lived almost one hundred years ago, we're still struggling with some of his ideology. So when I came to Springfield, I think I mentioned that I had six hundred children. I was principal of a school of six hundred children. I didn't have an assistant principal, but I had a very wonderful secretary. But it wasn't the same. The first year I was there, it was all set up. I was very distressed, but I had to control it. There were six classes on each grade level – that was grades four, five, and six – and they were assigned based on what the school people felt was where they fit in the learning spectrum. So you'd have six classes, and class one would be all the brightest children, and class six, all the slowest children, and everything in between, the theory there being that this is the best way to teach. I had never – well, not never. I was a strong advocate of the fact that you should have more interaction with different levels of learning and different kinds of children – and this is a very big if – you adequately support that kind of thinking, and I think this applies to today very much, by giving the support that's needed. That means one big thing, and I think this is something that Vermont should be proud of, is that our class size has never been very big. That I think is very good. Well, anyway, I just left it and worked with the teachers and got to know them and some of their reasoning. And one thing that struck

me was one of the teachers had a number one class and a number six class. Number one class was all the bright children, and the number six class was all the slow children. I used to spend a lot of time in classrooms, and then we'd meet with teachers. I remember her telling me, “You won't think this is possible, but I get much greater pleasure out of the slower children, so to speak, than the bright lights because all they worry about when we start to do something and study is, ‘will you grade this paper? Will I have to?’ – worried about the grades.” She turned out to be an excellent teacher. By the end of that year, I had developed a good rapport with the superintendent. There was an elementary supervisor because we had a number of lower-grade schools and the reading coordinator for the whole elementary division. With lots of discussions and discussions with the teachers, I suggested that we look at this differently. So, for the first time – well, I should add, that year I came in '71, there was a program called the Right to Read. It was a national program; you're probably familiar with it. Vermont was chosen as one state to participate in the experimental part of it. So the superintendent and the elementary supervisor came to me, after we were there a little while, and says, "There's going to be a national conference in Washington. Would you join us and go and hear about it?" Well, I was very impressed with it because it was really facing that issue of children learning at different rates and in different ways. We came back and reported to the staff and said that the state of Vermont chose our school – it had nothing to do with me because I was new to the school – to be the school to test the program. And we did. We worked with the reading specialists, myself, and teachers. What we did was not eliminate the basal readers because they’re needed by some children, but develop a whole program of individualized reading for the children. Every class – this is known today, and they do it – had an extensive library of books. We also had skill work for children, but if they had already acquired that skill, they didn't have to sit and do it over again; they went to another level. We had a lot of levels. It worked well. The teachers, on the whole, were very responsive. We gave them a lot of help and support. Now, that was my experience in Springfield generally. Working in that school, I think I told you the

last time, was probably the best experience of my career. Wonderful superintendent. Unfortunately, he didn't stay for the whole period. A woman came in, and I was so excited that they hired a woman. She turned out to be impossible. [laughter] Generalizations about these things. So I think that's my experience in Springfield. I left Springfield feeling very good. I was there eleven years. I developed quite a rapport with the teachers. I was very much accepted, and I know that from a lot of sources. I still see some of them. I tell everybody, and I say, “It's not because you're Vermonters, but I do feel this is the best experience of my life as an educator.” I learned a lot too. I learned to understand where some of the teachers were coming from. I learned that when I was a selectperson too. That was a fabulous experience. After I retired, I was elected to the Select Board. I worked with two gentlemen, both born in Belmont, Mount Holly [the town that includes Belmont and several other small communities]. I tell you, I learned a lot, and they knew it, and learned to respect – I always did respect, to a degree, but concretely, other cultures – which, the culture was very different from mine, coming from the city. But I learned that too at the school. So that was my last official position as an educator. After I retired, the state did ask me to join a group of other teachers. They were evaluating schools based on – we'd have to spend three or four days at a school. I was on the team and went to different schools, and there were criteria that the schools had to meet. It’s something like they do for the high schools, but it was a little different. And that was very, very rewarding for me. I have maintained a tremendous interest in education. I'm active in the Retired Teachers Association. I was on the State Board and active in my local group. I continue to be very concerned about education. I am very distressed. I think that we're on the completely wrong track with No Child Left Behind. It's a wonderful slogan. But it absolutely is distorting every basic principle that I believe in and a lot of others believe in. First of all, it's not funded. But basically, you're going to get punished – the school is, the teachers are – if your children aren't up to these tests. I also have always had quite an aversion to evaluating, assessing children's – or anybody's actually – total success on standardized tests. I think standardized tests have

tremendous limitations. Maybe they can be used partially, but for most years, it's used to categorize children, and I just feel that's very unhealthy. So I read a lot about education, and I'm a letter writer. One of the things I wrote, and I sent them to The Herald, was that this act came through. I don't know if there was an educator on the board, that committee, but maybe there was. But they don't know anything about education and the educational process. You can talk about curriculum, but there are all kinds of ways to achieve a curriculum, and there are all kinds of ways to assess children's growth. I think Vermont was on the right track – I don't know where it is now –when they set up this whole portfolio system. I know it has difficulties, and the classes must be small, and it's very demanding on children. But I know because I have a daughter-in-law very involved in education, a grandson still very involved in elementary education, and no matter what –Dottie particularly, my daughter-in-law. She was a consultant in the Springfield district a year before this on reading and literacy. Those children achieved a lot that may not always show on a standardized test. And the –

AB: Stanford Achievement Test?

SU: Yes, they, but I'm thinking of that high school test for children going into college.

SG: SATs.

SU: SATs, yes.

SG: Scholastic Aptitude Test.

SU: Yes. They also have their limitations. I mean, some people are very good at test-taking, and some people aren't. What it does is detract from the development of – which starts in the earliest ages, of questioning, critical thinking, [and] problem-solving. There was a good article in The Herald recently. There have been a number of them making that point again, that what the teacher – one teacher came to me one year, when we had to do standardized tests, and I couldn't fight it all the way, and I didn't. But she said to

me, "Semah, I'm going to be honest with you, I'm going to stop my curriculum, the things we're doing in the fifth grade for two months, and we're going to focus on test-taking, using samples of the tests," which were always given to us. She was upset. I was upset. But the district said, "We've got to, you know, show that these kids are achieving." I don't think that measures achievement. That's basically my feeling about education. I just hit the ceiling every time I see what's happening in the schools. They're going to be testing pre-kindergarten kids and kindergarten kids with a standardized test. I mean, it's ludicrous. Preschool should give children an opportunity to learn to relate to one another, associate with children, think, and play. I mean, what are we – I don't know what we're doing to our kids.

AB: So do you think this movement now in the state of Vermont, to bring the preschools under the umbrella of the public school system, will turn out to be a negative or a positive thing for the preschoolers in Vermont?

SU: As much as I know, I think it's positive because I'm a strong advocate of public education. You need good teachers, and I know the problem of the existing private preschools and how it affects them. That's another issue. But I think, basically, it should be part of the public school system. I know that school situations for a long time had – well, they weren't systems, mainly private schools – had children coming in at three and four, in a preschool environment, and parents paid for it. I think what would happen here is that if we let it be part-private and part-public, which is what they're talking about, it's going to be the same old story that families with money are going to be able to send their kids to these private schools, some of which – I don't know, maybe it's changed. I had some questions about the staffing and the requirements of the providers there. The other children [whose] parents that don't have it will go to the public schools. Again, you're stigmatizing children, and you're not giving them an opportunity to see the other children. So I'm all for public schools providing preschool.

SG: Okay.

SG: Providing preschools [inaudible]

SU: Oh yes, absolutely.

AB: Yes, it's moving in that direction.

SU: And don't tell me it's money because then I get really mad. Just as an aside, there was a man in this town that always fought our school budgets when we would go to the meetings. One day, he got up and said, "What's this business of you can't control costs? What you should do is fire all the experienced teachers and the silly music and art, and we could save a lot of taxes." H said, " I ran a factory." Well, I got up, and I said, "A school is not a factory." [laughter] I almost lost my cool. But that's just the kind of thing – when I hear there's no money – well, I won't go into politics now, but it's outrageous.

SG: [inaudible]

SU: I won't go into politics now. It's just what's happening in New Orleans now. [laughter] That was a long answer.

AB: That's very interesting.

SG: [inaudible]

SU: I can get [long]winded. [laughter]

AB: Well, actually, our next question was going to push you a little towards politics because we were going to ask you what other trends or issues or changes in the world are you concerned about at this point in time? How do you yourself respond to these issues? What do you think other people can be doing?

SU: Well, again, you need a little background. I lived through the end of the Depression, not quite, and the Second World War, and everything that followed, and was very actively involved in – I think I told you that I got involved in high school. I still feel very concerned about politics. I think that elections and politics are the crux of everything because the control that our state and federal legislators and even local ones have on making policy is very, very critical. I think we're seeing that happening when – I mentioned No Child Left Behind. What I'm seeing is – I tend to be quite a Pollyanna about seeing things – I've been accused of that, of always seeing the good side. I have never been so politically depressed as I am now. I lived through a lot. I told you [about] the Second World War. I lived through the McCarthy era, which was terrible. People I knew – my husband was called before one of the committees in Washington. Nothing compares to what we're going through now. I'm not discussing the terrible Hurricane [Katrina] at the moment, but it's beyond me how we're going to get out of this whole business. Not really beyond me – the kind of radical things that have to be done. I'm a strong believer, and I wasn't until pretty recently that our troops have got to get out of Iraq. I remember Senator [George] Aiken saying about Vietnam – it became the most famous thing--

SG: [inaudible]

SU: Yes, saying, “Bring our boys. We won the war," or something.

SG: We won the war; let's go home.

SU: "Let's go home." I think it's just terrible. I think we were lied to. I'm a very strong Democrat; you can tell. [laughter] I've been active in the Democratic Party here and very actively have supported some of our very wonderful legislators. People say, “Well, it's the stupid Americans,” and so forth. I said, “That's an oversimplification.” Remember, when Hitler was in power, one of the things that was said was, “Tell a lie long enough, and you win the people over.” That's what scares me. I think that's one side of the coin. Being a Pollyanna, I think it can change. I think what's happening now is the

Republicans, and our president, and his gang, are just destroying all their credibility. I'm hoping that it'll help the Democrats to get some of the seats in Congress, particularly. I'm a little annoyed with the Democrats. I think that they should be more forthcoming. It may be a minority opinion; maybe they are going to be. I had a lot of hope in Howard Dean and his grassroots movement. Maybe they're busy cooking it up or something. But there was a marvelous article in last Sunday's Times. Helen Thomas used to be the lady asking all – she had an article in the Times that was just excellent. What she was saying [was] you can't make excuses for them. You got to be assertive. She's citing specific things. I equivocate on that because I know politically, you have to compromise. But the question is the degree. I don't see us compromising with this administration. As I say, they just lead us astray. So that's where I stand. What can we do? Well, I'm a letter writer because I have physically somewhat limitations. I think Howard Dean's on the right track and should be getting support. Grassroots, that's the thing. That's how he raised all that money. There was talk soon after the election, and maybe it's happening, and I'm not aware of it, of sending people, training people to go into particularly the red states, and meet with – don't wait for an election campaign, start right away, and start going to their meetings, and developing relationships and seeing what the basic issues are. I think it has value. During the Roosevelt era, the way we won the things we won was a tremendous – was a big labor movement. But you go back and think of all the legislation that came through and had to be fought for. Even the civil rights legislation under [President Lyndon B.] Johnson was a result of pressure. I'm a big believer in pressure. [laughter]

SG: What does that look like?

AB: Well, I was thinking about how unfortunately – I was wondering if you see a connection between the problems in education and the public's choices that they're making politically?

SU: Yes, I think everything has an influence. I had mentioned if we were focusing more on young people, up through the college level, analyze and thinking and not just accepting verbatim what the textbook says or what the professor even says, I think it would have eventually an impact. I tell you, very frankly, a personal thing is [that] my mother was extremely apolitical. She was a mother, a housewife. When I became involved in politics, she'd go to my father and say, "Well, how should I vote?" [laughter] When I became involved in politics, she was very interested, and she became very independent, and she started to read and to think. That's very grassroots. [laughter] But I really all my life have felt that way. Both Mickey and I got very involved here in this community. It wasn't easy. Well, it seemed easy to us. The fact that I got elected as selectperson running against somebody who was born here and had been a selectperson for years, and I'm from New York, and I'm sure there was more talk about being Jewish and maybe being radical, I don't know. But I got elected and elected again. And Mickey became president of the fire department, president of the museum. But you know how we did it? By getting to know the local people. We'd have them to dinner. We'd go to their houses. Some of the people I knew from New York would say, "Well, how can you spend so much time with those people? They're not interesting." I said, "Yes, they are if you want to look at it differently. Maybe they can't discuss Shakespeare and Shelley and so forth, but there's another dimension to it."

AB: Are there any other stories about your life that we haven't asked about that come to mind? Something unique and interesting that you'd like to record, tell us about?

SU: There's so much in my life.

AB: Of course.

SU: Yes. I told you about my marriage – it was very non-conforming – that we refused to have a religious ceremony. Didn't I tell you that last time? I think so; yes, we went to a Justice of the Peace.

AB: Oh, yes.

SU: Yes. I had a very interesting marriage. It's hard for me to even talk about it. We did everything together. We had our political activities. We're always pretty much close to one another. He was very active in the trade union movement right during the war. He helped organize a big aircraft factory with some other people.

SG: Was that down in the Baltimore area?

SU: Yes, I told you about that. We had a very difficult beginning in making a family. I'll be very brief with that. My daughter was born in October 1941. Perfect birth, weighed six pounds, and my delivery was fine. In those days, women had to stay in the hospital for ten days; it was ridiculous. At three or four days, you could put your legs off the bed. Anyway, about the fourth day, Mickey came to me and said, "Semah, we're going home. We're taking the baby home with you." I said, "What?" "And you have to go in an ambulance." I said, "No, there's nothing wrong with me, but you're supposed to be here for ten days. Why do I have to go home?" An epidemic of dysentery broke out in the hospital. Did I tell you this story?

AB: You did.

SU: I did?

AB: Yes.

SG: Did she?

AB: You can tell it again.

SU: I'll be very brief, then. The doctor said, "A lot of babies are dying. We want to get her out of here. She's okay." Well, she wasn't okay. We found that out later. After six months of hospitalization and everything else, she came through. She's going to be

sixty-four next month. [laughter] Full of life. I said to the doctors – I don't know if I told you they had to give her a transfusion every day because she was an infant. I said to them, when things calmed down, "Did you put some piss and vinegar in that blood?" [laughter]

SG: That's cute.

SU: That was a very big – I was only twenty-one years old, living in Baltimore, [with] no family. We survived it.

AB: A hard beginning.

SU: It was a very hard beginning, but it made up for it because we had another one that was perfectly normal, physically and in every other way. Highlights?

AB: Did you [inaudible] travel?

SU: Oh, yes, I was just going to say. We started to travel – you see, we were both teachers, and we never made much money. We ended up in private schools because I lost my job in the public school. The private school that Mickey was with – marvelous school – didn't have much money, so they didn't pay tremendous salaries. So we somehow accumulated – [telephone rings] I can let it ring and get the answering machine.

SG: Let's stop.

AB: Let's stop for a second.

[Recording paused.]

SU: Okay?

AB: Yes.

SU: We had many, many wonderful trips. We were able to do it because we mainly went to bed and breakfast places. I'll just enumerate some of them. We spent six weeks, one year, traveling in Europe. We went to Luxembourg, rented a car. We went to France [and Spain; we touched on Germany and Italy. It was wonderful. We went up for six weeks to Greece, Egypt, and Israel on a trip again. I have diaries about them. Then we went to Russia when it was the Soviet Union. That was shortly before the change in government. That was very interesting too. We had a very nice guide. In Russia, you had to have a guide. I don't know now, but you had to then. He was wonderful. He had learned English, but he wanted to learn about all the idioms. He had a notebook, and he would be writing it down. We went to Cuba one year before there was a ban on travel. That was 1978, I think. We found every trip interesting because everything was different. We met different kinds of people. In Russia, when we were in Georgia, there, the children all spoke English. This little girl came up to us and said, "Would you like to come home, see my house?" We said, "Oh?" and she said, "I play the piano, and my grandmother is there. I'd like to show you our library with all our books." So we went. She was the sweetest little thing. We were very much alike in personality. We tended to look at the positive side of things, not the negative, not that we were ignoring the problems wherever we went. But we just learned so much. There were other trips sort of that we – oh, one of the best was a trip cross-country by car. We left in October and went on the northern route all the way to California. [Recording paused.] We left here by car in October, and we were a little nervous about that. The only time we met a little snow was in South Dakota. But we went on a northern route to Washington and then down all the coast around the southern part of the country. I was on sabbatical that year. The superintendent says, “Well, Semah, you want to do something related?” We talked about it, and I visited twenty-five schools and then wrote a paper on it. They were very enlightening. The most enlightening was a very negative experience in New Mexico or Arizona? I can't remember. Anyway, it was in a Native American community. The children, some of them, had to commute fifty miles to get to school. Their principal was a

retired Army officer. I thought I'd die because the kids had their native language too. But absolutely no respect for their culture. He didn't know how I felt. But it was so, so negative for me to do that. But I saw also a lot of good things. Unfortunately, we also had two very sad events while we were away. This young lady that just walked in is the niece of my oldest friend from elementary school. She's dead now. Eleanor. She was very ill for about twenty years, a very unique kind of leukemia. But while we were – she came here every summer to stay with us, visit when she was off from work. When we got to Texas, on the way, we were going to visit my cousin, got a phone call that she died. I knew she was very sick. In addition, we were – you know the De Cormiers, Sandy?

SG: [inaudible]

SU: Well, we're very good friends of theirs. We had arranged – Bob was on tour with his group with Louise. We had arranged to meet in New Orleans over Thanksgiving and have a nice [inaudible] day. We got to California, where his son was, and I called Chris and I said, "Well, where are we meeting?" Chris had a girlfriend. He said, "Well, things have changed, Semah. I've been diagnosed with testicular cancer. They think it's under control, and I'm doing certain things." He died the week later.

SG: What year was that?

SU: 1977.

AB: This was one of the (De Cormiers'?) children?

SU: Son, yes. He was twenty-something. Twenty-two or twenty-three. That really put a damper on – what happened, Bob and Lou were coming to New Orleans to do a concert, and we had arranged to meet them at the airport. That was a scene I'll never forget. Bob and Mickey were very close, the two of them because Bob taught at the school too, and they became very good friends. We generally were. So that's a highlight, but that's not a

highlight; it's an experience that has had a lasting impact. But most of the things have been just great. We think we have two wonderful offspring. We never had big problems with them. We were very naive. He's a very successful gentleman now. I don't know.

AB: Maybe we've finished our interview.

SU: Yes. Maybe.

AB: That's right. Your husband – what school was that again that he worked at?

SU: At New York?

AB: Yes.

SU: The Elisabeth Irwin High School, part of the Little Red Schoolhouse.

AB: Okay, thank you.

SU: Yes, yes.

AB: Okay?

SU: Very good.

AB: Yes. [laughter]

[END OF INTERVIEW]