

Bessie Berman Transcript

BETSY ABRAMS: Today is December 10, 1996, and I am Betsy Friedman Abrams.

BESSIE BERMAN: Betsy Friedman, what?

BA: Abrams. Betsy Friedman Abrams.

BB: Oh, [inaudible].

BA: You heard me. I'm interviewing Bessie Berman in her home under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archive Temple Israel Oral History Project in Boston, Massachusetts. Bessie was the secretary to the rabbis at Temple Israel for about fifty-five years.

BB: Fifty.

BA: Fifty years? Oh, I thought –

BB: [inaudible] fifty years.

BA: For at least fifty years. And she's going to tell us how she got the job to start out.

BB: I had a friend who was working for Rabbi Levi as a secretary, and she was leaving, so she said to me, "Why don't you apply for the job, Bessie?" I said, "I think I will." Well, another Friday night – I used to go walking with her. That went by; I hadn't spoken to him at all. Third time, still hadn't. "Did you go?" I said, "No." She says, "You know, he's coming back from his vacation." This was the summertime. "He's coming back from his vacation. Let me know now." "So, I'll apply. I will apply to Rabbi Gittelsohn." So, I call Rabbi Gittelsohn on a Saturday night, I think about nine o'clock at night. I told him that I was interested in the position that was open. He said to me, "I was just about to make a

decision, but I will wait for you.” So, Sunday morning, took the streetcar, went to [inaudible] Street where he lived, walked in the front of the – opened the door, sat myself down in the most comfortable chair I could find. I was a kid – never had a job. We began to talk. He questioned me about my parents just as you have written down here, with the sisters and where I went to school and all that sort of thing. Then, he finally told me what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to take dictation and do what he was telling me to do and everything else that the rabbi wanted. Then, he says, “As long as you questioned me, are there any questions that you wanted to say?” I said, “Yes.” I said, “I want to know: if you invite me to be your secretary, I want to know how much the – how much money? When will I have my first ...?” What do call it?

BA: Vacation?

BB: No, the first interest – the first interest. What do you call it? See? To get me more money. When will I get more money?

BA: Oh, my first pay increase?

BB: Increase. I said, “I want to know how fast you go with your dictation.” He says, “Well, just about as fast as I am doing now, and you know Rabbi Levi, he went very ...”. I said, “Oh, that’s too fast for me.” He said, “Then I’ll go a little slower.” And [inaudible] like that. I can’t remember exactly what other things I said. “Where will I work?” and “What are the hours?” and “When will get my vacation?” and “Will I be paid for my vacation?” and such questions that were my questions, not his. Well, he said, “Let me think about it, and I will let you know.” He thanked me for coming, closed the door, and that was that. In a few days – also a Saturday night. He knows I’m up. He called me, and he said, “I decided that I will ask you to come and work for me but on condition that I give you two weeks trial. If you’re willing to do that, you can come to work Monday morning.” I said, “Very well.” I went to work Monday morning, took dictation. Everything was going fine. I worked, went in the morning, went away at night, [and] was happy.

Nothing. Just very, very kind and very lovely. Two months went by, and I'm still working there. He didn't fire me, and I began to know what a rabbi was like. They were wonderful. If all rabbis were like him, the world would have beautiful, beautiful rabbis.

And this is while I'm sitting at the desk taking dictation. I said, "Rabbi, why did you invite me to be your secretary?" I remember he went back in the room – the chair – they were [inaudible] pushed back. He smiled, and he said, "I'll tell you why." He said, "What you did not know" – and that's the truth. "What you did not know was that I had interviewed fifteen girls and one boy, and that one boy was the brother of my dearest friend, and they never told me." He said, "And you were the only one who interviewed me." That's why I said, "If I was good for you, you were good for me, and we went that way." That was it.

That I'll never, never forget. See, isn't that interesting? I interviewed him.

BA: It's really interesting. So that's how you became –?

BB: That's how I became a secretary, and I worked and worked and worked and worked and worked and worked and worked and worked for years and years and years. I told you why I went away. And I thought I'd get – that's a good time to get out. Wouldn't that be? Oh, Rabbi Liebman felt so badly and I felt worse because I was crying. I hurt him. And the wife said, "Yes, you did; you hurt him." So, that was the story.

BA: Well, but you didn't stay away for very long, as it turned out.

BB: No, I was out at 3:15 on Friday; I was back to work Monday by 9:00 in the morning. [laughter] I wasn't afraid of anybody. But then, when the girls all followed me when I went – the girls would tell you, but there's nobody there anymore. Maybe they wouldn't remember, but they heard me screaming. I was absolutely screaming. My voice was – I was so angry with him. "How could you tell that to me? I didn't work for you? Now you spoiled it for yourself." You know, that's what I –

BA: In other words, there was the situation where the executive director wanted you to work for him as well as for the rabbi.

BB: Yes. That's right.

BA: And you really didn't have the time –

BB: Oh, no.

BA: – to do that.

BB: I didn't have the time, but [inaudible] have the ability and the strength. Then the rabbi said, "Bessie, you went over my head." This is what he said, "You have no right to work for anybody. Now, I will tell you [inaudible] the Sisterhood, the Brotherhood, the congregation, any activity in this temple – if anybody asks me if you can help, I will say, 'No.'" And that's the only thing I remember.

BA: We were very lucky.

BB: Oh, we had beautiful rabbis. Of course, the others may be beautiful too but I didn't know them. But the ones we had, I loved – every one. And another thing I wanted to tell you, not one of them – not one single one ever, ever said an unkind word to me, or even to Muriel. Muriel said when he was taking us out one time to dinner, he called for me and for her, and she said, "Bessie, you were right. The rabbi was" – in front of him – "he was wonderful."

BA: Which rabbi were you with at this point? Rabbi Gittelsohn?

BB: Yes, Rabbi Gittelsohn. And he says, "Yes." She said, "You told me that he never said an unkind word, and you're right." He was lovely to work for. So, she went to work for him for a little while. Then, the summer came, and I didn't work anymore. And then, one time, I was – how did that happen? Gee, I used to know – so bright and so alert and

what I wanted to remember. I was going to say something about that, too. Now, see, I know what I was going to say, and I'd [inaudible] like I told the man, "You spoke what I wanted to say." See, that saved me, but I can't do this. [laughter] He used to embarrass me.

BA: Well, tell me something about –

BB: But they still keep me on the board. Now, when I told her, "I'm on the nominating committee. Take me off." She went off. I said, "Take me off." She says, "All right. Put down Bessie Berman." She says, "Take another year." So I said, "Well, I'll see."

BA: Well, this is the club here where you're living.

BB: Yes.

BA: So, that you're working very hard –

BB: Yes, but I'll tell you –

BA: – in the community here, which is nice.

BB: Well, that's the way I [inaudible]

BA: You're taking advantage of it. You made the comment that you got to know rabbis, but before you came, you really didn't know rabbis.

BB: No, no, I didn't.

BA: So you said—

BB: I went to a cheder, but he's not a rabbi; that's the only one.

BA: Where's the cheder, in the North End?

BB: But I was too young, and then I was growing and growing and growing. I didn't. I used to go to service, but I didn't understand what it was. You know why? I went to see my mother upstairs. She was sitting in the synagogue. I wanted something. And that's how it started. Then when I worked for Rabbi Levi, he was so wonderful. I said, "There's no one like a man like him." He was so dear and so sweet and so bright and so loving. Darling. His son, Charles – I think I have the letter somewhere – wrote to me, and he wanted his children to – wanted me to write about him so the children will know about him. Well, I wrote a nice – talked about him but I didn't – but then, afterward, I got so tired writing that he never wrote to me again because I ended it off, "Thank you for so and so and so and so," and ended it off. I didn't want to. You get tired of this same thing over and over and over again.

BA: Oh, [inaudible]

BB: But I loved every minute that I worked there. I loved it. I loved it.

BA: And that was really the emphasis of your life?

BB: Yeah, that's right. I think the biggest thing in my life were those two citations. I got something in my life that I'll never forget. I love it. I love it.

BA: Well, the first one was what? In 1968 from the Board of Trustees.

BB: [inaudible] Yeah. And the congregation. But that congregation was – when Rabbi Liebman died, I didn't have a job. So, I was ready to walk out. They said, "No, you don't walk out. You work for the congregation." And I loved it. But the girls – see, before, I couldn't. I had no contacts. That's the four rabbis that I worked for and the congregation. That's why they put the congregation one year, and when they –

BA: That was [inaudible] –

BB: And when he died, they brought in Rabbi Gittelsohn, so I went to him. Rabbi Gittelsohn didn't know anything about me. I think it was through reputation, and they were all delighted. Even Rabbi Klausner, who did not know me at all and didn't want to know, couldn't get over it. He just loved it. Even called me when he was speaking at Symphony Hall. He called me to see how I was. The rabbi said, "What did he want?" [laughter] I said, "Nothing, he just wanted to say hello." [inaudible] that in the school office. That's where I was talking to the girl – one of the girls in the office. Why did they stop Sundays? That I don't even know. They stopped, and that's all. We worked every week but not Saturday and Sunday. I don't remember how it happened to stop. It just stopped, and I didn't work.

BA: I don't know. My instinct is that –

BB: [inaudible]

BA: – in many communities – many jobs that –

BB: That's what they did. They worked five days a week, that's all.

BA: That's right. That's right. They cut it down. I mean, we still don't really have – I mean, we have people who are working on Sunday morning because the religious school is there.

BB: Oh, yeah. Does Mr. Sawyer work there, too?

BA: He's usually there.

BB: He's a nice man, isn't he?

BA: But now the –

BB: How is he getting along?

BA: Okay. The senior staff – the clergy, the executive director, the religious school principal, and so forth – Wednesday is their day off. Unless there is a –

BB: Emergency.

BA: – necessity for a funeral. But that is basically their day off because now the rabbis are all teaching on Sunday and Monday night.

BB: Oh, are they? The rabbis themselves. Yeah. They're good teachers.

BA: Oh, yes.

BB: The best.

BA: Very good.

BB: Do you go to school? [laughter]

BA: Do I go to school? No. Although I go to some of the Continuing Ed [education] programs.

BB: No, I'm just joking. You know that. I'm just joking. [inaudible] get a new one. In my business, sound [inaudible]. [RECORDING PAUSED] I didn't know what you wanted.

BA: Now, you said that – was your family Orthodox?

BB: Yes, they were –

BA: And they were very –

BB: Yeah, but they were not too extreme. They were nice about it. Gentle.

BA: They belonged to one of the Orthodox –

BB: Respect everybody.

BA: They belonged to an Orthodox congregation.

BB: Oh, yes.

BA: Not to Temple Israel.

BB: Oh, no.

BA: Then when you started working at the temple, did they like your joining?

BB: They were gone.

BA: Oh, your parents had died by then?

BB: No, they were still there. No, they were still there when I was working, but nothing was ever mentioned.

BA: They didn't mind the fact that you were involved with a Reform congregation?

BB: No, not at all. No, they were very, very whatchamacallit –

BA: Now, did you learn secretarial work in high school?

BB: In high school. Not in grammar school.

BA: No, I meant in high school so that you could take dictation when you –

BB: Ya, but I was [inaudible] I didn't – when they used to give me work, I did it. I was very speedy and very accurate because I knew it. I don't remember. I honestly, truly mean that. I don't ever remember sending back, at least with Rabbi Gittelsohn's time –

maybe before I would get so much experience – ever sending back a letter that wasn't correct. I remember when my sister died – my sister Frances – I went away for a month. I wanted to leave. Rabbi Gittelsohn said, "No, you're not going to leave; you're going to stay." So he said, "Well." I said, "What are you going to do about somebody taking care of their work?" He said, "Everybody's going to help here." They didn't hire anybody. Everybody there was helping. I want to say something about that. See, little things [inaudible]. But I'll tell you because I know what it is. It's just interesting. What happened then? Isn't that funny? And it's interesting, too [inaudible].

BA: Well, when you think of it, you'll –

BB: Is it going?

BA: Yeah, it's all right, but don't worry. You'll do it.

BB: What did I say?

BA: You were talking about writing letters perfectly.

BB: Yes.

BA: I know for once that I have – going through Rabbi Gittelsohn's papers, I have seen many [inaudible] –

BB: Oh yes, when I came back, my sister Fanny had died, and then I – see, the same thing. No, I know what I want. I'll get it. What happened? After a month, she died. Rabbi performed the [inaudible], and I told him I'll be back to work on this and this day. I came back. See, the mind, it goes – this is my mind. That's what I'm afraid [inaudible] talk to people. Put it off. [RECORDING PAUSED] I went back to work. Mr. (Pincus?) said, "Bessie, you want to come down here a minute? I want to show you something." While I was gone – see, when I left, I worked until two, three o'clock in the morning.

Rabbi and Mrs. Liebman were in their office waiting for me to get through because it had to be done. I was working – worked hard. When you have to make different – for the publisher, you have to put in all the corrections, take it out, and there were some places there was no room; I had to do the whole sheet over. That's why it took me about three or four hours after work – more than that.

BA: When you were working on one of the books?

BB: Yes, to make the corrections. When I got back, he called me down. He said, "I just wanted to show you this letter from the publisher of the one" – they don't call it a publisher, but the one who reads the manuscript. He said – the man wrote – he said, "I have been a" – whatever it was.

BA: Editor, probably, or copywriter.

BB: Whatever it was. "For many, many years, but in all these years, I have never seen a" – what do you call it – "a manuscript with so few typographical errors."

BA: Oh, that's wonderful.

BB: Isn't that [inaudible]?

BA: That should have made you feel –

BB: Oh, I'll tell you. All of them – honest to goodness, it just didn't mean anything to me then. But Mr. (Pincus?) was impressed. He said, "Never, never did he ever find anybody –?"

BA: Did you type all of Rabbi Gittelsohn's books?

BB: Yes. No, not all. I did a lot of them. But my name is in them as an acknowledgment. No, what I was going to tell you –

BA: Didn't you also type sermons for the rabbis?

BB: Oh, yes, but don't you – maybe you were at a sermon, a Friday night service when I was sitting – the rabbi – I don't know why I happened to be on the pulpit with him, and I was talking to him but nobody knew what it was. Then the rabbi, after he made his speech, said, "Bessie was asking me why I didn't" – why he didn't let me type the manuscript. He said, "[inaudible] they talked about sex." And Everybody laughed.
[laughter]

BA: That must have been Rabbi Gittelsohn. [laughter]

BB: Ya, that's what it was. [inaudible] Oh, he was a darling. No, it was just my genes. It just was in me. I didn't know. One time, there was a problem at one of the schools where they had some problem, and we gave – the temple gave them the first floor where I worked for their schools until everything was fixed at the – a little further down. I don't remember the name of the place. I was typing. The door was open, and I was typing away, and then I stood up. This woman was looking – she was seeing how fast I was going. This is what she did. I didn't know she was there. When I got up and looked at her, [inaudible] she couldn't see out [inaudible]. That was my genes; that's all. Nobody told me. They just were there. You lose your intelligence anyway. Not that I was so intelligent, but you use what you have to have. If you have to do this, you do it.

BA: Did you ever consider going on to college?

BB: My family wanted me to. The only one that went to college and wasn't much of a college – you may not know that she was related to some of the Levines. She knew how to play the piano, so she became a kindergarten teacher. All my friends refused to go to college – neither did I. But the fact that – see, they were – that's how I stopped going to college. Oh, yes, they did. They wanted me to. They said, "Go to college. We'll pay for you." I said, "No, I don't want to go. My friends aren't going, so I'm not going."

BA: Your female friends?

BB: Female, good female.

BA: I mean, did most of the –

BB: I didn't know too many male friends then in those days. I was too young [inaudible]

BA: Well, that's true.

BB: Yeah, that's true. It would have been nice. Look it, I was eating, and I got this a little bit –

[END OF INTERVIEW]