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Mrs. Israel (Rebecca) Bernstein

Rebecca Thurman Bernstein

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PORTRAITS OF THE PAST: THE JEWS OF PORTLAND

The Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program

Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, Director

September 1, 1977

Commissioned by: The Jewish Federation of Southern Maine

The Maine Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Program

PORTRAITS OF THE PAST: THE JEWS OF PORTLAND

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Commissioned by:

The Jewish Federation of Southern Maine with the
support of the University of Maine, Portland/Gorham,
College of Arts and Sciences

1977 Federation Program Board for the Project:

Mrs. Harry Sky
Matthew Goldfarb
Jerry Goldberg
Mrs. Stephen Levine
Mrs. Charles Mack
Alan Levenson
Rabbi Harry Sky

Project Dates:

June 1, 1976 to September 15, 1977

PARTICIPANTS IN THE ORAL HISTORY

1. Judge Louis Bernstein
2. Mrs. Israel Bernstein (Rebecca)
3. Sumner Bernstein
4. Mrs. Louis Black (Selma)
5. Gerald Boxstein
6. Sam Cinamon
7. Robert Clenott
8. William Cohen
- *9. Morris Cox
10. Mrs. Maurice Drees (Mildred)
11. Rabbi Steven Dworken
12. Julius Elowitch
13. Daniel Epstein
14. Mrs. Abe Fineberg (Tama)
15. Mrs. Norman I. Godfrey (Ethel)
16. Jerome Goldberg
17. Arnold Goodman
18. Mrs. Arnold Goodman (Dorothy)
19. Julius Greenstein
20. Morris Isenman
21. Harry Judelshon
22. Mrs. Max Kaplan (Ethel)
23. Jules Krems
24. Mrs. Meyer Lerman (Ethel)
25. Mrs. Charles Mack (Cynthia)

26. Harold Nelson
27. Mrs. Harold Nelson (Mildred)
28. Arnold Potter
29. Mrs. Rebecca Rice
30. Maurice Rubinoff
31. Louis Seavey
32. Barnett Shur
33. Mrs. Barnett Shur (Clarice)
34. Bertram Silverman
35. Israel Silverman (Dean)
36. Rabbi Harry Sky
37. Jerry Slivka
38. Mrs. Ben Troen (Gertrude)
- *39. Harry Weinman
40. Louis Weisberg
41. Judge Sidney Wernick
42. Mrs. Sidney Wernick (Charlotte)
43. Mrs. Lester Willis (Rita)
44. Dr. Benjamin Zolov

* Deceased since interview

August, 1977

The Oral History Study

A Note to the Reader from the Director:

Background to the Study

Sometime in the early summer of 1975, a group of Jewish leaders appointed by the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine as a "Jewish Bicentennial Committee" met together at the home of Rabbi Sky. National and State Bicentennial planning was at its peak; and some Jews wanted the Jewish community to do something to emphasize the heritage, the presence, the tradition, or the contributions in Maine over the 200 years of a distinctive culture and religious community. They knew from heresay that the Jews had come early to Maine, formed significant communities and had made and were making a considerable impact on the past, present and future of the State. But what should they do? The American Bicentennial theme, "Heritage and Horizons," seemed to echo the Talmudic words: "Know whence you have come and wither you are going." So many possibilities existed, and the suggestions flowed freely. Should the plans be comprehensive and cover the entire State or should they emphasize only the larger communities? Should the program, whatever it became, be aimed at increasing the historical and cultural understanding of the general community, or should it be a kind of re-exploration, re-examination, reminder for the diverse Jewish community? Ought it take the form of some gift which a grateful Jewish community could present to the State which had so recently served as a haven or opportunity for all of their immigrant parents and grandparents? And what vehicles should it use - theatre, music, lectures, exhibits, discussion groups, dialogues? Whatever was done would have to be inexpensive, because the Federation Program Funds were already committed to a continuing project which by consensus the entire community agreed had an urgent priority - the resettlement in Portland of Russian Jewish families, fleeing from the

modern form of Soviet persecution. The Federation had always participated fully in national and international projects, and the Refugee Program received its usual alert and committed attention. So the Committee deliberated, argued, pondered, debated.

Finally, a member of the group hesitatingly suggested the sponsorship of a book - which would detail the entire history of the Jews of Maine. No information was available on the Jews of Maine with the single exception of a brief book, Portland Jewry, written by Ben Band in 1955, sponsored by a newly formed Jewish Historical Society, and published locally. Meant to be a beginning step in helping the Jewish community learn about itself, the book essentially tried to pull together the chronology of events in the formation of the Portland community and its institutions, and to identify some of the participants and leaders in that extraordinary development. The beginning step was a valiant one, but it ended there as did the Historical Society. The Portland Jews were too busy doing, building, creating, and helping Jews across the world. It was not yet the time for reflection, for stocktaking, for a thorough examination of the ROOTS of the community. But now, perhaps the time and energy had to be taken, lest the history disappear, never to be reclaimed; and the rich tradition never be transmitted accurately to the children and to the community.

Rabbi Sky mentioned that the American Jewish Committee was suggesting, in fact, encouraging, a series of Oral History Projects across the country, emphasizing that a well conceived multifaceted reconstruction of the past could surely help to create a balance, an awareness of the unfolding story of the American Jewish experience. Perhaps that thrust should be seized upon in Portland. But no one really knew what oral history meant, and additionally, who would do it? There were no Jewish historians in the State of Maine. Rabbi Sky alerted the Committee to the unusual fact that the Dean of Arts and Sciences

at the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham was a scholar of the Holocaust; and as an Associate Professor of History had initiated courses in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Perhaps Dr. Konnilyn Feig could be approached. Rabbi Sky knew that Dean Feig had a heavy schedule in her position; that she would never allow her additional commitment to the teaching of the Holocaust to be tampered with; and that in whatever free time she managed to find, she was writing her own book on Hitler's concentration camps - the capstone of fifteen years of research in Europe. It looked hopeless, but the Committee asked the Rabbi to try. And he persevered. And Dean Feig found herself volunteering her free time to create and direct the project.

When I entered the picture, I had the same overwhelming reservations which the Committee had already expressed. I had little time, and my interest and commitment centered on the Holocaust. Where would I ever find the space for such an enormous project, and who would help? We had no graduate program in Liberal Arts at the University. Where would I get the trained assistance I would need? I met with the Committee, outlined the limits of what could be done, and explained that the project could never be a book, but a re-beginning, another first step, which could be built upon in the succeeding years, and resulting perhaps, someday in a full and real history of Maine Jewry.

It would be an oral history folklore of Portland Jewry; but widened to use the group as a microcosm of Maine Jewry, an example of some kinds of experiences of American Jewry, a renewed acquaintance with the Old World Culture, and a picture of the often-repeated American immigrant story. It would result in a set of final transcripts, made available to the entire reading public. Thus, a small study, a beginning, with wide implications, centering in Portland but suggesting a state-wide impact, a re-examination for the Jewish community and a first reading understanding for the general community, a part of a picture

puzzle for an entire nation, a gift - to the Jewish community and to the Portland community. To my surprise, the Committee and the Federation voted to sponsor the project. I finally agreed to do it for two reasons. When I came to Portland, the Jewish community had been very good to me and had invited me to the Synagogues, the organizations and the homes to talk about the Holocaust. I felt some gratitude. But far more important, I felt a sense of shock when I, too, discovered the absence of any real research and history on one of Maine's most significant immigrant groups. I, too, felt the sense of urgency to re-begin before it really was too late.

Oral History as a Research Discipline

Oral History concerns itself with conservation of a special kind. It conserves the intimate knowledge and experience of humans who have made significant contributions to the life of the time, to a group, to an area, or who have been ideally posted to observe the major events and developments. These humans may be leaders and movers of history, such as Kennedy, Kruschev, and other notables. But oral history taken from those who "made history," only touches the tip of the iceberg when understanding of human cultures and the fabric of civilization is at issue. Perhaps, then, of even greater significance are oral histories taken from groups of ordinary human beings - men and women, known primarily to their neighbors, and perhaps in their towns and states, through whose lives have flowed the currents of an historical age; and whose reactions and understandings determine a collective impact upon a cultural grouping and a time; or upon whom a collective impact of a time and a culture can be measured, evaluated, analyzed, pondered.

The ways of life characteristic of earlier America are rapidly disappearing, but there are persons still alive today who remember them

vividly. Their memories will not be preserved by writing historical memoirs. Oral history projects have attempted to utilize individual recordings, which are admittedly fragmentary and highly personal, but when taken together provide a fund of color, detail, and incidents valuable for future historical research. Roots, centers, beginnings, road signs - all are critical ingredients to any portion of America's colorful culture, and to the essentials of every human being's possession of knowledge of his own individual and group past. And here it is that the necessity for an oral history project centering upon Jewish life in Maine reaches the critical level.

The Jews in Maine

That Jews have been deeply involved in the religious, educational, political, cultural, intellectual and economic life of the State of Maine is one of the best-kept secrets in historical and sociological literature. And Maine is one of the few states in America to be devoid of any major study of one of its important cultural influences. Since 1800 at least, Jews have been living in Maine, and since 1829 with the formation of a Jewish Community in Bangor, some Jewish community life has existed. By 1866, Jews had begun to settle in Portland in noticeable numbers. For nearly 100 years, then, Jews have been making a considerable contribution to and impact upon the state at every level and in every area.

The Jerusalem of the North - the term used so frequently in the past to refer to the Portland Jewish Community. Almost all of the Jews who immigrated to Portland came from Eastern Europe - from Poland, Russia, Latvia, Lithuania - and they brought with them the rich Ashkenazen Orthodox religious and cultural traditions. Orthodoxy found a new home in Portland, in a transplanted form, and held its strength and oneness far longer than most communities in the U.S.

Early twentieth century Portland might be described for the Jews as a community of eastern European shtetl survivors, a pious Orthodox community with several synagogues, central in the lives of the community members. Formal education played a minimal role in the lives of their parents, yet most of the children are learned in the study of the Talmud and graduated from college or comparable institutions. Here we have an unusual phenomena: parents are immigrants, starting out as peddlers or small shopkeepers, and in one generation, the children are college graduates. These college-educated men and women began in the Twenties and Thirties to question traditions which seemed to them troublesome in a modern world. In America, the land of freedom, of relief from pogroms and Russian Army conscription, where the streets were "paved with gold," the wall of Orthodox piety of Portland's Jews began to show cracks as these men and women struggled to educate and provide a better standard of living for themselves. Many had to break the holiness of the Sabbath to work.

Institutions had to be created. In the decade from 1920 to 1930 the Jewish Home for the Aged was built to accommodate family members who could no longer be cared for by their families. In the decade from 1930 to 1940 the idea of a new Jewish Community Center, with a gym, social rooms, kosher kitchens, and sauna and bathing facilities, culminated in the dedication of the present Center in 1938. Throughout the Forties and the Fifties this Center was the focus of family, social and athletic life and the focus of all Jewish functions in the city of Portland.

The winds of Conservatism and Reformism bypassed Portland and it was not until the decade from 1940 to 1950 that a demographic migration from the inner city to the outskirts of Portland, and a shared belief by many that options to Orthodoxy had to be created, resulted in the formation of Temple Beth El, as a Conservative Congregation. The Conservative movement wanted to conserve

that which was appealing in Orthodoxy, and to bring those who were no longer practicing Judaism back into a religious atmosphere. That decade also saw the organization of the Jewish Federation, and its international concern in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the birth of Israel. The funds raised to help Israel during those eventful years into the Fifties are impressive for a community which has relatively little Jewish wealth.

Jewish people succeeded during the next two decades in breaking down some of the barriers to those of their faith in clubs, organizations, professions, institutions, and geographic areas which had previously excluded them. The need for the construction of a new Orthodox Synagogue in the Temple Beth El area became clear during the early Fifties; and the Orthodox Shaarey Tphiloh Hebrew School and Synagogue on Noyes Street was erected. The Newbury Street Synagogue, Etz Chaim, and Anshe Sfaard maintained their separate identities, although many of the congregation members of Newbury Street became members of the new Synagogue. During the Sixties the Community Hebrew School was created.

Today Orthodoxy and Conservativism exist today side by side, strong, active enriched by each other. In the baggage which the immigrants, the founders of the Portland community and those who followed brought with them were two unflinching commitments and enduring dreams - education and public service, unfaltering, regardless of the cost. And the story which emerges is one of involvement and the mutually beneficial changes which come out of the tensions and reciprocal relationships between Maine society and Maine's Jews as individuals and as a community.

The Study

This transcript is only one of forty-four. It presents a portrait of a family, a story of generations, in America and in Europe. The reader would be doing himself a disservice to focus only on this transcript . All forty-four

volumes should be read, because they tell a different story - the story of a remarkable community, a courageous people. Each volume is a family story and one small part of a community folklore history. The full set of final transcripts will be readily available to the Jewish community in the Temple Beth El Library and to the public, in the Portland Public Library. In addition, a professional Permanent Photographic Exhibition containing mounted pictures of each interviewee and pictures of all of the buildings and places significant in Portland Jewish History has been presented to the Federation. It will reside in Temple Beth El.

The enormous project itself was completed under the Coordinator, Lisa Wilhelm, with two years of committed, continuous and volunteer help from a few undergraduate students trained by the Director and the Coordinator, and a few gentile and Jewish community volunteers who worked with incredible energy and dedication. Behind it was the unfailing sponsorship of the Jewish Federation. And, of course, central to it all are the human beings who are the study, the men and women who invited us into their lives and homes, and who so openly and compassionately shared their thoughts, their honest assessments, their feelings and intuitions, their remembrance of factual events, their hopes and their fears concerning the development of this exceptionally strong and traditionally Orthodox Jewish community over a period of seventy-five years, and its development in the future.

Contained within their words is an intricate web of Jewish concerns which bear significance not only to the present and future generations of this community, but also to the broader realm of American Jewry. The project raised as many questions as it answered, questions of considerable scope which could affect American Judaism in the future: What does being

Jewish mean to you? Of what significance is Israel to you in your life? How do you feel about intermarriage and assimilation, and how will these facts affect Judaism? What trends have you observed in the Jewish institutions in this city, and where are these trends leading you? What have been the changes in your Jewish family life - which traditions, cultural and religious, remain with you and which have been discarded?

The majority of interviewees are over the age of fifty, born of immigrant parents or immigrants themselves, who carried with them to Portland the traditions of the Eastern European shtetl and who have watched that ghettoized secure life in the "Jerusalem of the North" be slowly supplanted by a more modern, urbane existence of the present-day Jews.

They represent a heterogeneous group but with a strong linkage. Each is an inspiration, and each reflects commitment, dedication, humanness. As individuals, each has something to say about himself, his life, his hopes, his dreams, his thoughts, his sadnesses. And if the group is placed together, the picture that this gathering together paints, patch-work quilted as it may be, kaleidoscopic as it may seem, has an artistic potential for richness, continuity, color, form and spirit.

Those of the older generation miss the piety of the "Jerusalem of the North": the days when on a Friday afternoon the smells of the Sabbath baking emanated from Jewish neighborhoods; when the men gathered after the daily minyan within the confines of their synagogues to share their thoughts, discuss business, or play cards; when Bar Mitzvah celebrations were simple, with a little herring and kichel, and pure; and when the younger generation shared their lives with the older generation. Today the traditional, Orthodox ways are melded with a modern age, and Jews realize that they can be both good Americans and good Jews. The Jewish Family Services has successfully

brought about, during the past three decades, a transition from the old belief that Jews should take care of their own to an enlightened view that Jews should take advantage of community services. Citizens are now aware of Jewish contributions to the general community, and the "Jewish tokenism" of past decades is disappearing. While there are as many definitions of Judaism as there are Jews, ranging from ultra-Orthodox to minimal identification with any aspect of Judaism, there is little to support the belief of one of our interviewees that the American Jew "will sink into the fading sunset." Many view Judaism, to some degree, as a continuum which has survived for centuries. Many also talk about it as a cultural identification, a combination of religion and common ancestry in terms of the Bible and mystical in the sense that it is inexplicable. Judaism is more than good works and ethics. It includes that mystical, spiritual something which ties all Jews from all times together in their diversity - that mystical tie which all of our interviewees struggled to define when speaking of their own Judaism.

To everyone the state of Israel has some degree of significance. "A Homeland." "A fountainhead with which all Jews can identify." "A place that worries about Jews - just in case." "A unifying structure of Judaism." "The yearning of a 2,000-year-old culture." "It shows the world that Judaism lives." "Israel made the Jew an important human being in today's world." "A paradise built from a wasteland." These are just a few of many reasons why Israel must survive for the Portland Jews.

It is with a depth of gratitude that I express my final thanks to these forty-four individuals who have allowed all of us from the outside to view for the first time a picture of the Jerusalem of the North, to understand

the background and traditions of this community, and to realize the commitment and contribution, past and present, of Portland Jewry.

Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig
August 25, 1977

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Israel Bernstein (Rebecca)

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Konnilyn Feig

PROJECT ASSISTANTS: Lisa Wilhelm

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences
University of Maine

DATE: September 2, 1976

TIME: 1:00 P.M.

MRS. ISRAEL BERNSTEIN (REBECCA)

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1896, Rebecca Thurman Bernstein came to Portland 55 years ago when she married Israel Bernstein. Her parents had immigrated from Russia and met in Boston. Mr. Thurman went into the wholesale grocery business and brought the whole family over. Two of the brothers who came went to Harvard. Her maternal grandfather, Solomon Rabinowitz, brought his family to Boston. In time, he and three sons went to live in Israel. The Thurmans had six children and the children remain close as a family. Mrs. Bernstein attended Dorchester High School and then went on for one year at Boston University in Liberal Arts. In 1917 she graduated Magna Cum Laude from the Boston University Law School with a law degree and then received her Masters in Law from the same institution in 1918. In 1917 she was also the recipient of the famous Ordronneau prize. Following law school, at age 21, she joined her father in his new business, Jacob Thurman Company. She had already passed the Massachusetts Bar. Later she passed the Maine Bar.

Mrs. Bernstein is the widow of Israel Bernstein who was a most respected and outstanding attorney and community leader. His parents, Abraham and Sarah Bernstein, had come to Portland from Russia. Abraham Bernstein began in peddling and then opened a second-hand store. But his passion was the synagogue; and he was a leading scholar and a pious man. When the original Shaarey Tphiloh Synagogue opened its doors in 1904, one of the original members of the Board of Directors was Abraham Bernstein.

Israel Bernstein was the first Jewish boy in Portland to go to Harvard. When he graduated, he came back to Portland and opened his law practice. He enlisted in the Army in World War I and later returned to his law work. He and Mrs. Bernstein married in 1922. That marriage became one of the most

outstanding partnerships in community affairs which the city of Portland has known. Together they were founders, catalysts, leaders and always a quiet and continuous inspiration. Both of them were deeply proud of the community which they had helped develop and in which they lived. Mr. Bernstein died in 1957.

Rebecca Bernstein has given 55 years of continued, courageous and inspired leadership to the City of Portland, to the Jewish community and to national movements. One of her major commitments has been to the National Council of Jewish Women. She served as President of the Portland Council in 1925, President of the New England Region in 1929 and was a member of the National Board from 1935 to 1941. Her husband, Israel, was one of the founders of the Jewish Federation, but Rebecca Bernstein was on the original Board of Directors and was elected as its first Vice President. She was Chairman of the Community Relations Committee, a leader in the Womens Division, and is presently an Honorary Director of the Jewish Community Council of Southern Maine.

Mrs. Bernstein, many years ago, began to devote primary energies to social services and legislative changes in those areas in the State of Maine. She was the creator of the Jewish Family Services, its President, and is now its honorary President, but her interest was not only in Jewish social services. She has been a member of the executive and legislative committees of the Maine Conference of Social Welfare and Chairman of the International Relations Committee of the Maine Federation of Womens Club. She has been a Director of the American Red Cross, of the District Nursing Association, of the Birth Control League, and the College Club of Portland. She was a member of the State of Maine's Committee on the White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1950. She is a life member of the board of the Community Counsel-

ing Center, and has been active for years in the League of Women Voters. Throughout the years, many local and State groups knew her as a stimulating speaker; and legislative committees in Augusta and in Portland heard her testimony often on critical issues.

Always concerned about the wider Portland area, she was on the first board of the Portland Community Chest. She served as Chairman of the Public Service Committee of the Portland Community Chest. Vice President of the Citizens Welfare Survey Committee, she also was a Council appointment to the Citizens Housing Committee. In addition, she was a director of the United Fund Services.

Still active, Mrs. Bernstein is on the Board of Directors of the United Fund, is a Trustee of the Portland Public Library and a Trustee of Westbrook College. She is a sustaining member of the womens board of the Maine General Hospital in the Maine Medical Center.

The Bernsteins had two children. Sumner, their son, graduated from Harvard, Cum Laude, and from Harvard Law School. Today he is a senior member of the firm, Bernstein, Shur, Sawyer and Nelson. Helen, their daughter, a graduate of Radcliffe, Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa, received her Masters in Education from the University of Bridgeport. She is now a "volunteer professional," and lives with her husband who is a medical doctor in Connecticut. Mrs. Bernstein has four grandchildren.

Each group of which Mrs. Bernstein has been a part has recognized her outstanding contribution and honored and awarded her in great measure. She has been honored by the YWCA and National Council of Jewish Women in Portland in 1962. In 1966 she was named the Portland College Club Woman of the Year. In 1967 she was made an honorary alumni of Westbrook College. She received the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanities Award from the Israel Bond Drive in 1968.

The University of Maine at Portland-Gorham gave her its Distinguished Community Service Award in 1969. From Westbrook College she received the Deborah Morton Award in 1974, and in 1975 she was honored by the Portland Section of the National Council of Jewish Women.

An unusual woman, a remarkable human being, Mrs. Bernstein's commitment, her loyalty, her faith and her deep sense of charity and humanity have never wavered in her long years of service. When tragedies occur and times are hard, she is the kind of a human being who simply says to herself, "Rise, rise up."

Mrs. Bernstein lives at 38 Congress Street.

August, 1977

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL PROJECT

Portland, Maine

1976

ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee Name Mrs. Israel Bernstein

I certify that I have transcribed the Interview Tapes to the best of my ability, as accurately and clearly as possible. I have discussed the contents of the tapes and transcripts with no one.

Transcriber:

Name Judy Goldberg

Signature Judy Goldberg

Date Sept. 20, 1976

Ok'd by: Kennilyn Feig

Project Director

Jewish Bicentennial Project
Dr. Kennilyn Feig, Director
1976

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL PROJECT

Portland, Maine

1976

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Interviewee Name Rebecca Bernstein

I certify that I have edited the Original Transcript to the best of my ability, checking carefully on all unclear sounds and omissions from the tape. I have added no material of substance and changed no ideas. The editing goals were completion, clarity, removal of redundancy, removal of unnecessary comments and "chatter" non central to the interview, and grammatical clarification. The prime goal was a transcript which read well, flowed, and presented the ideas clearly, while always retaining the mechanisms and responses which kept intact the personality, state of mind, and beliefs of the interviewee.

Editor:

Name and Title Dr. Konnilyn Feig

Signature Konnilyn Feig

Date 12/18/77

Reread and Rechecked and held Confidential by

Name Lisa Wilhelm (signature)

Date 1/15/77

Name _____ (signature)

Date _____

Typist:

I certify that I have typed this transcript accurately and held the contents confidential.

Name Maie Lewis (signature)

Date 1/24/77

Jewish Bicentennial Project
Dr. Konnilyn Feig, Director
1976

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Israel Bernstein (Rebecca)

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Konnilyn Feig

DATE: September 2, 1976

F: This is an interview with Rebecca T. Bernstein, Mrs. Israel Bernstein, for the Jewish Federation and the University of Maine College of Arts and Sciences, Portland, for the Jewish Bicentennial Oral History Project by Dr. Konnilyn Feig and her assistants, one of which is present today, Lisa Wilhelm, at the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Maine, on September 2, 1976, at 1:00 p.m.

F: The first thing I'd like to talk with you about are your origins. We are trying to find some things out about the background of this Jewish community by tracing it back as far as anyone can recollect. No one has to be precise about this. You were born in America?

B: Yes.

F: But were your parents born in America?

B: No.

F: Where did they come from?

B: Now I should know. I just am going to give you Russia.

F: Both of them?

- B: Both of them.
- F: Did you get the impression when you talked with them that their parents and their grandparents had probably come from that same area, too?
- B: Yes.
- F: Did they come over together?
- B: No. They came different times.
- F: Were they married here?
- B: They were married in America, in Boston, Mass.
- F: Did they meet here?
- B: They met in Boston, Mass.
- F: Do you know when your father came to America?
- B: I think he was about fifteen. He was in his teen years, maybe fifteen or eighteen.
- F: What would that be, 1880 maybe?
- B: I'd say about that. If I am wrong in any of these things and if I can find out . . .
- F: It doesn't matter.
- B: It doesn't matter, but then . . .
- F: If we can get general ideas [Mrs. B: yes] that is what we are interested in [Mrs. B: yes, yes] and we will never say that we were having anything but general ideas. [Mrs. B: yes] Did he ever tell you why he came?
- B: Yes. I'll speak for my father's side now. They lived near Kiev, which was a big city at that time. My grandfather, who I knew quite well because he lived with us after Grandma died, lived rather well because he was closely related to a banker. So he was really among the privileged at a certain period. The anecdote that proves it is about my

father's oldest brother, James Thurman. When he came to this country, he wore a cape lined with white satin [laughter]! He was an unusually brilliant Hebrew scholar and so his parents were very proud of him and the community recognized him. They came to this country because the pogroms were beginning to take place. They came here and they were rather disappointed. They belonged to the Wellington group that flowed at least with opportunity. And not long after they were here Grandpa decided to go back. My father would not go back. He said that this was a land where we are free. "I am remaining in America." All the rest went back. There was a father and a mother, two sisters and three brothers. Papa lived here and met a man whom you call a landsman, who came from the same area. Later in life he started the Charak Furniture Company. They were both alone and they lived together and Papa did what the immigrants do. I don't know how they ever did it with the language. I think they were treated well by Jews who were already here. He was a young man anxious to make it. He had this great bundle of small household things and he used to peddle, you know, go from house to house.

And now may I tell you the incident that has really charmed the family. In a later period, my father was already in the wholesale grocery business and we were quite grown up. We were having company for dinner and there was this woman who really was interested in the beginning of things. And so Papa tells her a story; it wasn't a story, it was what happened to him:

The conductors hated people who came with big bundles. Papa finally decided that he would push on the bundles first and then hop on fast. Well, this time he tried it, but the conductor saw to it that he started the car and went off and left Papa without any capital! When this story was told the lady asked, "Didn't you carry insurance, Mr. Thurman?" I always thought of that because I look back now and wonder how they succeeded. Papa lived frugally and saved and saved and saved. And it wasn't too long before he got emergency mail from the family, that the pogroms were happening. To survive they wanted to come back to America.

was very pious. There was Mother, who gave him everything he wanted in a truly Orthodox home. When he went to services Friday night, if he saw a stranger, he took him home. Here she had five children born in America with sons who had already been accepted in the community. They understood her and she understood why they couldn't live the way their father lived. She was wise. She will never be forgotten in the community. Mother and another man, if they had to give food, would go at midnight and leave the food in front of the door so that the family receiving it wouldn't know who left it there - now that is Maimonides charity, you know.

F: Uhhuh, it certainly is.

B: When I came into the picture, Mother then would discuss the cases with me and I would always say, "Mother, they can't live on what we give them as charity, we have got to do more." So, of course, as I became a community person and knew what the different agencies stood for, I realized that these poor Jewish people had been deprived of a lot of aid that they were entitled to as citizens of the United States. She and I worked together beautifully. I respected her, genuinely respected her, and she respected me. It took me three or four years before I convinced the Orthodox committee on charity that they weren't serving Jewish people well and that we needed a new kind of an agency, and we got it. The Council of Jewish Women, you see, I come back to my pet, Council was my pet organization.

F: Uhhuh.

B: I didn't mention it, but I am a life member in the Council. The Council had a few women who had taken up social service at Simmons College. You see, we were already beginning to be known as an understanding group. Of course, you know why I picked the Council. I refused to become enveloped only in Jewish affairs. Someday I have to tell you about the Council of Jewish Women.

F: I intend for you to do that.

B: It is without question one of the most progressive organizations in America.

F: Well, that is one of the things I intend to go into with you, very definitely. I want to ask you a couple of other things now. What year did Israel form a law firm?

B: I should know that too. It happened this way. I don't know if Louie said anything. I have yet to see a relationship between two brothers as between Louie and Israel.

F: Oh, well, Louis Bernstein thinks that his brother was just about the greatest person walking on this earth.

B: Absolutely true, he still does.

F: Yes, I know.

B: Israel, Louie, and Sumner had already come in the firm and Lenny Nelson, and then a Ward fellow, and we really had a wonderful firm. It was the kind that you called a completely family firm. Nelson's father was and is very close to Barney Shur. There is a love story between Barney Shur and Israel. Israel was Barney's father's and uncle's lawyer and they didn't do anything without Israel. It was a time when you were more than a lawyer because you knew these people ever since you were born and it was a very close relationship. When Barney started to go to law school, we knew the time had come when he would not be their lawyer. The relationship still was warm. But Barney, as you gather, was a lawyer; Mr. Harold Nelson thought that it would make a wonderful combination for Barney to join Israel's team. The younger people in Israel's firm thought it was good, too, but they were afraid of Israel's reaction because here he was the head, working with people where the whole atmosphere was never charged with anything that wasn't complete cooperation. To their great amazement, when they were trembling in suggesting to him, he said, "GREAT!"

F: Can I tell you a story after that?

B: Yes.

F: I told this several times in the last two weeks. I am sure Louis will not mind and neither will Barney, Barney is one of my favorites. It was towards the end of the interview and I was asking Louis what he intended to do now, because he obviously had many many years left and he wasn't just going to sit on his duff. And he said, "Well, you know, I am spending some time in Florida. I went last summer and last winter and I am going this winter. One of the youngsters in our firm is doing quite well and it means that I can go to Florida more." And I said, "Who is the youngster you are talking about?" And he said, "Well, Barney Shur, of course!" [laughter] I chuckled at that story for a week. To Louis, Barney is a youngster.

B: I think so. You get to the stage where every year is compared to other periods in your life when you were sort of interested in how many more years you will have; and you are interested in the different things you are going to do as you grow older, especially if you are raising a family. Then you reach another period. With me it was after I was 70. I spent my 70th birthday as though I were 16! I'll never forget it [laughter]. Israel and I were visiting Helen and Ed - they were living in Connecticut - and I remember coming down after breakfast and dancing into the living room, "I'M 70 TODAY!" It didn't last too long. But I really was excited because I was happy that both of my children were happily married. It seemed that a mission had been accomplished.

F: You did raise two children?

B: Yes.

F: And Sumner went to Law School and then he met his wife in . . .

B: Law school.

F: And they have children?

B: Yes. Their son is going to be a senior at Bowdoin.

F: And isn't it true that their daughter is getting a Masters Degree in History?

B: Art History.

F: That's right, I remember that.

B: Yes.

F: And your daughter, Helen, went to Radcliff, Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa . . .

B: And President of her class.

F: And she lives in . . .

B: She now lives in Fairfield, Connecticut.

F: She is married to . . .

B: She is married to Dr. Edward Wasserman.

F: So, your mission was completed.

B: Yes.

F: How many times are you a grandmother?

B: Four times by nature and one by marriage, so I have five grandchildren. Roz's daughter is married, the girl who studied Art.

F: Okay, now, in what year did Israel die?

B: 1957.

F: Now I want to start going back. When you started raising your children, could you describe for me your home in a religious sense.

B: Yes. In the first place, the atmosphere was Jewish. Over our fireplace was a beautiful painting of a rabbi. We had all those little things like candlesticks. Friday night was as beautiful as it was when I was reared in the Thurman household. The holidays were celebrated at the Sedorim - we used to have 21-22. I remember during the War time when there were many Jewish soldiers in Portland.

The children went to Hebrew School and it was nothing you could brag about. They really had the old-time rebbes, but the children definitely were reared in a Jewish atmosphere.

F: Did Sumner play hooky like a lot of the ones I am finding out about in these interviews?

B: If he did, I would not have blamed him!

F: [Laughter]

B: You see, Sumner's Grandpa was the head educator and I know he used to feel badly that the teachers never punished him. He used to come home saying, "It isn't right, Mother - it isn't right - that the other kids would get a little slap or something, but I never did."

F: And you always kept a kosher home, didn't you?

B: Strictly kosher.

F: That has never changed, even to this day?

B: No. I wouldn't want to have the chief rabbi come now [laughter]. I am living by myself. I have the milk and the meat separated, but believe me, if sometimes a milk dish or a milk thing falls into the sink, I wash it with hot water and I say it's clean, and nobody is checking on me. But I am checking on myself because my life is so different now. But my conscience, I have to say, the conscience is there all the time.

F: I'll want to know later what accounted for the changes in your life and your beliefs and how you feel about things, but I want to now go into the organizations.

B: Yes.

F: And bear with me if I am just a little confusing from time to time.

B: If you think it is rough, you are making it very kind and understanding.

F: We've got you coming to Portland in 1922 and I am going to make an assumption, first of all, that you started to get involved in the Jewish community almost right away. [Mrs. B: exactly, yes] Now, I want to ask you one other thing. Did you ever practice law in Maine?

B: No.

F: But you did pass the Maine Bar?

B: That is one thing Israel absolutely accepted. When I married, I was already a liberated woman in the sense that I was recognized as a person.

F: All right.

B: But there is one thing Israel held on to. I will never forget the day he woke up and said, "I am not feeling well." I said, "You stay home and I'll go to the office." He jumped up, like a torpedo! You see, that was something that he couldn't quite accept, whereas in later years, it would have been par for the course. That was the one thing. Outside of that nobody could have given me more encouragement.

F: You and he were partners in your community affairs?

B: Absolutely.

F: You served on some of the same boards [Mrs. B: yes] together.

B: He encouraged me. He was wise enough to know that just domesticity would dry me up. And he encouraged me in everything. I had help. I had one woman for 43 years, but she never raised my children. Israel gave me the encouragement, I was old-fashioned compared to now, because once I was married, home came first and keeping those who looked to me for something - they came first. And cooking whatever Israel liked was never too hard for me, never was.

F: A very spoiled man and a happily spoiled man.

B: That's right. I mean, I don't know if you know what goes into making gefilte fish.

F: Yes, I do. So, you made your own gefilte fish?

B: Yes, or pickled herring [laughter]. Israel helped me grow because I certainly sensed how provincial my Jewish community was.

F: You did?

B: Yes, and that's where Council came in.

F: You did sense that?

B: Yes.

F: I am learning about the parochialism - I am sure this is true of not Jews only, but of everyone in Portland. I am noticing [Mrs. B: yes] that I am meeting so many people, Mrs. Bernstein, who have never been anywhere else but Portland.

B: Yes.

F: I think they have done the very best that they can, by the way, and I am very proud of them, and I will write that way; but this word parochial has been hitting me over the head, right now, today, in 1976, and it must have been so much more outstanding in the days that you are talking about.

B: It certainly was. I ought to tell another thing about both Israel and Louie. They did inherit a real training through the influence of their father. Israel and Louie could literally conduct a religious service and read from the Torah and all that. I think those two stand out. They really could conduct a service as of old.

F: Well, that's what Louie said.

B: Yes, that's right. There is one thing I am glad that I can say. I can almost hear Louie talk, and I have got to say that he has been a wonderful brother-in-law.

F: Well, Louie Bernstein is the kind of a man who will say that he hasn't done very much, and then each time you mention a subject, you might just mention higher education, and he'll say, "Oh, yes, well, I did this and this," [Mrs. B: oh, yes] and then you'll start talking about medicine and he'll say, "Well, of course, you know that I put this and this together," [Mrs. B: yes] and then you'll mention another subject and he'll say, "Oh, well, I was involved in that too." I found it fascinating. Now I want to start with the religious life - the congregations. You remember that before you came to town, congregation Eretz Israel was formed and then it changed to Etz Chaim.

- B: Yes.
- F: And it meant at that time the tree of life, and as the literature I have read said, at that time, they thought they were the modern shul.
- B: That's right.
- F: I also am aware that in the past, Portland was called a Jerusalem [Mrs. B: Jerusalem, yes] because of its [Mrs. B: Orthodoxy] very solid Orthodoxy. I am aware that in about 1929 another organization was put together called Vaad Hoir, which is the Jewish Community Council and it had all three congregations under it. So, in 1929, they had three congregations here, all under a religious ruling group that was called the Jewish Community Council, replaced later by Federation. So, back in 1926, Shaarey Tphiloh celebrated the burning of the mortgage. Do you remember that?
- B: Very faintly.
- F: Do you remember that your husband at that big event was the major speaker?
- B: Those things I remember, but I think the children were very little. Did you say 1924?
- F: This is 1926.
- B: 1926. Sumner was a baby then and I think I used to stay home more then.
- F: The Jewish Federation, then, was formed in 1941 and on its board of directors was Mrs. Israel Bernstein, and one of its first officers. She was the first second vice-president and then she held other offices in it. All right. Prior to the Jewish Federation, there was an organization called the United Jewish Appeal which lasted until 1944 and that group was led by none other than Israel and Rebecca Bernstein. Am I correct so far?
- B: Well, I am not as sure as I am of other events because the United Jewish Appeal was the beginning of the Jewish Federation. During the Second World War the city of Portland felt that instead of having different ethnic groups have their drives, that there should be one community campaign; and those agencies doing social service

would participate in that cause. I remember that is where the Hebrew Free Loan got money, and that is where the Council got \$5,000. I remember it was \$5,000 because it was as though we had found a gold mine! I remember that period rather hazily, but as I talk about it now, it becomes clearer. When the charity part was given up to the Jewish Family Agency, they turned over their money to the Hebrew Free Loan, and that was put into a trust, tied with chains - with copper chains - limiting it to spending only for certain things. For instance, they can't use any of that money to give to the Jewish campaign. Then we fought to elongate another branch because the whole commercial thing was troublesome. There are very few people who can go into business with \$500 now or \$1,000 so we now have extended what we call the Educational division of the Hebrew Free Loan. And that is also where you get the idea of Judaism, of loaning money without interest so that a Jewish youngster can go to school, or an adult who is seeking education but needs money for tuition, can apply for the Hebrew Free Loan. And the Council of Jewish Women has a scholarship. Last year, I think Council distributed \$2,400.

- F: And the Council of Jewish Women right now can point with pride to a woman singing in the Metropolitan Opera [Mrs. B: yes] who wouldn't be singing in that opera if it had not been for Clarice Shur, Rebecca Bernstein and the Council of Jewish Women, am I correct?
- B: You are right - you're right! It's true, isn't her name Batya? Yes, all right, you are now going to be my resource [laughter].
- F: Well, I am learning a great deal. So then, you ended the United Jewish Appeal and immediately moved into forming this organization called the Jewish Federation. And you and your husband were very instrumental in forming that agency.
- B: You know, if I have to tell the truth, Israel was the founder. But Abe Levey at that time, without question, was the biggest giver who believed in the Federation and he was Israel's client. I don't think he moved a step without Israel. And he wanted to be known as the founder of the Federation, and so it has been written, but to you I am telling it as it was.

F: It was really Israel?

B: It was really Israel.

F: Now, why did Israel want this? Certainly there must have been some controversy about this.

B: Well, we had already heard that the community as a whole was beginning to be fed up with all the Jewish organizations soliciting money. That was one reason. Secondly, the need for giving money to Jews in other countries was growing. The other thing with Federation, every meeting was held at 184 Bolton Street for years.

F: Oh, really.

B: Yes.

F: So, both of you felt strongly about Federation.

B: Yes.

F: I want to go back again now. In 1920, the Council of Jewish Women was founded.

B: Yes.

F: At some point in time, you became its President.

B: Yes, when I came to Portland, I was elected Secretary, and I think this is a cute story. As secretary, I used to write the minutes, and one day one woman said, "Your minutes are too long. [laughter] Before you, we just said where we met and the refreshments were served." [laughter]

F: You have been called Mrs. Council.

B: Yes.

F: Do you know you have been called that?

B: Darling, they have been so good to me that whatever I did is nothing compared to the love I have received. Two years ago, the Council gave an affair to honor me, and Helen came up. I thought they gave Helen such a tough assignment to talk about her mother. The response was just an

overwhelming response. Both daughters were there. I find it so hard to call Rosalyne a daughter-in-law. When I spoke, I spoke of my two daughters because I feel that way. I had a good subject. I could tell there were many non-Jews there; I think more non-Jews were there than Jews, and that gave me a chance to talk about the National Council of Jewish Women and to the surprise of many, they had never heard about it. And do you know that they contributed over \$400 to the Council, and there was no soliciting of funds.

F: They came to that and gave \$400?

B: Yes.

F: This is your real love?

B: Yes.

F: But this is a love of yours, the Council of Jewish Women.

B: It began because it was the first one.

F: Would you tell me about it?

B: Yes. When I came to Portland, I sensed how provincial everybody was, and that we were being known as an Orthodox community because nobody was ready to start another Synagogue that would be very modern compared to Orthodoxy. I belonged to Hadassah before I was married in Boston because Boston was really the home of Zionism.

F: It was?

B: Yes. It certainly was, for a long time. There was a fervor. It wasn't that you just belonged to Zionism. There was a fervor connected with the membership. When I came here, the leaders of Hadassah thought they were ready, not to convert me - they didn't have to convert - but they were ready to adopt me. They thought they could be successful, you know, with entertainment and all the whipped cream [laughter]. I had heard about the Council of Jewish Women. I was impressed with

their program. I didn't belong in Boston but I was aware of it. When I read of their program, which was both Jewish and American, that was for me. I never said no to Hadassah when they asked me to speak, never. I became a life member as soon as I was able to be a life member. I hurt them because they couldn't say that I was devotedly interested. But as an American citizen, I just couldn't envelop myself completely with Judaism or with Israel.

Now, my grandfather is buried in Israel. I have been to Israel twice. But there is a prior commitment. I am living in America, and America has done an awful lot for me. My father told me that we are just fortunate to live in this country. And the opportunities open to Jews have been growing and growing and growing, and that is why I feel that strongly. A good member of Council can really feel as I felt, that I was going to graduate school. When I was intensely interested in legislation, I used to go to Radcliffe to the Cambridge League of Women Voters. They represented Harvard and Radcliffe - and we used to have a seminar and that to me was dessert! And then, of course, I had subject matters to talk about when I would come back. At Council meetings now, I have reached the point where I listen and I follow protocol very, very carefully; and none of those young people are going to say that I don't know that my time is over in dictating. But I am tremendously interested. We are now having younger people run the Council and I bless every one of them because they really recognize that this organization is giving them what they are looking for - now that they have little children and can't do all the studying that they are going to do when their children go to school. The material I used to get from the National Council of Jewish Women was outstanding. You know, we have a bureau in Washington.

F: What did the Council give most of its attention to?

B: Well, in the first place, we encouraged social welfare and we encouraged a relationship with the agencies, with the community agencies. You see, Council became a part of the community too. You know, it got to the point where if any of the organizations wanted a good

worker, they would call us and it would be a Council person who had reached the point of promotion. It became a resource of the community too, of the kind of Jewish women who could serve the community.

F: So the Council, locally and nationally, took the leadership, not just for Jews, but for Americans. It was concerned with social welfare, and social services, and legislation.

B: And peace. Do you remember peace? Do you remember the Kellogg Pact and all that?

F: Yes, of course. Oh, you did that?

B: Yes.

F: What else?

B: [Laughter] Well, at that time, I could see the Council was a wonderful tunnel, a beautiful tunnel . . .

F: You could take all of your commitments and your concerns and . . .

B: Yes, yes.

F: Well, let's talk about your commitments and your concerns in the Twenties and Thirties. What were they?

B: I don't know what organization I belonged to first. Oh, I had the most wonderful experience with Margaret Payson.

F: You know Margaret Payson?

B: Do I know her! She had organized a group of six of her personal friends who were interested in getting into agencies, trained professional people. She was the first one. Then she felt that it ought to have a wider base. So, she asked Mrs. Donahue, who was an outstanding Catholic. She was postmistress for a while. And she asked me. We didn't talk about it, but I would represent the Jewish groups. We worked as a team. At that time it was the Children's Service Bureau. I can never forget her introduction of a

professional person. It made the woman who was running that agency feel that Margaret was doing these things to kill her job. That's how bitter things became. But Margaret has made it her life; and she also has had the financial strength to back everything. I can never forget when she wanted the Portland Community Chest to accept her agency. It became her agency. She was the first one to bring a professional director. She was the first one to bring a psychiatrist to the agency once a week or once a month to take care of problems that seemed too much for the case worker. Fortunately, we summered at Casco Bay, at Waites Landing where she lived, and it was very easy to be together. I figured the other day - 34 years of active participation - when I shared all the programs, and we made a wonderful team. She was born for research, and I could do the interpretation of what she had dug up.

F: And much of this is translated into legislation?

B: Yes.

F: Now, the Council today, is it vigorous?

B: We have very young leaders and as I say, I am disciplining myself not to rush them [laughter] because they mean well. Now, they are becoming Jewish. Listen, they have at the Mall during the Hannukah period, a program. It is because they have a fresh energy. They have something there every day for the eight days that we burn the candles. They have the cantor sing, some of the choir - and they have a wonderful program.

F: What other kinds of things are they doing now?

B: Let's see. After all these years, there is this woman who has come to live in Maine who worked with the League of Nations. I am going back, you want me to be historical, and she has been to the Washington Conventions. She is trying to build up what really has been a dream of mine - a committee interested in social legislation. I was re-elected to the United Way for three years. I told them that they were very optimistic, and there is a legislative issues committee on which I have been since the beginning. An agency like the Council can lend strength

to the legislation that this committee is recommending. That is what I think. I am very encouraged because this woman evidently has the kind of living that she can go to conventions.

F: What is her name? I shouldn't have asked that?

B: No. I want you to know that in the last two years, names have become a problem. Now I know - Ms. Eleanor Multer.

F: Names, Mrs. Bernstein, I cannot remember.

B: Do you know, I went through an agonizing period - then in the middle of the night when the name would come - I would get up and write it down. It is the hardest thing for a person who once used to remember. I would go to a National Convention and remember every single person I met, and where they lived. And now, I can look at you and say is it Feig or Fieg; and of course, I love the name of Lisa. To me it is a beautiful name and I immediately associated you with a beautiful person I knew, Lisa; and Cheryl is the daughter of one of my friends. I try to do it with association.

F: Well, you can't do it with my name. My name is Konnilyn.

B: It's a hard name. I'd call you Konnie before too long! [laughter]

F: Please do. You spent a lot of time, then, going up to Augusta, didn't you?

B: Yes.

F: After awhile you got to know the Governors or the Governors' wives, is that true?

B: Yes, with Hildreth, I remember. Margaret did this - she is responsible for having an educated head of Health and Welfare. It used to be the reward for a person who had worked to elect the Governor. That was his reward. He would be Chairman of Health and Welfare. What a fight Margaret fought. I'll never forget Horace Hildreth. He was going to appoint somebody who did not meet Margaret's qualifications.

So, he invited us to dinner or to luncheon at the mansion. And he put me next to him - because he had an idea that I might influence Margaret and because I was there to interpret what Margaret wanted. [laughter] He was right. The League of Women Voters made one big mistake. We worked for two years to change the probation department in Cumberland County, two solid years. And we had the law changed and the law provided for a professional leader and an assistant who was a professional in Junior problems. And it started off beautifully. I remember when we visited the old probation officer. He was 82 years old. I would ask him, "Do you have many bad boys here?" He said, "Yes, but I talked to them and they promise to be good!" Margaret and I made that our contribution to that period, and it was such a subject, budget-wise to the local superior court judge. So we kept after him to increase the pay. And then we became very delinquent. We became too involved in other legislation of the agency and we became terribly involved in child care. At that time it became the child and family - children, child and family. That was a struggle because Margaret had had a vision of how to treat the child who needed individual care. You know we are coming back to it now.

F: Yes, we are.

B: I am telling you.

F: It sounds like we are talking about right now, today.

B: May I say this to you, the first meeting, when I went to the United Way, it was as though I was 30 years old again. All the problems that Margaret Payson had envisioned were squelched when we had to take in family care. She saw, but we couldn't fight the community needs, because the family association at that time just died. They didn't have the professional leadership and the Board became discouraged. And certainly no one can deny that you need a family agency; but the powers that be decided that it should be hitched on. But let me tell you, I sat at the meeting and they brought up this whole problem of abuse to children and juvenile delinquency and all that. It was just as though I had heard that and lived it. But Margaret Payson has never been

shown the gratitude a community owes her. She did get two honorary degrees. I went to the Colby one. As a matter of fact, I went to both of them. There she was honored and Frost the poet received his honorary degree. I had a swell time there. [laughter] You were with the elite and it was very, very nice. But then when she got the University of Maine honor, the president who worked with her had decided to leave. I forgot his name. Evidently a secretary wrote it up. Her family came. Don't forget her family. She stood outside of her family. They were social people. They were the most generous contributors and everything had to be anonymous. They are, without question, strong aristocrats - and whatever they did was anonymous. And when I think what the Payson family did and gave to the Maine Medical Center, it should have been named after them. You see, I feel a personal hurt because of working with Miss Payson for 35 years. Then I was fortunate again to know Margaret Jones. Have you met her?

F: Of course.

B: When Margaret Payson wanted something done, it took priority in your life. By that time, I had grown children and I had been with them in the most important period of their lives. I wanted to be there. I gratefully welcomed Margaret Jones, explained how she had to work with Margaret, to understand that Margaret is a perfectionist from beginning to end, and thank God, Peggy Jones is a perfectionist, and they get along together beautifully. I'm kept informed as to what they do.

F: You were on the board of the National Council of Jewish Women?

B: Yes. Six years.

F: Six years. Did you enjoy that experience?

B: Wonderful.

F: And you met a lot of people that way, didn't you?

B: Wonderful! Again, I'd like to know how I can explain to you the people. I love people, but I have lived long enough to know that there are levels, too [laughter].

When you go to a national convention of the Council of Jewish Women, it is just as though you are meeting relatives. Then I once had the honor when the President came to visit; and then I had the Executive Director come to visit. She had already told members of the board that she never saw two children so well brought up as Sumner and Helen. Helen just is a very warm, gentle person who has - do you mind if I sing her praise a little bit?

F: I wish you would.

B: On May 12th, an organization in which she is interested, called the Judaic Christian Society, planned to honor her as Woman of the Year. There were over 200 people there, and I never can re-live being enveloped in the love for Helen more than I was enveloped then, at that affair.

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Israel Bernstein

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Konnilyn Feig

DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 17, 1976

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Lafayette Town House

PROJECT ASSISTANTS: Lisa Wilhelm
Cheryl Greaney
Martha Browne

JEWISH BICENTENNIAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

- F: This is our second interview with Rebecca Bernstein on September 17, 1976, at her apartment in the Lafayette Town House with Lisa Wilhelm, Martha Browne, Cheryl Greaney, and Dr. Feig present.
- F: The last time we were talking, we stopped with the Jewish Council. We were going to go on to the Federation as a separate entity and the Jewish Welfare Services; and we also needed to talk some about the Jewish Community Center. We had just talked about the Center Day Camp, so we need to go on. But before we do that, last night I was reminded of what we ought to do first, to talk about right now. I guess that I had assumed that certainly by this time you would have let up a little, but after my experience of last night, I find that simply isn't exactly true. I was sitting at a dinner with President Miller of the University, and I said, "You know, I met the nicest woman . . ."
- B: Drop me down a peg! She'll get me down there.
- F: No, no. I could say a lot of things about you, but I don't think it is wrong nowadays to say something nice. [B: no] I said, "I met the nicest woman the other day, President Miller, do you know her? Rebecca Bernstein." He said, "Oh, yes, we are on the United Fund Board together." So it occurred to me last night that what we better do is work backwards. My assumption that you had let up a little on your activities [B: yes] may be correct, but [B: the assumption is correct] . . .
- B: The assumption is correct, but when the United Way asked, I told them they were much more optimistic than I was! I was on the first Board of Directors; then I was re-elected about 30 years later, maybe 40 [F: laughter]. I came to the first meeting,

and it was as though there had been no past time, because every agency wanted money, and the whole attitude of the agencies toward the central agency was the same, too. They felt autonomous. You were on a board, and you knew from the by-laws what you were going to cover; but one of the most aggravating experiences was this: that if a case came in that didn't exactly fit, there was such an attitude that well, we're not geared for that. But it was human beings who didn't know all about the agencies; and they came for help. It seemed to me that if they really were at heart, good social workers, they would at least give that person more than a "we are sorry." But I have lived long enough to see a change in that now. So what happened was I could sit there, and from sheer experience at a meeting relate what was being discussed to the question of whether or not it was progress. Again it gave me that plus: I seem to know more than most of the new people [laughter]. It's just one of those inevitable things. Mike Pettit presented what I could tell was the first crack in the set-up of United Way. You began to sense that the United Way was beginning to be concerned with these little gaps that I refer to; it was concerned with the community and whether agencies were doing their full duty. If there were gaps, they are being recognized - that there were new social problems coming up, contemporary things that didn't have the tradition of old agencies. Bob Hart, the Executive Director, is showing very modern leadership, and it isn't easy. It isn't easy to come to an agency that has always had power to decide what it can do well; and then to put elasticity in it and relationships to the community as a whole. It seems to me that he has turned the tide. He now says that the United Way is much more than just a funding agency, much more than just interested in finance. It is concerned with the community at every phase. And of course, now they are becoming intensely interested in child abuse which, of course, is the result of child care; and so much emphasis is being put on that it is becoming alive and current.

F: It is very interesting. I don't like to react personally to anything in an interview, but I have had problems on occasion when contributing to the United Way, not to any certain organization [B: yes], but to the United Way on occasion. I have felt that there

are in Portland some people left out, those down on Danforth Street and all around in there. I am concerned what we are doing about them; and in many communities, the United Way has lagged behind on some of the problems that have come up [B: yes, but . . .]. But you are saying [B: yes] that concerns you also.

B: Definitely. There is a certain delight in seeing the tide turn - not completely turn, and I go back to Mike Pettit. He showed his deep concern for people who needed understanding. He presented a paper that was exactly what we had been thinking about at the Child and Family Services; and of course, I have to remember the influence of Margaret Payson. I think I told you that to me it was like post-graduate work [F: I know]! Anytime I could apply what I had learned through her, I have. I could see that here was a chance for what she had the vision to see can happen. I saw that in Mike's first paper. At that meeting, you know you could pinpoint the real Republicans who believed that they rose by their own bootstraps and succeeded over all kinds of problems, and felt that we are becoming too soft. I kept looking at Mike's face, just like a mother seeing his child get sad. You could feel that he wasn't being understood, but I literally was delighted. I had never met Mike, but I went over to him and I congratulated him, because I felt that way, and then I said, "Don't be discouraged because some people don't share my enthusiasm." But he has come a long way and he has been successful enough so that we have the Social Legislative Committee in the United Way. There was one very good board meeting in which we were given the authority to use our judgment in the legislation we would endorse and work for. So we put in probably quite a few things that these other people thought was socialism [laughter]. So I see progress and I really feel now I have the feeling that I had at the very beginning - that the United Way needs year-round understanding. Now they try not to concentrate everything in the month of the campaign; and they really are making it a year-round education.

F: Well, why do you still serve? It must be very tiring.

- B: I'll tell you why. I assume no responsibility for a project. I probably should have said this first. I am now deemed recipient of what I used to do in former years - the recipient in one way that I don't have to look up everything [laughter by all]. Secondly, they are courteous enough to understand so that I don't have to tell a long story and bring a doctorate certificate. [laughter] They understand that I am there, that I'm interested; and they are willing to share my experiences. I am learning a lot.
- F: They are bringing you up to date, too, all along?
- B: All along.
- F: In other words, you are beating them in the being up-to-date process, right?
- B: Yes. I am being the beneficiary now.
- F: You know something, you probably are very current on all the major social things that are happening, aren't you? Social problems?
- B: Many of them.
- F: You know, the things you have mentioned - child abuse, wife beating, all that sort of stuff [B: yes] - awful child abuse stuff, it's even getting more and more in the paper. I don't know if it is happening more than it ever did, but it certainly is in the paper more. Back in the old days, did you and Margaret come across all this child abuse?
- B: No, but you know, when we had to absorb the family services, of course it meant that we had cut short in doing many of the things that Margaret felt were so important for the individual case of child care. We now had a much broader base, and we were involved in families. But a lot of the volunteer agencies who did volunteer work weren't burdened down with the procedures. However, there is something about which I talk almost like a villain. I fear that sometimes a professional has so much theory in her or him that he forgets some of these human reactions.
- F: You say that very, very well.

B: Somehow or other some become almost too professional.

F: I see, you find yourself going from one extreme to another. When you started, the big thing that you told me concerned you and Mrs. Payson the most, a primary concern of yours, was the fact that there was no professionalism.

B: No, none at all.

F: So, you urged and fought and got legislation to secure professionalism [B: yes], and now you find [B: yes] the other extreme, on occasion [B: can on occasion] is true.

B: On occasion, yes. There still are some wonderful human beings in every profession; but because I am not the professional person, I can be a little bit more emotional at times. It wouldn't do if I were professional! [F: laughter] So, I probably am a little bit more critical when I don't sense some of that understanding. And I know you have to discipline poor people too. I don't think I would get an A on that one [laughs], but I do in some things.

F: So, now you serve on United Way. But you are a life member of the Council of Jewish Women [B: yes]. Do you still attend meetings of the Council of Jewish Women?

B: Yes. Now, I have to do this. I really don't go all the time. I feel badly when I miss a meeting, but I feel I can, especially if the weather is too bad. But I know the president, and I do read the minutes carefully; and sometimes I get more out of the minutes than if I were at the meeting.

F: Can I tell you a story about Sumner?

B: Yes.

F: Would that be all right with you?

B: Yes.

F: I asked Sumner, obviously, what it was like to grow up with a father like Israel Bernstein and a mother like Rebecca Bernstein. I think that's a perfectly okay question. That's the same kind of question you would have asked, had you been me, right?

B: Yes.

F: Well, he had no trouble with that. Sumner is one of the most emotional and dedicated Jewish men whom I have ever met; and many a time he had to catch himself yesterday. I didn't think I was even asking him troublesome questions, but of course, now I realize they were troublesome. I was just asking him to talk about his commitments. I thought I was committed, but after I got through with your son yesterday, I thought, you know, Rebecca Bernstein raised one of the most committed and wise men I've ever met in my life. For 52, he is very wise [B: yes, very]. All right, he related one event, which he chuckles about. I said, "How did you get to be like you are? You keep a kosher home, but you are not in the Temple every morning or every Friday night or every Saturday morning. You do try to observe Friday night, but you are not all the time in that Temple or in Synagogue. Why? I want you to explain it to me." Well, he also started talking about his family, his mother and his father. Then, in addition, he said, "I just have one little story I'd like to tell you about my mother and how as a kid I grew up. When I grew up, I took it as a matter of course that people went to meetings all the time." He said, "My father never had a car [B: I didn't know this], and so life was everyone going to meetings, and I believed that that was what a man in a community and a woman in a community had to do." He also said that he had a little program at school and his mother was in Boston at a meeting: "I was supposed to be on that program, and I just cried, and cried, and cried, and my father had to come down." Do you remember the story?

B: [Laughter] Yes, I'll never forget that [laugh]. And believe me, he said, "You won't be there, Mother?" And I said, "Well, will Israel's mother do?" He said, "NOBODY - I WANT YOU!" [laughter] And he cried. Really, for a long time there, that was one of the reasons why I never missed luncheon at home if I had to leave meetings at noon. And how did I know? We lived on Bolton Street, and he was walking down Brighton Avenue. When he reached the corner, he was yelling, "MOTHER!" When he came in the house, he was a bubbling brook. But I think the incident that I remember with such affection was the first time he was in kindergarten and he had forgotten

something and I brought it in. It was obvious he was embarrassed, so I made haste and I just gave him what he forgot. He may have been a little older because he probably was going to Hebrew School and forgot his change or something. Two years later, no, it was more than that, Helen King, who was principal at school, said she wanted to see me. She said, "Well, Sumner, when he is in primary school, I suppose that I will be seeing you all the time." I said, "Supposing you wait!" [laughter] So, of course, she quickly put me on guard [laughter]. She put me on guard, and I was rather amused to think she called me and told me that it was time that I came over. She said, "I asked you to come at recess time for a special reason." We went to the window and there was Sumner, his shirt was out and at that time they wore the pants up to their knees. One leg was down to his ankles, and his face was smeared with perspiration - he was having a wonderful time. I said, "Well, Helen, the next thing I'll do is send you a snapshot of what he looks like when he leaves the house!" [laughter] So we had a lot of incidents, and at that time she wanted him to get a double promotion. I said, "I'm not delighted with that at all. I'd certainly have to talk it over with Israel and if anything, I am a little hesitant; I don't want to push him." "Well," she says, "then let me tell you the whole story. He is so bored in this class that the other day I found him crawling on the floor to tickle somebody. That is so unlike him." But that is how bored he was in that classroom and he had to get it out somehow. That took care of Israel's and my decision!

- F: So that's why he went to college at age 16 or 17.
- B: Yes, that explains it. The first time, I will never forget. I came in and there he was. He kept slapping his chest and telling all the kids that I was his mother. There was no embarrassment. As I said before, I'm sorry you can't meet Helen. That's why I feel as blessed as I am, because Sumner is rare. He has a way of saying, "Mother." All he has to do is say "Mother" on the telephone, and if I thought of finding fault at something, I am gone! There is something in his personality!

F: When you read in the paper, as I did, that he got up in that meeting with all those Catholics sitting there, with Monsignor Nolan, 900 Catholics down at the Holiday Inn, and really laid it to them, very quickly and very quietly and very succinctly, I am sure the first you heard of it was reading it in the paper, right?

B: Yes, that's true.

F: Now, I was proud of him as a citizen of this community. But you are his mother! As I was telling him yesterday, I can still see the paper and I can still see where it is in the paper [B: yes] and I can see what it said about Sumner, and I can see the editorial. I was angry with everybody in that room, and I was proud of Sumner Bernstein because he represented other parts of this community in what he said. But how did you as a mother feel?

B: Well, you know, I don't think I know about this one incident you are talking about.

F: The big thing that Sumner Bernstein did in this town in the last year.

B: Well, you know, I have been away a lot.

F: Well, then, may I tell you what your son did?

B: Yes.

F: Monsignor Nolan, who is a Catholic big shot, lived in Israel for awhile, which made him an expert on Israel, obviously. He knew the Pope, and I am not sure exactly what he is officially because I didn't care to know. I guess he is like the Pope's advisor on Jewish affairs or something like that. He came over and spoke to 900 Catholics, the Catholic Brotherhood of the State of Maine, and at that point he took a pro-Arab stand. This was down at the Holiday Inn. Now the man who brought him was a friend of Sumner's, a Harold somebody or other.

PA: Loring.

F: Loring. Harold Loring asked Sumner if he wanted to come, and Sumner said, "Sure." Then Mr. Loring reminded him the day of it and Sumner got a ticket. In the meantime Sumner had called the American Jewish Committee about this Monsignor Nolan. So he said to Harold Loring, "I would like just one thing from you - I would like an opportunity to speak after Monsignor Nolan is through." That is an awfully audacious thing to ask [B: yes]; but Harold was a friend of his so he said, "Sure, all right." So he went down there with all those Catholic men. A couple of my students were there because this was a big deal. Evidently Monsignor Nolan is a very famous man. So, the thing started about 9 a.m. and at 12 noon Monsignor Nolan was still talking. When he finished, Harold did turn to Sumner, even though it was so late, and nodded at him. Sumner stood up and he said something like this - let's see if I can remember what he said. He said, "You know, you have only heard one side of this issue!" Your son stands in front of all those Catholics - the members of the brotherhood throughout Maine [B: yes] - and he stands up there and he says, "You heard one side of this." Oh, by the way, Monsignor Nolan flavored everything he said by saying, "Of course, I talked to the Pope about this and the Pope and I discussed this." [B: laughter] Here it was - Monsignor Nolan, the Pope, and Sumner Bernstein! And Sumner says, "You have heard only one side of this. This side is full of erroneous facts, misrepresentation and ignorance. I would hope that as concerned individuals, you would want to know the other side, and that each of you in all of your brotherhoods would invite me throughout the state to come and talk." There was a hushed silence and then Sumner told us, and I think this hurts him a bit, "You know what, I have never been invited once!" And I said, "Well, Sumner, don't feel bad. I worked on these two students in that audience for eight months and they didn't come around."

B: And, of course, they know now his attitude.

F: But that's your son.

B: Well, of course, you know the Pope has never recognized Israel.

- F: But don't you know the great thing that the Catholic Church did for the Jews? I don't go into sarcasm very often, but finally, after years of insisting throughout the world that Jews killed Christ, the Catholic Church through great insight and wisdom, put in the encyclopedia in 1970 or '68 and said that they would like us to know that they no longer believe that the Jews killed Christ! You know more than I do, [B: yes] but they just made this statement saying that Jews didn't really kill Christ and everyone really ought to try to get along with them. It was to me a statement that was totally out of order.
- B: May I count now for the other side?
- F: Yes, I knew you were going to do that!
- B: I was asked once to be on a citizens committee to evaluate the nursing service, nursing teaching at the Mercy Hospital. I can't distinguish one sisterhood from another, and in the survey, I represented the community. One of the sisters there - to forget her name is a sin.
- F: That's all right.
- B: She was chairman of the committee, and it was quite obvious, I felt, that at least she and I had established a real silent rapport. She went to Israel and she met one or two priests who were there studying that Judaism is the basis of Christianity.
- F: Obviously.
- B: But you see, she brought me small pamphlets.
- F: All right; there's a Mother Superior out at St. Joseph's College who lived in Israel for four years. She asked me to come out and speak on the Holocaust [B: yes]. She hasn't quite made it, and she is never going to quite make it as to where she should be; but she had the courage out at St. Joseph's to put in a course on the Holocaust taught by someone else. She had courage to do that in a Catholic College. That's steps ahead of where it used to be.

- B: Of course, it is the work of one nurse, Sister Teresa, and there aren't many Sister Teresas, But she came to visit Helen and she admitted everything that she didn't approve of in Catholicism. She still can be what you call an honorable Sister because she found enough giving her life to it. Do you mind if I get a piece of publicity?
- F: No, I don't at all.
- B: I think I know the day. I know it was June 6th.
- F: I should never have brought this up, because I knew you were going to in a small way chastise me; I knew that ahead of time.
- B: No, I am not chastising you.
- F: Well, a little. I know I am harsh.
- B: I am sharing myself with you. Just read that.
- F: All right. I will read it so that you can all hear: "Mrs. Edward Wasserman of Fairfield received the Woman of the Year Award of the Judeo - Christian Women's Association from Sister Mary Agnes O'Neil, former Chairman of St. Vincent's Medical Board of Directors, during the third annual dinner of the group in the Jewish Community Center. In speaking to the approximately 200 people assembled, Sister Mary Agnes cited Helen Wasserman for her innumerable contributions to the greater Bridgeport area and as the kind of 'woman who comes over the horizon only rarely.'"
- B: This is another picture of Helen.
- F: You do understand that we are talking about Mrs. Bernstein's daughter?
- PA: Right.
- F: Martha, you weren't here the last time. You have met Sumner, but Mrs. Bernstein also has a daughter who in every way equals her son.
- B: Yes. I have other Christian friends to whom I can speak as easily about Antisemitism as though she were Jewish.

- F: Yes, I wouldn't doubt that. I understand what happens in the ranks, but I still have more difficulty . . .
- B: Well, until we get a new Pope, and this I am really saying seriously . . .
- F: Until we get another Pope John.
- PA: They don't come that easily!
- B: But if we could get another Pope who was younger and who would probably understand that the world is changing, like Pope John. This Pope is blind.
- F: Well, he is destroying his own church [B: yes].
- B: Yes, he is, I think you are perfectly right.
- F: He is destroying his own church.
- B: That's right. So, now you are talking about the organizations.
- F: Now, I will move right into the Jewish organizations.
- B: All right, dear.
- F: Now, the Federation.
- B: Yes.
- F: You were on the Board of Directors of the Federation in one way or another, the Vice-President of the Board of Directors ever since the first day. [B: yes] Did you do that to be with Israel or did you play a role? Did you work or was it nominal?
- B: No. Well, I happened to agree with Israel in these things, not with everything, but I did in this; and I am up to here when it comes to the campaigns. Absolutely.
- F: You were helping raise all the money. You were out there.
- B: I was out there. I have given more speeches on that. When I speak to a group of women, if I didn't make them cry a little bit, then I felt I wasn't doing my job [laughter]. When I say the "we" now, it is an editorial "we." Those of us who are comfortable

are really spoiled in many ways; and we sit there and you listen. And I know that some of those women can spend \$50 before I'd spend a dollar; but then you would ask them for what I thought they ought to give. I gradually earned that nerve. You know, it took a long time because I was very polite at first [laughter] but they had to pay! Of course, what it meant was that I had to set the example; and of course, you know that I have a daughter-in-law now who is just as warmly involved. I was thinking of it the other day. They have got to be stirred. It's hard to give, it's hard. Again, I go back to my parents. I was brought up that way.

F: When you come down to 1945, everything blows up in Israel [B: yes]. The word comes down that you must give money. They needed \$200,000 in ten days [B: yes], so you go borrow money and everything. Then back in the Fifties, Barney and his group and you and Israel were raising \$222,000 and then \$300,000 in Development Bonds. I said to Sumner, "You would have to agree that what this Jewish community has raised as a Federation is just phenomenal considering the non-wealth in this community." You know what Sumner said to me?

B: What?

F: He said, "You're crazy." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You are so wrong; is that the thesis that you have come to, that this community is phenomenal in its giving?" I said, "Yes, that is the thesis to which I have come." He said, "You are absolutely wrong, Konnie Feig. At the lower level, and the lower middle-class level, I would bet that those \$100 that are listed on the Jewish Federation are a sacrificial giving, but at no place else, even me!" Now how do you feel about it?

B: I have seen Sumner and Roz make contributions that as a practical mother, I said, "I'm proud." But I wondered how they were figuring, because this was at the beginning, before the firm had grown to what it is now. You know, at first every meeting was held in our home.

F: Yes, that's right, isn't it?

B: Yuh. That also is another one of the items of leadership. You cannot be a leader unless you do what you tell others to do.

F: I agree.

B: And I think that Israel and Louie and Sumner and Roz and I can see Helen and Ed doing it now. It all becomes an inheritance; but there are many people who do not give as much as they should.

F: Do you tend to agree with your son?

B: Yes. Because you see, now it is not easy to hide affluence. You know, there was a time when you couldn't tell whether people had money or not or how much they had.

F: I think it is still hard to tell, don't you?

B: Oh, but when they buy Cadillacs . . .

F: All right.

B: You know.

F: When did you stop raising funds? [B: I never will.] I've got you everywhere there were funds to be raised . . .

B: Now, when it comes to scholarship funds, of course, I have to admit that I now have a technique that makes it very difficult to refuse. When it came time that I really should begin to recede, so when it comes to UJA or when it comes to scholarships, I'll talk as long as there is voice left [laughter]. So, when I say goodbye, I say, "God willing, you will hear from me next year." Now, what can they say when I call up the next year [laugh], that they are sorry I lived? [ALL: laughter] How can they?

F: All right. [laughs]

B: So they know where I will begin.

F: And when you say to them that they will hear from you next year now, they understand that quite clearly.

B: Yes.

- F: Well, when you are talking about scholarship funds, what are you talking about?
- B: Well, that's for the Council Scholarship Fund. And we have a Donor's once a year.
- F: So, you are allowed to do that, even under the Federation?
- B: The Federation gives us permission to have one money making affair, but only from our own members.
- F: Well, you are a member of everything, aren't you?
- B: I belong to, I think, every Jewish organization in the city. And that I do because Israel was born here; and I think I told you that the day I got engaged, Portland became my city. [F: uhuh] See, I basically am not extravagant in the sense that many of the friends I have are. They don't think they are extravagant, but well, I will put the value on belonging to an organization. One day there was one organization that I didn't belong to; and I met a lady, an elderly darling little lady and in Jewish she said, "How come that you don't belong to the Mizrachi?" That's the Orthodox part of Zionism. So, I said, "I'll tell you the truth, nobody ever asked me." She said, "I'm asking you," and I said "I'm saying yes." [laughter] They work so hard and they give of themselves because they don't represent Hadassah, which is the strongest Jewish group. But they give of themselves. You know, I am so close to Hadassah they won't believe it. But in the early years, these things came first. I would never say no if Hadassah ever asked me to talk to them, because, don't forget, they started giving generously when Israel was a dream.
- F: I know that. You said something last time which stuck with me and I read it again today. You said that there were many groups pushing for Israel, and you were behind them, and you would contribute and you would belong to the organizations. But you said that there was something else, some other vision that you had also. You said that your parents came to America and America provided something that was very special [B: yes, that's right] and that you wanted

also to give this energy back to America. You would give your money and your support to Israel, but you wanted to give [B: yes] your energy to America and to the Portland community.

B: I owe this country a great deal, still. With all the things that are wrong, I still think the Constitution is protecting a great many ethnic groups.

F: So, I am right in saying that, obviously, you have always supported Israel and all those dreams, [B: yes] but as far as your energy and your major thing, you wanted to do something in America [B: yes] and in Portland, and particularly in social services [B: yes]. Am I right in all this?

B: Yes. And that is why I am so dedicated to the United Way. I remember feeling I could feel for a great many Jewish people that they were called upon to give so much in Jewish things, coupled with the terrific feeling that we, as Jews, must support the United Way. If we don't, we are just ungrateful. I remember when Louie was chairman of that campaign. He stirred things, and I know when Sumner is on a campaign, he goes at it with the lawyers.

F: He told us he has lost friends.

B: Yuh.

F: Because he goes up and tells them that they are not giving what they should.

B: That's right.

F: Would you do that also with your friends? Or did you have a more delicate way of putting it?

B: Well, delicate [laughter] because I was going to call on them for something Jewish the next day [ALL: laughter]. I didn't want to get to the point with them that they would cross the street when they saw me [laughter]. I had to retain understanding, because another thing in this community, if you lived here long enough when we were much smaller, you knew the young people who were taking care of their parents. You knew of young people who were doing a great many things without talking about

it so that they couldn't give as much as they wanted to give. So that even with the soliciting, when Sumner talks that way to them, he knows to whom he is talking. I see Roz is on a special gifts committee this year.

- F: And Clarice is going to be in charge of the whole Jewish Federation Campaign.
- B: Clarice - Clarice is terrific.
- F: As I read it, you and Israel did this together as a partnership [B: yes] before it became the Jewish Federation, right?
- B: Yes, that's right, that's right.
- F: So Clarice isn't exactly the first woman, but let us say that she will be the first woman alone to do it.
- B: Yes. Well, I think Clarice is terrific. I love her. She just has life.
- F: Well, she said she was trained by you [B: laughs]. In Jewish Family Services, Mrs. Bernstein [B: yes], when you finally set that up and got that whole thing going in 1951, and you were President, you divided the whole thing up into different committees [B: yes]. A lot of people joined in to help you, whether it was an important committee or a volunteer committee or the medical committee, or the refugee service committee; but am I right in thinking that initially the concern for refugees was a very major part of the Jewish Family Services?
- B: That's when the power of an organization brought results, and we had a very good city manager. He was wonderful.
- F: I want to know about these families you brought in, in those days, because you must have helped someone. I know that Mrs. Shur was head of the Refugee Service, [B: and Selma Black] but didn't you help?
- B: Yes, but you know, honey, I have to tell you, I was just as interested in getting younger people to do things.
- F: But I just want to know something. Did you ever go over to some apartment and help clean it up and go down and get a stuffed chair?

B: No. That I didn't do.

F: But that's what the others did?

B: Yes, the others did. I am going to say in fairness to the people I worked with, they felt that I had contributed in influencing them, that they really never asked me to do that. Well, I did some things. I have not given of myself as a human being in going in and cleaning and taking care of sick people.

F: I am not trying to say that is good or bad. I am just trying to decide what it is that you did [B: yes]. When you got this Jewish Welfare thing going, you devoted your energy to deciding first of all, the best way to divide it up and organize it [B: yes]. I'm guessing now. You decided to divide them, to go to the people whom you thought might be most helpful [B: yes] like in the medical services, knowing that a Benjamin Zolov would give his time [B: yes, that's right] and picking people carefully [B: yes]. You knew that Clarice would go out and [B: Clarice would] buy and get old furniture for people.

B: And work and work to prepare them.

F: And to coordinate it.

B: See, she'll prepare the luncheons. She'll work in a kitchen all day in order that we shouldn't have to pay for it and can do it for half-price.

F: So you put the structure together. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses [B: yes] and one of your strengths was to be able to see the whole picture [B: that's right], pick the right people [B: yes], and coordinate it and keep it going?

B: Yes. And the other thing was that I was the first Jewess in what I would call community affairs.

F: Yes, of course, that's clear.

B: And that was timing; that was timing.

- F: Okay. By the way, I found an interesting thing. I found that the older people who started all these things, whether it be those who started the Community Center, those who started some of the other things, are the people, interestingly enough, who are most flexible about understanding the changes that are taking place.
- B: Yes, that's true.
- F: This is no secret. Everyone in the community in one way or another believes that somebody better do something about the Community Center, okay [B: yes]; and the people who feel that the most strongly are an Ethel Godfrey and a Harold Nelson and some of the people who have founded it! [B: yes] Now, with the Jewish Family Services, you were really the push behind all the Jewish Family Services [B: at that time]. Nowadays, is there much left to Jewish Family Services?
- B: We now have a very young woman, and she is very pretty and attractive, but it has changed her life. She has become so involved. Everything depends on who is the president or the chairman of the group; and now we found in this little girl just that. Let's see, her husband is now the President of the Temple, Dick Aronson.
- F: Is it really Aronson?
- B: No, she is, what is her first name?
- PA: Linda?
- F: No, no, that's Linda Abromson.
- B: She's Dick's wife; he's President of the Temple now. Arlene - no, not Arline - it's a pretty name. Anyway, it is her first big involvement with people who need help; they are the Russian refugees. And she has given them hospitality; she has given them a welcome, it was very interesting. As I told you, now I consider Rita Willis my successor in Jewish Social Welfare.
- F: We decided after what you said before that we should interview Rita also.

B: Yes. There were times when Rita would call or report or talk to me, and we'd feel that she was going a little too far. But I felt that it was important to let her get a real taste of what working for somebody else does. And she took the discipline. Now this is what I call discipline. When some of the refugees came, I thought it was a mistake to take them to the richest Jewish homes [F: uhhuh], because then they would say there is nothing that they can't do for us. But when you start paying rent and oil and weekly income for them to live, it takes an awful lot of community money before they can stand on their own two feet. So that there are some things that are very, very nice to have, but here if they see too much of it, and Ethel Godfrey was very good at that, because when Ethel Godfrey took over, she told them how to shop [laughs]; and she showed them that you can live very modestly. So that in the change, it was necessary to discipline, but instead of being cross about it, or discouraging the person who was trying hard, you get a person like Ethel, and she balanced it - a good job.

F: I see what you mean. If the Russian refugee thing dries up in a while, do you think that it is okay then if Jewish Family Services or Jewish Welfare Services and all that becomes unnecessary?

B: No. In that I think some people think I am stubborn [F: laughter]. We still have enough Jews in this community who find it much easier to go to the Federation for their first needs than to go to a community agency. The Federation then, or the Jewish Family Services, then will give them the benefit of one of the community agencies, but it eases and opens the door. For instance, if a Jewish woman comes to the Federation office and her son isn't working or she has a daughter who is sick, she first shares it with a Jewish group, and she is much more at home. If Rita is there, or somebody else will tell her that there is an agency that specializes in this age group or things like that. And they call up the agency, and believe me, that's very, very different than coming in on your own.

F: Okay. I think I have it. You and almost every other Jewish leader in this town can move easily in the gentile and the Jewish world [B: yes]. But for many

people, there would be no reason for them to yet know that that would be perfectly possible. And what you are saying to me, if I am getting it correctly, is that at certain levels and at certain times, this understanding does not exist [B: no] and they are solving it this way [B: yes]. Now, let me ask you something that I have been trying to find out. Where are the poor Jews in Portland? Are there any poor Jews in Portland?

B: Well, that is another thing where the Jewish Family Services has a job to do. The Rabbis, you know, I pick on them very often because I think it is part of their business. It is nice to have very comfortable members who can pay their dues and things like that, but . . .

F: There must be poor Jews in Portland.

B: There must be. Mother Bernstein was really a wonderful person, and she practiced the charities the way Maimonides said it should be practiced. And I had to tell her something that took me a long time and it was done very tenderly. "Mother, whatever you are doing is wonderful, but we are not helping them as we should." She was smart; it didn't take long for her to understand. And the Council, you know, was one of the social agencies that carried on. Then we yielded everything to the Jewish Family Services. And the other thing, the Jewish Family Services can get funds from the Federation, and we are in a position so that in an emergency, we don't have to go around begging. Do you know what that means?

F: Yes, I do know what it means [B: yes]. What does it mean to you?

B: It means a great deal to me. For instance, if somebody called me up today and said the man lost his job, the wife was in the hospital, and they need money, before any questions would be asked, I'd call the President of the Jewish Family Services and say, "We believe them." You see, a Jew doesn't doubt a Jew when he comes for charity!

F: Okay. That's one of the most important things that you have said so far.

B: Then we will carry them on for an emergency, but when it is going to be a long term, by that time we have made them feel that they have a right to go to the city for aid.

F: All right. So this is not something that should go away.

B: No. There will be times when there will be a lot of things happening. There are times when everything is very quiet. And, of course, there is the visiting that is important. We didn't for a long time, because we felt the auxiliary of the Jewish Home for the Aged could do it.

F: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

B: In the Jewish Home for the Aged, the members are not of the younger fighting group. They have Hadassah and they have Council. Those are the two big ones, and the Federation. So that there really aren't too many Jewish women who do more than entertaining the members at the Home, getting people to pay their dues.

F: Do you ever go and visit at the Jewish Home for the Aged?

B: I used to go quite often, but I could always manage to be home the next morning. I didn't have to stay there. When you see people you've known and watched through the years, when they finally get into the Home, it's much more real to me now than it was. You leave with a wonder [laugh], is it worth it, isn't it wonderful to grow old. And of course, if you knew them.

F: There is a tradition in Judaism, right? I know that Sumner and Roz and the two mothers-in-law, whenever it is possible, share Friday night together - and that they do it not for you people but for themselves. The two mothers-in-law and Sumner and Roz want to be together [B: yes, that's right] and that is terribly important to them [B: yes]. But it is evident to me that there must be other Jewish families who do not feel this way.

B: True. But from the point of view of visiting them, don't forget there were many years when I knew many of the women who finally had gone to the Home for the Aged. You see, I have lived in this community for 54 years. So you

see, there was a time there, say in the Forties, when there were women there who had already reached 60, 70, and 80 and who were at the Home. So that when I went, it was almost like a personal visit, whereas some of them who are there now, I don't know. Of course, you know we have the Friendship Group which involves the Center and Council which feels a responsibility for those who want company. But I still think we could do a better job in visiting some of the people who just don't get out.

F: I want to switch you now to something I want to talk about and that is the religious community. You were around right on the dot when Temple Beth El was formed [B: uhhuh]. Up until that time you have been a member of Shaarey Tphiloh and when you were a member of the Newbury Street Synagogue, you were at least going on the High Holidays and from time to time on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, am I correct?

B: No. We went so few Saturday mornings, that I may just as well plead guilty now [laughter].

F: But, the High Holidays . . .

B: Well, you see, dear . . .

F: Do you still keep a kosher home?

B: Yes.

F: You do?

B: Yes, I do.

F: Well, I know Sumner and Roz do, and . . .

B: And Helen does.

F: Yes.

B: And both girls did it on their own. I kept a very kosher house because I knew that if not, Mother Bernstein or my own parents wouldn't feel comfortable. It was the least I could do for them. And it created a Jewish atmosphere. It was good.

F: When Temple Beth El was formed, I can go down the list of people who started participating there, and there is Rebecca Bernstein. Why did you feel that it was important for Temple Beth El to be founded?

B: Yes, it was Conservative and we at least could understand our prayers. Now my brother who died, Dr. Thurman, would disagree with me. He became Reformed; he went one step beyond - a brother of mine! But I like the decorum. I will never forget a debate that my younger brother was in. He belonged to this Synagogue group and they had just this discussion about the Orthodox service and the Reformed or Conservative. I think my brother Aaron found himself alone. But he said, "When do you get the real Jewish atmosphere? It's when you put on not just a neckpiece but you put on a good sized tallis and you don't care if you pray aloud, but you are praying the way you want to pray." He said, "You go to the other and everybody is quiet and everybody is polite, and are they feeling the way we do in an Orthodox place?" You know, I have never forgotten that because I think he had something. But he changed enough to become Reformed because his wife was Reformed. I think we found it more pleasant. It was really newer. I am really giving you all these materialistic things.

F: No, I want them.

B: And Conservatism made it easier not to be pious because you could ride. Now, for instance, when Mother and Dad, Mother and Father - I never called him Dad, it was Father - which also signifies something. I never thought of calling my father anything but Papa, and I remember for the fasting and for Rosh Hashanah, we would go to the hotel, that old, old hotel and we would stay there for two days for Rosh Hashanah and we'd stay there for Yom Kippur so that we wouldn't ride.

F: Was this in Boston?

B: No, in Portland.

F: In Portland?

B: Yes.

- F: Because you lived way out.
- B: Yes, we lived in Woodfords, and some Jewish people walked; but we weren't quite ready to walk. So we would stay at the hotel on Yom Kippur and sleep over. Mother would get enough cots in there so that we all slept there.
- F: Now, let me ask you to fantasize for a moment. Let us say you are 40 years old and your daughter is ready for a Bat Mitzvah, and I think . . .
- B: No Bat Mitzvahs then - Helen was not Bat Mitzvahed.
- F: Okay. But let's just say that it is today and you are 40 years old and your daughter is ready for a Bat Mitzvah. Of course you would approve of that?
[B: yes] You have already answered that, and already you are in a Temple where men and women sit together and they go as a family.
- B: Yes, that was another important thing.
- F: All right, it's today now, and you are 40 years old. Would you have any wish to be called to the Torah or to be part of a minyan?
- B: It is an interesting thing - now they asked me to take part - to go to the Bimah for Yom Kippur and I didn't go. I'll give you the reason. I didn't give it to them. I just said no for a very good reason. I now, with my sciatica, can have a day, when if I walked up those few steps, I might fall down. There are other days when I feel fine. And the other thing, in reading Hebrew, I think my vision is not good enough. I would have to look at it very closely. It would be both an emotional and physically difficult thing for me to do. But I would have loved to have done it!
- F: Would you consider if a woman touched the Torah for it to be sacrilegious?
- B: No. I believe in equality. I think a woman is really the biggest influence in guaranteeing a continuity and being a part of the services. I think the first woman who took a portion of the reading of the Torah was Florence Halpert. She came from New York and she

put on a yarmulke. I noticed this year when I got the tickets for the High Holidays, they said, "Please have something to cover your head." Now that has been a custom, a traditional custom, but all of a sudden women didn't do it because they had their hair dressed. That's the only excuse I can give. I had never gone into a Temple or a Synagogue without having something on my hair. Now, I notice that they have repeated it.

F: So you've seen changes [B: yes] in Judaism, in this town, and in America [B: uhhuh], in your own family, in your brothers, in your son and your uncles. If I am right, everybody in your family has a little bit of difference religiously, right? [B: yes] But each of them retains one thing - this deep-seeded commitment to Judaism. So Judaism then must be much more than religion. I don't want you to misunderstand when I say that.

B: No, you can say that.

F: By religion, I am not talking about a person's own relationship to God. I am talking about form and observance. How do you define Judaism then?

B: I feel related to every single Jew, as Jews.

F: As far back as Jews were on earth?

B: Yes, yes I can. I could strangle some [F: laugh] for how bad they are, how wrong they are, how they violate every humane thing. There is bad in every people, but there is a certain obligation, a responsibility that I feel as a Jewish woman. There are things I do on Saturday, but I am aware of the fact that it could have been done another day, but it is more convenient. Here where I am alone, where I am not influencing anybody [laughs] that Saturday, I listen to the opera. There is something about Saturday that has a certain holiness. You see, my father never worked on Saturday.

F: I know, you told me.

B: So you see, I inherited that. I am a little indulgent now with myself, and sometimes I don't feel right, sometimes I do things on Saturday that I know could have waited.

- F: I am still going to push [B: yes] on this.
- B: I see you are! [ALL: laughter] You dig, and I can only give you the truth as I see it. The other thing I regret is that I am illiterate in what I have been much more informed about. It has come at a bad time in my life. I feel ignorant when there is so much to know [pause], that's right. I do, and now is it because I am getting older, is it because I was too absorbed in too many things that I had to keep up-to-date on? But I can read.
- F: Have you read a lot in your life? Did you read vociferously?
- B: I used to read a lot, but I have had poor vision for a long, long time.
- F: But when you were forty and fifty and thirty, did you read, devour books?
- B: I used to read so much more until I became so involved that I always had homework to do [F: uhhuh]. That is why when the Rabbi gives the message, I listen. I like to absorb and I sort of feel elevated when I have listened to a good sermon. But I am not as informed as I should be.
- F: But you know how you feel, and this is what I want to get back to.
- B: But my feeling, darling, is that I am completely Americanized. You know, I live it, but from the point of view - and it is related to religion, honey, isn't it? It is related to a loyalty.
- F: It is related to God.
- B: To God and to a people.
- F: All right.
- B: To God and a people.
- F: And to a people.
- B: Yes.

F: There are several new books out, one is Irving Howe's book, A World of Our Fathers. Let me read one of the things he said. In describing a Temple, he calls it "a secularized community center, a low-pressured and undemanding religiosity that stresses good works, liberal ethics, Jewish responsibility, a minimal identification."

B: Now, do you want my attitude?

F: Is that good enough for you?

B: No. You know I have a very strong feeling about marrying out of your faith. Still I know I have accepted it because in a huge family like we have now, practically all over the country, some have converted, some have not. I have three grandsons, and all windows are open and all doors are open for them. I can pray to myself. I can find no fault with my children. They have a Jewish atmosphere at home. The homes are Jewish; they have gone to Hebrew School. Bethy and David knew my mother and father. Why am I unhappy about an intermarriage? Because I feel that most Jewish children - now somebody may correct me now because there are Jewish children who aren't brought up like Jews who feel sorry they were born Jews, who find it a burden. There are some young people who wonder why should they be punished because they like to mingle with non-Jews. They are searching for more recognition in a society that sometimes hasn't granted it like belonging to a country club or something like that. I feel that if you were brought up at all with a Jewish atmosphere, you have something invested in you that becomes a part of you. I can never forget a rabbi, a very fine rabbi in Rhode Island who was defrocked. He came and spoke before a group, and he was as sad a person as I had met. He said, "Little did I realize how deeply buried was that Judaism in me." I feel that way now, appreciating that something has the first place. I feel Jews need Jews, and at the rate that we are now being assimilated, even our own rabbis now feel that it is a crisis.

F: Right, I was going to ask you about it, so please continue.

B: Yeh, yuh. They feel that it is a crisis. We do. Now I remember when the rabbi spoke on intermarriage. There were several members in our Temple who, if they could have, would have run out. They felt very hurt - and of course what I said to them was, "What do you expect a rabbi to do, encourage it? The rabbi was doing what he felt strongly he wanted to do, and really had to do as a rabbi." So your son wants to marry a non-Jew. You don't want to lose your son. He's old enough; he has married this girl. He says he loves her, so with an ache in your heart, you accept her.

F: You don't disown her, do you?

B: No, no.

F: Because if you disown her, you make sure the children are not raised Jewish.

B: Yuh, that's right.

F: If you accept, you have a chance.

B: You have a chance, and after all, one of those two is your own child. [F: uhhuh] I remember one young man I talked to, and you can see I spoke very freely with him. I said, "Would your sweetheart convert?" And he said, "I wouldn't ask her because she wouldn't ask me." That was a very fair statement of two young people.

F: Fair, but he doesn't understand the difference [B: no] between Judaism and other so-called religions [B: no]. All right, still I am pressing. There was another book that I read. I love mystery stories and my favorite mystery author is a man called Harry Kemelman. He writes all those books like Wednesday the Rabbi Saw Red [B: oh, yes]. I think everybody ought to read them because they talk a lot about Jewish law and it is fun to learn that way. And in this latest one that I read two night ago, this brand new . . .

B: Do you sleep at all?

F: No, hardly.

B: [Laughs] I was going to say - I always come to that conclusion. Do you know Dorothy Healy?

F: Yes, I know who she is.

B: I am fond of her and she really is a very fine person. One day I began to list all the things she does, and I said, "Now I know; you don't sleep!" She said, "How did you find that out?" I said, "Because no human being could read all you do." [laughs] And I think two hours she closes her eyes at night.

F: Yes, I think that's about right.

B: You probably do the same thing.

F: Well, that's about right. In this book Rabbi Small is explaining the difference between Christianity and Judaism and he says Christianity is concerned about mysticism and faith, but with Judaism we are concerned about ethics and morality. I have a hunch that that isn't quite right because you are talking about some mysticism, Mrs. Bernstein [B: yes, it's more than ethics]. You are talking about [B: I am] some mysticism in this Judaism. I said this to Sumner the other day. Somehow or other I am picking up some stuff. You are saying that you feel identified with every Jew who ever lived and [B: yes] that is mystical - there is a mysticism in what you are telling me.

B: Yes - I plead - I have that, [F: all right] [ALL: laughter] I have inherited that. You are right, yes, and there is a strain of that in me.

F: But Judaism is something more than a Synagogue or a Shul or a Temple [B: yes] or ethics [B: yes]. It is something that says that I am Jewish and that Jewishness means - the way you are defining - it is more than [B: it is stronger than ethics] anyone I have ever known [B: yes]. It's more than people I will ever know [B: yes]. It's everyone I have known [B: it's there]. Everybody who has ever been there [B: yes]. That's what you are telling me, am I right?

B: You are right; you are right.

- F: Well [laughs], that's what I keep getting down to [B: yes]. Rabbi Sky and I argue all the time, three times a week.
- B: Now he is very learned, I think. Don't you think he is very learned?
- F: Rabbi Sky is my favorite Rabbi of all time [B: my dear]. Not that he is perfect.
- B: Oh, no. But he is bright and he knows a lot and he is such a comfort. I talk to him about three or four times a week. Certainly, if we don't talk to each other, he wonders where I have been. He calls me very often, and we have a very wonderful relationship.
- F: Well, Rabbi Sky and I consider each other friends, do you know that?
- B: Yes, I do. That is how I heard of you.
- F: He invited me over one Friday night and he says, "Are you a Christian?" I said, "No." He said, "What Church do you belong to?" I said, "I don't." I told him I was one of the twelve Lutherans in America to be confirmed by the great Bishop of Hannover in the Minneapolis Lutheran cathedral. I said, "So don't talk to me about not having a religious upbringing - we won't go into that. I went to a church college and all that. I am talking to the rabbi now, you understand [B: yes]. I said, "I'm not anything in those terms - I am not - I do not have a label." He said, "Well, then you are nothing!" And I said, "All right, Harry Sky, on my Sabbath we are going to talk about the difference between a label and nothing! [B: yes] So we talked. He said, "But you must convert." I said, "I am not going to convert to Judaism; why do I want to convert to Judaism? I am not going to become another 'thing.' I know who my personal God is.
- B: But what a warm feeling you have for Jews.
- F: Here is what I have figured out - it has to do with what all of you are defining as the many faces of Judaism. Most people say it but they don't know

they are saying it. I told him this: "Judaism is more than a religion. I will never convert because a convert Jew can never be a Jew - he can only be a convert." [B: uhhuh] What I feel from all of you is that Judaism is more; it's something [B: yes] carried on for centuries and you feel all a part of it [B: yes]. You feel a part of it, don't you, Mrs. Bernstein?

B: Yes, I do. Yes, definitely.

F: And you are not telling me that Judaism is something of the moment or of religion or of ethics or of community. You have been telling me for the last four hours [B: it's the whole thing] of this interview, as does your son, that it goes on for centuries [B: yes]. It's part of the chosen people!

B: We never would have survived, honey; no people would have. [laughter] Other people have been destroyed. When you stop to think, every generation has tried to wipe us off the map. There is something in the survival of the Jew.

F: And I am not trying to make anybody define their Judaism. [B: no] All I am doing is keeping my ears open. And Judaism is so much more. One hears a lot of this fear of the disappearance of Judaism because of intermarriage, assimilation in America. [B: there will always be a nucleus]. Okay, and there will always be Judaism.

B: Yes.

F: And you know what Sumner said when I asked him about that? He said, "I worry very much, but I think maybe Job worried [B: laughter]. Job worried too!" I have four or five more things to ask you that have nothing to do with the community on the same level about what some things mean to you.

B: I have an unusual relationship with Rabbi Sky.

F: You tell him what you think. You tell him off all the time, don't you?

B: Yeh, well, no. This is how it happened. I wouldn't because I have respect for an office.

F: So do I . . .

B: But one day, Sumner, he and I found ourselves in a cozy little group, and he turned to me and he said, "Gee, it would be nice to have you as a mother." I said, "Oh, no - as a mother I say things that a child doesn't like to hear." He said, "Oh, I'll take that." I said, "No, I can't be your mother, I can't act as your mother, but I want you to know if we become friends, I will never hide what I want to tell you, and if I think you are wrong, I would tell you. Later it got to the point where I really was telling the truth, because you see, I could get the outside reaction. It got to a point where if they were going to talk about the Rabbi, they'd say, "Stop, Peggy is here." So then they thought that I was one-sided. So I said, "You can talk because if I disagree with you and if I agree with you that what he did was what I think is wrong, I'll say it to you. It isn't a hidden relationship, but I have had wonderful conversations with him, and I felt that I was the mother and he was my little boy.

F: I have felt that I was the older sister.

B: [Laughs] Yes, you probably are!

F: I believe the community could do far worse than Rabbi Sky as a scholar and as a teacher and as a human being. Listen, I wouldn't be sitting in this room today if it wasn't for him. He twisted my arm for six months and I am a strong woman and nobody twists my arm to do something - NOBODY!

B: It's the Holocaust.

F: No. I am sorry, but he kept it up. I got nasty, I got mean, I got distant, I did everything but he kept it up. He kept after me, and he kept after me, and he kept after me, and finally I said yes. That is the reason we are all here. It is partly commitment, but he pressed us and he just never let go; he's like a buzzing fly; he just kept right after us [B: yes] and I laugh at this.

B: Well, you see, he has that in some ways too. You know, he has wanted a new prayer book. Most of us, I have to admit, thought we saw nothing wrong in the old prayer book. But he buzzed around for a long time and now we're having a new prayer book. [laughter]

F: What do you think from your perspective over the years is the major responsibility of a rabbi nowadays?

B: I am going to say it would be wonderful if he could establish, earn the trust of his congregation. He can be either the teacher, the scholar, which would separate him from the membership to a degree. But he has to have the confidence - I use the word trust, I am using that for the United States Government too.

F: I agree with you.

B: Yuh [laughs]. Really, when you get into a membership of over 400, it becomes almost physically impossible to know everyone. That is why, if a Temple can afford it, they have an assistant to the rabbi. I think, you see, I feel badly about this: that the rabbis aren't as involved in the Hebrew School as they should be. I go back a long time when I went to a convention with Israel in Connecticut and already the younger group was surfacing, and they said, "You get two rabbis together or three - none of them agree. One will want more Orthodoxy." You get the thing separated to a degree - Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reformed Judaism. But I feel that it is an important function of a rabbi, and that is what he doesn't have the time to do, and it is wrong. I would almost give it priority for awhile. [F: uhhuh] Because his scholarliness becomes something that the Temple loses in not sharing with them. You see, I am giving you all these things that one rabbi has to do [F: uhhuh]. I think that if we don't want so much assimilation, it has got to begin when children are being taught what Judaism means, not superficially. I think that the rabbi can evaluate a teacher, a Jewish teacher, better than a lay member. If I am really expecting an awful lot, it is because he is given authority; he is given Jewish authority.

F: Which is an unusual kind of authority.

B: It's a wonderful thing, it is a plus for Judaism. But the rabbi really has authority, and he is an influence. He can get us at our weak moments when a child is born, and that is when you are really weak. In a marriage he can almost lay the foundation of what a marriage is. It can take ten more minutes, and the dinner can wait.

F: And in a Bar Mitzvah?

B: Yes. We have had Bar Mitzvahs where you sit there and, of course, I cry. When the rabbi blesses the child, I'm gone, because there he is, thirteen, and of course, in 1976 he is already almost a man. And what is his life going to be? Is he going to be blessed? Is he going to struggle? Somehow or other the bigness, the mystery of life becomes so alive at that moment. I love a Bar Mitzvah - there are streams of affection and you join with the prayers of the mother and father. I look at the mother and father all the time, and I know what they are wishing. And also, when it comes to death, oh, how people look for the consolation of a rabbi.

F: And sickness . . .

B: Sickness - so you see, he is a part of life, and to everyone of those avenues, he can bring the understanding of Judaism.

F: And who brings to the rabbi when he needs - when he goes through birth [B: yes] and Bat Mitzvahs, and sickness and death, and depression and conflict and sadness and wonder, who brings to the rabbi?

B: Either he has to seek another rabbi, and you know, there is in Jewish life too this tremendous respect for the Jewish rabbi who has, in some way or another, won recognition by Jews. And then we expect more of the rabbi: that if there is a campaign like the UJA, that he should be an active member in the campaign. We are expecting an awful lot.

F: And what you really said earlier though is that it is also the responsibility of the older members of the congregation to give to the rabbi when he is in need - you already said that in three or four different ways, didn't you?

- B: Yes, he needs understanding, and many of the young people lack respect and understanding. A lot of times that's where I also come to Sky's defense. They say they wish they had a rabbi who knew enough to put a little more polish on.
- F: The pink sock and the green sock?
- B: Yes, and those are things - it's nice - I am not denying the polish is soothing and agreeable, but if a person has other qualities, go easy on polish!
- F: That is a very wise thing to say. You can't have everything in one rabbi.
- B: No, you can't.
- F: And everyone wants everything in one rabbi.
- B: Yes. And God forbid if he overlooks the widows. I can understand it because I have been widowed. There are some widows who feel that he is there during the week of mourning, and then gradually he never calls them, he never sees them, and they will come and they will say something to me and I'll say, "Of course, you needed it, you wanted it, and it would have been wonderful if he did call on you. But think of all the other things that are happening that demand his time." But of course, the person who is hurt, honey, just feels hurt, and we all get hurt occasionally, sometimes more often than others. And unless you are able to pick yourself out of that hurt, it continues, and if anything, it grows because they are going to find somebody who is widowed and who gets many more visits from the rabbi.
- F: Okay, now, what year did Israel die?
- B: My husband?
- F: Yes.
- B: 1957.
- F: Most of the years of your life, you and your husband were partners.
- B: Yes.

F: You came to the community when it was young.

B: Uhhuh.

F: And it was beginning to move - the Jewish community and the Portland community.

B: That's right.

F: And together, as partners, you moved through this community, sometimes dragging it behind you, [B: uhhuh] sometimes leading it, [B: uhhuh] sometimes catalyzing it, but always in there - morning, noon, and night? [B: yes] Now you are letting up a bit [B: yes] and you are pondering and you are looking back [B: yes] and you are learning [B: uhhuh] and you are thinking [B: yes]. Well, first of all, do you feel some sense of satisfaction when you look at this community? Do you feel a part of it?

B: Let me start with my family. Last week I went to Boston to visit the graves of my mother and father, and it was a real visit. Nobody hurried me from where they were. And I asked myself, "What have I done with my life?" What I had in my marriage was mine. You know, that's a thing that Sumner feels. I remember once I was being honored and he said, "Isn't it too bad that somehow we couldn't put Daddy into the program." I was under control all the time and it was really a protective thing not to go into memory. I did what they wanted. You know, they need a gimmick for a campaign, and I know it is often a gimmick to honor a person and they asked me, and I refused after Israel died. Then one day I was sitting just where you are sitting, and I will never forget, three young men, Lenny, Dick, and one of the Lewis boys came, and they represented the generation I was looking for. And they very tenderly gave me the reasons for their visit - that they wished that I would accept the honor. My first thought was how much I disliked that publicity. And then I said, "You know, it is just too fresh and I am not quite ready for it, but I will think about it." They left, and for some time I was sitting there and I said, "Why am I just thinking of myself that I don't want the publicity? What is the cause? They feel that if they are honoring me, more people might respond and it might help the

- campaign. Doesn't that come first?" Lenny was then appointed to be the one [laughs] to see me again. He didn't have to wait. I called him because I realized that I was thinking of what I like or what I don't like. Lenny came and said, "Peggy, if you had more time, you could have added \$100,000 to this campaign, because nobody says no to me." I think for the two weeks before I spoke, I would think and cry. I said, "I am getting all the tears out of me because I am not going to cry when I talk and I am not going to skip talking about Israel and his influence in the community." And believe it or not, I made it! I kept watching the others crying [laugh] but I didn't! And I did it. Those are the things in which you find a conflict, and I think you can sense the conflict that I feel I have been honored too much.
- F: I have sensed that you have felt that for some time.
- B: Yes, I do.
- F: What it is like, inside? I have never asked you a question that was only you. I have always said you and Mr. Bernstein [B: yes, that's right]. It is clear to me that each of you did your own thing [B: yes]. You did this and he did that [B: yes], and you did together. But it just always seemed so clear to me that it was together.
- B: Uhhuh.
- F: Equally.
- B: Yes.
- F: What is it like to know that you and another human being almost brick by brick built a Jewish community - with all of its institutions, all of its complex institutions?
- B: Well, of course, darling, you have to remember that everything was within the scope.
- F: I know.
- B: Well, it was carried on. Louie did and Sumner did. You know, Sumner is a terrific strength. When we won the first war, there was an emergency meeting called in the Center. There was no time to prepare speeches;

there was a time for giving. Sumner was chairman. I sat there trembling with what he did to me as a Jew and what he did to everybody else. And you see, the wonderful thing about the community is that they recognize that in Sumner, without expecting him to go to the services [ALL: laughter]. I really think they are very kind to him [laugh].

F: But you look at this community and you chastise it [B: no] and you cry for it. No, wait a minute - you chastise it and you cry for it, and you care about it [B: yuh] and you grieve for it [B: yes].

B: And I am still proud of it.

F: And you are very, very proud of it, that is what I am getting to [B: yes].

B: I go down to Bridgeport, and sometimes Helen says things about Portland [laughter] that are such an exaggeration that I have to put her back in cooling off because of the campaign. They have a very hard time there because, see, she still reflects what she found at home. I think I told you that, when we had company for dinner, and if any Jewish people were there, the first thing they would say was, "Does he give to the Federation?" [laughter] Of course we get disappointed. There are times when I am terribly upset, but overall, there is always an effort. You feel that there is always something to build on. You know, the candle isn't out; and when we go down, when we don't reach the goals we hoped for - for instance, the way this campaign was organized last year, it sort of fell apart a little bit because the Executive Director came when there was really no time to plan it. The women were very well organized, but after all, most of the money still comes from the men. We haven't changed that yet! You know, we were one of the first communities to have a women's division. It took some cities a long time because that is a plus, because what they said was true - in most instances it is the husband who is the money earner, so why go to the wife. But of course, our argument was that it is the wife who creates the Jewish atmosphere. I talked even to the rabbi, long before this. I said, "Something has got to be done to get the younger kids - even if they only give fifty cents or \$1 and to get them."

F: They have to know about their Jewish heritage.

B: That they do.

F: They have to know about the joys and they have to know about the dangers [B: yes] and they have to know about being eternally vigilant without being terribly suspicious. You do not destroy six million people in a Holocaust [B: no] without asking at least at the end if people have some knowledge or some awareness that without being upset or being terribly emotionally upset [B: that's right] that there is at least a need for vigilance and continuing contribution.

B: That is true.

F: Now, look, you have seen in this Jewish community the widest range of human tragedies and the widest range of human joys. Would you say that is true?

B: Well, I'll tell you, the joys have been sporadic and didn't last long [laughter].

F: Okay.

B: That's true, isn't it?

F: All right.

B: You see the struggle . . .

F: Yes, I know. But the tragedies made you stronger [B: yes], is that it?

B: Yes, yes.

F: The joys didn't really add to the strength, did they?

B: No. The joys brought some compensation but they were so temporary because all the lack of understanding that we still stand alone in the world as a people [pause]; and you see, that provokes hate because the world finds it very hard to admit that Judaism gave the lessons of humanity when there was very little civilization. You know that being chosen people creates an awful lot of harm because it takes a certain kind of knowledge of

the non-Jew to understand that what it means - chosen for responsibilities - not chosen because we are superior as human beings. So that we have in our Jewishness things that can hurt what we are trying to strengthen. Then there is the reaction that it strengthens, but then the question comes, is that number increasing or decreasing? So then we come to the problems we talked about today. When I said before that there are some young Jewish people - I am talking about teenagers who, you know, want to taste everything and reach everything and who feel that it really is a burden to be Jewish - defending something that other people won't accept. That is why I come back to being educated; that is why we must. In Jewish education, you get the conflict there. You can't have a child who is in school all day long and who has been dying to play football or something - the days are getting shorter - and he goes to Hebrew School and comes back when it is dark. It really is tough for those little kids. And all of it, sort of, is just like a wave that goes over them, so that we can list more problems and still survive them [laugh].

F: The problems you have seen have occurred to me. With the fear of Jewish survival in America, for very many reasons which I don't share, but then, I am not Jewish; but the problems you list, and the problems that I worry about, because I worry about them too, you know.

B: Yes, [laughter] you certainly do.

F: It is very difficult to see progress, but I see certain kinds of progress. If we were sitting here and it was 1875, and we were sitting in a Russian town and were talking about the progress or 1890, we wouldn't be listing the same kinds of things as problems [B: yes]. You wouldn't be telling me, a non-Jew, of the problems of the Jews in 1890 in the same way that you are telling me now. If we were sitting in Poland in, let's say, 1930, and you are telling me in our interview, that you are a middle-class Jew in Warsaw, a middle-class aristocratic, semi-aristocratic, intellectual, educated Jew in Warsaw and I were asking you what are the problems of Jewry here today, 1930 in Warsaw, the problems that you list for me would be in their own funny way, far more frightening [B: yes] than the problems that you just listed.

B: Yes, much more frightening.

F: So I guess in a way . . .

B: There has been progress. That's because America has blessed us. Nobody can kill a Jew now and just walk off as though he just had some fun.

F: That's true. That's true. And that is progress.

B: Yes, that's progress. Progress we have here. A Jewish child who wants to get ahead can really break down any little block that comes his way. I'm talking educationally.

F: Yes, I know that. And if he wants to get into a club, all he needs to do really today is to say "Boo!"

B: And this club business, of course, to me, darling . . .

F: It is not exactly terribly important to me [B: no], but I understand that some people want it.

B: Because you know, Sumner said no when they finally . . .

F: I know, he told us that story also.

B: Yes, yes. So as I said before, some of those things are very, very important to people. I can see some people in business who do their business socially finding it important.

F: And those things are important because that's where the business is done.

B: I should say that I think it is very, very important for firms, or for any business. You know, when it comes to business, being Jew or gentile, if he has some merchandise you want, it's business. And of course, now, the boycott. I didn't read the morning paper yet; I read that in the evening. The Secretary of Treasury is quite cool, and I said to myself, "Sure, he can only think of money - of the strength and power of money." But I think, to me, that is progress. To think that the United States can do what it is doing - because the Arabs are boycotting Israel. With all its failures, I think it is terrific progress.

F: Let me ask you a final question - it's a very complicated one. How to put it . . .

B: Say it, don't . . .

F: Well, I want to - oh, listen, I'm not the least bit hesitant.

B: Yes, I can see that [laugh].

F: I have no problem in asking you anything. I just want to be clear. You've seen human tragedy. You watched Ethel Godfrey [B: uhhuh] when her daughter was paralyzed for two years, and you knew that she was dragging her in and out of those bathtubs and nearly killing herself over that tragedy, all right? Just human tragedy in different families [B: yes] and Norman dying [B: yes]. I'll just take the Godfreys for example. Norman dying, and then the next thing happening in one family that her daughter, one of her favorite daughters, becomes paralyzed [B: yes, that's right]. That's just in one family. Then we could take other families - Sumner is five years old and you get sick and you both go to Boston and Sumner stays in Boston and you, your face was paralyzed at the time?

B: I had facial paralysis.

F: But you do not anymore.

B: No.

F: But you did at that time, and you had problems then with that. I mean, you faced that with . . .

B: And in addition to the facial paralysis I had after he was born, I had eye surgery.

F: Then?

B: Are you talking about the war?

F: Way back.

B: Yes.

F: So you faced some very scary, fearful times.

- B: Yes, very scary.
- F: But wait a minute, you got over that quickly.
- B: Yes. No, the eye surgery, you really never get over. I am the most thankful person in the world that I can see and I've seen you and I'm seeing you and you, but you see, with reading, there are many things that are being curtailed and that is why, as I get older, I've got to admit that I am a little more timid. I am afraid of falling.
- F: Yes, because of seeing, you are saying.
- B: Yes, when I am going down stairs, I mean, because of the eye surgery, the vision keeps . . .
- F: What was it? A retina displacement or something?
- B: Yuh, yuh. That was done with the cataract. There is a certain time for instance, when I walk down-stairs, it is as though it was hazy.
- F: Like my grandmother - may I have your arm please.
- B: Yes. It sounds very familiar. I have reached the point now where if I have to go to a new place, you know, the ups and downs, I really feel reluctant unless I am going with somebody I know.
- F: You know the things which you had to wrestle with in your own mind. You wrestled with them and you have seen them in your friends. You see them now.
- B: Yes.
- F: Okay. Now, being Jewish, when you face these kinds of fears, do you turn at that point and talk to God?
- B: You pray, but for many years now I pray much more for strength to take what will happen [F: uhhuh]. Yes.

- F: Okay, that's what I am asking. As a Jewess [B: yes], you pray in times like that [B: yes] - whatever those times may be, whether it is your friends' times or your rabbi's times or your own. As a Jewess, you pray? You ask God for one thing [B: yes] and you ask Him for strength?
- B: Yes. The strength to take whatever will happen. Everybody prays for good health, everybody prays for good cheer, everybody prays that everything should go right. We all know what is good, but life doesn't work that way, and I am not so brave. My sister Ann really has an awful lot of inner strength, and when the retina operation was a failure, I said, "You know, Ann, I think death would be better than blindness." I thought that at that time because of the helplessness.
- F: Oh, yes, I know what you mean.
- B: I now literally sit in awe of the wonderful blind people I have met [pause]. Now, you see, I have reached the point in my life where I personally do not fear death. I feel I have had a very rich, wonderful life. I don't fear death, but I have to admit, I don't want a long illness. I don't want to be a burden to the children who love me - who can do nothing to change the situation.
- F: But it isn't necessarily the point in life, Mrs. Bernstein. I think it is shared by people of all ages.
- B: Of course it is. It is nothing new. I mean, I think everybody . . .
- F: The only thing that is different is that you don't fear death. More people fear death than need to, but everyone fears the way it is going to come about.
- B: Yes, that's right. I think I could have a petition [laugh] and have every single person I know sign it.
- F: No, too many people fear death. You don't fear death. I know that, I can tell that [B: no]. You don't fear death [B: no] and most people do, which is too bad.

B: You see, there is only one thing that I have which I really can't take, and it happens quite often. That is when the lonesomeness becomes overwhelming; the lonesomeness in not sharing the way we used to, and then I say to myself, again, "You are thinking of yourself. Daddy has now found eternal peace - he is at rest, and no matter how good life would have been, he might have been ill, he might have lost the things he used to enjoy which he wouldn't enjoy anymore, so that he now is at rest. Be glad that he is." And that sort of gives me just enough to say to myself, "Come, come, come rise."

