Bess Fishman Transcript

Elaine Eff: This is Elaine Eff. I am interviewing for the Jewish Women's Archive "Weaving Women's Words." I am interviewing Bess Fishman at her home in Baltimore, Maryland on May 30, 2001. And I'm going to just stop right here and allow a little bit of the sound of her house since we are recording near an open window on a beautiful spring day, and there are some wonderful bird sounds. So I thought I would just give room tone to start. [birds chirping] Bessie, let's start by telling me who you are when you were born, where you were born, and your earliest memories of growing up.

Bess Fishman: I am being interviewed by Elaine Eff and she wants to know about my earliest years. It's strange that I don't have strong memories of my younger days. I was born June the second, 1909, and amazingly, I still have the birth certificate in my album. And I really think the first thing I remember, not of my birthplace because that was on Caroline Street near Baltimore, and anybody that's from my generation would know where Baltimore Street was. It was a real Jewish center with all sorts of synagogues large and small. And I think the first thing I remember is that we lived at Bond and McElderry Street. That was one block away from Johns Hopkins Hospital, which was at Broadway and McElderry, and we had a grocery store because that was the usual thing to do. You didn't have to know the language too much; you could just point at things. We lived upstairs and there was a coal stove downstairs to heat the kitchen and the rest of the rooms were upstairs. I really don't remember a lot. It's amazing. I remember lots of things but I don't remember those early years. They weren't my favorite years. And then we moved to another grocery store on East Baltimore Street. That was a move-up. And there was a big kitchen downstairs and there—everything was cold. There was the stove for the heat and it was cold upstairs. We had bedrooms on the third floor. The second floor was rented out. And I never thought about it too much. They weren't my

favorite years.

EE: Tell me about your parents.

BF: Well, my parents—that's a long story. My father left Europe in the early 1900s. They lived in a little shtetl. My father had a very fine mind but just lived in the wrong generation. He left his tiny little shtetl, Kupel, and left my mother with five children; came to Baltimore as he already had landsleit there. He boarded for some years while accumulating pennies to send for tickets for his beautiful Baila and her five children to join him. They came on a boat—one of those boats that take forever to get here—and they started a new family. That's why my siblings are like 20 years apart. He had a whole new family.

EE: Tell me about the siblings and maybe if there was a difference between those born in Europe and those born here.

BF: I find it very strange, now, that they never talked about what went on in their youth. Today it's very prevalent. In those days, I think they were just so happy to get away they never talked about it. Now, my sisters were all older except sister Dora. From what I heard and what I know now, that my oldest sister Ida married an uncle. My mother's oldest brother married her child, and in those years it was against the law to get married in Maryland, a niece, and an uncle. And they went to Rhode Island to get married. Soon after my sister, Nettie, the next one got married to Rabbi Panitz. And then Adelle married to Isadore Rosenthal. They got married young in those days. And then my brother, Walter, married later. He joined the Jewish Legion as they didn't have a branch in the States connected with Britain. And they had a branch in Canada and so Walter joined them and from the little bit I remember up there, my father [chuckles] was happy to have him do that. Today they would say he didn't find himself. Those days they called it something different.

EE: What was the Jewish Legion?

BF: It was a branch of the Army in the First World War. As a matter of fact, maybe five years ago—or maybe three years ago there was an exhibit in the Jewish Museum, and they had pictures of the Jewish Legion. And there were some people from Baltimore also involved. And my son came over to me and he said, “Look, Mother. I think there’s Walter’s picture.” And sure enough, there it was in this group. I think—I’m not sure but I think Shoshana’s [Cardin] father might have been in it. He was in that generation. See, it goes back so far. What, like seventy, eighty years ago?

EE: Did they see any wartime action?

BF: They were in Turkey. I’ll tell you the same story. They didn’t talk about it. It’s hard for you because you’re in this field that—you know, people didn’t talk about it. They just never talked about it. You were so busy working in the store making a living and it wasn’t easy. And my father was an invalid at that time. And Walter—they were glad Walter went into the service. He had something positive to do. Then he came out. He married a very nice woman, Lil Erlich, and the Erlich family—very nice. She was good for him. I had another brother, George. So, at that period my father was already sick. What had happened, which had happened to many people in the 1918 era, the people were dying like flies. There was a big epidemic and my father got sick but he didn’t die. But he got what is called today Parkinson’s. It wasn’t called Parkinson’s; it didn’t have a name. It was just called a nerve disease. There was one nerve doctor and no medicine and he had a bad tremor. So my mother and my brother took care of the grocery store. That was also a sad thing because my brother, George—was the only one that had graduated from Polytechnic High School, and he wanted to go to college. But in those days you couldn’t have aids; you couldn’t have nurses. Who had the money for it? And it wasn’t done. And so George and my mother took care of the store. My mother was a quiet, peaceful lady. She didn’t make any waves. She did what she had to do. It was her

temperament. And so my brother George had to do that. I was already up to high school by that time and my sister, Dora. When they started their second family I heard there were four children but I only know two of them lived. My sister once told me that there were children that died, you know. It wasn't unusual for young infants to die in those days. I was already in high school.

EE: Now, you were part of that second family, right?

BF: Yes.

EE: So how many came over with your parents?

BF: Five.

EE: And then how many—?

BF: Two.

EE: And that was—?

BF: Seven.

EE: This was what you said, you were in high school at the time?

BF: Oh, yes. And my father really needed somebody to be with him. His shaking was terrible. They didn't have medicines like they have now. And so I had to leave day high school. I was at Eastern High. Dora and I were both at Eastern High. I left high school and I went to City College on Howard Street at night, so I graduated from high school at night. Of course, that was as far as we could go, and I stayed home with my father. I used to read then. That's how I learned to read the Yiddish Paper. We used to get, not the Forward, but the Tagablat. The Forward was more of a labor paper. Labor, in those days—you know, labor was very high. But this was a more intellectual paper. I think it

was called the Tagablat. I think. Maybe the Morgen Journal—one of those two papers.

EE: What language was spoken at home?

BF: Well, my parents spoke Yiddish and we spoke English. It wasn't great communication. It was two different worlds. My mother started us to school but the rest was up to us what we did. You see, it was so hard to make a living; they couldn't be concerned. We never had a doll. I mean, who heard about such things? Nobody knew you were poor. Everybody was poor. You know, either you worked in a shop or I think at one point my father had a paper route. So you'd get on the streetcar and go down to Charles Street and pick up the papers and get on the streetcar and come back and deliver them. You didn't have to talk English so you could, you know, maneuver. There were two big shuls on Lloyd Street. Today, Lloyd Street sounds fancy. It was pretty dumpy. And there was a Rusheshul that's now renovated. It's gorgeous, and it's doing a very fine job. It's really become a regular shul. And then there was Shomrei Mushmares, which is now called the—I'm trying to think of the name—anyway, my father was active in that shul. I think on the plaque he was the secretary at one point. And everybody that came joined my father in that shul. And we sat upstairs. I can still picture where our seats were. And women weren't shul goers then like they are now. First of all, if you had children, you know, nobody had any maids. There was no such a thing, not in our society. There was a rich society that we didn't know about. They lived down on Eutaw Place. But we didn't know that. The only person that had a car in the family was my brother-in-law, but he had a grocery store too. He was in Hampden. I'm skipping years here back and forth.

EE: Let's see if we can stay with the early years and maybe that'll help us to, you know, frame it better.

BF: Early years—what do you call the early years? I mean, I don't know what you would call the early years. I mean, ten years old? There wasn't much.

EE: Let's try—what I'd love to do is talk about living in East Baltimore.

BF: That's funny that I stayed on Baltimore Street. My father had a store on 1912 East Baltimore Street, and then when I got married my husband had a business at 1600 E. Baltimore Street. That was quite a coincidence. I got married in '32. So you want the years before that.

EE: Yeah, I'd love you to tell me about the neighborhood that you grew up in or the neighborhoods. Could you describe what they were like, what the street was like, what other stores there were, and who your friends were?

BF: Every corner on every alley—you know, there was Wolfe Street and Washington Street, and in between was an alley, and Washington and Chester, and in between was an alley. On every one of these corners was a little store. There was a grocery store. Further down near Broadway was a fruit store and a butcher and a—where they sold the fish and the vegetables. On Baltimore Street on the 1700 block was Butcher Tucker, who had fifteen children. They were a charming couple. And you didn't have a front porch. You had to sit outside. That's what you did at night. We had a store and the milkman used to bring milk every day in wooden boxes and we used to sit out there. And, you know, you didn't expect much. You just had what you had and you had to help in the store and you had to help in the house. As soon as you graduated high school you went to work the next day.

EE: Can you describe at all what street life was like?

BF: The street life was very simple. You sat out on the front stoop if you had a stoop, or you sat on chairs or boxes or whatever. And on the corner of Wolfe and Baltimore Street was a drugstore—Flom's Drugstore. The boys used to congregate there, and they had a fountain. That's where you went for your activity. Up the street, three blocks was Patterson Park, so you walked to the park. You know, you didn't have cars and you didn't

have much money.

EE: Were there vendors? Do you remember any people came by —in their horse and wagon or—?

BF: Occasionally. It wasn't customary because we had stores on every street, and in between the streets was an alley, and ours was on the corner of an alley, Chapel Street, which today is very beautiful down there—Chapel Street. Do you know where that is now? Well, that was a mess. There in the alley is where the colored people would live. In tiny little shacks and they lived there, and mostly what they did was domestic work. But then they got to work in Bethlehem Steel and big mills and factories, and later on, they moved out but it was all black, low-income people. They didn't have much. I mean, they would come out and do your steps for five cents. You know that was already Depression time. Before that, they didn't do anything.

EE: Was there any relationship between the white communities or was it exclusively a Jewish community?

BF: Yes, Jewish community. I would say ninety-nine percent and the little alleys were mostly blacks or low whites. No, there was no communication at all. They would come to the store. That's cute. My mother didn't know English and the little boys would come here. She would say, [in dialect] "Get out of here!" [laughter] I mean, the little bit of English they picked up and, you know—so we knew how to speak Yiddish to them. But we were in another world already, you know. Then in 1925, my father died and so my brother, George, was left, and me, and my sister, Dora—the four of us. So we stayed in the store until George got married, and then we stayed on. Then I got married and I left the store and moved into my husband's home. And my sister, Dora, was left. Then she married my brother-in-law, Dr. Manny Kaplan, and we had to do something about that. So all the siblings got together. My brother, George, was sick at that time. He was in the hospital. So we got together at my sister, Adelle's house on Moreland Avenue. That

was off of North Avenue. It's a different North Avenue than it is today. Today it's for the birds. There are more guns than people, I think. It was during the Depression and most of the family wasn't doing too well and we were already in the business, my husband and I. Al said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of Mother." So she moved in with us and we had this three-story house and he made a kitchen upstairs for her, and brought her bedroom stuff.

EE: Before we get to the house, let's talk a little about your mother. Just tell me about her.

BF: My mother was a very beautiful woman but very placid, very—a lot of us have inherited some of that, which was good because she was not a person for changes. She went along with whatever, they had the store. My father was very intelligent and my mother was a down-to-earth, sensible woman, a healthy woman. And she worked hard. She worked in the store all the time and there was—I don't know how to explain her. She didn't make a strong impression on you. She wasn't a strong person; she was just a placid, calm individual and did what had to be done and that was it. I really can't say a whole lot. She moved in with me and she stayed with me until 1950 when she died. My father died in '25. She died in '50. And so all those years she was with me. At some point, she was very helpful because I was in the business all the time and she was in the kitchen for me, because I always had domestic help anyway. She was pleasant and peaceful.

EE: Describe her. What did she look like?

BF: She was beautiful. I have pictures of her, a beautiful woman. She would probably have gone on a diet if she lived today and she'd wear clunky shoes. You know, it wasn't a matter of style with her and she wore her hair pulled back. She never made a tremendous impression on you but she was solid and, you know, you felt solid with her—at least I think so. I don't remember what I felt then about that, I never thought

about it very much. My father was always so sick and we were always so busy taking care of him, and she was also busy being in the store that you didn't bother with impressions those days. You just did what you had to do. I went to work, you know, after high school. And you got on the streetcar in the morning with your gloves and your hat and you came home on the streetcar with the same people almost all the time. You know, it was that kind of a social life, it was just matter of fact way of things to do.

EE: Now, where was your mother born and raised? And do you know anything about the age difference between her and your father and how they met?

BF: Oh, my goodness! You're talking about 100 years ago. I'm sure they didn't go out on a date to the movies. They lived in this little shtetl and I suppose, you know—how they got married I don't know. But he was more vital than she was. I had to put her in a nursing home for the last two years. It was terrible and it was me. There were seven children and I was the only driver and I had to take her and I had to pay for it. And I had to watch her. You know, there's always one and it was me all the time.

EE: What happened to your mother and father's family back home?

BF: Who knows? Nobody talked about it. I have no idea. My mother had one sister; she came here. I knew she had one sister that moved to Israel, or Palestine in those years. Actually, Al and I did meet their daughter-in-law at a kibbutz there. And my mother had a sister here. She married a guy that really wasn't worthy of her. That happens sometimes, you know. And their children—one of them just died. Oh, we're going back a long time. I found the later years much more interesting than the early years.

EE: Well, tell me about your early Jewish education or your awareness of Judaism.

BF: Oh, we kept the store closed on Shabbos, you know. And we kept kosher; there was no question about that. And Hebrew School, we went four days a week, and

Sunday— we went five days a week. Actually, my daughter did too in the ‘40s. We didn’t talk about it much. You just can’t imagine how different things are today. People are making a living and so that’s not your major thought anymore. You know, you got a job and you went to work. In those days the girls went to work for $5 a week, but of course, the value of money was different. You know, money had a different value.

EE: Tell me what you think about your early years growing up in a Jewish community in East Baltimore. How did that inform perhaps your later interests in the Jewish community? Do you think there was any relationship and how would you describe it?

BF: Well. I’m not talking about my early years— ten years old or fifteen years old. I’m talking about when I became a person that I could work by myself. You know, I was aggressive and I did things. I know, I remember we had a friend there, Mr. Kramer. He was a teacher and his daughter was Shoshana Ginsburgh. She married Stanley Ginsburgh. Well, way before he was a remarkable educator and her parents were Zionists, we started a group called “Gordonia” for Aleph Gimel, Gordon. That was his name, Gordon—Aleph Daled Gordon. It was called Gordonia, and I belonged to that and I became a leader there. And then—this was all after high school—it was very dull before. Looking back, I guess then I didn’t think so. You didn’t think about it. You just did what you did and that was it. But then when I got to the point where I could make my own decisions, I joined Junior Hadassah and I worked there. I just always liked that sort of thing.

EE: What were some of the influences in your family? Was there any talk of Zionism? Were there any images around the house?

BF: Oh, yes. We had two pictures hanging up in my house. One of them was Theodore Herzl and one of them was Max Nordau. Two Zionist pictures hanging up. If my father had been well he would have been a great leader but he was sick. It was a debilitating disease, Parkinson’s, and without any medicine it was terrible. There was one doctor—a

nerve doctor—Dr. Speert. They couldn't do a thing for him. We didn't talk to your parents and tell them what you did. They were living in different worlds.

EE: Now, when you went to shul, who did you go with?

BF: It's a different world today. Young people didn't go to synagogue and when you got married and you had children you couldn't go. You had to stay home with them. Synagogues were not institutions like they are today. They were just like shuls like you call a stebel today, it was a shul—a nice shul and the men went and you stayed home so they could go. But shul life was different than today. You didn't have a PTA; you didn't have anything. You know, you went to Hebrew School. They taught you and that was it. It wasn't exciting like they make it today. You know, those days the children came along. Whatever you did—you liked it or not. If you didn't like it, too bad. They didn't take you from one school to another. They didn't bother. You just never thought about it. It's different. I had domestic help so I used to go to shul—on Yom Tov, on Shabbos none of the women went. And everybody walked, no matter how far it was. It was nice, Yom Tov time.

EE: I'm trying to get a sense of how you became so steeped in the traditions, which you have so firmly embraced and whether there was, in fact, anyone you knew, to those early years that you might remember, and how you learned really about Judaism.

BF: No. I don't know. I just taught myself everything. No, I don't think anybody in my family that I could say, that because he did it I'm doing it. Whatever I did, I did the first time. No, I just think that was the way it just developed. I suppose I had it in me because I was president of everything that I was in. So—those years were—I don't know what you got from other people you've interviewed but nobody had anything. Friends, the Kramers were true Zionists. Maybe unknowingly I absorbed some of that but nobody in my family—they were poor working people. They had little stores and little things like that. But it wasn't exciting. At least—looking back, I don't find—those were not my

happiest years. I'm saying not happy now because then we thought we were happy; we didn't know the difference. You know, you came home and you helped—we never sat down to dinner together. My mother was in the store. I didn't like any of that. I mean, nobody told me not to like it. I just didn't like it. I know now that I didn't like it. I didn't know then. But I really found after I got married were my best times—that's when my life really expanded and I was able to do things—my husband had a little business when I married him. I went into it and in two weeks I was downstairs already working. But I never really put much time into thinking about those early years, which you feel are so important, but they were just things you did. You didn't—you know, what do you know at ten years old? You know what you're exposed to. You know, when you're exposed to going to the office in the morning and helping out, in the store you'd do it. We learned to make Jello, my sister, Dora, and I. And we used to have people over, my mother never made Jello—never heard of it. And we bought Jello dishes and—my sister, Dora, and I, we used to play the old-fashioned bridge. Today, there are two kinds of bridge. I never did learn the current one. You know, we just made the best of everything. I don't know how else to explain it. We would invite some friends over, friends lived right in the neighborhood. Nobody went anywhere. If you had a date you went on the street car, and nobody dated a lot because it cost money. It was okay. You know, in retrospect, it was just something that you had to do and you did it. When I was able to do more things—I always liked a challenge and I liked the different things to do, and I'm writing on this paper today two other things I'm working on.

EE: You said that when you graduated from high school you went right to work. What kind of work did you do?

BF: I went to work in an office. My girlfriend, Esther Witten, who I met on the streetcar going to high school—and then I found out she lived across the street from me a block down. Frances Burman lived a block up. We became friends for seventy years and—one of my most interesting activities was going to the library, as I was an avid

reader.

EE: Tell me about the library. Where was it located?

BF: My mother didn't know that I had a library card. I mean, they didn't know from that. You know, that was something either you did—I mean, not like now, you take your child to the library to get a card. I took myself to the library to get a card. The library was on Central Avenue, I think, between Baltimore and Lombard. It was within walking distance so you went and you got a book and you read it, and then you went back and returned it and got another book. My mother wasn't interested in what I was reading. She wouldn't understand it. The library was wonderful. Now in retrospect, I can see how important it was. But then you didn't think about it. And I used to write little stories. I think I always had a feeling for that sort of thing.

EE: What other places do you remember walking to in the neighborhood?

BF: We would go to Patterson Park, and we would go to Broadway. Broadway was it. You know, where the harbor is now. At the end of Broadway was water—crummy, dirty water with crummy, dirty sailors. But on Broadway were the movies and we would go to movies for five cents. I forgot all about that. We did go to the movies. But, you know, you couldn't come home and tell your mother what you saw. You didn't discuss things then. I mean, even people that did things, they just didn't talk about it. That's the way I visualize it and maybe it wasn't so, but that's how I pictured it, now that I think about it. I never thought about those years too much, actually. Once in a while, I'll get somebody to drive me down and see what it looks like now. You can't imagine what it looked like then. It was crummy. North Broadway was nice—a big, wide street, to take a walk.

EE: Was Broadway a Jewish neighborhood in any way?

BF: Broadway was influenced by the hospital and so nurses and doctors lived down in that area. No, not exclusively; not like Baltimore Street or Fayette Street. It always was

such a pretty street. You know, you would walk on it and take a walk on Broadway. It was so pretty. It had a park in the middle like—like Callaway Avenue had, and it's still pretty. The Hebrew School was right there on Broadway near Baltimore. I think it was a shul too; I can't remember that. But the Hebrew School was right in that building. I remember Eleanor went there while we lived on Baltimore Street. In '41 we moved. Look— two little birds talking to each other.

EE: What did you do in Patterson Park?

BF: Well, actually, I think I played tennis once in a while. We didn't do anything. When we went to junior high school we walked across Patterson Park from Baltimore Street and Patterson Park Avenue and Baltimore Street. You walked diagonally across the park to the junior high school; forty-seven I think it was called. [An accelerated school.]

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BF: We went there. I made three years into two. I don't think my parents ever knew that.

EE: Do you feel like you raised yourself? It sounds to me like you were raised—?

BF: I don't know. I really don't know. Those years were very unimportant in my memory. I don't know how much I wrote about it in my history. But they weren't the kind of years that I enjoyed.

EE: Okay, well, we'll move ahead. I promise.

BF: My life really blossomed when I got married.

EE: Well, we'll get there.

BF: But then, did I raise myself? I don't know. That's how everybody was raised. You ate what they made. You know, they didn't make two different dinners for anybody. My mother would come in and cook on the coal stove, and whatever she had in the store I guess she cooked. I don't even remember that. We were not complainers. You know, we had that part of my mother's disposition too. We still have—a lot of us. You didn't think of complaining. Why were you going to complain? Everybody was working, doing their best.

EE: Who did the cooking in your house? Did your mother actually have time to prepare meals?

BF: Well, she'd make meat and potatoes. I don't know, whatever— I never think about the food. Never—I'm not—'til this day, I'm not a food person so I don't think then I cared either. Who would complain? I mean, if you didn't like it you took a roll and butter. You know, you can't imagine how different the times were. What year were you born?

EE: I don't think we want to go there.

BF: [laughter] I mean, I would know what kind of era it was. See, I was married in '32. It was during the Depression.

EE: Okay. Well, then why don't you tell me how you met your husband?

BF: Yes, we had some landsleit.-- had Ziza Cohen. He was a teacher at a parochial school. What I did was very unusual in those days. I was always, more mature than my years, and going out with silly young guys wasn't interesting to me. Anyway, so Al Fishman was a widower and he had a five-and-a-half-year-old daughter. And Ziza Cohen was also a landsleit, so he told Al to call me. I didn't know him but our families were interrelated. And when he called me to go out I said "yes" because I knew his background already. You know, it was like mishpucha almost. I had never met him, and he only lived three blocks away and so I said "okay." And we went to Gwynn Oak Park,

dancing. I must say, I liked him from the very minute I met him, and he was really a handsome dresser and a wonderful dancer. They went to the same shul we went to and had the same sort of interests. Anyway, it was really a snappy thing. And six weeks later we were married.

EE: What was the age difference?

BF: Nine years difference. He was older than me but that didn't matter to me. He was already established in a little business and he had a car, and all that appealed to me. I liked that feeling of getting out of this era I was in. And we had a little wedding at Rabbi Schwartz's house on Aisquith Street, and no invitations and no orchestra, and no caterer. And we went away for the weekend and then we went right back. Of course, everybody thought I was out of my cotton-picking head. But they found out I was right.

EE: Why did they think you were—?

BF: Well, who got married and had a child five and a half years old? Nobody did it in those days. You know, it was unheard of.

EE: How old were you? And tell me about this child.

BF: Oh, she was five and a half, a beautiful girl—my very best friend 'til this very day that lives right around the corner. She's already been married for fifty-two years. It was a challenge and it was difficult but I handled it and I went right into the business, which I loved because I had worked as a bookkeeper for a couple of years. I even knew that industry.

EE: Tell me what that was.

BF: Well, he started out from a very humble beginning, really. In those days there were many, many factories in Baltimore in the needle trade. But visualize factories that do

everything from making hats to making shoes to making everything in between, and making gloves and making awnings. Everything required thread, sewing thread. Before Al went into the sewing—into the thread business, which was their main industry—not domestic but industrial, I think his uncle gave him a thousand dollars. He used to go to the factories where they cut all this—if you have ever been in a factory where they cut all the clothes, the cloth was laid out and they cut the patterns. There are pieces of fabric that fall off the table. In Yiddish, it was called “upfall.” He would go from one factory to another and pick up these pieces and put them in sacks. As a matter of fact, I wrote a poem about that for him, on his sixty-fifth birthday, I remember. Then they would sell ‘em and they would sell ‘em for making rags. You know, they’d sell them to the factories. But then he went into the sewing thread business gradually—he was a good salesman, an excellent people person, and I was very good on the inside. I could never go out cold to sell but I could manage anything inside. I took over the inside and together we did a great job. He was selling and I was taking care of the help inside. He had his niece that went to work for him when she was in high school and she stayed for forty-five years. We were friends ‘til the day she died, my husband’s niece and we were having a great time. I loved it. And then I could do things, you know. Then we had two boys after that, and they’re just great kids. They were wonderful years. We lived upstairs and Al took the whole place apart and did it over and it was gorgeous. Nobody had such a pretty place as we did and a car.

EE: Tell me where that was.

BF: At Baltimore and Bond Street. It was 1603 East Baltimore Street. We had white steps going up and first, we used the first floor, and then we went back further into the end of the house and we used that space for a lot of thread and Allied Products. I found it very interesting and I would do anything that had to be done they stuck me there and I did it and it was great. I just loved every minute of it and our marriage was wonderful, just wonderful. He was full of life. He was whistling and singing and his parents—his

mother was sick—died before I met him. He was saying kaddish for her then. He was full of life. They didn't know it. They didn't see it. Yeah, we had a good time together.

EE: Tell me about your house on East Baltimore Street and who lived with you.

BF: Oh, the house had three stories. The front steps were white steps in front—big ones. Before we got married they lived in the back room and upstairs, on the third floor. And when we got married they moved out, and on the second floor— see what I'm talking about, the same house— was another family. Ruthie Kabik's parents lived there. The Ruthie Kabik that we know today, lived there when she was a little girl. So she was a friend of Eleanor's since she was a little girl, and Marsha Zuriff lived down the street, and they're still friends. When the Neubergers on the second floor moved out Al took everything apart and made a most beautiful, modern apartment. It was so pretty, made a bath and a half and we had two bedrooms. And upstairs Eleanor had a room and then my mother had a room and a kitchen, and this was all on my head. I was managing everything, and it was great. The busier I was the better I liked it and it was really nice. I also learned to drive.

EE: When did you learn to drive and how did you learn to drive?

BF: We had a deliveryman by the name of Eddie—Eddie something or other and so he taught me how to drive, and then eventually I got my own car and it was a wonderful period of my life. I mean, if you want to know about that period I have very fond memories. It wasn't always easy. You can't have a family with three children and not have any problems, but we managed very well. Didn't take any nonsense from them. It was great.

EE: Now, you got married in 1932, and you pretty quickly— well, you had an instant family— but you also started your own family.

BF: Yes.

EE: So tell me about starting your family while you were working and raising your stepdaughter.

BF: Oh, sure. I was working. I had no problem. Eleanor was my daughter. It didn't make any difference. Nobody ever said, "Stepdaughter." I mean, that was taboo in my house. I can remember telling my girlfriend, Esther—I said, "Esther, never ever let me hear that word." There's no question about it. In those days the grandparents didn't know how to handle me. They just didn't believe you could be friends. In those days it was a different era. But it didn't bother me. Life was good and then Nelson was born in '33, the next year. Only remember really pleasant things.

EE: Were you getting involved with any synagogues during that period?

BF: The synagogues were different. Women didn't have any part, not until we joined Beth Tfiloh in 1941 and we moved to Ashburton. We were the first Jews that lived there. They didn't let Jews in there in the early years.

EE: Now, where was that?

BF: Callaway Avenue, Ashburton. They were verboten, the Jews. I think Frances' [Burman] was one of the early owners there. One day we went to New York, Al and I. We used to go to New York a lot and—because we liked to travel. And we went to visit a cousin that lived in Brooklyn— Brooklyn across the street from a park. What's the name of that park? I'll think of it because my granddaughter just bought an apartment there. Not Central Park. The other park in Brooklyn. And I said to Al, "My goodness! This is so lovely!" We were in business and doing nicely and I said, "No more, we're going to live on Baltimore Street." Then, we saw an ad in the paper on Callaway Avenue. So I called Frances and Moe took us in to see it, and he said, "Oh, I know a better one that's across the street from me that I want you to see," and we bought it and it was beautiful. We lived there for twenty-four years. It's very nice and all the people belonged

to Beth Tfiloh and all the kids were going to Hebrew School there. It was a very pleasant place to live. Everything was on Garrison Boulevard. You walked up and whatever you wanted was there—every type of store, the bowling alley, the movies, the Hebrew school, and the gym, everything you wanted was right there. It was wonderful. It was a terrific period, and I said, “Gee, we’re never going to move from there.” But, you know, I learned you never say never. Anyway, Al got sick and it was hard. He was upstairs in a big house with a big lawn in the front. We had weddings there and everything—showers and parties—all kinds. We were party people. Al loved people. He loved parties. We always had parties. It was a great life— forty-five years he ailed a lot and then he died. Eleanor had a party for us. I guess it was our 45th, 1977, wedding anniversary. I said, “Elli, the cake you have here cost more than my whole wedding.” That’s how things changed, and it was fine. It was great.

EE: Now, you had a second son too.

BF: In ’39 David was born. In between I had a stillborn and I had a miss— everything I had. You name it; I had it. But I was busy and I could cope. I was a coper. I could cope with it and he was just the dearest thing. He was such a darling child, smiling all the time. Now, he’s got a gray beard and is so smart. All 3 children are bright.

EE: Was it hard for you to juggle work and the children and this new sort of religious involvement?

BF: I don’t think so.

EE: How’d you do it?

BF: Well, first of all, when you’re your own boss you can do what you want more or less. I always had help. Our niece, Sylvia, was always in the office. When we grew and we expanded, one of the girls that came to work for us was Margie Whitman, right after one year in college. She came to work with us and stayed—for forty-eight years, Fishman n’

Son. She's now a good friend of mine. She called me the other day.

EE: Did you still work while you were raising the children?

BF: Oh, sure. We lived upstairs at the store and my husband never liked to get up early and I did, so I used to get up at eight o'clock. I always had a full-time maid and then, of course, when my mother came to live with us that made it easier for me. You know, I was just always involved and wherever we had to change locations because it got too small—1603 got too small, and so I went shopping downtown, walked around downtown 'til I found what we want. We moved twice. We moved to Liberty Street and the city took that away. They opened up this—what did they build there on the corner of Baltimore and Liberty Street? What was it called? They had the Center— Civic Center or something. Then they took that away for the Center. Then we moved to 410 West Baltimore Street and had upstairs and downstairs. A lot of threads. We sold to all the factories in town, and it was a busy time. I had a lot of help and I could always get away. It wasn't like I had a nine-to-five job, and Al loved me doing it.

EE: How was the business growing? What was changing besides moving from location to location?

BF: Well, the business grew because the factories were expanded. There was like a million—not a million. I guess we must have had a thousand customers. There were shops, all kinds of things. It was a very big center, Baltimore. The needle trade was tremendous. But at some point that changed too and so we had to go into another field. Do you want all that? It's really written in the business much better than I can think of it. We stayed in that industry until factories started to move down south where the wages were lower, and then they moved overseas. The factories just moved out. Everything you buy today is not made in the USA anymore. Then, we went into the carpet layer supplies business. I took Al—he wasn't well; I used to drive him around, and we started to sell them. We used to take the carpets. See this, how it's sewn around the edge?

You see, that's not a bonding; that's sewed. And that's what they used to do. They used to take—

EE: Why don't we take a break?

BF: I have to stop awhile.

EE: Yeah, I think we're almost done—this tape anyway.

BF: Oh, my goodness!

EE: I can tell you're flagging a little.

BF: Yeah, my neck is hurting me a little. Oh, I got—honey, that's not the end of my life.

EE: Oh, no. I don't think we're done.

BF: Oh, my gosh, no! [laughter] All the things that happened after that.

EE: Oh, no. We're—listen, the point is, I don't expect to do an interview in an hour. Do you know?

BF: I don't think so.

EE: We thought if we could take your life in an hour, why bother?

BF: Not me.

EE: You know?

BF: No.

EE: But I want—

BF: Did you get the feel of it when you read that thing? Or did you read it?

EE: Yeah, by the way, I know Stanley Savitz.

BF: You do?

EE: Yeah.

BF: How do you know Stanley? He's adorable.

EE: I lived in Canton. I'm one of the people who gave him a hard time when he wanted to open up his nursing home.

BF: Now, wait a minute. I made some coffee. I didn't even stop to ask you. I got so involved with this.

EE: You probably want to move around a little, right? I didn't mean to be rude to you. What I was doing is—

BF: That's all right.

EE: There's a thing on here—

BF: Now, could you put it back for me to hear it?

EE: Yeah, but it isn't finished yet.

[end of side 2, tape 1]

EE: Today is June 8, 2001. This is Elaine Eff interviewing Bess Fishman at her home in Baltimore, Maryland for the Jewish Women's Archives, "Weaving Women's Words" Project. This is the second tape of our interview. And Bess just had a wonderful milestone, so tell me how your birthday was.

BF: You're interested to hear about my birthdays. This year, last Saturday I was ninety-two and I thought, well, it was time to stop having big to-do's about my birthday because when I was eighty I had a big party my daughter gave me. When I was eighty-five and she said, "Mother, I'm not making you another party." I said, "Okay, I'll make my own party." So I had a party that I made myself for my eighty-fifth at Cross Keys, and it was really fun. My children—some of them—prepared a program and it was great. And at ninetieth, I had a terrific birthday because I was honored at Beth Tfiloh, and by strangest of coincidences it fell on June the second, which is exactly my birthday. And so it was a tremendous outpouring of people for Beth Tfiloh, not for me. But it so happened by coincidence it was on the night of my birthday, June the second. It was great and my family was there and 1,400 other people sang me "Happy Birthday." So it was that—now, that's enough celebrating. So the children all made note of it. We went to dinner at their homes or they took me out to dinner, and they sent me lots and lots of pretty cards. Thank God that I was able to live to this day. I say, modyani in the morning when I get up, which means "Thank God I'm awaking without much pain for another day and we shall see what goes on from now on."

EE: Well, I'm glad you're here too.

BF: Thank you.

EE: What I'd like to do is, since you just referred to your ninetieth birthday celebration at the synagogue, I'd love to talk about your involvement in Jewish—affairs. So maybe you could start by telling me about your Jewish education.

BF: If you want to talk about eighty years ago, the Jewish education field was a different picture than it is today. You had Hebrew School and you went to Hebrew School every day four days a week after public school and on Sunday morning. That's what kept you out of trouble 'cause you were busy. You came home from school. You had a snack and you walked to Hebrew School. That went on until you were old enough that you didn't

want to go anymore, and that's what went on with the early years.

EE: Where did you go?

BF: We lived on Baltimore Street. Here we go again. Baltimore Street had a big play in my life. We lived on East Baltimore Street and the Hebrew School was on Broadway, which was just a block away, and it was on Broadway, that beautiful street right around the corner. I think it was a shul and they had a Hebrew school there. I think at one time they had another shul on Baltimore and Chester Street. It was all in the same area. Everything had to be within walking distance, and we went there. I can't remember now how long we did and how long we stayed, but then when we got older and we had to go to work and that was it. We were finished. But when I finished high school I decided I wanted to continue, and so there was Baltimore Hebrew College. Now, it's called the Baltimore Hebrew University, but it was the college for me. It was on the corner of Eutaw and Dolphin Streets. It's a pretty long shot from where we lived but we walked it, and it was on a Tuesday evening. In those years they called it "an extension course" on Tuesday evenings. And we went there. I remember the day that Dr. Louis Kaplan came to Baltimore. It was during that period. And I really loved that and I met some lovely women. And after I got married there was a Tuesday morning class that I went to, and I went there for many, many years. I started in 1926 and went on and on and on and on. I used to go there all the time, and that was as far as my education was concerned. But then when I got involved with Beth Tfiloh, of course, I got involved in many, many activities. We moved to Ashburton in 1941 in the spring and my daughter, Eleanor, was transferred to Forest Park High School, and Nelson was transferred to junior high. He went to the TA for the first six years. That's the Talmudical Academy. And he wasn't too happy with it but he learned a lot. He can still get up and read the Torah. And David was young. He was two years old when we moved there. And then two years later in the '40s he joined the nursery school at Beth Tifloh there was a kindergarten and then they started the day school. He was one of the first pupils in the first grade of the school.

Rabbi Samuel Rosenblatt came to the house to ask the parents, if we would take a chance and send David to his class. And we did! There were seven children in the class, and today, of course, it's grown big—it's gone to great lengths. Actually, this year it was chosen as one of the best private schools in the city of Baltimore by a national organization. I don't remember the exact title of the organization. And David was always interested in Jewish education and to this day he takes an advanced Talmud class on Wednesday nights at B.T., among all his other many accomplishments.

EE: Can you remember the kinds of courses you took when you were going to the Baltimore Hebrew College?

BF: I couldn't remember the names if that's what you want to know because every year they called it something different. And it really didn't matter too much what the name of it was. It was just that I liked the environment, the atmosphere, and it was something I always enjoyed. And then, of course, when David started at the school it wasn't long before I was president of the PTA, and it was very interesting. It was programming and stuff and I liked that. I remember that I insisted we had alternating programs. One meeting would be religious subjects and another one would be, secular. It was nice, I enjoyed it. David was always such a good student. He was never a problem. It only went up to the sixth grade and then he went to—I think he went from there to City College, but that couldn't be. City College didn't start in the sixth grade. He must have gone somewhere else. I can't remember which school he went to.

EE: Let's talk—I want to really talk about you and about your activities and what your volunteer commitments were.

BF: Oh, well, I always worked for Hadassah.

EE: Do you remember when you got started with Hadassah? Do you remember your first meeting?

BF: No. I worked for another organization. It was called “Gordonia.” It was a Zionist organization. It was for “Aleph Daled Gordon”; that was his name. He was a leader in Palestine at that time. And we had meetings on Sundays of course, ‘cause all of us worked. I was inspired by Stanley and Shoshana Ginsburgh. They were ardent Zionists and very interesting people, and they lived down the street on Baltimore Street in an apartment, because the houses down there were usually three apartments in a house. I remember that. I can’t remember exactly where we even had meetings but I remember that I was active and I became a leader in that group. I joined Junior Hadassah. I always worked for Hadassah all the time. I was on the senior Hadassah Chapter Board for about twenty or twenty-five years, and I did so many different things. I never wanted to be president because I was too involved in the business and that was a big job, and I was editor of the “Bulletin” and I was Book Review Chairman. You name it. I was Chapter Treasurer for one year. I remember Al used to help me with that. And then, of course, when I got married I joined Senior Hadassah, and these activities, of course, were mostly from Senior Hadassah, which went on for years. I was very interested in my making my children Life Members, and I have a nice picture of eleven of them— my daughter and my daughters-in-law and my granddaughters, and my great-granddaughter, who just became the eleventh member of the Life Clan. Elise Ochfeld about three months ago became the twelfth one. So they know—everybody knows that they belong. The whole family knows they belong. They don’t all go to Beth Tfiloh but they’re all affiliated to one congregation or another. Sarah—my daughter-in-law, was president at Beth Am Congregation for three years, and her husband, my son Nelson, they’re very involved in Jewish events, which I feel they must have gotten some of it from our bringing up I hope. My daughter and son-in-law Ochfed belong to Beth Tfiloh, and my granddaughter, Susie, and Dickie Rotner, and their two daughters come to Beth Tfiloh with me, and my two sons belong to Beth Am. So it’s a pretty good average, I think. They don’t go every Saturday like I do but they know I go and so this is just what I like to do. I’m still doing what I like to do at ninety-three years.

EE: Now, I know you were involved also with the Sisterhood.

BF: Oh, sure.

EE: So why don't you talk about your involvement?

BF: Oh, my goodness!

EE: I would love to know something about your growth, you were never just a member.

BF: Not long. Not long. I was not just a member for very long. No, of course, I joined the Sisterhood when we moved and joined the Shul. I mean, you know, it was just the thing to do. You never thought about it. You just did it. It wasn't too long until, I guess, they asked me to be secretary. Now, in those years we used to have a Board Meeting in the morning and I would go into the office and type up the minutes and then we would have a meeting in the afternoon. I didn't find that hard; some people do. And then I went on to be vice president and moved up the line really. There were a thousand members in the Sisterhood at that time, and you had to work hard to find enough committees to give these women chairmanships because nobody went to work. You know, you worked as I did in our own business, but very few people went to work, nine-to-five, and left the children home. It wasn't done, not because they were so rich. You just managed the best way you can. Then from 1956 to '58, I was president. In between those years in 1957, Al and I took our first trip to Europe and Israel. It was my first trip to Israel. Subsequently, I made nine trips to Israel. We all had our board meetings at home. And my vice president took over for the summer and we went away for six weeks, which was very exciting a break. My son, Nelson, and Sarah were in Paris. He was in the Army and we went to see him, and my niece, Elaine, and John—he was a doctor at Guys Hospital in London, and so we visited with them. Then we went on—I can't remember the exact itinerary—we went on to Italy and then to Switzerland. Oh, I remember Switzerland. That was great. And then we went to Rome and then to Israel. It was a

very exciting time in Israel and everybody was building.

EE: Where do you remember being? Did you have any contact with any of the residents?

BF: Yes, we had some contacts—we had been active in the Israel Bonds, Al and I. We didn't plan our Israel itinerary until we got there. We went to the Israel Bond Office and they set up our itinerary. That was very nice, we had acquaintances there, and friends of friends. In those years not many people were traveling around and so if you did—the people in Israel, if they had company, it was really exciting. Today, you know, they were bombarded with people over the years. It became unbearable sometimes; they would have so many people. But those were the early years—1957. I remember seeing that very important general with one eye. I can't think of his name right this second. Not Dayan? [ed. Moshe Dayan] At any rate, if I weren't making a tape I would think of it in a minute or two. Talking about this tape is a little different than writing. When you're writing you can change it around; you can turn it around. And sometimes you don't want to say what's on there. At any rate, I'm doing my best, I hope. And our life went on like that. Al died at forty-five in 1977, and I stayed in the business all the time. I was driving and I went down to the office. If Al couldn't go, I went. And the business grew, got bigger. Then when Nelson left the Army and after we had left Israel on our first trip we came back to France—Nelson and Sarah were there, yet in the Army. But it wasn't a fighting war and so they really enjoyed living there. When we came back to Paris on our way home, he was living in Paris when we—in '57 when we made our first—our second stop. Our first stop was in London to see Elaine and John Freeman. Our second stop was in Paris to see Nelson and Sarah, and they had a tiny little apartment there. He was with the Army and the accounting. He was already a CPA and we stayed at a hotel. Don't ask me the name of it—a little hotel. And then we left and we went to Switzerland and that was really beautiful. We went to Zurich; I remember that. And I might be mixing up times but—if you're writing you can change it—when you're talking.

EE: Well, actually, you said your husband died in 1977, which—

BF: In 1977, my husband died. He was ailing already. We were married for forty-five years.

EE: Right. Let's talk—I want to hear more—we really would love to talk more about your, involvement in Jewish activities, and we're really at this point, talking about your visit—your trip to Israel.

BF: Oh, that was very exciting.

EE: How was it that you met Moshe Dayan?

BF: At the hotel; we were there and he was sitting at the next table. He wasn't doing anything but I thought it was an exciting stage of Israel's growth with people like that. It was a good time, because the people that were fighting in the war, the whole spirit of the country, wasn't Westernized like it is today. It's not the same Israel today that it was in 1957. It was exciting. You felt so powerful like you won every war, and we loved it. What was exciting about that period? There were cousins in Tel Aviv related to my brother-in-law. And really, it was wonderful. As I said before, they didn't have a lot of visitors from the States then. Here you couldn't go to a travel agent and get an itinerary for all the places we wanted to go, so we had friends that were travelers—veteran travelers—a Jewish couple. We invited them over and they told us where to go and so forth—every place that we wanted to go to. There was something special about that first trip. You'll never forget that one. Then we went so many times. I went myself. I went with Al. I went with my second husband, Sam Savitz. It was my favorite country that I would want to go back to. But I couldn't make it number 10 no matter how I tried. So I had to be satisfied with that. I think I was pretty lucky.

EE: Were there places that you would always revisit when you went back there?

BF: Your question was, did we revisit some places? Sure there are always some places you went back to, but mostly there were new places to go to. There was so much going on. You went to the Hadassah Hospital. And after my husband died we dedicated a grove in his name, and the children came. We had a big to-do. It's sponsored by the Jewish National Fund and we have a plaque there with "Albert and Bessie Fishman Grove." And we had a lot of people there, people that lived there, people that were traveling, and people that came. It was really great. I had a niece that lived there already in the Negev, Maxine, and Frank Perlmutter, and they're still there. They love it. They don't care how hard it is, and they have now two little granddaughters that live on their moshav. How different things are. They sent me last week a picture on my web TV of [laughter] Maxine and her grandbaby; it was so beautiful. The things they can do today they couldn't do then. I don't know if it's better or not. I think we had a better world than we do today. I think it's—something's wrong somewhere. I wish I could put my fingers on it. It's a different society and Israel altogether—you'd think you were in Miami or New York. You don't get that feeling of—there's this family that we knew —from Baltimore. The children went to Israel first and made aliyah and they went to a—what's the name of that place? I know it so well. They went to a moshav. First, the Lavi brother went and he loved it and then the sister came, and then the parents came, they have a beautiful apartment in Tel Aviv. The boys and the children were in this religious—oh, not a moshav—or maybe it was. Anyway, they worked on the farm and everything, and then, like, a lot of those moshavim became business places. They're building—to this day they're building furniture—synagogue furniture that they sell all over the world. And it's not primitive and a lot of tours include them. It's just—I never felt the same way about Israel after the first visit. We would go to Florida. We'd spend the whole winter, and you couldn't compare it. It was just a different feeling, if you had a feeling for Zionism, you know, you felt it when you came there. The first time you see—Jerusalem, was just like, "Wow! This couldn't be any better." Al was a good sport and we did a lot of things together. They were wonderful years to look back on. Now that I have this album—this

is my fabulous album—I just have to go back and sit down and look at it and I live my life all over again. So I highly recommend it, if anybody wants their life preserved. We had a good life.

EE: This tape will help preserve a bit more in your own words—

BF: I suppose. Right.

EE: —with your pictures so they would be nice companions.

BF: But see, when I could write I could think back. I can't believe that I can't remember that—moshav Lavi that I—we always went back there. It was Lavi—also became a tourist place where people traveling on their tours would stop there. So anyway, this is going to be my tape. I hope it's okay.

BF: It's the best I can do.

EE: All right, let me ask you a question. You said that you became involved with the Ginsburghs and they are sort of your mentors in Zionism.

BF: Well, they didn't do it intentionally. It just hit me.

EE: Yeah, I would love to know how you sort of had an awakening as a Zionist.

BF: I don't know. I guess my father must have had it too because in our dining room, we had a picture of Herzl all the time, and there was another picture. I think it was Max Nordau. There was just—I knew—and then I could tell by the books—you know, magazines and things that he liked to read, which I had to help him read because he had that terrible shaking palsy. It was awful. That's where I spent so many years sitting there.

EE: Now, you were a member of Young Judea, were you not?

BF: Yes.

EE: When was that?

BF: Young Judea is part of Hadassah. The single girls belonged to that. I don't know what was so important about it. You just belonged to it. I guess I was drawn to these sorts of things. I mean, nobody told me what to do. I don't think that my mother knew anything about it. You know, she was too busy. She didn't have time for anything. It's hard to imagine, you know, today. But they were different times. You go through different times and if you're a coper, like I am, you overcome all the difficulties that you have to go through. It wasn't fun, coming home and helping in the store and straightening up in the house and going to work, and, you know, doing all that stuff. You did what you had to do. You know, if you were able, you did it. If you weren't able, you didn't do it.

EE: Do you remember balancing your volunteer work with your—

BF: Business? No. No, anytime I wanted to go I could go. I had my own car and I could go wherever I had to go. I always had good help. One of the girls that worked for us—my niece, Sylvia, worked in the business for 45 years—Al's niece. Margie Whitman worked in the business for 48 years. She just called me the other day. We're still friends. But then I dropped out of the business, really not involved in it at all. When I was driving I used to ride down just to see everybody. Now, Margie promised she would take me down one day. So, I'm waiting for her. And Nelson took me one day. Now, he's also semi-retired. The business has gotten so big. He's got good help and he doesn't have to be there. He's a leading light. You know, he sees the future, does the building. I think they have 15 branches now.

EE: What values do you think you handed down to your children?

BF: Well, you have to ask them. I mean, I can't tell you that. I have no idea how it happened or what had happened. Whatever I did I did because I wanted to do it. It never occurred to me to ask. We had a very Jewish home. We celebrated all the Jewish holidays, and the only years we used to close the store—Al and I—Nelson came in and it got so big. They did whatever they wanted to do. I mean, you can't tell your grown children what to do. I mean, either you like it or you don't like it. You know, it's too bad. But they're all very fine people—I mean, very stimulating people, very interesting adults. And my grandchildren are all doing such nice things. You know, different fields—everybody's in a different field, which is good. It has to be like that, you know.

EE: Why don't you describe to me, if you can remember, what holidays were like at your house on Callaway Avenue?

BF: Oh, they were—holidays—we loved the holidays. First of all, my husband was very gregarious, very lovable. Everybody loved Al. Uncle Al—he was great. And we always had the biggest house and we always had the biggest dining room and I guess the only one that had so much help. My mother was in the kitchen for me and so I didn't have to do much cooking. I did the shopping and everything and got it together. And my sister, Dora, and her family would come together. On Thanksgiving, we had everybody that could come would come. We had wonderful parties in that house. We had weddings. I'm going next Saturday night to a party for one of my nieces—her 60th wedding anniversary. And the wedding was on our lawn in the back. It was big. We had a back porch. It was a nice, big house and a big lawn and a nice back porch and front porch and a double garage. We had all these parties there, my goodness! We had Family Circle barbecues and my sister, Dora's, 25th wedding anniversary, with a beautiful party. I have so many pictures of it. Oh, it was great, all holidays were wonderful. Everybody walked to shul in the neighborhood and walked back and it was—people would go all the way from Dolfield Boulevard and it was a long distance, but everybody walked. They didn't mind. I mean, we walked. It didn't make any difference. You know, we could do it.

It was different. It's different now today.

EE: Yeah, let's talk more about the neighborhood.

BF: Okay.

EE: The old neighborhood.

BF: Would you like to hear about the old neighborhood of Beth Tfiloh? It was quite different than it is today. Four different neighborhoods converged on Garrison and Liberty Heights. You could live way out down by Wabash Avenue off of Liberty Heights, and you could live way up to the Ner Israel Yeshiva, the other way on Garrison Boulevard. You could live in Ashburton and Forest Park. It was so many different areas that people would just walk to shul. It was an era of people walking, at least in the very beginning. Later on, you know, people got older and they couldn't do it. You would go out and you would see everybody. It was like a picnic. Everybody was walking around and everybody was dressed up and the kids would all know each other. It was a joyous time on holiday time. Every holiday we celebrated at that time.

EE: Tell me about your own holidays in your own house. You said that you had a special Shabbos table. Tell me about that.

BF: Well, we always celebrated Friday night. There was a Shabbos table and we always—if we didn't have the children, we'd have company. We liked company. Al liked to have people around him all the time. It's really strange. As I go through my album, we were married in July, and in November, I see we sent out invitations for a big party in our new house that was decorated. Al did it all over. The tenants all moved out and he had excellent taste. He liked beautiful things. He had beautiful clothes and he loved jewelry and he loved pretty things. We had a beautiful apartment down in that dumpy neighborhood and took the whole second floor and did it all over, it was great. We made two bathrooms up there and hardwood floors, and we bought rugs.

EE: We actually talked about that earlier. I would love to talk more about whether Al or you did any special decorations for the holidays.

BF: No.

EE: Did you do anything special to the house?

BF: No, not really. Not especially, because the house had a lot of windows and there were a lot of trees and flowers and bushes all around. And it was a great period; I liked that period.

EE: Tell me what a Shabbos table was.

BF: Well, you always had your nicest dishes and your nicest silver. You didn't think about it as special. It was just something that you just did. To this day erev Shabbos where I put my cloth on and my candles even if I'm alone. It sounds silly but that's what I do. And it was a great period, I can tell you. It was great.

EE: Were there any special celebrations for Hanukah?

BF: Oh, gosh, yes, now that you mention it. We used to have—we had a big dining room and at that time everybody would give everybody a gift. And I can remember that we put a card table up against the wall and I had ribbons from the ceiling, up on the wall, and it was all attached to the different—oh, you always made some kind of ceremony. I just never thought about it. We always did something. To this day, when we get together on Thanksgiving, they never know what I'm going to do. I give them sometimes a little gift about the family. Sometimes I give them something I bought that I thought was pretty suitable and sometimes a map—oh, all kinds of things. Or I would write something. I always write something and up until this last year I gave them my family history in a folder. What did you call that? Spiral—in a spiral folder. And I bought white envelopes and each one of them got a gift. That was my last gift so far. I don't know what next year

will be. As I said in the introduction, I said I don't know what the next year will bring but this is for you today, and each one of them came up and got this gift. Oh, I do a million different things. You keep asking me things. I could never begin to tell you everything I did because every year was something different.

EE: Who carries on the traditions today from your family?
BF: Nobody does just what I do but everybody does something. I mean, I think we have left some impression of Yiddishkeit in the family, I hope. It looks to me like I did. It wasn't just me; it was Al and me. We worked together. We never were at odds in the business or in the home. We would listen to each other. It was a good marriage.

EE: Have all of your grandchildren and great-grandchildren married within [the faith]?

BF: So far. So far we've been very lucky. All our kids married in the faith. What tomorrow brings nobody will know.

EE: What do you think of what's happening?

BF: I don't like it. I don't like to see what's going on but it's a phase they're going through. We've exposed our children to so much and we've given them so much, and there's no limits to anybody. Whatever they wanted to do, they just do it today no matter how much it might hurt the members of the family. Most people of my generation today are just accepting the fact that you don't throw the children out anymore like they used to. There was a time they sat shiva for a kid if they inter-married. But now, I notice that it's totally different. I know several families who came from very fine Jewish backgrounds. All three children married out of the faith.

EE: Have you ever thought about sort of the changing demographics, where Jews are living now?

BF: I don't think it matters. My sister Ida—my older sister and her husband had a grocery store in Hampden. They had six children. All the children married in the faith. They just didn't think about doing anything else about it. It was a different period and a different era.

EE: Bess, let's get back to you and basically your contributions to Beth Tfiloh.

BF: Oh, I've given a lot of stuff.

EE: Yeah, why don't you talk about what you think your most significant contributions to Beth Tfiloh have been?

[end of side 1, tape 2]

BF: My most significant contributions to Beth Tfiloh were my time and my ability to do things. I started a lot of different projects here. It was very hard to get started. We have a—I'm the archivist, so to speak—an archivist without a place to store anything. We collected a lot of stuff, and my most wonderful co-chair was Eric Lavi. We both loved working on this project, and we both worked diligently on it until he, unfortunately, passed away at too young of an age. He had total recall, and it was just a delight to work with him. We decided to do a "Chronicle of Beth Tfiloh." In 1960, when Beth Tfiloh was 60 years old; it is now 80. So I decided that that would be a nice thing to do and I called a committee right into my apartment with Rabbi Rosenblatt and about six or eight other people, and I suggested to them what I wanted to do. Everybody thought it was a wonderful idea and after they left I decided it was too many people, it could only work with one other person. So I asked Eric to do it and he asked Ruth, and Ruth said okay because he came to my house every Sunday for years—Sunday morning. It's a big job. It takes years to produce a book like that. Eric had a total recall and we would divide up what we had to do and we did it. I did my part and he did his part. He checked on me and I checked on him, and it was a great, great deal. We did it; we loved it. Then I

started their archives. I started to collect the stuff. We didn't have any space. The shul never had any space because the school got bigger and bigger, and every time we had a room we thought was ours they got another teacher, another principal and they took the room away, because—I always kidded them. I said because we weren't a moneymaking branch [laughter] they took it away. Now, all we have is a closet and we're still collecting. I was fortunate to get a co-chairman, Ann-Sue Grossman—a fabulous woman—creative and articulate and a fabulous photographer. We enjoyed it so much together.

EE: Tell me what kind of things you collect.

BF: Oh, there are so many things to collect. Do you want to know what I collect? I couldn't begin to tell you. It's so many different things that people saved from 50 years ago or 60 years ago—oh, papers and artifacts and lots and lots of things. Then we're collecting, in book form, all of the issues of the Beth Tfiloh "Bulletin" and we have them now in order but we're running out of space. So we're doing our best. At any rate, it is a resource center. When people want to check up on anything either they look in my history book, my "Chronicles," or they come down into the room, which is downstairs in the basement. [laughtr] We've very unhappy about that, and a very funny thing happened. My children were very upset about it because they knew how much time I had given to it, and one of my grandsons is just the dearest thing. He went to Rabbi Wohlberg and he said to him, "Look. Look what you did. You took Grandma's room away. I'll pay your rent if you'll give her her room." [laughter] I thought that was so cute. Of course, it didn't go. And every time they built a room the school got bigger and bigger and they took it away. And the shul doesn't seem to have any room. Anyway, we're sort of pushing along, maybe someday. Just last year I was lucky enough to get another member of my committee. That's not easy. [laughter] So Joe Waranch said he would work with us. And Joe Waranch is a great, great guy. He's a dedicated Beth Tfiloh man.

EE: What do you collect? How do you find the materials that you collect for the archives?

BF: Well, for instance, I'm saving all of those bulletins. I have a box in there and Ann-Sue has a box of stuff that she collects. We have maps and we have banners and millions of different little things, and it's very pretty if we ever get a room to really show it. But maybe—maybe someday. Then, we started this—I had an idea. I wrote it up somewhere here. I had an idea that three-generation families—I looked around one day in shul and there were so many three-generation families. You had to be members—three-generational members that were alive—not dead. With dead ones, you would have five generations of people. And now we have a Dor V'Dor Wall. It's generation to generation. We started out with my family and now the wall is full, of two rows of pictures. It's even hard to see the ones on top but they're all beautiful. If you're a three-generation family, Ann-Sue will take your picture and frame it, and then we put it up there, and the wall is, like, full. If you ever walk by Beth Tfiloh you'll see it. And I've seen people bring their families over to see their pictures, which I thought was very gratifying.

EE: What does Dor V'Dor mean?

BF: Dor is "generation to generation." That's what it means in Hebrew.

EE: You were also a member of the board, were you not?

BF: Oh, Yeah.

EE: Tell me—you were a pretty long-serving member.

BF: Well, I was a board member of the congregation for, I guess, 50 years. Well, first of all, if you were president of a constituent organization you automatically go on, but I was always president of something, or I was chairman of something, so I just stayed on. They just took me off about a year ago. I don't like it. I thought I should be an honorary

member. [laughter] But anyway, the chairman knows what they're doing. They need new people. That's the whole idea. When I would go to a board meeting and would hardly know anybody I would think, 'That's great. That's the sign of a living organization.' They have such a good rabbi with that Mitchell Wohlberg. Almost everybody loves him. Whoever doesn't love him hates him. [laughter]

EE: What do you attribute the resiliency of Beth Tfiloh to?

BF: Well, I would say they've had very good leadership. Rabbi Rosenblatt was a totally different leader than Wohlberg, but he was just right for his time. And Wohlberg, who is a super PR man—if you ever have any personal relationships with him you're fixed for life—you never give it up. He's done a lot of little things that people like. He's a good PR man. He's a person-to-person. He'll tell you how pretty your hair looks or he'll tell you how nice you look, [laugher] and how good a job you're doing and all that stuff, but he's great. He's really well-loved by the communities and a wonderful orator. I get his message—I get his sermons on my Web TV and even when you have heard them and you read them again they have content. They're interesting. He has a fabulous knack for bringing all sorts of ideas together, from the papers to the television, from the movies to anything. He can take four or five different things from different papers and different magazines. That's really a knack and he'll give it all a theme, put it all together. He's fabulous that way.

EE: Were you on the board when the congregation moved from Forest Park up to Pikesville?

BF: Probably.

EE: Do you remember?

BF: Probably.

EE: I mean, how do you feel about the move and what were your reactions at the time?

BF: Oh, to me, how did I like the move? Honey, it doesn't really matter. I don't get upset about—to me, that was a little thing. If you move, you move. If you had a new cantor, so this was your home and this was your cantor. You liked him or you didn't like him. You weren't going to run around—I mean, I didn't—I liked the music. If we didn't have a choir I would like it. We have a choir, I like it. I'm easily pleased. [laughter] Move with the waves.

EE: Describe this community that you live in and the whole Beth Tfiloh complex.

BF: It's not really a Beth Tfiloh complex. It's so spread out. Where I live in Stevenson Village there are only maybe five or six families that belong. The others—it just happens to be a very nice location and a very nice apartment. I think I've lived here like forever.

EE: Now, you would leave for Florida in the winter at some point in time.

BF: Yeah.
EE: How did that come about?

BF: Well, Al couldn't—we couldn't travel anymore—Al was sick by the time he was 70. What he had could have been corrected today. He had—they called it "a heart insufficiency," and now they operate you and you're at it again. So we decided we would go to Florida. So we rented—first, we went for one week, then two weeks, then a month. And then we rented an apartment for a couple of months. And then one year we decided to rent by the year, a very nice apartment on the top floor. We stayed there and we would always leave the week after Thanksgiving and we'd always come home the week before Pesach. That's all we did, except—when my brother died. I had to come back, you know— important things. I would come back and forth. Al wouldn't go. I had to do all these things myself.

EE: How did you maintain continuity with your commitments here in Baltimore—particularly with religious commitments?

BF: It's doable. You can do almost anything you want if you want to do it. I always said, "It's only hard if you don't want to do it. If you want to do it, it's not hard."

EE: What was your religious practice when you were in Florida?

BF: Same thing as here. Same thing. We have the same friends. A lot of people we knew were down there and we always went to shul on Saturday, and we always had company. We were just company people. It was nice. It was a nice apartment and, you know, the kids never came to stay. They went other places or they [laughter] weren't interested in sitting around in Florida. Now, my daughter does. They have a place.

EE: Did you have much leisure time? Did you think of yourself as having leisure time?

BF: Sure. Nothing takes all your time.

EE: So what did you do in your spare time?

BF: Oh, I would knit. [laughter] We had a store, the Yarn Center, at the time during the war in the '40s when we were selling industrial thread to all the factories. The mills decided, rightly so, to first supply the manufacturers that were making Army stuff. And so we had a limited amount of thread that came our way. So Al went to New York one day and he saw this store that's selling yarn, knitting yarns, and he said, "Gee, I think that's a good idea. So we went to New York the next week. I went with him and you could hardly get anybody to sell you if you were a new customer, because everybody had more customers than they had merchandise. But anyway, we sort of got somebody after we went around for a while, and they said, "Well, we can't pack it." I said, "Don't worry. We'll pack it"— they said, "we can't weigh it." I said, "Don't worry. I'll weigh it." Anyway, we did and we opened up a Yarn Center. And wow, did that go like a house on fire! It

was a miracle! It's like the whole world wanted to buy stuff that we had. And I would make samples. I—don't ask me—did everything… dress the window. [laughter]

EE: Where was that located?

BF: 410 West Baltimore Street—Baltimore near Eutaw. It was great, near the Hippodrome. It was a wonderful period around the time that Eleanor got married. It was great. I really worked hard. Then we moved our wholesale business to 420. The Yarn Center was 410. And we sold everything. It was just wonderful. And Margie was in charge at 420 and I was in charge at 410.

EE: Who were your customers?

BF: The whole city. They were flocking down there standing in line outside. Oh, it was unbelievable! [laughter] It was unbelievable how that caught on fire.

EE: What do you think that was about? What caused it?

BF: Well, it was just the times—just the times and we happened to be right downtown where the people were, and the people from Pikesville, they were the worst customers. [laugher] But we had them because we had the merchandise. Al would go almost every week to New York to buy. But it was great. We took it together—super.

EE: Why were they bad customers?

BF: Oh, well. When they would start something and if they gained a couple of pounds and it got too tight they would blame the store. Anyway, everybody was knitting dresses and pocketbooks and hats and you name it. We had fashion shows. It was a super time. Don't get me started on all the things I forgot to tell you. [laughter]

EE: That's why I'm here.

BF: Lots of them.

EE: Weren't you a needle pointer?

BF: Yeah, sure I did. There it is.

EE: Tell me about that interest.

BF: It was all part of the needle trade, everything you did at home. In my bedroom, I even have a little bag with a needlepoint piece and I have another bag with an afghan. I used to make afghans for the kids. I always knitted and crocheted. I did all that—all the handwork I did. Whatever you did, whatever there was, I did it.

EE: I don't know where you found the time.

BF: Don't ask me. [laughter] We did.

EE: Did you think you were a busy woman?

BF: No, I don't think so. My goodness! In the middle of all that I would have these Family Circle parties and no—they wouldn't have them unless I started them. I chose a committee. Each time we had one it would be a different group of people. I never asked the same people twice and, when I thought it was time to have another one I would organize it.

EE: Tell me about your Family Circle. What was it called and who—?

BF: It was the Yaniger. My maiden name was Yaniger—the Yaniger Family Circle. It started out…we used to meet once a month at different homes. We paid dues—I think 25 cents when it started. We used to get together every month religiously at somebody else's home—could always accommodate them around the table. And that went on for many years but then, as things do, it sort of waned. And after a long time, I thought,

‘Well, this is ridiculous. Such a nice family and people like to see each other.’ And I decided we should have a Family Circle party, so I wrote it in there somewhere. I wrote I think seven or eight notes saying I’m having a meeting here. They all came, and, wow, they were all so interested. My niece, Bunny offered her home and this one said she would do this and everybody was getting involved. The first one was at Bunny’s house on Amleigh Road off of Smith Avenue—my niece, Bunny Rosenthal. She was married into the family too. She liked the family. We had that one there and I made a rule that whoever—and everybody brought stuff [laughter] in those days. And I made a rule with everybody that whichever you brought—of course, now, Bunny—my niece, Bunny was leaving for London the next day. I said, “Whatever you brought, you just take it home. Anything that’s left goes back home with you. And before you leave all the chairs get folded up.” And everybody was cooperative and did it. It was great. And then I don’t know. Every five years or three years or six years, when I felt ready—nobody else did it. If I didn’t do it it wasn’t done, and we had one a couple of years ago. It was very nice. And then we had one when it was my ninetieth birthday. That was really great. About 180 people there, I think. Anyway, I did it. Don’t ask me how I did it. Only takes a few minutes to write a couple notes but you just have to sit down and do it. I just sent off yesterday three letters to three people, telling them how much money we have in the treasury and what they think we should do with it. Now, when they all get together, whatever they decide—

EE: So does that mean you have meetings as well when you have the party?

BF: Well, we have to have usually a couple of meetings in somebody’s home. But now, I don’t know. If these three people want to take it over I don’t think I could—I think I could if I really wanted to. But I think it’s time. Anyway, I’ll see what happens. I sent them last week and if I hear from them in the next month—because they’re all such busy people. But if they want to do it, you’re never too busy to do what you want to do, honey. I’ll tell you that.

EE: Tell me what you do with the money that you collect from Family Circle.

BF: It's in the treasury. That's why I want to get rid of it, either we'll give it away or we'll use it.

EE: So have you used it over the years at all?

BF: We never had so much. I just heard we have a thousand dollars in there. I was shocked. So that's what happens with the Family—that's how the Family Circle continues. If one person doesn't do it it just doesn't get done.

EE: What would you like to see happen to the money? How would you like to see it used?

BF: I really don't know. They're three very intelligent people and if they—whatever they decide. If they want to have something they will have to decide.

EE: I just want to ask—talk to you briefly about your friendships, the women in your life, who your girlfriends and what role women have played in your life.

BF: Well, Frances Berman was—I met her in 1925. She was also one of the—what do you call these?

EE: Interviewees? Narrators?

BF: One of the narrators. We lived across the street from each other and she was a very bright, creative woman. She was making hats when she was maybe fourteen, or fifteen years old practically supporting the family. They moved to Baltimore because they had some family here, and also lived on Baltimore Street. So I knew Frances and her family from then—now, she married before I did and moved to Ashburton or Forest Park. I don't remember exactly what you call that area. This was maybe 10 years later. We kept in touch off and on, and—because she married much sooner than I did. And then

when Al and I decided it was time to move, because we lived over the top of the store, as they call it—lived on the second and third floor, and there was a house for sale on Callaway Avenue. I think I saw the ad in the paper, and I called Frances and told her we wanted to see it, and so Moe, her husband, met us. He said, “Oh, there’s a nicer house across the street.” And we looked at it and we bought it and it was across the street—across the street from Frances and Moe Berman.

EE: Right. Well, I know you told us about the house. I’m more interested in sort of what role women’s friendships played in your life.

BF: Well, the women I saw the most was—we had a Saturday night group that Al started that we met every other Saturday night at each other’s homes. There were 10 couples and this group—we all got together for each other’s Simchas. Whatever event went on, we were always together. I wouldn’t say they had any effect on me.

EE: Who would you call your best friend?

BF: Well, Esther, we grew up together. I met Esther when we went to work. We used to go on the streetcar. There were no buses and I went to night school. It must have been before 1926 because that’s when I graduated. So we were both going to night school and we walked over to get the bus, or the streetcar, I think it was. I met Esther and coming home we were again on the bus, and she lived right across the street from me also on Baltimore Street. Esther—Whitten, her name was—and now it’s Luchinsky. She just died a couple of years ago and we were good friends.

EE: What do you think the value of a woman’s friendship is?

BF: Oh, I don’t know. It didn’t make any difference to me. I don’t know. I think I made more impression on them than they made on me—most of them. That’s just the way it was. I don’t know. The things that seem important to you seem very unimportant to me.

EE: What's important to you?

BF: I mean, did I have girlfriends? I mean, what difference would that make to my life? I was busy. I was happy. I was raising a family and my mother lived with me all the time and I'd look after her. With all the seven children, it was me. She lived with me when she got sick and when we moved to Callaway Avenue I gave her the prettiest front room, and I gave the kids the back room.

[end of side 2, tape 2]

EE: This is Elaine Eff on June 8, 2001. This is the third and I believe final tape interview with Bess Fishman at her home in Baltimore, Maryland for the Jewish Women's Archive "Weaving Women's Words." And I just would like to ask Bess what she thinks the most—what you think the most important moments in your life—your wonderful, long life have been?

BF: That's a very difficult question. It seems that my motivations were always correct. The decisions I made all worked out great. I married my husband with a five-and-a-half-year-old child, which was unheard of in 1932, and it was great for us. My daughter is my very best friend until this very day, so I call that a success. I entered the business with my husband and it worked because he was the ultimate salesman and I was the ultimate inside operator. We—our children by the grace of God are all very intelligent and really menschen. They're wonderful to the family; they're wonderful to the community. They're involved in Jewish events, so I'm feeling that perhaps they absorbed something in what we tried to instill in them. Now, after ninety-two years —which is a long span, from 1909 to 2001—I would say that I'm very gratified and that it's something that you can't preplan. It just has to happen. So I assume that what we did must have been somehow or other okay. And I just hope that all the kids will just outlive me and keep on doing all the wonderful things they're doing. They have done wonderful things and I just hope they continue, and the family should all stay together because I'm very family oriented. I even

wrote—an ethical will, which the children will read after I'm gone, and it's been a great experience. It's been exciting and I'm still with it a little bit, even at this tender old age, and I just hope that life goes on, and should never be any worse. Thank you for asking me to do this interview. I never thought it was all so exciting when I was doing it, but everybody seems to think it is, so [laughter] I'll have to take their word for it. It's been a great life.

EE: I just want to ask you a couple of things while we—

BF: More? [laughter]

EE: Will you please forgive me, Bess? I hope I don't shorten your life by asking you a couple more questions. But I thought, one, you might want to just tell us about your album and about the process and what it means to you because my guess is one day, you know, your words and your album—

BF: Oh, yes.

EE: —will appear together. Tell us what it is and what—

BF: Some years ago two of my grandchildren—one was Rachel Fishman—she was an editor with Disney in New York—and my granddaughter, Susan Ochfeld Rotner all felt that since I'm getting older I should please tell them about what happened in my life way back when. Well, I started to write, because I like to write better than to speak, [laughter] and I collected material from each one of the children—I have a filing cabinet—because they've all done things. And Rachel sent me a letter and I should tell her how we lived and what we did and so on and so forth. So I started to think about it, and I started to punch the memory buttons because it was a long time; it was ninety years. A friend of mine recommended a woman, Audrey Polt, who does albums—family albums. I contacted Audrey. She came over to my house and saw all the material that I had and decided she would like to help me. My granddaughter, Susan, became my

sponsor and Audrey came to my house periodically, to decide what we should do. What she did is an absolutely beautiful album, which will live in posterity, because my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will certainly, certainly appreciate it, because it is done in a very fine, unusual style. I hope I did the right thing. It was a lot of work, but nothing is hard if you want to do it. And when it was finished, I must say, I was very happy about it.

EE: What do you like most about it? When you open it up, what do you want to look at?

BF: It's just like I'm going through my life all over again, all the things. She was so smart. She knew how to do it. It was divided into different sections and my whole life story is written in there in three chapters, different parts of my life. And the pictures and the way she decorated the thing are so artistic. It just feels good to see, that anybody could do anything like that, and I really am very pleased with it. Susie was a great gal to want to do this for me, and the longer I have it, the more I like it. [laughter] It gets better with age. Is that what you wanted to know? Well, I hope it suits you.

EE: One more thing is—I mean, you've lived through some pretty remarkable times. You know, you've lived through wars. You've lived through a Depression. You've lived through the space age. Do you think of any particular world events that have had a particular impact on your life?

BF: Well, it was a wonderful era for the good or the bad. It was a terrible Depression time. When I think of the men that used to finish school and if they went to college they would beg you for a job—$10 a week—anything. Or they would sell apples on the street for five cents apiece. And it was so sad, and the girls that went to work, they worked in a store in a five and ten. If they would get five or six dollars a week that was good. I was fortunate in that I went to work in a firm that taught me to do business with machines. They were just coming in, and when the first firm that I worked for went out of business I went downtown and I went to a company that sells the machines. Here again, I just can't

remember which brand it was, and they got me a job right downtown on Paca Street for $20 a week, and that was a heap, a bunch of money to make in those days. I was able to help out some of the poorer members of the family, and it wasn't until Roosevelt came in and started the CCC and the—all the other different alphabet programs that he started, that things started to pick up. Of course, we were on the bottom floor. We were already in business so it really helped us, because we sold to all the factories in town, and there were so many—hundreds and hundreds of them. We had so many accounts, and so it really gave us a break. By the time we—in '41 when we went to buy our house we already had enough money to buy the house, and it was great. We gave the children every comfort and convenience that they needed. It was a super period-- for us because we came in at the end of the Depression, sort of, like '32 was over, and it started to go up. Then when the war came and Nelson was old enough to go into the service he decided that he was going to be called anyway, so he volunteered and he was very lucky. They sent him down south to a camp. He was already married and Sarah went with him because they were childhood sweethearts from Forest Park High School. And she went with him down there and when he graduated from there they sent him to Paris. It was a wonderful experience. It was not a fighting war anymore so they really had a ball; they had a wonderful time there. That's when we went to Europe the first year in '57 to see them. Fortunately, he was not in the fighting war. That's also just by the grace of God. Who knows where you're going to fit in? And David, he was even smarter than that. [laughter] He decided when he was 16 to join the Reserves, and so he just had to go for a couple of weeks out of the year to serve in the—you know, in the States. So, you know, that worked out fine. And even the rest of my men folk that were in the Army, they came out of it okay, so another blessing.

EE: Well, and that would have been the Korean War we're talking about. Right? Your sons?

BF: The second one. Probably the Korean War. I don't remember the dates.

EE: Right. They weren't old enough to serve in World War II.

BF: I don't think so.

EE: [laughter] No. You don't make any references to the Holocaust, either in your work or in your—

BF: Well, we worked very hard for Israel bonds and we worked for every cause that came along. We gave and we worked, both of us. Al said, "You know, if you'll give more you'll make more." It worked out like that for us until this day. I send so many checks because I think it's the right thing to do. If you have it you have to spend it, and we liked to do the things that we felt were the right thing to do, and we did it. There's no question that—never a time that we didn't give to charity. It was inbred. You know, you could have a little box from the Jewish National Fund. That was the charity at that time, the best you could do. But thank God, we were able to do more and we did.

EE: Do you see any difference in how your grandchildren, for example, are working for Jewish causes?

BF: No, I think they're all—well, not all—some more or less—you know, Nelson always was on some committee. Right now he's going to be president of the Myerberg's Senior Center. Next year he'll be president of that association. Eleanor and Robert don't do much. I'm sure they give their share, and Nelson and Sarah are very active in the community and in Jewish events. She's on the board of the Hebrew—it's not the Center anymore—the Hebrew University. She's on the board there. They're always into something. They're very activists, Nelson and Sarah. And David, he's also into Jewish events, and Merle works—nice girl. They're all nice, intelligent people.

EE: Well, it sounds to me like you've done a great job instilling the values that informed your life.

BF: I hope so. I wouldn't say I did it with that in mind, I think. It was just the way I felt, and always did—I was a doer, and, you know, that's all I can say. I was a doer and a coper and I still am. You have to be some sort of a politician to have such a big family and everybody talks to each other [laughter] and is friendly—always get together on Rosh Hashanah at Eleanor's house, and on Thanksgiving they all take turns. They all have big homes. There were like 22 people in the family now. So everybody comes and everybody is kindly—you know, I'm sure everybody gets annoyed at times if you're only human. But I think I couldn't carry a grudge. I've been plenty of times annoyed [laughter] but that goes with the living.

EE: Well, I think you've left a wonderful model and will leave a wonderful legacy for your family to follow.

BF: Yeah, I hope so and I've been lucky enough to physically be able to continue to do things, even though I don't have a car anymore. They took it away and I'm not driving, which I hate. [laughter]

EE: Well, now, everybody will know that.

BF: [laughter] But anyway, I'm doing the best I can. I'm sure I'll adjust to this too because I must have said it a couple of times but I'm a coper. [laughter] It was really a pleasure meeting Elaine Eff. It's an odd name. Always ask her where the rest of it is. [laughter] It was really a pleasure—

EE: And the pleasure is mine.

BF: —working with her.

EE: Thank you so much.

BF: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]