

Yemema Seligson Transcript

Joan Rachlin: How old were you here, do you think?

Yemema Seligson: I don't know.

JR: Seven months, eight months?

YS: Who knows?

JR: Where were you living then?

YS: Brooklyn, New York. It's Brooklyn. It's in Brooklyn.

JR: Tell me about the coat. Was it something in the photographer's studio, or is that a relative's?

YS: Sure, it's a photographer. Sure. That's a photographer.

JR: It's a beautiful picture.

YS: Yeah. This one [inaudible] is high school. I couldn't afford to – I have just the negative.

JR: The proof.

YS: The proof. I didn't have any money. I was a senior in high school then, so it was 1931.

JR: Beautiful picture.

YS: I had long hair like I have now.

JR: What do you call this style, where --

YS: No style.

JR: I thought that was like – what are those girls?

YS: I just had wavy hair, long hair.

JR: There's a word for it.

YS: I didn't have any style. This was in high school too. You see? I told you my parents were divorced. I lived on Madison Street in [Brooklyn]. We always were on the roof. The roof is where we were. So you can see the roof, you see? Here, I had short hair. I must have cut it after that.

JR: This was a summer day.

YS: Guess so. This you wanted to copy, I know.

JR: Yes, this I would love to get a copy of.

YS: I have that in there. Okay.

JR: Can you just say a little bit about the childhood books that you've already given us that are at the temple? Can you tell me about reading those books in Hebrew, the books that you gave us?

YS: Yeah. I read all the classics in Hebrew, including Sherlock Holmes, Alice in Wonderland, and Three Men in a Boat, and all the classics in Hebrew when I was little because I didn't know a word of English until I was seven when I went to first grade. My father wouldn't let me go to kindergarten because he said it would spoil my Hebrew. [Recording paused.] – when she was first married, probably.

JR: What year do you think that was?

YS: It must have been 1914. No, no. Must be earlier. I was born in 1915. Yeah, I was born a year later. This is my mother.

JR: What does that mean? What does that mean, "That's me?"

YS: That's me [inaudible]. I don't know what it means. Maybe she was making fun. She had a very good sense of humor. They used to call her Dynamite. That was her nickname. That's my mother. I don't know. This is her writing. This is mine. My mother's writing.

JR: I love that. She did have a great sense of humor. Maybe she's talking about just looking stiff.

YS: Yeah. And this is me with [Eliezer] Ben-Yehuda. You know, Ben-Yehuda? He wrote the first Hebrew dictionary. That's me and my father. He got cut off.

JR: And how did you or your family know Ben-Yehuda?

YS: My father and he were very good friends. He was very good friends with [David] Ben-Gurion, too. When Ben-Gurion ran away from the Turkish sultan, I told you he slept on the kitchen floor in our house in Brooklyn. This is Ben-Yehuda.

JR: So this was in New York.

YS: Ben-Yehuda, New York. Father in the background. I don't know what year.

JR: Do you have any memories of Ben-Yehuda?

YS: No. No. This is my first job I had at Camp Felicia, Hudson Guild, Orange County, New York, 1930. These are the kids in my group.

JR: You were a camp counselor.

YS: Yeah.

JR: Do you have fond memories of that summer?

YS: Oh, wonderful. Now, let's see. Oh, this is my --

JR: This is amazing.

[Recording paused.]

YS: This is my mother in school in Pinsk, Russia. This is my mother and her best friend, Elizabeth (Pomeranz?). They were friends.

JR: Your mother is the woman in the middle in the front in the lighter colored --

YS: Yes. They wore uniforms, which they had to sew themselves. What did they call it? I don't remember the name of the school, like a lycée, half college. It was a junior high school. There's a name to it in Yiddish, and I can't remember.

JR: Lyceum, in French.

YS: No, there's another name. Pinsk. Frieda and Elizabeth Cooper. That was her best friend.

JR: So what year --? [Recording paused.] She died in what year, though?

YS: I have it written somewhere.

JR: But in the '90s or the '80s?

YS: What's that? '97? In the '80s.

JR: So, in the '80s. So this was definitely the late 1900s.

YS: This was when she was in New York. This is also her [inaudible] the extension department at Columbia University. She was studying English. 1914, New York. That was before she was married – my mother. She has the names of all the people in the class with her. There she is, Frieda [inaudible].

JR: She was studying.

YS: English. [laughter] Immigrants in those days didn't wait for bilingual education. She went to Columbia [laughter] This is my mother. You don't want this one. Here. And this is my parents, evidently, when I was a little girl – my mother and father and me. I must have been about -- in Brooklyn too. Brooklyn, New York.

JR: And that's 1915.

YS: About. '16 or '17. I must have been two already there, don't you think? With hard shoes? Two. Couldn't be '15. I was born in June '15. It can't be '15. Can it?

JR: No.

YS: I just changed [inaudible] cut off the edges, which were – it's my father and mother.

JR: What a fine portrait. That's beautiful.

YS: Nice portrait.

JR: Extremely beautiful. I love the bow. Someone took great care with that.

YS: Yeah, she did. Oh, mother was very handy. She used to make jackets for him. She could sew. She was a genius with her hands.

JR: And a great sense of humor. Do you remember her brushing your hair?

YS: Yeah, I used to holler. [laughter] I had red hair.

JR: Until what age?

YS: I had red hair when I was married. My son remembers me with red hair.

JR: High spirits. Red hair. Great combination.

YS: This is here on Tappan Street, my mother, me, my son, and Betsy when they were little.

JR: Three generations.

YS: Yeah. No, it's New Hampshire, '48.

JR: That's a wonderful picture.

YS: That's a nice picture. I found that!

JR: That's a very nice picture.

YS: It's a letter from my mother if you want to see it. She lived in Brooklyn. And I lived here.

JR: Can we read it?

YS: Sure. It's for you.

JR: Thank you.

YS: She dated it.

JR: It's a very nice letter. Did you two correspond often?

YS: Yeah. All the time. She wrote to my son wonderful letters when he was at college. Wonderful letters.

JR: Sounds like she was a good bubbe and a good mom.

YS: No, she was a very educated woman. She spoke six languages, which I can't.

JR: Well, you can speak three or four?

YS: Three. But she spoke six well. French and German she knew well, and Russian. I'm trying to remember the name of what the school was called.

JR: Gymnasium?

YS: I don't know. It's higher than a – yeah, maybe Gymnasium.

JR: That's beautiful.

YS: I think I gave you this one, didn't I?

JR: Yes, I have that. Right.

YS: It's a big one. You don't need that one. This one, I gave a Purim party when I lived here before Betsy was born, and I had a lot of kids.

JR: Oh, does that look like fun? All dressed up.

YS: Yeah, they are. This was David.

JR: So he was Mordecai? He's certainly not [inaudible].

YS: I don't know who he was. These were his friends. This is Clifford Adelman. He also went to Temple Israel. He was head of the youth group at Temple Israel. This was Aaron – what's his name? He was a teacher at Temple Israel for many years. You had

him. He taught at Boston Latin School with his daughter. Oh, sure. He was a graduate of Harvard, and he taught at Boston Latin School.

JR: We could ask Rabbi Mehlman. I'm sure he would –

YS: No, it would be long before Mehlman's time. When Rabbi Liebman was there, I was teaching with him. That was his daughter. This is the Shore girl, Gila Shore. She lives out going out towards the Cape. She teaches English. She knows Hebrew. [She] also spoke Hebrew. This is Nemzoff daughter, [inaudible] Nemzoff.

JR: Wow. Queen Esther.

YS: This was my house on Tappan Street.

JR: That looks like a lot of fun. [Recording paused.] How many Hebrew students did they have?

YS: Two. It's enough. Two too many. I had one last night.

JR: You've been teaching Hebrew since you were – what? – eleven, twelve, thirteen.

YS: Twelve, thirteen years old. [Recording paused.] [inaudible] because this is Nemzoff's daughter.

JR: I would love these.

YS: Aaron. What was his name? He was the head of [inaudible]. His daughter. This is Ruthie Nemzoff. She lives in Newtown now, I think. His mother was a social worker with my husband, and this is the (Goldsmith?) girl. This is David. (Clifford Adelman?). He was head of the junior division. He went to Temple Israel. This is the Shore girl, Frieda Shore's daughter. She was teaching. [Recording paused.] Same furniture. I don't change it.

JR: I'd love to.

YS: You want this one for the exhibit?

JR: I'd love them for the exhibit.

YS: Because people will come and say, "There's my kid."

JR: That would be terrific. That would be great fun. I think there are some amazing photographs in there.

YS: Now, if you want them. Now the other thing I have here – I told you, my mother was a genius. She took an old pair of pajamas of mine and made an outfit for my daughter's doll.

JR: Where did she get this silk? These were pajamas?

YS: That's my pajamas. [laughter]

JR: And did she do all of the detail work?

YS: No, they come.

JR: They're Chinese pajamas.

YS: No. Yeah, they're trimming things with that now too. Here are the pajamas.

JR: Your mom made these.

YS: Yeah.

JR: And all by hand?

YS: I guess. I guess she must have made it by hand. And I have a piece from the pajamas originally. I thought --

JR: This is beautiful.

YS: – if there's a hole, I'll fix it.

JR: No, this is beautiful.

YS: I was going to iron it. If you want it, it's my mother's handiwork.

JR: This would be beautiful.

YS: They were for my daughter's doll. Would you like it?

JR: They would love this.

YS: Okay.

JR: It would be very special.

YS: For the exhibit?

JR: Perfect.

YS: My mother made it.

JR: Perfect.

YS: No, they're not torn. I was going to iron it. I never got around to it. Oh, yeah.

There should be another one here. It's missing. They were my pajamas. My husband's first present to me when we were [inaudible] he bought me a pair of yellow silk pajamas, and I had them for years. Look. [laughter]

JR: Oh, that's so special. It reminds me of a wonderful book my children have called Something from Nothing, how you can keep –

YS: And this is the –

JR: That's the belt to the pajamas.

YS: Pajamas. [laughter]

JR: So, the gift your husband gave you ended up as beautiful hand-remade pajamas for your daughter's doll.

YS: Doll.

JR: Those are exquisite. Now, did your mom make a lot of your clothing?

YS: All of them when I was little. She sewed on appliqué ducks and chickens. When I got to [inaudible] grades, I hated them. I wanted clothes like everybody else. I didn't want these handmade things.

JR: Did you say anything to her or [inaudible]? Hopefully, these days, people do it too much.

YS: But they do it now. So, you want these? I wondered whether you wanted this for the exhibit.

JR: I'd love those for the exhibit. They're special.

YS: Because I found them. I was going to iron them, and I should have, but I didn't. Do you want me to iron it?

JR: No.

YS: I only iron about once a week.

JR: Those are perfect. No, don't iron it.

YS: Look at, she put darts in here. Look at that. By hand.

JR: That's love.

YS: That's love for my daughter.

JR: [inaudible] to take that kind of care.

YS: It was in the linens. It was in my tablecloths. I went through every tablecloth. You don't know what I found there. I found there all kinds of little spoons that I can give as gifts and certain – do you need serving things?

JR: No, thank you. But thank you.

YS: I don't know what to do with the damn things.

JR: Your grandchildren.

YS: They don't want them. My granddaughter's in graduate school. She [inaudible] carvings. She does beautiful work at the museum school. They gave her two years' credit for one year's work, and she [inaudible] two places in New York. She takes it from – my mother was an artist. [inaudible] want these things?

JR: Your mother was an artist. Your mother was a linguist. Your mother was a humorist.

YS: She was a smart woman.

JR: And you are following in her --? Your father, it sounds like, was so extraordinary with his Hebrew and his scholarship.

YS: [inaudible] I found a picture of my half-brother because he had a little child too with her. [inaudible] You don't want this. This is the [inaudible].

JR: That's very romantic. That was your husband's gift to you.

YS: That was the first gift he gave me.

JR: I think that's very romantic.

YS: He didn't give me a diamond for my twenty-fifth anniversary

JR: Did you mind? Did you miss not having a diamond?

YS: [laughter] I never wanted one. He gave me a wristwatch. That was [fine]. My granddaughter goes to the Museum School here in Boston.

JR: That is beautiful.

YS: She gave me two. I think I will hang up one here.

JR: These are exquisite! That's a perfect spot for it. That is very beautiful.

YS: She gave me this one in color. No, they're both --

JR: That is beautiful.

YS: This is the wrong side I showed you. This is one. It's green.

JR: This is very beautiful. This reminds me of Oriental --

YS: It's a woodcut. She made it from wood. [inaudible]

JR: I love these. Wouldn't it be nice if they could be companion pieces on the two sides?

YS: [inaudible] I'm going to put out there. I have a panel for it. She's taking a course in papermaking this term. She's going to make paper. She gave one to her brother. I think she gave Betsy one. My son is going to get a whole bunch of – she's taking pictures, like you. He'll pick out what he wants.

JR: That goes so well with your décor.

YS: Yeah, I like the green.

[Recording paused]

JR: – so that you did it. I hope it was mostly pleasurable.

YS: Yeah. Well, it's hard to go through old – I found an article that my husband [inaudible].

JR: An article that he wrote about what?

YS: "The Oldest Jewish Federation: Pioneers in Social Service."

JR: And he was one of the original –?

YS: He was the associate director.

JR: That's something your children would really like to have and grandchildren. This is something.

YS: He was the associate director of the Associated Jewish Philanthropies in Boston.

JR: I bet CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston] would like a copy of that.

YS: I wonder.

JR: Don't you think? When we go to the copy center, why don't we –?

YS: [inaudible]

JR: Well, I think you should definitely save copies. I'll take that and make copies for your kids.

YS: Have you read John Grisham's [inaudible]?

JR: Yes, I love John Grisham. I just went to see The Rainmaker.

YS: Yeah, you want --? I was going to give you The Rainmaker.

JR: Thank you. I bought it in paperback.

YS: I pass them along.

JR: Did you see the movie?

YS: No. I might go.

JR: If you want, I'll take you some night. I loved it.

YS: Yeah?

JR: Yeah.

YS: I don't think I'll give them out. What else can I show you?

JR: Well, I'm very content with what we have if you're willing to go with me to the copy center.

YS: You want me to go with you?

JR: Or I can take them and bring them right back. It's up to you. It's pretty raw. I'm happy to go. I just definitely want to Xerox your Columbia – can you just tell me a little bit about being asked to write this for your –?

YS: They called me on the phone. Would I write it for my sixtieth? So, I wrote it to them, and I mailed it in. But I should have written more personal things. They said, "Just a half a page."

JR: I like what you wrote. It's very historical and philosophical.

YS: I observed it. See, they wrote long things. I went alone on the bus, and I gave a speech in Hebrew too.

JR: You did? At the reunion? Wonderful.

YS: At the seminary, at JTS.

JR: What were some of the things you said in your speech?

YS: I don't know. I just spoke off the cuff, and the chancellor gave me a big kiss. What's his name? This guy – [inaudible].

JR: Very exciting. Do you think that you'll think about making a trip to Jerusalem this year for all the festivities?

YS: [inaudible] I was a volunteer a couple years ago. I went with B'nai B'rith for two and a half months.

JR: How many trips have you made to Israel?

YS: Three, I think.

[Recording paused.]

JR: Do you still correspond?

YS: Yesterday, I had a plumber here. My son went to shave upstairs. Don't you think, with his strong hands, the faucet came out in his – what do you call that? – faucet came in his hand, and the place flooded. I didn't even see. I was down here. He says, "I'm in trouble." I let him wipe it up. [laughter]

JR: Good.

YS: He came down. "The faucet's broken." He went down –

JR: [inaudible]?

YS: [inaudible]. No, there's a better one [inaudible].

JR: Connelly Hardware.

YS: He went to Connelly. He said, "I'm a surgeon, not a plumber." He took a couple of screwdrivers and [inaudible] faucets replaced.

[Recording paused.]

JR: Aaron Gordon.

YS: Yeah, he taught for many years. He was also the director of one of the Jewish camps. I can't remember which one. Aaron Gordon. I mean, I never went to the camp.

JR: I made you a copy --

YS: I went to YMCA camp.

JR: I made you a copy of everything that we're going to borrow so that you'll have a record of everything we borrowed. That way, I don't have to make a list.

YS: Yeah, because this is Ben-Yehuda, and I only have one of those. I don't care about that.

JR: Then I made some copies of everything.

YS: Yeah. All yours. Oh, I have to pay you for all these copies.

JR: My pleasure. No, I signed the –

YS: Listen, [Joan], you're spending all this money on all this stuff.

JR: It's fine. This way, it's easier.

YS: You give me guilt feelings. Please.

JR: No guilt. No guilt. [inaudible]

YS: This was Aaron Gordon's daughter, the little girl. Her name is Laura. I remember. His wife's name is Blanche, Blanche Gordon. They lived in Belmont. You didn't know them at all, Mr. Gordon? He taught for years at the school, same as I did.

JR: But what I need to do is [inaudible] –

YS: See, some of these, I remember, some of these kids. And some I don't.

JR: It's nice because you see this – I know that's not you because you're taking the picture, but some of the moms. Yeah.

YS: It's one of the mothers. I don't know which one. Sure.

JR: So we have to execute a release to give your permission.

YS: To do what?

JR: To lend the photographs.

YS: I'll give it to the lawyer. [inaudible]

JR: Always the lawyer. But if you write your name as you want it to appear on the exhibit label. Then, believe it or not, we have to describe -- I'll do it for you in one word. But we have to sign a release for every photograph.

YS: This is my name.

JR: I know that's your name

YS: My maiden name is Papish, P-A-P-I-S-H. It's in that book.

JR: Yeah. I have it in my original –

YS: I'm not changing anything. Okay?

JR: Now, you have to sign ten of these.

YS: Oh, my gosh.

JR: You have to sign – let's see – right here.

YS: [inaudible] I'm reading it. I'm reading it. Okay. All right. You want me to put in everything here?

JR: Yeah. I'll be glad to do the rest of them. But the first one, if you can do it, that would be –

YS: You're working too hard.

JR: Oh, I'm enjoying it.

YS: You are?

JR: Yeah, [inaudible]

YS: I want to come to that lecture. I hope it won't be an [inaudible] day. I want to come when you're speaking to that group. I have it over there. I have the whole [inaudible]

JR: Okay. In the bulletin.

YS: Bulletin. I get it. Yeah.

JR: I am so honored that you lent us the silk pajamas that your mother made for your daughter's doll.

YS: Oh, do you like –? Aren't they cute?

JR: I think that's going to be such a special part –

YS: That's cute. But I was going to iron it. That's why I had it out, to iron. I never got – I only iron once a year. You know when I iron? When it gets very cold, and I'm very cold in the house. Then I take all my napkins that I use for dinners and things, and then I iron them all. [laughter]

JR: Helps keep you warm, the radiant heat.

YS: That keeps me warm.

JR: Did you iron much when you were growing up?

YS: Sure. When I went to high school – you saw the pictures when I went to high school. We lived on the East Side of Manhattan. Because my parents were divorced. I told you that. I went to live with my mother and grandmother. My mother and I lived with my grandmother and grandfather. So, my mother would do the wash, the sheets, and the pillowcases. She made them all by hand. She sewed. I never had a bought pillowcase or a sheet until I got married. Then I went to Macy's and bought it all. On Fridays, I would come home and iron. I would iron the sheets, the pillowcases, and everything else.

JR: Starting what age do you think you started to iron?

YS: I must have been about -- when I was thirteen or fourteen.

JR: Did you mind it?

YS: No. I did it. I did it. The way my grandmother on Thursday – every Thursday, my grandmother made noodles. She made a great, big [inaudible] thing. You know, all these modern cooks. She made her own noodles. From the side, she would bake little pockets and fill them with cheese, [inaudible], and the noodles and make [inaudible]. She did it every Thursday. I used to watch her. That's all. That's what she did.

JR: Must have been good smells in your house on Thursday.

YS: She always did that. I went to high school. I went to Seward Park High School and worked very hard there. It's a tough school. Fifty percent of the graduates ended up in Sing-Sing. You know what Sing Sing is.

JR: A prison.

YS: The other fifty percent, we used to walk along the walls because the boys would pull up our skirts. So, in order to shield ourselves – the group of girls that I knew went to

Hebrew High School, and we lived in the same area. We were good kids. We would walk along the walls like this so that we'd be safe.

JR: That sounds terrifying. That's sexual harassment.

YS: No, but they didn't have that in those days.

JR: They didn't call it that but --

YS: There were forty-two of us in a class, and sometimes there weren't enough seats. We sat on the windowsills. I can tell you stories.

JR: Did a boy ever pull up your skirt?

YS: Must have. Then I used to run to the L, the Third Avenue L, to go to Hebrew School on Sundays. It was Boys' Technical High School. It was on 21st Street or something. I would take the L. I'd run all the way there and run all the way home because it was dangerous on those streets. How old was I? Thirteen, fourteen. When I graduated from high school, I was fifteen. So I was thirteen years old – thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.
[inaudible]

JR: Character-building episodes, I think.

YS: When we married, you didn't think you were poor. I never had more than [inaudible]. I wore a (gamp?). My mother had made that (gamp?) for me, and I wore different shirts with it. Sure. You have that picture.

JR: Yeah, I do. There it is. There it is.

YS: And wore different shirts with it. Clean shirts [inaudible]. We didn't think we were poor. That's the way we lived.

JR: For your family, learning and language and scholarship was –

YS: That was the [inaudible] go to school. When I graduated from school, my mother was working in a shop, sewing. She says, "It's either silk stockings or college. Which is it?" I said, "I'm going to college." [laughter]

JR: You made a great decision.

YS: I went to Hunter College for two years. Then I went to Cornell for a year. My uncle was head of the department there. They heard I was going to school and working so hard afternoons teaching Hebrew. On the subway, I did all my homework for Hunter College. I wrote all my theses on the subway, sitting down. The subway was pretty scary, too. Guys were fresh. Oh, sure. Just the way you read. They were fresh. They would unbutton themselves. They were fresh. The subways were no picnic in New York. [laughter]

JR: Were you aware that you were a pioneer, as a woman, achieving this level of education?

YS: No, because I had an aunt who went to Valparaiso University, same thing as my father and my uncle. She became a nurse. She was head of the operating room in Chicago. My other aunt came to live with us for a while from Moscow. She was a pharmacist. See, in my family, they're all –

JR: They're all educated.

YS: They were educated. My mother went to Columbia to study –

JR: English.

YS: – English. She acted in a play, in As You Like It. [laughter] She told me about it later. She was kind of a pretty lady. She had yellow hair – blonde with green eyes. She dated one of the (Weissman?) brothers. She was considered the prettiest girl in the town

of Pinsk. She and my grandmother lived on the [inaudible]. That means on the river. Their house had the sticks.

JR: The stilts?

YS: When there was a flood, my grandmother – they told me this story – rowed out of the windows and gathered up all the children in the rowboat. She rowed out.

JR: She saved them --

YS: Yeah. My mother swam, and my father swam. They taught me to swim. I taught my children and grandchildren how to swim because I think it's very important.

JR: Well, you know, the Torah says the parent is obligated to teach a child three things: Torah, a trade, and how to swim.

YS: There's another rabbi who said, "And to ride a horse." I have a picture of myself riding a horse, in which I'm crying. I hate it. He put me on a horse. I hated it. [laughter]

JR: So, you come from a long line of strong women and educated women.

YS: My grandmother was a little bit of a woman. She had red hair under her wig. She was a little bit of a woman – slim, small. My mother was a little stronger. But she swam. That's all. I took her swimming at Brookline High.

JR: The courage, too, to go out in the middle of a flood and rescue children.

YS: Yeah, I used to take my mother swimming to Brookline High – they have a pool – when she came to visit. Why not? I went, so it's okay.

JR: Also, really, you understood how important exercise is to well-being. I mean, that's also a fairly –

YS: Well, we didn't think of it as exercise. We did it for enjoyment. I still do it for enjoyment. Had a wonderful time today. I met all the ladies. I heard a new joke.

JR: Let's hear. I love jokes.

YS: You like jokes.

JR: I love jokes.

YS: I've got a joke. But this is an ethnic joke. Don't take offense.

JR: Okay, I won't.

YS: The first time a Jewish woman is -- this is one of my friends, Bunny. She tells me a joke. I have this friend, Pinky. He's a retired policeman from New York. He swims there. He always tells me a joke. He wasn't there today. But Bunny told me this one. First time a Jewish woman is elected President of the United States -- oh, you'll like this -- and she's there at the swearing-in. There's her daughter, with her hand on the Bible, swearing in to be President of the United States. Momma is sitting there very proudly. She says to the woman next to her, sitting there, "Did you know," she says, "my son is a doctor." [laughter] I love it.

JR: [laughter] Can we put that in the exhibit?

YS: No. That was a joke today.

JR: I love it. I love it. I know. But I want you telling it in the exhibit. That's the best.

YS: Isn't that cute?

JR: The best.

YS: You like it.

JR: Always, "My son, the doctor." I love it.

YS: I think it's funny.

JR: I can't wait to tell my husband that joke.

YS: It's a funny joke. She told me. Bunny told me. She lives in Newton with her husband. Her husband is a graduate of MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. She comes from New York, and she swims where I swim. What a group of diehards. [laughter] Been swimming for years.

JR: Like Esther Williams.

YS: At the Y, myself and Beatrice Sherman. I suppose she must have taken this. Then I have one with Beatrice Sherman that shows the roof. I don't have her.

JR: So this one on the roof, where, again, was this? Brooklyn?

YS: Oh, this is in Manhattan on the East Side of Manhattan. Summer, we spent on the roof. It was cooler. Where do you think we went? We didn't have a living room.

JR: What did you do up there? Did you play cards? Did you talk? Did you read?

YS: Talked. We talked.

JR: Were there chairs up there, or did you –?

YS: Were there what?

JR: Chairs up on the roof?

YS: [inaudible] roof with Beatrice Sherman. Her brother drowned in a Yiddish camp, and her parents never recovered. She went to camp with me, that same camp where I have

my children, where I was a counselor. Yeah, she was a counselor.

JR: Do you remember the name of this camp?

YS: Sure, it says so. Camp Felicia. Run by the Hudson Hill in Orange County. There it is.

JR: How many years did you work there?

YS: Oh, about two or three years. After I was married, I went back for a month because I loved it. But Beatrice Sherman slept with all the boys in the sleeping bags. They came from Riverdale to be counselors. She became a streetwalker. Those were the influences. When people write about it – I showed you the pictures that I showed you there of what the East Side looked like. Because my son wanted to know where I went to high school, so we went once to New York, and I showed him where I went to high school, where I lived, where I grew up. He was curious.

JR: And this is Ben-Yehuda.

YS: This is Ben-Yehuda. [inaudible]

JR: He was friends with your father.

YS: Yeah. Here's my father, sort of cut off.

JR: And there you are. How many times did he come to visit your family?

YS: I don't know.

JR: But more than once? I mean, would he come when he was in New York?

YS: I don't know. I really don't know. He was friends with my father.

JR: And your father corresponded with him.

YS: Must have. Because Ben-Yehuda raised his family in Hebrew. We were raised in Hebrew, see. My mother spoke Hebrew too.

JR: So, in your family, when it was the four of you, you were speaking exclusively Hebrew in the early years.

YS: Except that my parents spoke Russian to each other when they didn't want us to understand.

JR: And all your childhood books were in Hebrew, all the books you've loaned to the exhibit.

YS: Yes. Now, what do you want? So, you'll know most of this.

JR: If you just sign –

YS: I agree to the Jewish Women's – by the way, do you need any volunteers in that place, the --?

JR: No doubt, when the time comes, we'll need volunteers.

YS: No, I mean upstairs. You have an office on Harvard Street.

JR: For the archive. Are you interested?

YS: Yeah, I might be interested [inaudible].

JR: That would be wonderful. That would be wonderful. I'll tell Gail Reimer, who's the woman in charge.

YS: Who's in charge?

JR: Gail Reimer.

YS: I don't know her.

JR: She was a professor at Wellesley for many years. She's a really wonderful woman. She wrote a book called Reading Ruth. She's a scholar.

YS: What's today's date? Six or seven?

JR: Actually, seven. I'm behind myself. The 7th. [Recording paused.] – plumber. I had such a laugh.

YS: That was yesterday.

JR: I know. The best.

YS: Today, I'll read you something new. You have to want to hear these things. I tell them jokes, too. They tell me jokes, and I tell them jokes. I used to be – you could start me off, I could tell jokes for hours.

JR: I really liked your first woman president joke a lot.

YS: That one we heard today. Well, you know, one of the jokes that I always loved – it's an old joke – the three women in Miami. You know that one? And one says, "Oh, when I was young, I was the most beautiful girl in Brooklyn." The other one says, "Oh, when I was young, my husband was the biggest lawyer in the District Attorney's Office in Brooklyn. And look at the ring he gave me." And the third one says, "Oh, my husband didn't know what to buy me. I have jewelry and pearls, and he bought me a house and this and that." The fourth woman sits there, and she's shuffling the cards, and she says, "Look, ladies. "Was was. Let's play bridge." I love that. [laughter] [inaudible]

JR: An honest woman.

YS: "Was was. Let's play bridge." I go to Miami every year.

JR: When are you going this year?

YS: February 10th with the Jewish Community Center. I went for three years for a month. Now I'm going – three weeks is enough.

JR: Where do you stay?

YS: We stay at a very old-fashioned Jewish kosher hotel right on the boardwalk with a wonderful swimming pool.

JR: Which one? The Saxony?

YS: Yeah, the Saxony.

JR: That's where my grandparents stay.

YS: It's okay. It's old. It's miserable. But the food is good. You have to push it away. Otherwise, you can come home like this. [laughter] I play bridge every night.

JR: Every night?

YS: Almost. If I can get a game, I play.

JR: Do you rotate houses? Do you go to different people's houses?

YS: No, in Miami [inaudible].

JR: Oh, in Miami. I thought you meant here.

YS: Well, here we rotate. I play once a week now. I used to play twice a week. My very dear friend died, Joan Needleman.

JR: I knew Joan Needleman.

YS: Did you know her?

JR: Her daughter, Lucy Brown –

YS: Yeah, Lucy.

JR: – was the mother of one of my daughter's playmates. Lucy's daughter Jessie.

YS: Well, Joan would come here. We would play this winter. Last year, every Tuesday night, we played.

JR: She died about a month ago?

YS: Her husband died a few weeks later. There's a big hole. It happens to me all the time. It's Tuesday night, and I want to play bridge, and Joan is gone. And then, when she got very sick, we would go to her house and play to divert her.

JR: Was she sick for long?

YS: Almost two years. She was very sick.

JR: It was really wonderful that you went to her house and tried to keep things –

YS: Yeah, we'd go. Lucy's old boyfriend, Jake.

JR: Lucy [inaudible], her old boyfriend.

YS: Lucy had an old boyfriend, Jake, and Jake played too. So, we were four. And my accountant. We were four. Then Jake would drive us to Joan's house, and we'd play in Waltham.

JR: I haven't seen Lucy since she moved to Canada.

YS: Oh, Lucy called me at eight in the morning when her father died. He died on Monday. Tuesday was the snowstorm. That was the funeral. I couldn't go. My daughter took me to Joan's funeral, but I didn't go to Bob's. It was a terrible snowstorm. Couldn't get out. You remember, on Tuesday?

JR: The day before Christmas Eve, yeah.

YS: It was terrible. It came down in buckets. You remember?

JR: I do.

YS: I feel very bad that I didn't go because Lucy called me personally.

JR: They understand.

YS: When Lucy got married, I had a big party here for all the girls that she couldn't invite to her wedding. I had a big dinner party here for them.

JR: Well, her stepdaughter Jessie played with my daughter for years until they moved away.

YS: The little one.

JR: Yeah, the little one.

YS: She had two children. Yeah.

JR: Jessie and (Jo-Jo?).

YS: Sure. They've been here.

JR: Yeah. They're good kids. I keep thinking we'll visit them in Canada, but we've never quite – we go to Canada a lot. [inaudible]

YS: Oh, yeah. No, I have to call Jake to get – I wrote to her at the address in Waban. But maybe she didn't get the letter. So, I'd better get the address in Canada.

JR: Yeah.

YS: I have to write.

JR: I can look for the Canadian address.

YS: I was friends with Joan for maybe thirty, forty years. My daughter and Lucy went to school together, to Devotion. They went to each other's birthday parties. Oh, sure. I knew Joan from Hadassah too. She was president of – and [inaudible].

JR: Yeah. She was a talented lawyer.

YS: She was a wonderful girl. I miss her terribly. I miss her terribly. Account of Joan, I keep a record of my checks that I wrote for the last – and papers, for seven years. She made me promise – a lawyer. [laughter] Right?

JR: That's for sure. That's the law.

YS: Well, that's what Joan told me to do. Many a New Year's Eve I spent with them – and my husband. Well, Joan was a wonderful friend, a real friend.

JR: So tough. So, she was sick for about two years. I had seen her right before Lucy moved.

YS: Yeah, she was sick. Well, I went to Lucy's wedding. Lucy was the most beautiful – she had the most beautiful dress I have ever seen on a bride. You know where she had it made? In the Arcade Building.

JR: You're kidding.

YS: Joan told me. She said, "There's a dressmaker upstairs." It was the most beautiful wedding dress I have ever seen.

JR: Where was the wedding?

YS: Downtown, in one of those new hotels. I forget the name.

JR: Like the Marriott or the Westin or one of those?

YS: No, not that Marriott or Westin, another one. It's on the side, where Filene's and Jordan's used to be.

JR: Oh, the Lafayette.

YS: I think that's where it was.

JR: Lafayette, yeah.

YS: Beautiful.

JR: This is the last one. This is for the pajamas. This is different.

YS: [inaudible] [laughter]

JR: You're right. When the lawyers get involved, there's nothing but trouble.

YS: Joan would tell me about her cases. She took on a lot of adolescent boys who were in trouble. That was her job after she stopped teaching. Well, she was a wonderful girl. We knew each other for years. You don't replace friends like that.

JR: No, that's lifelong.

YS: No. What can you do? She called me up on a Saturday. "Meet me for coffee. Bob's going out." I'd meet her. [laughter] Why not?

JR: Nice to be flexible and spontaneous like that.

YS: Nice to have a friend like that.

JR: Yeah. Well, I guess they used to live on Browne Street.

YS: That's right.

JR: And then Jim and Lucy –

YS: And I lived on (Egmont?) Street.

JR: Right. And Lucy lived in the Browne Street apartment.

YS: Yeah. The kids went to the Devotion School. That's when I first met her. But then I knew her. We were very good friends.

JR: So, this is all very fresh. This is all very new for you, then.

YS: Yeah. Every time I went to Florida, she was there, too, visiting Barry's wife's mother and father, refugees from a concentration camp. They're survivors, and they live in Florida. So, she went to a hotel, and she would always call me at the Saxony, and I'd call her back. We never met because it was too far away, but we always got in touch with each other. She always wanted me to come for lunch, but it was a two-and-a-half, three-hour ride.

JR: That's far.

YS: Once you go to a hotel, you stay.

JR: Stay put. Right. Make it easy for yourself, yeah. So these are the wonderful yellow silk pajamas.

YS: Aren't they cute? [laughter]

JR: Oh, beyond. Again, it's so nice that it was your husband's engagement gift to you.

YS: No, not engagement. Well, we'd just met. We started to go steady. He lived in Auburn. I lived in Brooklyn. We would meet at – where would we meet? We used to meet at Grand Central Station or Pennsylvania Station because it was halfway.

[inaudible] the gifts he gave me. He'd give me rings. He was a social worker. [laughter] He didn't have that kind of money.

JR: And it's a tribute that you kept them all those years and that they were in good enough shape that they could be refitted.

YS: My Aunt Pauline says, "You want something? Go [to] Yemema's attic." I've got Betsy's wedding dress up there. [laughter] I've got the dress that she went to the prom with Don in.

JR: Probably is back in style. Save it for Sara.

YS: Sure, if she'll wear it. I don't know.

JR: So, let's see. They have dates, but the pajamas – you don't know when your mother made them.

YS: When Betsy was little. So, what is she? Betsy's going to be fifty in April.

JR: It would be like forty-five years ago?

YS: I'd say, yeah, about forty-five years ago.

JR: So, 1953, maybe.

YS: About forty-five years ago, yeah. Thank you very much for [inaudible] –

[Recording paused.]

JR: The last thing I want to ask –

YS: Wait a minute. I'll be right with you.

JR: You're spoiling me.

YS: Not spoiled. I've been eating them myself. I have to eat one every night here. Take one.

JR: Oh, my goodness. These are truffles. These are heaven on earth. All right.

YS: They're wonderful.

JR: Thank you so much. This is a treat. I'll be here every night.

YS: Please. You've been running all – aren't they wonderful?

JR: You have one. We have to do this together.

YS: I'll have one after dinner. You want some more? Pecans are there.

JR: What would you like the people in the exhibit to know about you? I have some really nice – I have your books, which are so special.

YS: I gave you the books, and I gave you the pictures and picture book.

JR: What would you like to say?

YS: I don't know.

JR: I'm going to take this.

YS: And this is the letter from my mother. I have a whole lot of them. Just one gives you an idea.

JR: What was the greatest adventure of your life? And then I'm going to go home and make some –

YS: The greatest adventure in my life? I don't know. I can't tell you.

JR: What would you say to your grandchildren?

YS: They're not interested in all the stories of old ladies.

JR: Absolutely, they are.

YS: Grandchildren are not interested. [inaudible] Shall I put the pictures in the envelope, in here?

JR: That's what I was going to do.

YS: Wouldn't it be better?

JR: Yes, much better.

YS: Be better in there.

JR: What are the memories that warm you at this time? What do you remember when you think about the past?

YS: I loved working in the camp with the children.

JR: You look very happy there.

YS: I loved it. These are my kids that I took care of.

JR: So, it's girls and boys.

YS: It was the Hudson Guild.

JR: It looks like a very carefree time.

YS: [inaudible] I had a very good time. I had a very good time. I'd go swimming, and I'd take the kids. I had friends.

JR: Did you do any Hebrew work up there, or was it all recreation?

YS: It was a camp.

JR: Yeah, I just didn't know if it was –

YS: Nothing to do with the Jewish – then I went to a Hebrew-speaking camp. I was a counselor. I was head counselor. Camp Ramah in the Poconos. I was a counselor for many years. I loved being a counselor in camp because I had lived in a tenement on the East Side. I mean, to go and be a counselor is wonderful.

JR: Real special.

YS: It was special for me. I loved it. I loved the food. Even to this day – we used to eat apple jelly for [lunch]. It was very poor food. They had apple jelly sandwiches. I still love apple jelly. I liked it.

JR: The memories. [Recording paused.] That is exquisite!

YS: Right in the back. That's what I have in –

JR: Oh, is that beautiful!

YS: My barberries. This is the garage. It was snowing.

JR: Is that a bird feeder?

YS: Yeah. This is snowing.

JR: Beautiful.

YS: Yeah. It's Barbara Papish. [inaudible] my cousin.

JR: Oh, is that lovely.

YS: Isn't it lovely? She lives in Beverly. She took pictures. She said the chrysanthemums were covered with snow. So, she went out in the back to take a picture of them. She said, "One film left." She said, "I took this, and this turned out better." Isn't that nice? My son wants one of those too. I'll tell Barbara. She'll send him one. She lives in Beverly.

JR: So beautiful.

YS: Isn't it lovely? And I have the barberries.

JR: What a nice gift.

YS: On my dining room table, I have them as a centerpiece, the barberries. I'll put it back in there.

JR: I suspect you are one of the most accomplished women in Hebrew language and Hebrew culture of your generation.

YS: I know Hebrew. But I know other things too.

JR: But that must be an extraordinary sense of pride.

YS: I was a reading specialist too. But that was funny yesterday. [laughter]

JR: Tell me that story one more time because the tape wasn't working.

YS: The Ashkenazi? He walks in, and I said, "You have an accent. Are you from Russia?" He said, "No, I'm from Israel." I started to speak Hebrew to him. He almost fainted. He said, "You speak Hebrew like you're from Jerusalem." I said, "I know."

JR: Because you've been doing it from the cradle.

YS: We had a very nice visit, and he did a very good job [inaudible]

JR: I'm going to call him. I wrote down his number.

[Telephone rings. Recording paused.]

JR: I love hearing you speak Hebrew.

YS: Well, I can speak it. That's my friend Miriam. Her son is the dean at the Hebrew College. Do you know him? Dr. Levin?

JR: Yeah. Well, I see his name and picture over there.

YS: Well, that [inaudible]. [laughter] She's my friend.

JR: And she's fluent as well.

YS: She was born in Israel. She lived there for many years. She married a Parisian. She married a Frenchman. I knew him too, very well. The four of us used to go up to the Hebrew-speaking week every summer, over July 4th. There's a week that you have Hebrew speaking in the Catskills.

JR: That sounds like fun.

YS: A Hebrew-speaking week. And we always went, like you go, to a French-speaking or German. So, we went for years and years. Now, since her husband's died and mine, I go with her. I went with her for four years.

JR: Was your husband fluent in Hebrew?

YS: Yeah. Not as fluent as I am. He was a graduate of Yeshiva in New York.

JR: That sounds like fun.

YS: And then he was a graduate of Clark University. He had a couple of degrees from Clark. I showed you the article. Then he went to the School of Social Work at Columbia after we were married. I said to him, "Look, if you're going to be a social worker, you may as well get a certificate." I sort of pushed him. He was a social worker without the license. I said, "If you're going to go into social work, do it right."

JR: So, I know that the things that we talked about when you didn't want the tape on are things that were –

YS: Personal, yeah.

JR: Right. But the things that we talked about today, it's okay with you if we put snippets in the exhibit.

YS: No, I don't mind. That'll be so cute.

JR: Yeah, I thought we had a good time.

YS: That was fun.

JR: It was fun. I just realized I need one more signature for the article you wrote for the sixty-year – that's an object, not a photograph, so I just need one more of those for the article you wrote for the teachers' college.

YS: My goodness. That's seminary.

JR: The seminary, right.

YS: [inaudible] I taught Hebrew at Brandeis University for a year. Was it an eight or a nine o'clock class every morning? Sachar's idea of a part-time job was one class every morning at eight, nine o'clock. Betsy was two years old. Oh, come on. That was awful.

JR: That's tough.

YS: And then I had to go back at night.

JR: Why did it have to be at eight or nine in the morning?

YS: I don't know. That was the way the schedule was. At night, they had teachers' meetings, so I had to go back. Oh, boy, did I fly!

JR: Who took care of Betsy when --?

YS: I got a girl off the boat, an Irish girl who came from a family of twelve. It was not the best thing in the world. It was tough. Ludwig Lewisohn taught there, and I did, and Marie Syrkin. We were the early ones at Brandeis.

JR: Was there a sense of excitement, this new venture, new Jewish university, born with the state of Israel?

YS: Yeah, I guess so. The whole place was covered with apple trees, and I used to take my son. He used to pick the apples. I would make applesauce. [laughter] Because the girl couldn't take care of a baby and him.

JR: So, you took him with you to class?

YS: Well, no, not in class. He waited outside. I said, "Dr. Sachar, is it alright if my son picks apples?" I took a barrel. He picked apples while I was teaching.

JR: And Dr. Sachar said the Seder.

JR: That's a great story. So that's one of the original work-family conflict resolutions. That's how you resolved taking care of your son and teaching.

YS: Had to. I mean, school vacation in Brookline [doesn't] coincide with college vacation.

JR: So, what'd you do?

YS: I took him with me.

JR: More applesauce.

YS: Made applesauce.

JR: And your son probably learned patience, waiting for you.

YS: It wasn't terrible. Didn't kill him. [laughter] Now, this is the what?

JR: This is the booklet with your sixtieth-anniversary reunion class speech. See, we have to fill out a separate sheet for things that are not photographs. So, this is the alumni book.

YS: I'm trying to help you out a little.

JR: So, the exhibit opens March 14th. I'm going to call you in a week or two, and we'll try to –

YS: Well, I'll be back.

JR: I'm going to come and help you with your letters one winter night. I'm going to come help you catalog all that.

YS: [inaudible] didn't go through. I don't know what to do with them.

JR: Well, I have a good idea. I'm going to bring you a notebook and some acetate sleeves.

YS: Don't bring a notebook. I've got lots. I've got a chest full of notebooks upstairs.

JR: Binders? But I'm going to bring you some acetate sleeves, and we'll organize them. Because that's what I did with --

YS: Ninety--

JR: '98.

YS: Did I write '98 on the --? I don't remember. Maybe I wrote '97. I don't remember.

JR: I'm still writing '97, so I wouldn't be surprised if you [inaudible] it's in here. Don't worry. We can change that.

YS: I'll make an eight out of a seven.

JR: Yeah, these are sevens. But that's okay. They're easy to fix.

YS: See, I'm getting old.

JR: No, I'm doing the same thing with the checks I wrote yesterday. I wrote '97. I'm writing '97. You're not alone.

YS: Oh, I'm very -- that's stupid.

JR: No, it's not. Don't be hard on yourself. We're all doing it. My husband did it.

YS: No kidding.

JR: No. He wrote some bills. He said, "I'm writing '97." I said, "I always do it the first week of the New Year."

YS: That's terrible. I didn't put down the date at all here.

JR: That's okay. Good. Nothing to correct.

YS: So, I'll correct it. I'll put it in. Yeah, I left it out.

JR: Good.

YS: Must have been telling you the story.

JR: All right. I'm going to go home and make dinner for my family.

YS: What are you going to make for them?

JR: I'm going to make --

YS: Fish?

JR: I have some pesto, and I'm going to make pesto with noodles and fish. I'm going to probably broil the fish with breadcrumbs and lemon juice and make pesto with noodles.

YS: Well, see, by teaching, I was home at 3:30 most days. That's different from a lawyer. But Joan worked many years. She used to buy the food. She never cooked.

JR: Right. When you work, you have to make accommodations.

YS: [inaudible] My husband always did the market, so there was no problem. He always did the shopping.

JR: It sounds like he was a very –

YS: He was a very helpful guy. Yeah, one more here. Here.

JR: Thank you so much, Yemema.

YS: This is yours. You need any pens or pencils? Don't bring me any paper, pens, or pencils.

JR: I'll call you in about two weeks, and we will work on our catalog.

YS: Remember, I'm leaving February 10th.

JR: Oh, well, I'll call you in two weeks.

YS: Then I'm going to be three weeks, I hope.

JR: Right. I'm going to see you before then because hopefully, you'll come to the Kallah.

YS: Well, that's in March. That's after.

JR: No, no. January 24th. [inaudible]

YS: I was going to write it down. I went to the Kallah once, and [inaudible].

JR: Definitely a different kind of day.

YS: It's not for me.

JR: Well, I'd love it if you came.

YS: I go to some.

JR: Are you interested in going to the Martin Luther King dinner on –?

YS: I don't know. I got an invitation to it. I'm a member of the Social Action Committee.

JR: Yeah, so am I. If you want a lift there, I'll gladly drive you. Think about it.

YS: When is it?

JR: It's two weeks.

YS: It's on a Friday night.

JR: It's a week from this Friday. It's the 16th or whatever.

YS: They ask you to bring something.

JR: Yes. It's like a potluck dinner. First, there's a brief service.

YS: I was going to bring my Black – I had a Black friend next door, and she was a very close friend of mine. I've got wonderful pictures of her from her birthday party. She sent me a picture for New Year's, too – Joeritta. She's a student now. I've been pushing her to take her Ph.D. at Harvard. I said, "You're Black, Joeritta. You'll get your Ph.D. right away." We're very good friends. She lived next door for a long time. I thought of asking her to go.

JR: That would be wonderful. I'll drive you both.

YS: Because she's taken me to – she lives in Belmont now. She lived next door. She had taken me to –

JR: Kwanzaa.

YS: Yeah, Kwanzaa.

JR: Kwanzaa celebration.

YS: Yeah, we're very good friends. Her name is Joeritta Almeida.

JR: Beautiful name.

YS: Almeida, A-L-M-E-I-D-A. I have some wonderful pictures.

[END OF INTERVIEW]