

# Florence Gross Transcript

RACHEL ALEXANDER: Today is July 11, 1997. I'm Rachel Alexander interviewing Florence Gross in her home under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archives Temple Israel Oral History Project in Boston, Massachusetts. I'd like to start out if you could just state your name again and where you were born, and what year you were born.

FLORENCE GROSS: I'm Florence Wilinsky Gross. I was born in the West End of Boston, which is where we've come back to, in 1914.

RA: Okay, and maybe you can tell me about your siblings and what growing up was like.

FG: I have a sister, Harriet Goodman, and a brother, Gene Wilinsky. And Harriet is a bit older than I and she really had more time in the West End than I did because our mother passed away when I was four, and she was a bit older. We moved to Brookline, Massachusetts to be near our grandmother, who took over temporarily. Harriet tells wonderful stories about the West End. I have some memory but I was quite young, and our father, Dr. Charles F. Wilinsky was a school physician and an insurance doctor, but also had a private practice, his office being in our home and also in the same home was a Dr. (Hosemann?), who was a dentist. Harriet attended the Wells School and was an honor student. I never went to kindergarten because our first-grade teacher was Dora Lurie Klein who saw to it that I could do the first-grade work without kindergarten, and her family was well-known in the West End and her maiden name was Lurie. And Rubin Lurie, who was my Sunday school teacher in confirmation class, was her brother. Also, one of the rabbis now in Temple Israel is Rubin Lurie's granddaughter. I really don't remember her name but she's there right now as part of the team of rabbis.

RA: Can you tell me what it was like for your father to be raising you?

FG: Do you mean without our mother?

RA: Yes.

FG: That didn't last very long because he – it was very hard for him and, mainly, because it was a shock for her to die, and fortunately, we had a devoted grandmother who had a two-family house in Brookline, Massachusetts. We lived on one side, and they on the other, and my grandmother had one other daughter who always said she'd tried – a husband like my father and her sister's husband, and so within the year they were married.

RA: Who was married?

FG: My father married my aunt.

RA: Okay.

FG: My mother's sister. Her name was Lillian Isenberg Wilinsky, and we moved to Commonwealth Avenue, and I went to the Devotion School in Brookline, and my sister went to Girls' Latin School.

RA: How old was your father when he remarried your aunt?

FG: I can work it back but I –

RA: What year was it?

FG: It was the year after my mother died, and the only way I could figure that one out, which I don't think we need to bother –

RA: Okay.

FG: – but it was within the year after she died.

RA: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about the school that you attended?

FG: Yes. I was very fortunate to go to Devotion School in Brookline. In those days, Brookline schools were excellent, and the community is very different now than it was then. It was primarily made up of Jewish families and Jewish parents who really promoted education so the quality of the teachers and the students were excellent. I'm familiar with the way it is now. It's equally good because my grandchildren went there, but the population is mostly Orientals, and they're equally good students. I had a hard time finding a white, Jewish child for one of my grandchildren in her class [laughter] when they were there, which is interesting, and the same in high school. I, too, went to Girls' Latin School, and that was recommended if one wanted to go to college. There was no problem whatsoever of getting in from Girls' Latin School.

RA: So what year did you switch?

FG: Oh, I went there for high school. I know you can go in the sixth class, meaning seventh and eighth, but we each went for high school and I can work it backward – not important – to four years of high school.

RA: Okay. Right. And you and your sister were both there together?

FG: No. I'm being careful. She's a bit older than I but we always say as we're getting older we're getting closer in age. I'm eighty-two, and she's early ninety.

RA: Okay, maybe you could tell me a little bit about your family life when you were growing up, those high school years.

FG: My dad was quite strict about dating the opposite sex. I mean, school was most important. I was allowed out one night a week and there were curfews. But most of my friends from grammar school went to Brookline High, so I really only saw those friends on the weekends and we enjoyed seeing each other. One little anecdote is that in

adolescent girls, there's jealousy and there's also competition and whatnot. I had a wonderful time because I only saw them on the weekend and they formed a sorority and they elected – they allowed me to come into their sorority, and I was elected President because, as I say, it was wonderful to mutually see each other on weekends.

RA: What does that mean, you had a sorority? What did you do?

FG: Pardon me.

RA: Well, what were you doing in this sorority?

FG: We always were interested in whatever we could and for helping those less fortunate than we. We always had projects and our mothers had a Brookline Service Club, which encouraged this sort of thing because these women always worked and did charitable things for people less fortunate than they. They were a good example to follow.

RA: Was the whole sorority Jewish?

FG: Yes.

RA: And what types of charity organizations did you work for?

FG: Well, we volunteered. A lot of us were – when we could, mostly in the summer, be Candy Stripers, and we helped in the hospital, but also there was a Hecht Neighborhood House out in Dorchester and we were helpful as volunteers in that district. Are you familiar with Dorchester and Hecht?

RA: I know Dorchester. I don't know the organization.

FG: I think Hecht House is like a community organization. I do not know whether it's still in existence, but it was then, and when I became a full-fledged social worker and had a

job, I encouraged my friends who did not work to continue with their volunteering.

RA: What sorts of nationalities lived in Dorchester at that time?

FG: I know there was a big Jewish population because that's why they had Hecht House. I honestly do not know – I imagine there were Blacks because there certainly are now and there always had been. How big a population, I'm not sure.

RA: So you worked with the Jewish immigrants, were they?

FG: Well, when people came over as immigrants, they either went to the West End or they went out to Dorchester, and I think those were the focal areas.

RA: So you helped some with getting settled into America?

FG: Not so much. The older women did that through the Council of Jewish Women, but what we did as young people was in the community center, with the children who came to Hecht House, which was the community center, just like they have them in Marblehead and they have them in many communities. We were there for the children that were underprivileged.

RA: Okay, maybe now you could tell me a little bit about your relationship with your parents growing up.

FG: My dad was very seldom at home. In order to see him – because we went to school early and went to bed before he came home. He was very dedicated, and so in order – but I really enjoyed seeing him and talking to him, and obviously, he was my mentor. So, I would make an appointment to see him at the hospital, and I would go over there and have coffee. That was the highlight for me. As I started to say, he would leave – come home when I would be asleep, and I would leave when he might be asleep in the morning for school. I hate the word stepchild. Regarding my second mother, we had a

good relationship because she was our aunt, and by that I mean she knew us; we knew her. She became very active at Temple Israel. She was the treasurer for many, many, many years. She was a very bright woman and very capable, and she guarded the treasury, her money from sisterhood as though it were her own, and I think did a good job. I don't think – I know.

RA: So she put in a lot of hours there?

FG: Yeah. Well, maybe, yes. Naturally, she was there, but she did a lot at home too. And she studied where to put the money in to get the biggest interest. When my brother came, which was about four years after, by that time, they were a little more affluent so they could have help. I mean, when we were young, a doctor's income was three dollars a visit, so we didn't have the kind of help, but as time went on they could afford – but she was not at home as much as maybe women who weren't treasurers of Temple Sisterhood.

RA: So, are you saying she was out working?

FG: No, she was more socializing, playing bridge, and meeting with this group of fine servicewomen, who were doing their share of doing good for the underprivileged, like the Council of Jewish Women. During the war, she worked for the Red Cross, as did I, only I was very pregnant and had to stop finally when I got too big. But she really worked hard and she really was sort of a pioneer among women in being a Gray Lady. And also, the Gray Ladies drove station wagons for the hospital, the patients, and the USOs. They dealt food out to the soldiers.

RA: It seems like there is a lot of connections to health professions in your family.

FG: Right.

RA: Where did that come from?

FG: Health professions? My dad. Oh, how did he happen to be –? His dad was a doctor. His stepfather was a doctor in Springfield.

RA: A general physician?

FG: Yeah, right.

RA: And he was also?

FG: Yeah, and I think Dad was – in those days, a physician and surgeon did everything. Now, everything is specialized, but in those days it was a general – it was explained to me they didn't know as much. Now there's so much to know they have to go into specialties to be top.

RA: Did you know your grandparents at all?

FG: Yes. I just wanted to say one other thing – it's important – that I had forgotten. In the West End, they had health units and Dad, besides being a doctor, did become Deputy Health Commissioner and so he established the health units around the communities that needed it. There were fourteen of them, and he manned the one on Boston Street, which is where we are now today, and there still – have come back a bit. They didn't maintain the fourteen. There's one in Dorchester and there's one in the different sections that need them. There's one in East Boston also. He was not just a doctor. He was interested in organization and particularly to help the poor. When I was at Latin School, the physician that checked us was a woman doctor and she kept trying to egg me on to be a doctor, but I knew what it entailed and I really preferred being a social worker where I would have time. I wanted a husband and children and where I could be with those children in their formative years. It had nothing to do with the fact that Dad was not home, because you usually expect that of your mother. The men are out earning their living. In my generation, the women stayed home. But both my sister and I were privileged to have [an] education, and I know that that was a privilege. And

there were six years of it, and so I'm very grateful because when I needed it, like when my husband died, I was equipped, and my dad felt that it was just as important to educate women as to educate sons.

RA: Okay, what in fact was the health unit? I don't understand that.

FG: What are health units? They're a building and in the building are housed different specialties, but primarily the one we were interested in was to give health to the poor, so they didn't have to pay. And my dad spent – I used to go and watch him vaccinate babies, or give them chicken pox – you know, the different –

RA: Vaccinations.

FG: Yep. Yep. They wouldn't have it if they didn't – most people didn't even know – the immigrants didn't know what they needed. But by word of mouth within the community, they used to put up signs. If there was pneumonia or measles or anything, on doors, so that people did not go into those homes. That's way back then. I don't know whether they still continue or whether it's even necessary, but in the poor districts, I'm sure, they're still in existence because Ruth Cowin, who's a member of Temple Israel and who stayed in social work longer than I, told me she was, for example, in a place called Bromley Heath, which is a poor section, and that she praised my dad for having started this way, way back then. Mayor [James Michael] Curley – you may have heard about him in Massachusetts – who turned out to be sent to jail, but he was [laughter] very, very cooperative in the health of the poor, and he gave Dad lots of money to use for these health units.

RA: Where did your father's values to help the poor come from?

FG: I think he was a great philanthropist, and I think that he probably had suffered tremendously in Poland because he became a world traveler, and he never went back there because of the situation of the Jewish families. I think that he had a – maybe it's



instinctive. I don't know. I've got it, but of course, he was the example for me. I don't know who gave it to him, maybe his mother. Oh, I didn't know his parents. They were dead. But my other grandparents – my mother's parents – I knew. Not my grandfather because he seemed old to me from the time I knew him, and he sat in a chair and he – I never knew him to be very active. But my grandmother was very strong and very capable, and she and I were very close. I appreciated whatever she did for me, and I in turn loved to be with her. I can still remember taking her to get her hat at (Webbins?); it used to be at Coolidge Corner. I think she deserved very special accolades because she had two daughters who died young, and she handled it very well, including – she did for the other family what she did for us too when necessary. I have two daughters, and I know that I would do the same, but I know my grandmother was much stronger than I in whatever she did. And I wish I could be. I mean, she never fell apart, and I think that's pretty amazing. She had lots of children and many died at childbirth, but these two women – grown women who married and who left families, she took over.

RA: Where was she born?

FG: Grandma was born in Germany, but my grandfather was born in Russia – that combination. It was interesting to me because now I wish that we had talked – the family had talked Yiddish or whatever, or German or whatever. But they felt they wanted her to learn English, so my grandmother spoke perfect English and she would write to us. The only thing I noticed that was any different, [was] she would always put “mit” meaning with.

RA: [laughter]

FG: [laughter] But otherwise her letters were very well done. She was an exceptional lady.

RA: When was she writing to you?

FG: Well, we were privileged. We went off to camp summers and also, college. Grandma believed on your birthday, send you a check. I think she was a very bright lady, and I think she was very helpful in their earning money. I mean, I had uncles who went into real estate and did very well, and I think she was behind them. They would always discuss on Sundays around the kitchen table, which was always a big kitchen and the table. It was fun, but it was not fun because it was always a business meeting and you would always hear differences of opinion. To a young person, it could have sounded like arguing rather than that they were happy. But it was short-lived, and we had Grandma on other days when it was more pleasant.

RA: So, you had these business meetings when?

FG: On Sundays when they would come to call and they would discuss real estate and what to do next, and they did consult my dad. I think it's sort of unusual but – because doctors usually are not good businesspeople, at least they weren't. That's a generalization. But I think they valued his opinion.

RA: So your grandmother knew something about real estate.

FG: Yes, she did.

RA: And even though she was from another country.

FG: Well, they got into it when her children were old enough to discuss it, and it was several years later. She was brilliant and she did – you see, I didn't know my grandfather because he just sat and listened. [laughter] He had no opinion. But Grandma did with her sons. I think there are a lot of matriarchs in our family. I had heard my other grandmother – my father's [mother] – whom I never knew and wished I had, which he had twin brothers in this country. One was the doctor, the obstetrician, and they had made a decision, according to what I heard, without discussing it with her, their sister. So, I think it's not unusual for women in your generation to be interested in work and

careers because I think that the women of the past may have been quiet and not out of the household, but they really were behind their men and made great decisions and helped. Do you think so? Do you agree?

RA: Yeah, I think so. I also am curious to hear more about why you think she was brilliant. Did she receive any education in America?

FG: No. I just think she learned fast. As I said, I wished that they had talked a little. When I had my first – not my first job but when I volunteered to see whether I really would like social work, my first encounter was with a Jewish man in the West End. I had to come with some eyeglasses for him. He couldn't speak English, and I couldn't speak Jewish or Yiddish. I felt very bad because he didn't understand me, and I didn't understand him. So I hot-footed it back to Beth Israel and got my father who came with me and took care of the situation just fine.

RA: Because he spoke Yiddish.

FG: Yeah. Dad spoke many languages because when you lived in Europe, the borders are so close. Everybody seems to, in that generation, speak many languages. So he did. After the Holocaust, there were many doctors who came. Maybe they came – yeah, after the Holocaust. I was going to say maybe they came before, but some did and some came later. I remember – I have a vivid memory of their walking out after seeing my dad in his office, and it brought tears to my eyes because I don't like seeing many – walked out backward, you know. They were so appreciative, bent over appreciated that he could talk to them, and they were so grateful because he helped them realize that they would have to go to school here to get certified. And they did, some of them. But they were grateful they had somebody who could understand them.

RA: These were doctors who were Holocaust survivors?

FG: Yes.

RA: Was anyone in your family a Holocaust survivor?

FG: Not that I know. I mean, I don't know. There were people with our name but they spelled it differently. Anyway, I don't know of any. Nobody ever told us.

RA: Okay, is there anything else that you would like to say about your childhood years?

FG: I really enjoyed what was – what is now Brown [then Pembroke] tremendously. It was a wonderful experience.

RA: Maybe you could start out with your application. How did you decide to go to college in the first place?

FG: At Latin School, when you went, you knew you were going to go to college, and I wanted to be a social worker. But I wanted to do it faster. I really felt I could do it without six years, and Simmons School of Social Work was right around the corner from Latin School so I applied. Naturally, I got in. But after I'd been there one year I found it was just like high school. We had worked harder in high school and the routine was identical. Prepare for tomorrow, you know. And also, it was an all-girls school, and also, I needed to get away from the family in the sense of maturing. Oh, I was a counselor at Country Week, which is a charity camp in Beverly, Mass. for the summer. I made up my mind then and there I was transferring somewhere else and then [would] go back for my graduate degree. So, I took the bus. Somewhere I heard about Pembroke and it was just far away enough, and it sounded great. It sounded like it had everything I wanted. I had a day off and the dean had gone to Latin School, so I was in like Flynn. And in those days, it was not as hard to get in, so I told Dad I'd like to, and he said, "Fine." So, I transferred and it was really wonderful. It was like an entirely new world opened up to me and I'm very grateful that I did it.

RA: So you lived in dorms at the college?

FG: Well, not being a freshman, and since they took me, they had to house me. There wasn't any room in the dorms at that point. So I lived off-campus with the idea that if somebody left or they flunked out, that I could – and the only thing that was available was Sharpe House. Do they still have Sharpe House?

RA: Sure.

FG: That was a cooperative and so I moved in. You had one chore a day. Do they still? Was there a [inaudible]? We had one chore a day, and I didn't say anything to Dad because, why? It wasn't necessary. I wanted to go to the dorm. [laughter] And so I did. We ironed doilies. We peeled potatoes. But that was one hour a day you had to do something. And the housemother and I got very friendly and apparently, I wasn't too good at it [laughter] because she used to say to me, "Even if you never have to, it's good to know how to tell the maid to do it." Being not an upperclassman, but being not a freshman, the rule was you never – I don't know how the rules were when you were there, but you weren't allowed after a prom to go home. You went back to your dorm. But because I was a year older and because she knew me by then and she knew that if I went anywhere it would be Boston, she used to allow me to come home with my date. So, I guess the fact that everything worked so well was another asset to liking being there, and I had wonderful friends that were town people, meaning a doctor and his wife. After I got to know them, the wife had been a Wellesley graduate and he was a doctor, and I dated somebody in town and that's how I met them. Their name was (Wyler?). Anytime I wanted to not return to the dorm I could sleep on his examining table. [laughter]

RA: [laughter]

FG: Because they were young and new. That became a wonderful friendship for years. They're both gone now, but their daughter, Vicky, had gone to Radcliffe so when she was here I certainly reciprocated. Vicky became a doctor like her dad. But then I had to go for two years to Simmons Graduate School because that was – but it was okay because I

had had such a good time before, and I lived at home, on a graduate level. I don't know how much they put into it now, that one can accomplish that with a desire to do it. Obviously, if you could do it in four years, you can do it in five. You know what I mean? But it became a six-year – I think it could be in – that was good too because part of it was working. I worked at the Mass General for three months to get acquainted with what was to be expected of me and I really enjoyed every minute there. And then, my sister was in the retail business. She became a Vice President at Filene's, and that was unusual because they didn't have women doing that and she had made a marvelous name for herself. The interesting part is I ended up having an entirely different field, where she made money and I gave money up. But I was not as mature as she because she had protected me through life because when our mother died, she had thought she was going to take care of me. And she did when necessary, and I needed to mature. So my very first job was in New Haven Grace in New Haven because, in her field, she used her maiden name. In my field, we changed it when we married. I seemed to want to – you're a bright person; I can tell. You would understand, I wanted to do it on my own. I went to New Haven, and she wept because she said everybody in the class was staying around here and you're going there. But it was a wonderful experience because not only did I learn how to do social admitting, which they were doing – the person who became my mentor for life while in the field was Elizabeth (Brice?), and she taught Social Admitting, but she also had wonderful principles, and I learned how to be a good social worker from her. She just died last year and there's a memorial for her in Bridgeport where she lived in retirement, her retirement home. But she came into my life much later, again, when my children were grown. I wanted to go back into social work, and I asked her did she think I could run a department because I hadn't been in it for years. And she said, "I have a new paper that I sent out to the Social Work Association. I'll send you a copy," and it became my bible. I organized a brand-new social service where they never had anybody with a master's degree, and the way I did it was to work four hours a day giving them to – for not any pay and letting them pay me for two hours. That went well, and

then they needed a home-care department. So, I went to Pittsburgh to learn their home care, and then I worked eight hours – I gave them four – because the whole idea was not the money. It was the fact that it needed to be done and that it would be wonderful to see it grow and prosper. And my kids were grown. One was married and one was at Rochester, so I had the time. But I did not work when the children were young.

RA: I just want to go back to your years at Pembroke for a minute. What was it like living so far away from home?

FG: Wonderful. [laughter] Because I was near enough. Hi, darling. I was near enough to – you could fill in a lot of this because you know it all.

M: You're doing fine.

FG: Oh, well, I haven't come to my life with you. [laughter]

RA: Living away from home.

FG: Yes. No, the trouble is I knew that we were a closely-knit family and we had different ideas about different things and I knew that I needed to mature on my own because in my generation if you talked to your dad and offered somewhat of the same – he's my generation but he's much more strict than I am now with – we have five children between us and the three boys are his and the two girls were mine, and now, ours. But what your father said, you did, and there were no ands, ifs, or buts. And I think it's much better to be able to talk it through, the way it's being done now. On the other hand, I think a certain amount of respect is lacking, and I think they should take the good in both generations and try to work it out together because I think this is a hard time for your generation to be living in many ways, and I think your children are going to have it solved. I really do. I know too many women who are struggling with careers and who are doing so well and many of the men, even though they are young – he wouldn't have liked it. My first husband wouldn't have, but even the young – I see too much of their

being critical of the women. They still want to be in charge. It's getting better, I think, but it isn't good enough yet.

RA: So you think they're critical of their working?

FG: Not so much their working. We just had dinner last night with a niece [who] came here from California, and her husband. They're in the same field, [the] computer field. I said we better have dinner with her. He's Alfred's nephew, but I like her too. I just had a feeling that they're running into trouble because they're both from Berkeley. They both were in teaching. He had a choice of retiring or staying, as did she. She stayed and he got out because they had a wonderful computer business, and they don't need money anymore. She said she's just coming into her prestige, and she hates to retire, and he wants her to retire.

RA: And how old is she?

FG: We didn't ask her but we think early sixties, and he's the same, maybe a year or two older. We may be wrong but having lived our lives and having – and we made plenty of mistakes. But as you look at it, we felt really bad for each of them – how are we going to solve it? We don't know and it would be wonderful if they could because they are both very brilliant and they married late because she had never been married. She's a Radcliffe graduate. He had been married and divorced. There were no children in this second situation. And men get lonely. I heard Alfred say to her that when he retired, which he did because he had a stroke three years ago but he's okay, and he didn't know what he was going to do. He thought he'd be very bored because he wasn't used to sitting still. I heard him say, and I was just lucky – when we were retiring, none of my friends said, "Now you go your way and have him go his. Don't be together all the time." And we don't do that. We do just the opposite. I tried to think where would he be happier, with the school system or with the hospital. Volunteering, because you get satisfaction when you help young people or you help people in the hospital. His first wife



had been ill for ten years. As a matter of fact, maybe he would just dread going into a hospital. However, he chose the hospital. So I called the head of volunteers. Mine was a cinch. I mean, I could just volunteer in social service, which is what I did. But he didn't want [to do] that. So, fortunately, she was very bright and she had him go into the business end in the hospital, and he does fund-raising. He's very happy. I heard him tell her so. I could see that he was. That's why we volunteer at Spaulding because, again, it keeps him occupied. He isn't sitting on his fanny. He feels useful. That's the important thing. At our age, you have to be useful and our children are all scattered. Well, we have two of them in Florida in the winter. As I told you, we're going to visit two more this week, the boys, and the third boy's in Paris; we're not going there. So I think it's unfortunate that we don't go through this world twice because one would know how to do it maybe better.

RA: Okay, let's go back now to when you graduated from Simmons. Where did you go from there?

FG: That's when I went to New Haven. You mean [the] School of Social Work?

RA: What did you do? Right.

FG: I went from Simmons for my graduation to New Haven Grace Hospital in New Haven. I had my own apartment. I was an admitting officer as a social worker in that hospital, and unfortunately or fortunately, just before I went down there, my first husband – former husband, he likes me to say – asked me to marry him, and it was a little late to say yes. I mean, I couldn't say – I said, "Yes, but I have to accept this job because my father said" – here's another example – first of all, we couldn't be married right away. It was [the] Depression. But he said, "You accepted this job. You must go there and you must stay two years. Your first year you are learning, and the second year you pay back." That's what I mean about discipline. So, I did. I didn't stay the two years. I went to New Haven, and after I'd been there about six months I confided in my superior that

– what had happened and I didn't really – I really wanted to be near my future husband, but I would stay if she felt as my dad did. She was wonderful. She said, "Not only will I let you go when I can replace you, but I will get you your next job." So I stayed the year and then she got me a job at the New England Medical Center, and I came back to Boston and worked there until we were married and until I got pregnant.

RA: So your father thought that it was more important for you to be working than get married.

FG: No, he felt that we were in no position to marry at that time because my husband – he believed in the standard of you had to earn so much per week – for the man to earn so much per week before you married. The sum was seventy-five dollars a week. But more important was that if you committed yourself, you followed through. That was what he told me. So I listened to him, and I went, but my husband – we used to alternate coming home, and he would come to see me and I would come to see him on the train. And my dad offered to take care of the difference if I couldn't afford it. But I could afford it. My salary was very low but somehow or other, I could afford it, and it worked out. But I think I'm making a point that what your father said, you did because later came the war, and my dad had organized after the Cocoanut – did you ever hear of the Cocoanut Grove fire? Well, he had organized the team to take care of the people that would get hurt because they thought – he thought, and so did other people that the war was coming, the European war was coming over to America. So, they were organized to take care of the casualties. My husband was borderline at that point in age, and we didn't have any children, and frankly, I felt that he would be very helpful. My husband was an MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] graduate and his brother-in-law, Al Sloan, who also was connected with Temple Israel as a trustee, who taught at MIT, encouraged him to take a job at A.S. Campbell for the war effort. So when I heard that, I decided to give up my job and get pregnant. And I hot-footed it over to Beth Israel to tell my dad. This is another example. I didn't say, "I'm pregnant." I said, "Dad, before Mr. Wing tells you that

I have left my job,” – because he was the administrator – “I’m telling you I left.” His quick message was, “I hope you’re not pregnant.” I said, “Dad, I hope I am.” [laughter] I mean, I could do it. We could talk. But he had his idea and I had mine. And I did say to him afterward, “Why did you say that to me?” Because I told you I used to meet him and have coffee. He said, “Because women at best are emotional, and in time of war, they’re going to – when they’re pregnant, and at best – and then on top of it with the war, there would be more emotions.” So, he was being protective of me. I was not pregnant, but I did try after that, and I did get pregnant, and I had my daughter and all was well, and the war didn’t come.

[END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE]

FG: [inaudible] Oh, well, I guess now it’s your turn to ask.

RA: Okay, I wanted to know how did you meet your husband, your former husband?

FG: Oh, that’s an interesting story. He was a friend of my sister, and he was one of the ones that – I think he saw me at Cocoanut Grove. Anyway, his group was friendly with my sister and he must have known that I was the younger – that I was alive and I was in Cocoanut Grove, not at that time when – but an evening there dancing, and he said, “Hello.” And then, shortly after, his sister, who is also a friend of my sister, was having a party and invited them, and my brother-in-law got ill. So, she said, “Well, how about your sister being with my brother?” And that’s how we met. [laughter] That evening, everybody there was married because they were older. They were my sister’s age group, and they just assumed that my future husband and I had known each other for a while and sort of joked about why were we waiting, why we didn’t get married. Somehow or other, it gave him an idea, so we started to go out – one of those things. It’s much more interesting how did I meet him?

RA: Well, we’ll get to that. [laughter]

FG: [laughter] No, the only reason I say that is I'm a lucky, lucky person, and fate plays a role.

RA: Well, it sounds like fate played a role here too.

FG: Always. Always.

RA: So you met him. How old were you then?

FG: Oh, dear, in my twenties. Well, that's easy because I graduate – I was sixteen from high school, twenty from college, and twenty from the School of Social Work, so there we are – twenty-two, twenty-three.

RA: That's how old I am now.

FG: [laughter] Wonderful.

RA: So, you went to New Haven for a couple of years and then came back.

FG: One year to New Haven and then came back here and, incidentally, again, from the point of view of family – I mean, I don't know how it is with yours, but in my day, in our day, we didn't date a lot of people. We dated one, and that was the one, so naturally, at college, I had one that was special, and many families, including mine, never feel that that's the right one for their child. I mean, they're always expecting – that's been my experience with – not with my children, but I mean with my generation. And so they weren't very happy with what I produced from when I was up at Providence. So, they decided to have a party for me at the Captain's Cabin at Miles Standish, which is now a BU [Boston University] dorm. That's where my parents lived at that time. It was a hotel, and so they had this party and each girl – they knew my friends from the past – and each girl was to come with a date and then they had a few stags. But that didn't include my future husband, and they were all people that they knew I knew. And it was a lovely

party. It was very sad for my friend from Pembroke, who had moved up to be near me because you could live either in Massachusetts or Rhode Island. [laughter] That was a very sad situation to have to tell him goodbye. And years later, the only man I ever saw afterward that wouldn't even talk to me – and I don't blame him. My parents said that I needed to know more, didn't know enough then. So I said, "Okay, I'll do a lot of dating, and the next one I hope will be to your liking." And it was. He was an excellent –

RA: Can you tell me about the fire?

FG: The Cocoanut Grove? I only know what I read, and I only know what happened – what I was told. Fortunately, we weren't there. The fire started in the dining – where the cook was in the kitchen.

RA: And this was in –?

FG: Cocoanut Grove, which was a nightclub in Boston, and now because of that awful fire, they have exits. They're very careful. They have plenty of exits, in theaters or in restaurants or wherever, that you can get out without a stampede. But they didn't there, and so everybody panicked, and there were many, many of our friends and families who were destroyed because they were burned. It was just horrible.

RA: And what was your connection?

FG: We had no connection with it. It was just – oh, my dad was – they had organized for the war effort, that if the war came, they would have these doctors in readiness to treat the victims. And so they were called. The ambulances, the doctors, and everything called were alerted to help take care of them. So they saved as many as they could. But there was one family in particular, the (Levitts?), who lived above us [and] lost two daughters and two sons-in-law.

RA: Getting back to your wedding, it sounds like it was really your decision who you were going to marry.

FG: Yes.

RA: And how did you make a decision [about] who the right person was?

FG: Well, my values, my personal values were, I think – well, first of all, when you fall in love, you can't – it's hard to, I think, specify, but the first time is different than another time. You just know that – I know that my first husband had three sisters and a brother, and I know that he was wonderful with his mother. I got to meet the mother and father, and we had dinner there many a time on a Friday night, and there was just a nice feeling of family together, and he was their favorite. That was pretty obvious. He was the last to marry, so he lived at home longer than the others, and it was just a nice atmosphere. Frankly, I enjoyed being there as much as, if not more than, in my own home because it wasn't the same sort of thing – a Friday night togetherness. My father, at that point, as he got more affluent and as he got more into the field, was president of the American Hospital Association, president of the Mass Hospital, and so he – I have a disc; I don't which one it is that he was given. It means a lot to me. Anytime he was introduced to speak, it was always that he was the only one that ever had both those honors. And later, when I volunteered at the Mass Hospital, when he was no longer alive, I took great pride because I saw his picture on the wall and all that. Well, anyway, it was just a nice, comfortable feeling being at their home. They were comfortable. They didn't have any fame or anything but they were just comfortable, nice people and they produced a – I think the sisters thought of him as the Prince of Wales type of thing. He was the prince of the family. So, that was a good feeling. He died of cancer, and I know that they literally were emotionally upset that it happened to him, and they admitted it later that they were sorry that they were so emotionally tinged. Many people with cancer – it's like it was a curse in those days. Now, people understand it more, and there was nothing you could

do to prevent – not the parents; they were fine. But his sisters were very upset emotionally that this happened to him. He turned out to be a wonderful, wonderful husband and a wonderful father, but it was short-lived.

RA: What was his profession at the time that you met him?

FG: He was a graduate of MIT, and he was involved before he took this other job with A.S. Campbell in garments and the quality – as a matter of fact, one time it was Depression. He did door-to-door canvassing and spread it from Massachusetts to Providence in – I don't know how you would describe it because I didn't know him then, but he told me what he did and built up quite a nice business. But with the war, he went with A.S. Campbell. I told you where they did sketching of shells for the war effort. But while there, he was an engineer, and he met another man, [inaudible], who was an engineer, and they decided after the war to go into plastics, which was a great idea, and they did, and they were in the wrong end of it. It was extrusion because other companies had gone into it before. So they shifted to plastic sheeting. So all this plastic stuff that you see was a forerunner, and they did very well. They financially did extremely well. In order to do that well, they took in a third partner whose father was very affluent. They did not want to bother my husband's father – he was an old man at that time – I mean, for financing, so they took this son in of a father who was wealthy from New York, and he loaned them the money. So they went into sheeting, and they did extremely well. When my husband got sick, and we realized that he was going to die – he didn't yet, but he found that the young man was just a wealthy man's son and did nothing but like to fly an airplane. They were ready to oust him. They did it very nicely by selling the business to Owens Industry, which is in Connecticut, and they did very well in their selling, just like you sell businesses now so that my children and I did not have to go through the torture of "How are we going to live?" Now, that's another thing with me. I would have been very unhappy to depend on my father or my sister for income. I have to make my own. I would have gone back to work, but luckily – very luckily – we sold it, and it was adequate

enough for us to live like we had in the past and give the kids the same privileges that I had had because Dad always preached that too. “I did it, and you do it for them.” But I was not indulgent – I mean, over-indulgent. I mean, I could have, but I didn’t. That’s one thing, my second mother was very good with me in the sense of she didn’t over-indulge. So I could either be extravagant or not. I’m not extravagant, whereas my sister likes only the best. That’s wonderful because she earned it herself. But I feel very lucky because I can do either. But my point is he died, and that was sad. Primarily it was sad for me, but it was mostly sad for my older daughter because she was only eight. But she is a bright – was a bright eight. I had put them together a lot because they loved each other a lot, and they sketched things to keep him busy and her, and they sketched together, and they had a wonderful, wonderful relationship. But I couldn’t tell her that he was going to die and that was very sad, because – I would never do it again, but I had agreed with his family. They asked me not to tell him and that he had it, and I felt that – I would never tell him he didn’t, but I didn’t tell him he did until the end.

RA: You never told your husband that he had cancer?

FG: No, I had – Dr. Farber finally told him. The doctors before did not tell him, and his family had asked me not to tell him, and I respected them. I didn’t like it, and I never would do it again, but that was almost worse than the disease because I was doing a living lie. He didn’t ask me every day, “Do I have –?” But he surmised that he did because he was awful sick. But when he finally was told by the last doctor who wouldn’t treat him without telling him, and that’s right. Dr. Farber, the Dana Farber. He said to me, “I have it, and I’m going to die.” He knew because he had already told me he didn’t want any more surgery. I said, “You did, but they arrested it,” which was the truth. And that’s that. I mean, we didn’t have to discuss it any further because this doctor had told him. I don’t know. I wasn’t there when he told him because we were on vacation at Popponesset [on] the Cape. I knew it was the last vacation, and I thought it was a good thing to do, and he did too. But his two brothers-in-law came and took him to Dr. Farber



up in Boston, and that was really tragic. I had the two kids. They were four and eight. Not right – they were three and seven at the time. I called my family at that time, my sister, and she just had let it out to say what had happened, and from then on, he went downhill. I mean, he had to go back. He started out at the Mass Gen and ended up at Beth Israel because there was nothing more they could do, and he was more comfortable at Beth Israel because my dad was there. But Joan, my older one, really had suffered. I think that she – she's been married twice, and her second was the same kind of man. What I told you about women being capable, she's extremely capable, and they both have tried to not put her down, and I'm sure that she has her problems too. But whatever it is, she's working at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Florida. She is a very dear [inaudible] – they have a wonderful relationship so that it's very good. She now has a role model and has had –

RA: Your husband.

FG: We've been married for thirty years, but I do think that whatever happens to one in childhood up has a great – I mean, it does a lot to your future, no matter how hard you try or what you do, and I'm just lucky that he loves her and she loves him. I turn her over to him many times because he has a very good way of solving or helping her. Our other daughter, just like I, who have been lucky in our marriages, and she's married and very happy and has two wonderful children and is calm, relaxed [inaudible] for her because we love her and we don't know what to do to help her any more than we do. We live near her in the winter, and we have been very close. She has three daughters. One is getting married in November, and they're three wonderful girls. We know they're scared. We hope that they won't have the same kind of future. But they have to be allowed to do it their way, and the younger one – fortunately, they do have contact with their father, who married and has two more daughters. I'm the only one that really communicates with him because we get along, he and I. I mean, I'm not thrilled about it, but somebody has to be in contact. Somebody has to, for the sake of the girls also. We never say

anything not nice about him because that's their father. And when he heard about the younger one getting married, he did come to Florida and discuss this [with] Joan and me because I thought it was better that we join and be supportive to her because he had his wife with him. It was a very pleasant meeting, and it was good idea so there would be no problem at the wedding. But the middle child is training to be a social worker and is now – but didn't get her master's, and she's decided to be an occupational therapist, and she's the more sensitive. The older one is in New York and doing a great job. She was trained – all through high school worked in a specialty store and had great training so she had a job at Macy's, and she got in very easily and stayed there for five years. Now she's pretty much on her own. She is the oldest, and the oldest always has the burden of taking care of the other two. But she's very sound, and we're lucky they didn't go through any drug era, and what are the other vices? Whatever it is, we skipped that, which is lucky. But I really do think, not because I'm saying it, but everybody that knows the situation—I mean, the ones that care feel that the combination is most helpful. I'm grateful to Alfred for caring as much. They see a good marriage, what it's supposed to mean.

RA: I just want to review. You're talking now about your youngest daughter?

FG: No, our older daughter.

RA: Your older daughter has married twice.

FG: Yep.

RA: And the first marriage—

FG: Had three daughters.

RA: Had three daughters, and the husband of that marriage passed away?

FG: No, no. Oh, of my marriage.

RA: No, of your older daughter – her first husband.

FG: No, her first husband, they divorced, and he [remarried]. They went up to Vermont. Vermont's a very popular place to – well, he had worked down here in General Cinema and so forth and did well. He's bright, and he decided eventually he'd like to retire to Vermont and have a bakery. So Joan worked right with him in establishing this and that children actually displayed the wares in some of the stores, like Stop and Shop. She still would love to be married. She sees Nancy being happy. She sees me and this. That's human nature, although some people would not want to go for it again, but she really would like – and she's a fund-raiser in Jackson Memorial. She's very capable at whatever she does, and she never studied any of this, but she's a natural. Well before she – between marriages, she worked at the Lennox as a sales promotion at the Lennox Hotel. It's right across the street, and it's a lovely little, smaller hotel. She got that on her own and did well. When we retired to Florida and her sister's in Florida, she thought it would be pleasant to go, and it's a good idea because we're there in the winter.

RA: I want to go back now to your very first daughter's birth. You said you had tried to get pregnant, and this was during the war, and then you finally had a daughter.

FG: Yes.

RA: So, could you tell me a little bit about that?

FG: About the daughter? Oh, we were thrilled. It's interesting that you asked that. It's the first grandchild – I mean, great-grandchild – her birth, but my father, now being not as old as I am now, but old. [laughter] I mean, [inaudible] man but – cried outside the door, and here I was very, very happy to have this child and so-forth, and I couldn't quite figure it out. But it was explained somewhat to me – well, he was emotionally – because of his – I was his child and his first, but also that I suppose my mother wasn't there. I know that

I thought of my own mother, but he may have thought – I never quizzed him. But he's a weeper. He was a weeper. I mean, my grandchildren already know that I cry when I'm happy; I cry when I'm sad. So, if it appears odd, I'm being happy obviously for them. But he did, and everybody – and my second mother was thrilled because she loves babies, loved babies and was fine with them until they grew – she would tell you, "Oh, don't talk back again." [laughter] Anyway, Joan was the first grandchild.

RA: And then, how many years later—you were not working at the time?

FG: No, no.

RA: You stopped working after you got married?

FG: Right. And then I had Nancy four years later. We had Nancy four years later, and I didn't work then either. When my husband died, I did not work. I was fortunate that I could stay home with them. Losing a parent is very traumatic to children and particularly if they know what it's all about. And I remember Joan telling me a story that on Father's Day, the first Father's Day after, I had gone to school, told the teacher, and I had called the nursery school, Mrs. (McKennans?), and she recognized – Mrs. (McKennon?) was wonderful with Nancy and sent her home with some kind of syrup. It was her custom if you didn't have a parent to send that home. But this teacher at Joan's school must have forgotten or something. She had told them to write a card to their fathers and Joan didn't do anything, and she said, "I told you to write." "Oh," she said, "I don't have a father." She said, "Well, you can write it to an uncle or, or your grandfather." So there were a lot of traumas for Joan as a little kid. I mean, that's just one example. And there's a sensitivity, and sometimes it's not respected. Now, I don't know if all of this is going in. I hope a lot of it isn't but when you're between acts, what happened after I was – in fact, we were all alone for four years. Along came another gentleman in my life, and he came into my life through the (Wylers?). Remember, I said in Pembroke, Henry – Dr. Wyler let me lie on his –

RA: Yes.

FG: They introduced me to another gentleman, and we married, and we went to Utica, New York, for nine years. It was not a good marriage, but it had no bearing on Joan or Nancy because they loved him. Because I went to them and I said – well, Nancy was hopeful. I explained to them that this wasn't quite what I wanted and how did they feel? Joan said she was ready, but Nancy said, "It's the only father I know, and I love him." So, I waited until she graduated high school. Joan was now married and away, and Nancy was at high school. Oh, I mean, when Nancy finally said three years later that she was ready too. We didn't have to stay there any longer. I waited for Nancy to graduate high school, and I also went to work at the hospital. Remember I said I gave two hours and two hours free because I wanted to be home with Nancy – that's why I only gave four hours – when she came out of high school a meal after school. She adjusted very nicely, and I gave four more hours a day. We were together, and then I left – we left, and I came back, and that's when I went back to work when Nancy was in college and Joan was married and living in Buffalo. I went back to work, and I worked with unwed mothers at Boston Lying-In, sort of a substitute for my own children. It was a good experience both ways because it filled a gap for me, but I think I was very good with the unwed mothers because I identified – I was very helpful, and I wasn't traditional in the way. If they decided to have an abortion, that was up to them, but to be sure to come in and have the doctor check on them to make sure that they would be in good health in the future. And after four more years, I met Alfred.

RA: So, after your husband passed away, there were four years that you were a single mother.

FG: Right.

RA: And you stayed home that whole time.

FG: Yes, absolutely.

RA: And there was another man that you moved to New York with for nine years.

FG: That's right.

RA: And your daughters, at that point, had moved out of the house?

FG: No, no. They lived with us. They came with me, and they were very happy to go into a new – well, again, it didn't matter to Nancy. It could have mattered to Joan, but actually, after we got to Utica, and I got them acquainted with children in the community, etc., they were very happy there because it was a small community with a community center, and the Jewish population was small. It was an interesting experience – very different than living in the big city because they were very, very anxious that their children not intermarry. So, they really threw out the royal – two more Jewish girls was real wonderful for them. So, my children dated earlier in a small community, and I allowed them to go to parties and things at a younger age. And they had a good time. I mean, in retrospect, they liked Utica. The gentleman meant well. I mean, men don't always marry – how can I put it? Because it was just a relationship that was so – here, it looked good. The minute that I was there, it wasn't good because his background was such that – and I admired people who worked their way up because anybody can do it if it's handed to you on a platter. So he was a perfectly fine, respectable person, but our values were very different. For example, what mattered to him tremendously was to have a Cadillac and the body beautiful, and to go through school where he had been an athlete, played football for UCLA and for Denver U. The reason that he was where he was, or how he knew the Wylers was his wife had gone to Wellesley with Adelaide Wyler – my friend now. And they knew him, and they knew me. His wife had died of cancer, and my husband had died of cancer, and so naturally, very often, this happens. So that happened with Alfred and me. His wife had cancer, but there wasn't the sensitivity that I was used to. And certainly, to me, having a Cadillac was very unimportant, and the

sports were fine, but I didn't like to eat them and live with them. I had not agreed to work. He had a wholesale distributing company, which he had with her, and they really did nicely and well. Then, when she died, he had a secretary who tried, and he had never asked me to go into the business, and I seriously never really wanted to go into business. But in trying to make it a worthwhile experience, after I got the girls straightened out, their schools and their friends, I did go in, and he was a workaholic. And that's why I went in because I thought maybe we could have a family life if I went in and helped. And you know what? It helped, but he never – he was home all the time, and then I got to know – I mean, even the elevator operator in the building used to say, "Well, if you go home, I know your husband's going home because he follows you," whereas he used to stay all hours of the night. What I did was put out a catalog to the customers. I had high school children come in and put the catalogs together, so our customers had catalogs that they could order from. And we had a showroom. Those candlesticks come from the showroom, and I have a candelabra in the other room. I never took Social Security because he didn't offer it, so I just took things for the kids for my services. We had a showroom and either they ordered from the catalog or they came to the showroom, and they ordered, particularly at Christmas time. So the business was doing fine, and he didn't have to travel, and he was home every night. But for social life, it was going to the football games on Saturday, and our reward was dinner, which was always nice, and then a basketball game. And conversations were never on the same level. But that wouldn't be why I wouldn't stay. It was just not right. But I wouldn't hurt the kids again because death was bad enough on Joan. I didn't want the divorce to bother Nancy because she said he was the only father she knew and she cared. So that's why it was nine years. I'm very lucky because four years later I met Alfred and we're very compatible, very grateful for each other.

RA: You were going to tell me the story of how you met Alfred.



FG: Oh, I have boy cousins that are my same age, and they were very wonderful right through life. We grew up sort of – his grandmother and mine always brought the family together. One boy cousin lived in Lawrence, and the other lived with her and [inaudible]. I have a third one on another side of the family. I was the one girl with the three cousins, and years ago, we had the Knothole Gang to go to the baseball – you know, at Braves Field, and I was one of the gang, the Knotholes. So our relationship has stood the test of time all these years. Fortunately, just one is dead. The other three are alive, and we are a team. I mean, anything that's important we discuss with each other and love each other. Anyway, the one who died recently was coming from California. He was coming with his family, and my cousin in Marblehead, Stanley, invited me to come for Labor Day for dinner. At the time, when I was a widow – the first time – there were very few men available. Nobody was divorced, and nobody was dead. But this time, when I came back, I was very lucky. A lot of different people introduced me to different men, but now, this is pretty – Alfred and I thought it was very important to make a right choice or just stay alone. And so, anyway, when my cousin, Stan, invited me, I said, "Do you mind if I come with somebody?" because I didn't like to drive to Marblehead at night. And the person that I was going with [inaudible] me to come. And Stan said, "Fine." So his name was David (Kaplan?). We came. We got to Marblehead. We had dinner, and David said to my cousin Stanley, "I understand there's a widower in Marblehead." He said, "Would you know him because my relatives in Cleveland whom we visited last summer said they had a relative in Marblehead by that name, and it would be nice for the two men to get together." So Stanley said, "He lives right down the street." So he called him, and his wife had just died in June, and it was now – in the Jewish tradition, you don't get involved for a year after your – but he came out. But he didn't look to left or right. He just looked at David, and I looked at him, and I thought – I had just said to my sister, maybe the week before, "I'm ready for a new person in my life. I'm seeing five." I'm not bragging, but there were – the less tense you get when you're going out, the more they appear. As I say, my friends had introduced me to these different men. I said, "Sis, put them all



together, and they make one individual, but not any one of them would be good for me.” So it was natural that I noticed somebody new and I tried to figure out how was I going to see him again because he didn’t look to the left or right. But another friend, a woman friend who used to depend on me for some of her social life, Enid Phillips, had invited me to dinner on Saturday night, the next Saturday a week from – and I hadn’t accepted because Saturday nights I used to go out with a doctor. I don’t even remember his name; he’s dead. It’s thirty years since we were married and another doctor we used to joke with – but it’s not the same doctor. Anyway, Joe’s dead too. In fact, all five that I dated then are gone. But she had said she wanted me to come on Saturday, and I felt, did I want to or didn’t I? And then she said, “We’re going to share a man.” And I said, “Who is he?” [laughter] And she told me. This is one week later. Isn’t that fate? So, I said, “Well, let me – it’s not fair to you. May I come with somebody?” Meaning, I was going to take one of the five for her. She said, “No, I need you to help me, and I don’t” – she used to shake as she tried to do something. She was highly nervous. So I offered, and she didn’t bite. So two couples she was entertaining were here from Florida that we both knew, and one of the couples, the (Burnetts?), said they’d pick me up. I lived at the Hotel Somerset. That’s a dormitory now, but I lived there, and the (Burnetts?) picked me up. We got there, and then the Halperins were going to take me back. And that gets into the story. That’s why I say it. So, I got there, and I wore a – I’m telling the story as he tells it – a black silk dress and I was very prudish. The dress was cut low and had a “V” in it that I knew that it was the right dress. So he remembers it distinctly, and there I was, and there he was. Oh, I told Enid that I had met him and so forth, and all is fair in love and war. But, I mean, I asked her ahead of time and told her ahead of time. She was the last one that I told that I was going to get married because I felt bad for her, but anyway, when it was time to go home, the Halperins said, “We’ll take you.” He said, “Where do you live?” I said, “The Hotel Somerset.” He said, “I’ll take you.” So he did, and we spent, I don’t know how many hours in the bar at the Hotel Somerset while he drank and I listened because I occasionally take a little wine, but I don’t drink. He had

more problems than anybody I ever knew. [laughter] There were three sons, and they had lived in a very awful situation for the mother. It must have been horrible for her to know that she was going to die. She'd been ill for ten years. That's why he had all that. In fact, the rabbi told him that we should – he shouldn't wait a year, that those boys needed a mother. I mean somebody. So, we met Labor Day weekend, and we were married in December, and that's very quick.

RA: What year was this?

FG: It's thirty years ago – 1967. But it was a real challenge with boys, and I'm really pleased with what they're doing. I really think I was better equipped at that stage in my life than I had been with my own girls. Of course, also, I've had psychology. You have too, probably that mothers and daughters –

[END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE]

RA: I just want to say for the tape, today is July 11, 1997. I am Rachel Alexander interviewing Florence Gross in her home under the auspices of the Jewish Women's Archives. This is tape two, side one. And we're just talking about her starting a new life with Alfred.

FG: Right. Alfred, wouldn't you like to talk about your life with me?

Alfred Gross: No.

FG: No, okay.

AG: Except to say, maybe, it's pretty good.

FG: [laughter] All right. So anyway, regarding the boys and Alfred, I told them once we connected that I loved his father and I hoped we would love each other and take the time. It doesn't just happen overnight. My original introduction was around Christmas

time because we were married December 23<sup>rd</sup>. But as an introductory Channukah present, I gave them a pool table/ping-pong table combination because I thought that was a very good idea. I wanted to give them something anyway, and that was something they didn't have. The only reason I mention it is that I said later, as we knew each other, we wanted no more material items. It was just going to be a lot of – and that's really what I did, because unfortunately, when there's sickness and the same thing happened in my family with my husband and my children, there wasn't time to give them a lot of love and attention. I'm sure I was right near a gift shop – very often it was something material to make up for it, although in my case, it was like he had to go to the hospital daily, and I had help at home to take care of him, but it wasn't the same. That's why after that I stayed home and did not work. I moved home with the boys. I was there all the time. I did not have any social function or do anything at the Temple. I believed that they needed that kind of attention.

RA: How old were they?

FG: Eleven, fourteen, and eighteen. The eighteen-year-old was ready for college, so that it was very [inaudible] that he couldn't absorb. Actually, he really wanted – he felt somewhat out of it, so he got a good case of mononucleosis; you know how common that is [laughter] in college and came home. But the real reason, I think, too that he felt he forgot to say "Grandma." Their grandmother was going to come and stay with them when we went on our honeymoon, and unfortunately, she couldn't. I mean, she got sick, and so I said, "Let's take them." So we took them to Florida, and they were with us. That was good because we didn't walk out on them, and they didn't – it was just a happy experience for them, and Alfred had treated them much younger than they were. I mean, chronologically, they were eleven and fourteen, but, I mean, he took – we went to Alligator Alley, and we went and saw all the – as a group, but later I suggested they'd probably have a better time being with their peers. All the kids were bowling and doing that. So, after a while, they were with their peers. We repeated the same thing the next

year when we took them on a holiday. But other than that, it was just a lot of love, and we would talk together about what bothered them and what bothered me. And one day, Phillip – he's become a lawyer, and I know he's proud of him, anyway, because he did the talking. Johnny was the youngest, and after we had another meeting shortly after we were together, one day, he said, "There's some days I love you to pieces and some days I'd like to walk you out the front door." [laughter] "That's me," And I said, "You know, I feel exactly the same way." [laughter] But neither of us ever really – just once I felt like it, but I never did when it got rough because there were little incidences that were hard. Alfred was on the road a great deal, and I know I was right in one thing, that he was the disciplinarian, not me. But when away, I had to have some kind of rules to make relations, but they weren't as strict. But I think his consistency and caring, they really – they show it because the older boy is in Paris with his wife, and they've been married for twenty years, and it's lasted and stayed. He's the one – we haven't had as much contact because of the fact that he's older. He was in the Army, but he never went overseas. But Alfred got him the right connection because he had been in the Army for years, and he knew the proper person to talk to. But Phillip is in Manassas, Virginia, doing very well as a lawyer. Johnny is staying in the same position that he's always been in. He's interested in food, and he's very well equipped and knowledgeable, and he works for the same company that he started with in a managerial position. So I think that they're pretty steady. And I think they deserve a lot of credit for having had that in their background, the unfortunate – they've done well under the circumstances. Phillip is married and has been married for a lot of years too and has three lovely children. He's the middle boy, the lawyer. Johnny had a good marriage to a very nice girl from a very nice family, but it didn't last. They had lived together for three years and again it should – it worked out well, but after marriage, it didn't, which is typical of what's happening now – the statistics. But he is engaged again, and that's why we're going [inaudible], and the two older boys have married out of the faith which [inaudible]. But I honestly think that maybe it was just as well. And Johnny did marry a lovely Jewish girl from a lovely Jewish

family, and it didn't work. It's just one of those things. But he did it, I think, a lot to make his dad happy. I mean, he didn't just go out and get – find her and make – but he was pleased with himself to see his brothers upset him. I mean, it didn't work – that he would have preferred the – and so he just happened to, but now he's trying it out and the other things. Hopefully, it'll work. Can't tell.

RA: One of the things we haven't talked much about are your Jewish values. I was wondering if you could start when you were growing up, how your family celebrated holidays.

FG: Yes, my immediate family – I think I've told you my dad's religion was being a doctor, and he really didn't go. I mean, it was never formalized. I'm the only member of the family that did go. I had the need because I was seeking how – why did my mother die at such a young age? I think that was my interest. My sister never went, and my brother was forced to.

RA: To the synagogue.

FG: Yes. To confirmation class, but I went willingly. I really wanted to get – my grandfather couldn't tell me. I didn't try with my grandmother because it was too much of a hurt, I thought. So I went, and I was – Temple Israel in those days was a small place, so they couldn't keep – they had to divide, so some went on Saturday, and some went on Sunday. So I went on Saturday to class, and I was literally the goody-goody with the teacher handing me the book and saying, "Take over," because everybody horsed around but not me. And then, I went Sundays to read to the blind. They brought in students from Perkins Institute, and I read to the blind students what I was probably learning the day before. On Sunday afternoon were the children whose parents could not afford to be members, so I went Sunday afternoon and read and played the piano, the hymns, and took attendance. So my life was pretty well wrapped up at Temple Israel.

RA: You took attendance to see who was attending services?

FG: Well, these were children of non-members, but they came. Maybe the teachers took it, but I handed it in. I was a girl Friday for the Sunday afternoon, and I did that for quite a while. It's interesting, now that I talk about – why did I do it those three days? [laughter] But I'm telling you why. I sought out from whomever the rabbi was at that time, and I never got an answer that satisfied me. But I still did it, and I felt a close kinship with my religion and my faith, and even though dad died, that didn't turn me off. But I have to be honest. I gave my children the same education, and they were confirmed – my two girls. But when my husband died, I began to question, which is an inadequacy in me – I think – because that's not a – I mean, if people can live through the Holocaust and have a religion and survive – mine is a weakness. But I really literally – not for me but for my children, I saw what it did. It's a discipline to go anyway, and I just didn't have the same feeling, but for my children, I did. I mean, they went, and I went because I think they learn from example, not from any other way. But my heart was not in it after that occurred. I'm still seeking, and I'll tell you why. Oh, and I was very friendly with Roland Gittelsohn. That's the [former] rabbi at Temple Israel – now Mehlman. But Roland was my mentor in that sense because we were socially friendly. [inaudible] his second wife and I were very good friends. And he wrote a catharsis. He wrote a book about himself, one of the books, and this second wife was quite a help to him – both were, but I mean, she really got it back in the groove of reality, I think. But his feeling of God and religion was in nature. That's as close as I've come to it because I respected his judgment. But in social work, whatever counseling I do, which is mostly listening – we very seldom do the talking – I listen. Those patients who have faith do go out of this world in much better condition than those who don't. So I hope I find it, and I hope I'm satisfied with my feeling because I think it would be nice to have it. But none of us know really. I mean, I think that the Orthodox have a much better perspective because they believe in the future world; it's going to be wonderful, [laughter] just like the Catholics. I mean, that's the way I've interpreted it to anybody I've talked to. It may be naïve, but I think it's a

wonderful way if you can believe it. Does that help at all?

RA: Yes. I want to know – your father's religion was a doctor, but Friday nights, you had dinner together.

FG: No, we never did.

RA: No.

FG: I did with my husband's parents. No, there was no particular night that he was home. Maybe it would have been good if we had. Maybe that would have helped. But his life was a very busy life. And the only reason I say it is Temple [inaudible], and I'm sure it's because of my mother, because – my second mother because she was there as treasurer. But I don't remember any formal – tonight is his *Yartzheit*, by the way. I always went religiously for the family. Nobody else went. And I planned to, but I'll go tomorrow instead because you can go either or. I have some sort of feeling, certainly more than my sister or my brother. But I've never discussed it fully with my brother. I've discussed it with my sister, and she believes in being a *mensh* and all that and supporting. But it has not much significance to her. I told her the other day, I think it's what you teach your children, by example, meaning we always did have a big Passover. My sister always did Thanksgiving. My sister-in-law did Christmas because she's not Jewish. And she always had Christmas, so we let her have that one. [laughter] We always had the Jewish Passover particularly, but my daughter Joan always says, like when her daughter's getting married, "It's like breaking fast." I mean, she always knew that holiday time we were going to have family. So, they have some [inaudible] religious feeling, and I don't think it's anything you can – you do it by example, for them.

RA: So, what did you do for Passover?

FG: We always had the entire family right here. I mean, when we were in Marblehead, we opened up that table which opens up to twelve. We had another large picnic table



that did this. We had twenty-some people every Passover, and we did it in Florida too. Our boys came down there, particularly because his children never had a Passover because the mother is Catholic. Phillip says he tries to keep it up for them. We don't know if he does or he doesn't because – I know they go to parochial – not parochial school. They go to Sunday School – Catholic. I know that Terry, who's the mother, is broad-minded, and I know that she doesn't object to Phillip – in fact, she was with us for Passover, and I'm sure she was happy that we showed the children what it was all about.

RA: So you have dinner for Passover.

FG: Yes.

RA: And any special items on the table for Passover?

FG: Oh, we always have a potato plate, and Alfred always conducts it the way it's supposed to be, and we have a service right wherever we are, and they like it. In fact, in fact, our family prefers Passovers [laughter] in preference to Christmas or Thanksgiving. We didn't believe it at first, but now we do believe it. We asked them why. "Because it's fun." From the time they were very little – and I think it's great that they'll always have that memory. I think it's very important that they have something. I'm more concerned about what's happening in Israel now, what's going on. I don't know if you're a Reformer or whatever you are, but the Reform means absolutely nothing. We try to sponsor [inaudible] contribute because it just also happens that Netanyahu has relatives in Key Biscayne, and we're very upset about him. But who knows what's right and what's wrong about what's happening in Israel right now.

RA: Netanyahu?

FG: Yes, well, he's the chief, and there are those who say – my husband played bridge on Fridays in Florida with three other men, and they all died in the last couple of years.



So it's kind of sad, but one of them was a great, staunch supporter of Netanyahu. Am I pronouncing it correctly?

RA: I don't know.

FG: He's in charge of – Alfred, darling, [inaudible] Netanyahu. Yes, I'm talking about Israel.

AG: I heard.

FG: Yes, now one of your friends –

AG: Max Karl.

FG: Max Karl supported him completely, right?

AG: Tremendous funds. This man really poured millions into him.

FG: And David, the other man – I was telling Rachel that the men you played with all died in the last few years.

AG: Yes.

FG: But David –

AG: Unfortunately. They were marvelous men.

FG: But David felt differently, didn't he?

AG: Absolutely the antithesis of the other.

FG: That they should go –

AG: That's why the discussions were marvelous.

FG: Was it with Rabin? You know, just the opposite. We were over there. Believe it or not, when we were much younger, neither of us had been to Israel. And he really didn't want to go, and I didn't want to go. Why didn't we want to go to Israel, either of us?  
[laughter] But we went for each other?

AG: What do you mean we didn't want to go?

FG: Don't you remember? For years, we didn't go to Israel, and neither of us really were eager, and I said, "I'm going to go for you, and you go for me," and we were so thrilled with what we saw.

AG: I really don't know. I don't recall that.

FG: It was because we were part of the Jewish Congress. I don't want to give the wrong name – the Reform group that started out –

AG: [inaudible]

FG: No, [inaudible] since Roland Gittelsohn.

AG: Yes.

FG: This was long before when the family was so involved with Sears Roebuck, and they were preaching an entirely different idea. Do you remember that?

AG: American Jewish Congress, I think.

FG: Yes, American Jewish Congress. So, neither of us was – we had many more places that we want – but we decided we'd better go, and we were so thrilled that we had been because of what had been –

AG: I'll tell you, I don't want to go today. I have no desire to go today.

FG: Yes but I we were just thrilled –

AG: A shame.

FG: – with what we saw. I came back and told my friends whom I had said –

AG: I hate to interrupt, but you're going for two and a half hours here together. How long is this going to last?

FG: Why? What's bothering you, honey?

AG: I just want to get a time frame. Are you going until eight o'clock or –?

FG: No. [laughter] Going until eight o'clock.

AG: I'm going to get hungry by then.

FG: We'll let you'll eat.

AG: In fact, I'm going get hungry very shortly.

FG: What time is it anyway?

RA: 5:30.

FG: Oh, but no, we're going to –you can do whatever you want, sweetheart. I know what he means. He's the chief cook.

AG: All right.

FG: Nobody minds if you want to start preparing. Here's another thing, years from now, when you're married and your husband's retired, there's another thing he learns to do, and it's wonderful. He told me the other day – did he tell me or did he tell –? I think he said it to me. Oh, if anything happens to him, I must get somebody in here because I'm

not much of a homemaker. [laughter] And so I repeated it the other night to somebody, and they laughed because maybe some other woman it would bother, but it doesn't bother me. Oh, that doesn't go on there? Where were we? Oh, about Israel.

RA: You were telling me about your first trip.

FG: Yeah, it was just so exciting to see what they're doing to – their caring, what they had accomplished.

AG: The flight going over there –

FG: Yes, we could.

AG: Actually, marvelous, because they had a bunch of these Orthodox Jews on board who were in their black outfits, and the women had *shaideles* on, and they were dressed in old country clothes, and when the sun came up, they got up in the aisle and started to pray. That was a fascinating thing. That was our introduction.

FG: But when you go to Hebron, that's the seat of turmoil. Was then and it is now, but there is a [inaudible]. But you have to go there because – I mean, in order to get the full flavor. I don't mean of the turmoil, but that's where they pray. The Jews pray at one time and in the same edifice the others pray and at Mecca. We traveled with just a few people in a mini-van, and we saw our driver get pretty shook up when they were in their way because he was one of the Youth Aliyah boys, and he had been through all of that turmoil as a child. I agree. I'm glad I went when I did. I mean, I could take it when I was young. I think it would be kind of scary now, too important to [inaudible] still, but other people don't feel that way, I'm sure. Johnny Gross, our son, just came back. He knows about fish, and he's helping them with fish farms.

RA: He's helping in Israel.

FG: Yeah, cultivating the fish, so that was nice, and he said he loved it. We'll hear all about it when we see him. I think anything that anybody could do that's positive is great, but I think it's very – I just wish that we, as a Jewish group, could unite. It never will happen, probably, but with so few now that if they could unite and stop fighting with each other, it would be much, much better, much happier. But I'm not a hostile kind of person. I hate anything like that. But I do think the trouble in our world is over religion and over the haves and the have-nots. We notice in other countries, and now it's coming to America more, the haves and the have-nots. I was telling my sister recently also, because I talk to her daily several times on the phone, if not see her, that it's really – I don't mind – I'm not interested in communism or socialism. I mean, people should have the right to work harder and make more money. But gobs of money? If you read the latest *Boston* magazine, the number of millionaires, for what? When we have struggling people, it is just so sad; they have nothing. There has to be some better way. We're just one step above animals. [inaudible] said to me, as you can hear.

RA: Maybe if you tell me some stories about your social work experiences.

FG: I have never counseled anybody that didn't thoroughly appreciate what I did. That's why it's so important. It's a good feeling. No, I don't know if other social workers have the same experience, but everybody, from the time I had a little Black minister need false teeth – set of teeth – how appreciative he was, to the unwed mothers I told you about that became my children. We had them of all society, the poor people and a foreign – they could say they didn't understand the language, and they got in trouble – to the girls who were at college that thought they were punishing their mothers when they were really punishing their mothers and themselves. I just feel very grateful to have had the experience and to have been helpful. I'm even more happy – that's not good English – I'm even happier now when I volunteer because the social work field is managed care, and many of the social workers have been dropped, and medicine has changed to that. So, I feel very necessary to just go into any room, and if they want to talk, to listen and try

to be helpful and that, manage to get it off their chest. Every week when I do it, I often think, "Well, what am I –? What am I going to find today? Why didn't I –? Why can't I find something when I'm there that can be more helpful to them?" I'd find somebody, and it's the same thing all over again, that they had been wanting so hard to express themselves, and they feel better when they're through. I'll give you one very good story. We have a dear friend who doesn't know us right now, but he [inaudible] fall maybe because he hit his head. Physically, he's come back, but the head – we don't know if he is or he isn't. But I wouldn't go to – he's a man, so I'm waiting until he's [inaudible], but Alfred goes down. But I went down last week to tell him I was going with a friend of mine and he was going that way, and good-bye. And Ron, our friend came, propelling himself with two women, one on each side, who are his therapists because he gets speech therapy and the other therapy – occupational and physical. I honestly don't know whether he recognized me or he didn't, but I smiled at him, and he smiled back, and I said, "I'm Florence Gross. I'm Alfred Gross's wife, and I've just come to tell him goodbye." He leaned over and kissed me, and that made my day. I mean, whether he did greet me, at least it was a gesture. And then I went into his wife, who was there talking to him, and she was so grateful, and then I called my cousin, who's really close to them. That's how we knew he was going to be in, and we know him too, but not like my cousins do. Doris said, "Oh, you've made my day," and it comes back. It really does, whatever you – if you're genuine about it, it comes back to you.

RA: How many years were you practicing?

FG: I got my license when they started to – in all, I wouldn't say it was much. Two, six, maybe fifteen years. I'm not being accurate.

RA: That's okay.

FG: But volunteering we've been doing for five years there and three years here, and that's his – I didn't count that in there – because this is just volunteering.

RA: You talked a lot about growing up and starting families. You haven't talked so much about being a couple and being empty-nested. Is there anything you want to talk about? Hobbies you have now or volunteering now, or in the last twenty years even?

FG: I think I can answer. When the girls left – fortunately, in a way, the girls are older than the boys, so they left a long, long time ago, and they married young. When the boys left, we moved here. And time flies more quickly when you're older. It changed, and I think I summed it up in our marriage, just saying it's extremely compatible and we're appreciative of each other. Alfred often says he never dreamed that two people could really enjoy each other as much as we do, and I think I did it because, although that's what I wanted out of life, was a husband and children, and my social work next. So, I've been a very lucky human being. Does that answer your question?

RA: That answers my question. Are there any other stories that you want to add?

FG: I don't think so. I think I've really pretty much told you a catharsis.

RA: Great. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]