Helen Fine Transcript

Emily Mehlman: I am about to record an oral history memoir of Helen Fine, a resident of the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged in Roslindale, Mass. Helen, at the Friday evening Shabbat service at Temple Israel, Boston, on November 22nd, you were honored for Jewish Book Month. It was really a remarkable evening, and it was at that time that I thought it would be so wonderful to be able to interview you and to find out something about your background and why you were honored, and to hear from you some of the things that have made up your remarkable life. That's why I called you, and I'm here today to talk to you.

Helen Fine: Yeah, well, I remember that you said something to me at the honoring.

EM: That’s right.

HF: I was so proud of the people. I didn't know [inaudible].

EM: That's right. I want to ask you just a few questions about your background, etc. Would you care to reveal your birthday to me?

HF: Yeah. Eighty-one now.

EM: What’s the date of your birth?

HF: August 15th.

EM: What? Nineteen-what?

HF: 1910.

EM: 1910. Where were you born?

HF: Ruggles Street, Roxbury, in a hotel.

EM: Which hotel?

HF: Westminster, probably. They've razed that place over and over again.

EM: Is it near where the subway station is now [inaudible].

HF: No, it's off Northampton Street.

EM: Was that a Jewish neighborhood at the time?

HF: Oh, it was definitely an immigrant Jewish neighborhood.

EM: And were your parents immigrants?

HF: My father and mother – there was a divorce there.

EM: Your parents were divorced? Isn’t that interesting? In those days?

HF: But I never said anything to even my closest friends, and if they know, they don't talk about it. They didn't get along. My father was about twenty years older than my mother, and she was very much coddled in that she was a – they did everything they could for her. We lived with my grandparents [inaudible] Ruggles Street. I have an older brother, nineteen months older than I am, and he lived in Barton's Court, and that was –

EM: In Roxbury also?

HF: No, that was in Roxbury, too.

EM: What's your brother's name?

HF: He's dead.

EM: No, I know.

HF: Harold. He was a very fine man and MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] graduate, the immigrant who's successful. But he was never an immigrant, actually. He was born here. I had a younger brother, who was two years old when my father and mother –

EM: Were divorced?

HF: – split up, yeah. She got a get. I remember that. The get. You know that's the Jewish –

EM: I know, yes. So, you were raised by your mother or by your father?

HF: My mother, two uncles, and my grandparents, and they really and truly did a good job. Now, my mother was the one that didn't think I should go to college, because nobody in the whole district went to college.

EM: Where actually were your parents from?

HF: Russia.

EM: Do you remember the cities?

HF: Yes. [inaudible] for my father, and –

EM: Well, maybe it'll come to you.

HF: Oh, it'll come to me.

EM: It'll come to you.

HF: Been a long time.

EM: How old were your parents when they came to Boston?

HF: My father was eighteen, and my mother came to Boston, and the following year she got married at the age of sixteen.

EM: She met your father in Boston.

HF: Yes.

EM: At the age of sixteen.

HF: But nobody wanted the [inaudible].

EM: I see. I guess they were right.

HF: For reasons we know. That's one of the things I don't have to talk about.

EM: Was your father –?

HF: She was a mother and father to us, my mother, and she was very strict. She, at the same time, would take me to a musical comedy.

EM: And how was the family supported?

HF: My mother went to work in several factories, and my grandparents were comfortable. We lived with them very happily most of the time.

EM: Did your mother come with the grandparents? Did they come together?

HF: Oh no, no. Oh, no. My grandmother came with my uncle, Ben, and my – let's see. My grandfather came three years before my grandmother, and my grandmother had to go out and catch him because he was having a good time.

EM: I see.

HF: First, they took all his aunts, his sisters, and brothers, and he paid for their way to America, set them up in rooms, and did everything they could for us. But at the same time, they were very angry at my grandfather because he sort of – we don't know [inaudible] my nephew, Jeffrey's been at me to do this work, but I don't want to. So, let's see. This will be good enough.

EM: It'll be fine. It'll be great. I want to ask you something. Do you remember what grammar school you went to? What high school you went to?

HF: Yes. I went to the Quincy Dickerman in Roxbury, and it was a beautiful area in those days. It was really top-notch. I went to the Phillips Brooks from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Then I went to Girls' High. And my mother insisted – I wanted to go to Girls Latin, but she said I had to go to Girls' [High]. She remembers [inaudible] – she learned that Girls' High was also a normal school, and you could learn how to be a teacher. So, she insisted that I – she was a very powerful woman.

EM: Obviously. What was her name, your mother?

HF: Bertha Fine.

EM: And your father?

HF: Samuel.

EM: And your brother, Harold. And the youngest?

HF: Ben is my younger –

EM: Ben is your younger brother.

HF: He was six years old when – I think with my grandparents, they tried to foster – she was an independent lady. I don't think it was a very serious thing.

EM: You said that your mother worked in different factories?

HF: Yes.

EM: Clothing factories?

HF: No, I know she worked in – not a chocolate factory, but – I can't remember. You're asking me to plow through a lot of years.

EM: Oh, wow, it's okay.

HF: It was a tobacco – a cigar, that's it.

EM: Cigar factory?

HF: A cigar factory.

EM: What was she doing? Do you remember?

HF: She was cigaring. [laughter]

EM: Rolling it up? Rolling up the paper?

HF: But it was a typical immigrant home, very Orthodox, very Orthodox.

EM: Did you speak English or Yiddish at home?

HF: Both. If I had company, say, when I was sixteen years old or seventeen, I guess that's – when I had company, I used to say to my grandfather, "Zayde, don't come into the living room because I don't think you'll enjoy it." [laughter] I used to prevent her from having company in the house while – and that's something – that's not unusual.

EM: No, no. Do you remember the house at all? Was it a three-decker?

HF: Let's see. I'll tell you. We lived in Ruggles Street for a while. Then we moved to Thorndike Street, where my brother Ben was born.

EM: I see.

HF: And then we – let's see. I had that in my head a minute ago.

EM: Thorndike Street. Where exactly is Thorndike Street? What part of Roxbury is it?

HF: Thorndike Street is between Northampton and Ruggles Street.

EM: Oh, so it's in the same general neighborhood.

HF: Oh, it was an immigrant neighborhood. Absolutely.

EM: When you say immigrant, was it just Jewish immigrants, or were there Italian immigrants?

HF: No, Jewish.

EM: It was a strictly Jewish neighborhood.

HF: I think so. They might have had a few here and there.

EM: Were there a lot of things, places like kosher butchers?

HF: Oh, everything. You didn't have a kosher butcher.

EM: You had a shochet butcher.

HF: No, the shochet killed the –

EM: Yes, I know. So, where did you go to buy the chicken?

HF: Well, my grandfather had an inn in Bridgewater, and he bought chickens in Bridgewater.

EM: In Bridgewater?

HF: Yes.

EM: Did he drive?

HF: No, my uncle drove him.

EM: [inaudible] by car?

HF: We were the first family on Normandy Street, where we lived –

EM: In Mattapan?

HF: No, Dorchester. We were the very first family to have an automobile in the street.

EM: Really?

HF: [inaudible]

EM: And your grandfather would drive to Bridgewater?

HF: No, my grandfather couldn't drive. He couldn't even speak English.

EM: He took somebody with you. He took somebody with him.

HF: My uncle Manny.

EM: Yes, was the driver.

HF: They were in business together more or less.

EM: What kind of a business was it?

HF: Chicken and eggs.

EM: Oh, your grandfather was in the chicken business.

HF: Right, chicken and eggs.

EM: In Bridgewater?

HF: No.

EM: Where?

HF: In Roxbury.

EM: Oh, in Roxbury.

HF: And before a holiday, my brother Harold and I had to stand at the head of the stairs to be sure that the [inaudible] didn't cheat. All they had to do was put their finger on the scale [inaudible]. You put your – and it jumps. Harold and I were stationed up there, up on a flight of stairs that led into the back room of this place, of the store. We had to watch and see that the [inaudible] didn't cheat, didn't push the button, and if they did, my grandmother [inaudible] if you know.

EM: [inaudible]

HF: She really gave it to them.

EM: She really gave it to them. I see. Now, after the –?

HF: I want to tell you a story, one story because it's my childhood, and I don't remember as much, except that that story seems to have embedded itself in my memory, and I think

about it every once in a while, actually. So now, I can't think of it. [laughter]

EM: Now you can't think of it. Was it about the chicken and the eggs?

HF: No, no, that's past.

EM: Well, as we progress, we'll go on. What high school –? You went to Girls' High.

HF: I went to Girls' High.

EM: So, you learned to become a teacher there, or you had to go to normal school?

HF: No, no. I went to normal school. And when I went, it was a three-year course. By the time I left, it was a four-year course, and then I, of course, did master's work and all kinds of things.

EM: Did you become a school teacher?

HF: Yes, I did.

EM: Right away, or you got a master's first?

HF: No, no. I got a master's.

EM: Do you recall what year you graduated from the normal school?

HF: 1930. No, no. Yes, 1930.

EM: 1930? What was the name of the school?

HF: Boston –

EM: Normal School?

HF: City of Boston. City of Boston Normal School. Not Normal School. City of Boston [inaudible].

EM: Was it all women in the school?

HF: Yes, when I went there, it was all women.

EM: And then you –?

HF: It was my grandmother, I want you to know, that insisted I go to college. She's smart. She does everything and let her go. And Zayde, who loved me so dearly, said, "[inaudible]." And my mother was working all the time. She didn't know what it was about, because she was so busy.

EM: Now, you lived on Normandy Street at this time?

HF: No, I lived – from Thorndike, they went to Roxbury. At Thorndike, what did they do? You should have prepared me for this because it's hard to dig in.

EM: It's all right.

HF: Then, she went to Blue Hill Avenue. We lived in Blue Hill Avenue.

EM: Blue Hill Avenue? Near where?

HF: Near Seaver Street.

EM: So, up near Mishkan Tefila?

HF: Yeah, right, right.

EM: Did you go to Mishkan Tefila? Or was that –?

HF: No, we went to Otisfield Shul.

EM: Otisfield, because you were Orthodox.

HF: My grandfather was a trustee, I want you to know.

EM: Of Otisfield shul?

HF: And I was the only girl in the whole place that had to go to Hebrew school. I had to go. I was forced to go.

EM: You were the only girl.

HF: I was the only girl, and Sy Nemzoff was my teacher.

EM: At that school? At Otisfield?

HF: At Otisfield. He was going to Harvard.

EM: I never knew that.

HF: He was going to Harvard at the time.

EM: Really?

HF: Yeah. Did you ever hear him say, “And now, Helen Fine, I was her teacher.” I used to be glad because it made me look young. [laughter]

EM: Actually, Sy Nezoff couldn’t have been a lot older than you.

HF: No, six years.

EM: Yes, you said that. Well, we'll get back to the Hebrew part in a few minutes. Let's just talk, first of all, about when you finish with the normal school, you got a job teaching in the Boston Public Schools?

HF: No, Normal School. Let's see. No, I didn't work. No, it was Depression.

EM: Right.

HF: And I did not work except for small jobs. I didn't work for practically the whole year, but then my name came up. See, the [inaudible] came out on the list, and after that, I got work.

EM: Where did you work?

HF: I worked at loads of places. That was my first year, and all of us were in [inaudible]. The ones that got out in 1930, we all had our problems about getting work. My sister-in-law, Esther – Esther Fine – she went and got a job in the secretary's office. She had work, I think, the next day.

EM: What grade did you teach mostly?

HF: I taught mostly fourth, fifth, and sixth.

EM: Fourth, fifth, and sixth?

HF: Right.

EM: You had the pre-adolescence.

HF: I loved it from the beginning. I really did.

EM: How many years did you actually teach public school?

HF: I think forty-five.

EM: Forty-five years?

HF: Because they sent me a lot of literature in my name [inaudible].

EM: Did you teach in the Boston Public Schools the whole time?

HF: Yeah.

EM: So, actually, you really went through a tremendous transition in the Boston Public Schools in terms of the populations and the mixes of children.

HF: The what?

EM: The mixes. Different ethnic groups, different races.

HF: Where I was going, the mixes were either [inaudible] Galitziana.

EM: You taught mostly in Jewish neighborhoods?

HF: Yes, I did, but I taught in English, of course.

EM: Of course.

HF: You're evoking – [laughter]

EM: Did you remember anybody that you taught in those days who became very well known?

HF: Yeah, well, sure, there were lots of them. Frank Manuel, Professor Frank Manuel.

EM: From Brandeis?

HF: All right. He lived on the same street with me, and he once split my head open.

EM: [laughter]

HF: [inaudible] stitches. He was a sissy, and his mother was always sticking up for him, but don't write this. She'd be at the window. Oh, he was the guy that when [he] went to

shul on Saturday, read the whole haftorah.

EM: Frank Manual?

HF: Oh, Frank Manual. He really knows his Hebrew.

EM: Anybody else that you can remember?

HF: But he was a sissy. I have to finish this. He was a real sissy and a mama's boy. She used to sit at the window, and if we didn't choose him quickly enough, she would scold us. And my brother, Harold, hit Manual right here, so I had stitches.

EM: Now, obviously, as time progressed, the neighborhoods weren't completely Jewish, so you must have had an influx of other ethnic groups. What schools actually did you teach at? Do you remember?

HF: Yes. Christopher Gibson off Columbia Road. I was there for fifteen years.

EM: Yes. Where else did you teach?

HF: In East Boston, I taught at a school – there are a lot of schools because I didn't get work that very first year. So, I got day work, and I was glad to get it.

EM: Would you say you spent most of your career at the Christopher Gibson?

HF: No, I don't think so.

EM: So, where else? What other schools did you teach at?

HF: I gave you – thirty-eight. Where else? Let's see. Christopher Gibson.

EM: What was the last school you taught at?

HF: Oh, all right, it's in Brighton, and it's –

EM: The Garrison.

HF: No, no. Garrison is in Mishkan Tefila, that area.

EM: Oh, that's right. Not the Garrison. On Chestnut Hill Avenue? The school on Chestnut Hill Avenue?

HF: I don't remember. No, I don't remember.

EM: You don't remember.

HF: I don't remember. You know what I mean? It's just digging.

EM: Through your whole teaching career – obviously, you've been a positive Jew your whole life, but through your whole teaching career –

HF: Not only in teaching, but in living.

EM: Of course, you have, I know that, but in your teaching experience, in your secular teaching experience, not your Hebrew teaching experience, but in your secular teaching experience, did you ever experience any antisemitic activities?

HF: Not too much. But there was a time I was teaching at one of the schools in Roxbury, and as I came out of that room – oh, they were having lunch. As I came out of lunch, I caught the end of a conversation in which they said, "Too many Jews around here. Wish we could get rid of them." And they looked up, and there I was. They knew I was Jewish, of course. Thank God, I said, "Well, I tell you, I think you'd better change because this isn't going to keep on forever now." And I said a few other things, and told them I didn't like what they'd said. But I didn't have too much. If anything, I was always in the Jewish neighborhood. My schools were there.

EM: Even in Brighton's Jewish neighborhood.

HF: No, in Brighton already they became –

EM: It changed.

HF: – ethnic [inaudible]. I have to tell you a story.

EM: Go ahead.

HF: The only one I can think of. My first memory. I was sitting on a floor. See, this is going to be in pieces and snatches, because I was sitting on the floor, and I must have been playing with a toy, not dolls – I never had a doll.

EM: How is it –?

HF: I never had a doll until my Uncle Ben, who was a sailor and ran away from home – here's another story – brought me a bag and a doll of coffee beans.

EM: Stuffed with coffee beans?

HF: Yeah. Made on the outside. He bought it somewhere in South America. He's a story. Boy, he ran away from home, joined the Navy, became a doctor, eventually, and brought home a wife. And my grandmother says, “Oy-vey.” [laughter] Absolutely. And I went around telling everybody I have a Spanish Spaniard for my aunt.

EM: She was not Jewish.

HF: She was.

EM: She was Jewish.

HF: Yeah, she came out from Brazil.

EM: Tell me the story about your uncle Ben, [who] brought you a doll.

HF: I just tried to tell you that I never had anything else before.

EM: Well, what you said, you didn't grow up in a really poor household.

HF: No, no.

EM: But you didn't have any toys.

HF: They were comfortable.

EM: Yes, but you didn't have a doll.

HF: They were comfortable, but they let us have it. [laughter] [inaudible] and for a boy, it was [inaudible].

EM: [inaudible] No, my mother –

HF: Are you finding out from me –? You be careful what you –

EM: I want to tell you just a brief story of my own, even though it's an aside. You said you never had a doll. My mother, who would be, if she were alive, seventy-six right now, said that she had a doll, but her doll carriage was a pot. She always used to tell me that she never – she did have a doll, but her doll carriage was a pot, and I guess those were the days.

HF: Well, I go back to being four years old, and the door opened and in walked my grandfather, my Zyade, and he had a pointed beard and very, very much Orthodox in every way. But I'll tell you what they did, and it was not good, not nice. They went on Saturday to Dover Street, to the Jewish theater [inaudible], and they took me.

EM: On Saturday?

HF: But they weren't going to take me all the time, I was told, because I asked too many questions. [laughter] I didn’t know what they were saying. I've gone away from my story. So, my grandfather said to me, “Today is your fourth birthday” in Yiddish, and he gave me four pennies, and I was the happiest girl in the world because I got four pennies. Now, that is typical.

EM: Tell me. You just mentioned the Jewish theater on Dover Street.

HF: Yeah, that’s when I was –

EM: Did you go a lot to the Jewish theater?

HF: My grandmother and grandfather used to try to go –

EM: The Yiddish theater.

HF: Yiddish theater.

EM: What was it called? Do you remember the name?

HF: It's on Dover Street. It was on Dover Street.

EM: Were there famous actors and actresses?

HF: They had plush divans that you sat in for the best seats, and my Bubbe and Zayde, they were real sports.

EM: How old were you? Maybe ten at the time?

HF: Oh, ten, yes.

EM: And do you recall what the price of the ticket was?

HF: Because I was [inaudible] to be babysitting, so I have to be careful I don't bother –

EM: Do you recall what the price of a ticket was in those days?

HF: I don't recall, but you know where you can find out?

EM: Where?

HF: At the bottom of the Brandeis building on the Historical Society. They have all kinds of posters there giving you dates and names.

EM: Oh, really?

HF: It'd make a marvelous visit. Don't think for a minute – it's fascinating. Boy, am I having fun.

EM: [laughter] That's great. That's the idea.

HF: Now, the best story.

EM: Okay, go ahead.

HF: The best story [inaudible] for a minute, [inaudible]. I'll have it in a minute.

EM: Did you have a story you wanted to tell me about your grandfather's chicken and egg business?

HF: No, no. That was one. That was another – no. This one I'm talking – ask me another question.

EM: Okay. You told me you got your master's degree.

HF: Yes, and I also got –

EM: That's pretty unusual.

HF: – thirty points beyond the master's.

EM: And this was in the 1930s, in the early '30s?

HF: No, no, I went back to school. I went back to school.

EM: In the 1930s, this was?

HF: When I graduated from Boston Teachers College –

EM: That was the name of it. Yes.

HF: Boston Teachers College. I waited one year. I was babysitting, so I thought I'd make a little money, but that wasn't good, and my family decided that I ought to go on. And I did. And I got, as I said, a master's degree, and I even studied at Oxford in England.

EM: Did you really?

HF: Yes, I did.

EM: And you went off by yourself?

HF: For a whole summer. No, not for very long.

EM: Well, but still, these weren't exactly the 1980s or the 1990s. These were the '30, and you were a woman alone, and it must have been most unusual for something like this to happen.

HF: Well, I don't know. We had a whole class in the master's degree. I mean, twenty girls in the class.

EM: Was it all women?

HF: All women.

EM: And where was this? Also, at Boston Teachers College?

HF: You know where the Forsyth dental school and the Museum of Fine Arts?

EM: Yes.

HF: It's that area.

EM: That area. Was the name of the school the Boston Teachers College, where you got your master's, also?

HF: Mine was, yeah.

EM: I see.

HF: No, no. Boston University.

EM: You got your master's at Boston University.

HF: Right. I did all my points at Boston University. I loved that, and I went in for communication without knowing a hell of a lot about it. And the teacher that – "What are you doing here? How did you get into dramatics?" I remember that because that's exactly what I did.

EM: Dramatics. I know you were – we're going to get into dramatics when we talk about your years at Temple Israel. But before we talk about Temple Israel, I really wanted to talk more about your secular education experiences. Can you remember any incidents during your secular teaching that you might want to share with me? Any special experiences you had? Any special people, besides Frank Manuel, that you taught?

HF: I can't think of anybody. Frank Manuel, I hated him, so I remember.

EM: I'm sure you must have run across him in later years.

HF: I did. I went to a lecture that he was part of. It was a part of a seminar. And I thought with myself – this was a couple of years ago – all evening, “Shall I go up and say hello?” And I decided not to go because, don't forget, he split my head open [laughter], and that would be the first thing I would say. “You split my head open.” He’s not liked. It’s funny. It held over to his adulthood. He's respected, but he’s not liked.

EM: He was a professor of history, wasn’t he?

HF: He’s brilliant.

EM: Professor of History?

HF: He knew more Torah than all the kids on [inaudible] Street, and we hated him for it.

EM: Tell me about the Otisfield synagogue. You say you were the only [inaudible].

HF: Yeah, my bubbe insisted that I go to shul on Saturday with her. My bubbe had a Talmudic education, by the way. Her father, who was a rabbi, died when [she] was nine. My grandmother's father died. No, no.

EM: In the old country, he died?

HF: No, he died here. There’s a story here. If I can catch it – if I can get at it. Okay, during the influenza epidemic –

EM: What year was that?

HF: Maybe 1925, I'm not sure. And everybody in my house was down, except my grandfather; he was the nurse. You couldn't get a doctor for anything. My brother Harold had scarlet fever, my brother Ben was a baby, and we were all down with the flu, and we were very, very ill. And my mother was down, and my grandfather was the main person.

EM: He was the chiefcaregiver, as they would say today. Chief caregiver. Your grandfather was.

HF: I spied a box. It looked like a chocolate box. It was on the bureau, and I tasted one, and decided that this was pretty good stuff, and I liked it. And I was down there with the flu, too, and I ate it, the whole box. Ex-lax. This is the truth. The whole box I ate, and my mother. She ran after me, back and forth, back and forth. I couldn't be contained; it was so awful. But you know something? I didn't have the flu now. The flu went away with all that.

EM: That got rid of it for you.

HF: But what a night. [laughter]

EM: [laughter] That's a great story. That's a great story.

HF: I thought so. I thought so.

EM: Tell me, you said that Sy Nemzoff was your teacher, your Hebrew teacher, and that you were –

HF: Yeah, he was just as sleepy.

EM: And you were the only woman.

HF: I was the only girl.

EM: The only girl.

HF: Yeah, in the whole school.

EM: In the whole school. And how many years did you go to Hebrew School?

HF: Well, I quit at eight years.

EM: You quit at eight years.

HF: I did.

EM: Eight is pretty young.

HF: Yes, I did. Everybody went to Hebrew school there. Otisfield.

EM: You said you were the only girl.

HF: I was the only girl. But everybody in the whole street went to Hebrew school.

EM: Yes. Now, where did you learn your Hebrew then?

HF: Oh, I learned it from studying all my adult life.

EM: So, most of your Hebrew you learned in your adult life, not in your childhood?

HF: Yes. Oh, no, I had some. I had Sy, but lousy teaching. It wasn't education.

EM: Teaching changed a lot from when you learned to when you taught.

HF: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Only I hated going because I couldn't play Peggy as a game.

EM: Peggy?

HF: Peggy.

EM: What is that?

HF: You take a clothespin, and you sharpen the end to points, and then you – oh, Lord, I forgot how it ended. How did it end? Oh, you hit it with a stick, and then it jumped up in

the air, and if it landed in a certain place, then you were off, and then you won the point, or whatever. And I took piano lessons.

EM: You did?

HF: And I want you to know – I don't know whether you know, but I studied with the Reinhold brothers.

EM: Now, who were they?

HF: They're two. They had a music school near Copley Square, near the library. Reinhold. They were brothers, and I went there for about three years. But before that, I went five years. The five-year teacher drank and used to come in smelling like a boozehound, and my grandfather, right away, would say [inaudible].

EM: You went to the school in Copley Square. They didn't come to you.

HF: No, I went to the school.

EM: But you had a piano in your house?

HF: Oh, my mother bought a Chickering just for me.

EM: Chickering, really?

HF: And she was very disappointed that she didn't have a concert pianist. But she wanted the best for me. She worked hard all her life. My mother was a fantastic cook. A little later on, when I was in high school, and before, she opened – not she opened, but she had a – oh, at the (Morse?) Shul – what's the name of that place? She opened up a – she used to make weddings and bar mitzvahs.

EM: Your mother?

HF: My mother.

EM: She was a caterer?

HF: Caterer. She had her own waitresses, her own waiters.

EM: In Roxbury?

HF: I was trying to think of it. It's something-shul. I forgot. (Morse?) Street Shul or something like that. And we helped. The whole family helped, so they could keep the money in the family.

EM: In the family, sure.

HF: She was very popular. They all used her. Sometimes, she would make a go and have a – oh, for Passover, there were some women. I remember there was one woman on Skyler Street; I became friendly with her daughter a time after that. She was fantastic, and yet she could do all those things, and knishes were her favorite.

EM: Knishes? Mine too.

HF: My nephew (Stephen?), we went to – it was a bar mitzvah, my nephew's bar mitzvah, and he came by me, and he was chewing on a – he was eating a knish. And I walked by him, and he walked by me, and he held the knish, and he said, "Not like grandma's." This was done many years afterwards. "This is not like grandma's." We had a private joke together over that. I thought it was adorable. So, let's see.

EM: Why don't we take a break for a few minutes?

HF: I haven't anything to serve. I'm sorry.

EM: Oh, that's perfectly okay.

HF: I'll tell you what we could do.

EM: We're just going to take a break, okay?

[Recording paused.]

HF: The shul. So, my bubbe –

EM: [inaudible]

HF: – every Saturday morning, except when I had an elocution lesson, which was quite often.

EM: On Saturday morning?

HF: Saturday morning, because somebody told my mother it was good for me. My mother picked everything. She was going to make something out of her daughter if it's the last thing she did.

EM: She certainly succeeded.

HF: Oh, I was so happy that she was able to see some of my books and read them, and be glad that I had come to that point. For six years, she was an amputee, and for six years she –

EM: What was the cause of that? Was she diabetic?

HF: Diabetic. Everybody in my family, except me. I better not talk. I'm liable to –

EM: Anyway, getting back to your mother, your mother was sitting upstairs.

HF: She was sitting up. Yeah, do that to me because I ramble. They used to have these blocks, and they would push the blocks like that, and that was how much money they

were giving for tzedakah. See, I don't know exactly how that went, but all I know is my grandmother used to be up there in the [inaudible] because [inaudible] didn't care. He was the Mr. (Flick?), if I can make myself clear.

EM: I see. Well, it's sort of the forerunner of the Israel Bond Tab today.

HF: Except that this one was more heartfelt.

EM: Did you have a lot of girlfriends?

HF: How could I have a lot of girlfriends? I had piano, and I had Hebrew, and I had school and home lesson.

EM: And elocution.

HF: And elocution. I was always crying, "I never play. I never play." [laughter]

EM: But all the people who you associated with were Jewish.

HF: Oh, I worked in the library for my junior year in high school, my senior year, and then for a year after I graduated teachers college, I worked in the library. They wanted me to come and study to be a librarian, and thought I would do very well and work myself into something very quickly. But you know something? I thought, "I'm sorry. I like teaching." I really wouldn't let it go.

EM: Now, what age were you when you began to teach Hebrew school?

HF: I was a little girl. Let's see.

EM: No, to teach Hebrew school. To teach.

HF: Oh, teach Hebrew school. I'll say all my adult life. I can't even break it down.

EM: Well, you graduated from the normal school around 1930, and that first year, you did a lot of babysitting because –

HF: Yeah, there was no work.

EM: – there was no work. It was the Depression. Were you studying Hebrew during that whole time?

HF: I might have been taking courses. I took a lot of courses.

EM: Did you take courses at the Hebrew College?

HF: Yes.

EM: Did you go to Hebrew College?

HF: Are you kidding me?

EM: No, you didn't tell me.

HF: I didn't go to Hebrew College until I was a real adult, and I took courses there for eight years. I was with the same group, and we had a wonderful time.

EM: Now, Hebrew College was in Roxbury at that time.

HF: No, no. I'm talking about after it moved to –

EM: To Brookline?

HF: Brookline, yeah.

EM: Well, but in the early years, when you were younger, and you were teaching Hebrew, where did you learn your Hebrew?

HF: I didn’t teach Hebrew when I was very young.

EM: Well, if you taught –

HF: I learned Hebrew, but I didn't teach it. There is a difference.

EM: When did you begin to teach Hebrew? Do you recall?

HF: No, I don't recall. All I know is that I took courses.

EM: Well, you taught at Temple Israel –

HF: Well, let me tell you this –

EM: – for more than fifty years.

HF: Right.

EM: Did you originally teach Sunday school?

HF: It's thirty-eight years for Temple Israel; I taught Hebrew.

EM: Well, I was under the impression you taught fifty years.

HF: How could I teach fifty years? I'm old but not that old. No, you check, you’ll see. Sy was my teacher when I was a little girl.

EM: Yes. Sy Nemzoff.

HF: He was my teacher when I was a little girl.

EM: Who else was your teacher that you can remember?

HF: There was somebody. I had his grandchild after a while. Tom. It's up there. Thomas-something. I think I can't give you that information. There's so many things that I did. I mean, it's no wonder I [inaudible].

EM: When did you go to Hebrew college? When you were an adult?

HF: Yes. I was very, very loyal to the Hebrew Colleges. I used to help in any way I could. That was one of my favorite tzedakah –

EM: Projects?

HF: Yeah.

EM: Tell me about your relationship with Sy. You certainly knew him for fifty years.

HF: Not fifty years.

EM: No?

HF: No. It doesn't matter, but it really was not fifty years. What is it you want now?

EM: About your relationship with Sy Nemzoff. Tell me some things that you know about Sy Nemzoff. He was your teacher in Roxbury.

HF: No, he wasn't my teacher in Roxbury. I went to Hebrew College before I became a teacher.

EM: But he was your personal teacher when you were a child at Otisfield.

HF: Yes, yes, he was my [inaudible].

EM: So, that's how you started to know him.

HF: Yeah. I started in Sunday School in Belmont. I heard that there was a job open. So, my friend Frank (Shapiro?) heard about it, and he says, “Helen, how would you like to teach in Belmont?” I said, “I'd love to. Anything to make some money.” Money was scarce.

EM: What year was this approximately? In the ’40s?

HF: Maybe 1938. We were very friendly. Sometimes I used to be aggravated with him, but you see, this isn't anything you want to put on. He was loyal, and he was a fine man and really good-mannered.

EM: Did he bring you to Temple Israel?

HF: He had a terrible, terrible ending.

EM: Sy?

HF: People [inaudible] Sy. You can ask around. I remember one of them was – she comes from South Africa.

EM: Yes. [inaudible] (Laurie?).

HF: Yes. It’s funny. (Carol?) wrote to me last week –

EM: (Carol Laurie?)

HF: – to say that she had read the notice about my work and all, and she wanted to congratulate me. I once was able to do something very nice for (Carol?) many years ago, but I think she remembered. She sent me a picture of her boy. He's about four. And of course, it was quite a nice – and then I wrote – I didn't write letters, believe me, I could have written a letter. I had to cut it out. I had a stack like that.

EM: How did you get into Temple Israel, teaching Hebrew?

HF: From Belmont, I went to Temple Israel. Frank (Cohen?).

EM: Frank (Cohen?). Yes.

HF: Kozol. No, Kozol.

EM: Kozol. Frank Kozol. Yes.

HF: Frank Kozol.

EM: Yes.

HF: I don't know. He heard from one of the Belmontians that I wrote my own material, that I wrote plays, and I know Hebrew. I didn't really know Hebrew, and that was before I began to study it earnestly.

EM: See, I didn't realize that most of your Hebrew was learned as an adult, and that your wonderful teaching skills were acquired not when you were in the formative years, the college years, but as an adult.

HF: Yeah, I would say so.

EM: You would say so.

HF: Yeah. I was busy doing social things before that.

EM: Okay. [Recording paused.] This is the end of side one: interview with Helen Fine by Emily Mehlman on December 24, 1991. [Recording paused.] This is side two: interview with Helen Fine by Emily Mehlman on December 24, 1991. [Recording paused.]

HF: I'm so glad you're getting on. You're getting in harmony with this. They can be nuisances.

EM: Why were you so successful, do you think?

HF: Oh, come on.

EM: In teaching Hebrew? Why are you so successful at teaching Hebrew?

HF: Because I loved it.

EM: You loved it.

HF: I loved it. I adored Hebrew. I still do.

EM: I know you do.

HF: One of the things here that I'm unhappy about is that they don't have any – they have a Yiddish class with about six people in it. Outside of that, no Hebrew. I don't hear it spoken at all.

EM: Do you recall what year you started at Temple Israel?

HF: It was ’41.

EM: ’41?

HF: At the end of the war.

EM: At the end of the –?

HF: So, that would be ’44.

EM: ’44, ’45.

HF: Yeah, around there.

EM: That's when you started at Temple Israel.

HF: Right. And anyone that's called and asked me to come and be a teacher, Temple Israel has always received a real hard, heavy no.

EM: [laughter] What was Temple Israel like in those days?

HF: Well, it was goyish. [laughter]

EM: [laughter] Who was the rabbi when you started?

HF: When I started, it was Rabbi Liebman, and he did a lot to bring it out of the goyish state.

EM: How many days a week was Hebrew taught?

HF: I taught, too, at public school. You know that.

EM: I know you taught public school, also. I know that. But how many days a week did you teach Hebrew?

HF: Hebrew was Sunday and twice a week.

EM: Sunday and twice a week.

HF: Hebrew on Sunday. Sunday was mostly religious education. The other was twice a week.

EM: Was bar mitzvah something that was popular, or was it just for some of the kids?

HF: It was not even some of the kids. This is where Leibman came in. He put Hebrew into the school. I don't know how good you would call it, but he was a fantastic man. But he was more of a lecturer than a teacher, and he was a – I used to come from

Dorchester, if you please. I used to come from Dorchester to attend his lectures on Sunday morning.

EM: Where were you living at that time?

HF: Where was I living at that time? In Dorchester. We moved two or three times.

EM: But did you live with your mother until your mother died?

HF: Oh, yeah.

EM: You did?

HF: I certainly did.

EM: And you went to – after public school, you would go to Temple Israel two afternoons.

HF: Yes, Tuesdays and Thursdays.

EM: Yes, Tuesdays and Thursdays, the same as it is today. And you taught about two hours? An hour and a half?

HF: Yeah, something like that.

EM: And what was the response to the kids? It's been told that you were a very successful Hebrew teacher. Why do you think you were so successful? Why does everybody that I ever talked to who had you as a Hebrew teacher say, “Oh, Miss Fine was the most wonderful Hebrew teacher”?

HF: So, why don’t you send me a letter [inaudible].

EM: [laughter] What did you do to make Hebrew so interesting?

HF: Well, I had methods.

EM: What were your methods?

HF: Yeah, my methods were involving the children, really involving them, getting them excited. But when I got them excited, I got myself excited too, and that's probably [inaudible].

EM: How did you get them excited?

HF: Well, I had all kinds of visual aids and posters and plays.

EM: I've heard about your plays. Can you tell me about one of your plays, at least?

HF: The Wild West Purim.

EM: The Wild West Purim?

HF: Yeah.

EM: What was it about?

HF: There were four cowboys. I remember some of the kids. They are now adults. This is a story that I'd like to tell. See, if I pause, then I forget. Terrible.

EM: About The Wild West Purim.

HF: You just remind me about it.

EM: Okay.

HF: Wild West Purim.

EM: Talking about –

HF: Yeah, four cowboys. Now I can't remember the name, but they were made up, names – Bimbo and this one and this one. They came to rescue Queen Esther. And then (Mo Eisenberg?) used to do the music for me, and we worked together beautifully. He was a dentist and played the organ, but he used to write the songs for me. Anyway, they all come to rescue Queen Esther. Everything is fine for Purim [inaudible], but it was the lyrics that did it.

EM: Did you write the lyrics?

HF: I did the lyrics and also the songs.

EM: And were the lyrics in Hebrew? Or the lyrics in English?

HF: No, no, they were in English. But if I wanted to, I used [inaudible] my favorite.

EM: [laughter] Your favorite.

HF: I remember Richard. What was his first name? He was a clown, and he was so cute. And then he got the measles in the middle of the play. But the mother and I decided we wouldn't tell anybody [inaudible] measles. And I tell you, it was crazy, but it worked. It worked. Oh, there's so many things that happened.

EM: You put on pageants and plays?

HF: Oh, my goodness.

EM: Dances?

HF: Oh, everything.

EM: I heard that you yourself did a few dances.

HF: Oh, you heard about –?

EM: I heard about that.

HF: There's a story.

EM: We're talking about dancing.

HF: I had a big thing about tzedakah. And when we used to have Tu BiShvat, I'd say to the children, "Let's have a project." So, I bought a thermometer, or maybe I made one, a thermometer, and on it, how many trees they were buying that day. And every single year, I would sell one hundred percent trees in whatever grade I was teaching. I never got any compliments for it. No one even cared. And I used to say, "Why can't we do this over and over again? Why does [inaudible]?" Anyway, that was cute. So, I said to the children, "If you plant a tree, and everybody in the class plants a tree, I will dance for you." And the kids howled. "Now, wait a minute. Be sure you get it right." They have to – a tree every single week. I made the thermometer. It was [inaudible] thermometer, and we watched it. It was nothing for me to sell twenty-six trees on a Sunday. I didn't have to work at it.

EM: That is a great story.

HF: And there's the one with David Feldman. It was Rosh Hashanah, and I was walking into the temple, and suddenly this gentleman came up and walked towards me, and I knew it was Dave. I had seen him since he was in my room. See, when I taught the children a Hebrew sound, it was a Hebrew letter.

EM: Can you give me an example?

HF: He put his hands out, and he said – oh, I got it. He put his hands out when he saw me, ran toward me, and said to the kids, "Come after me." And he said, "Oh, my two children." And he was so thrilled to see me. There's another part to that story. Oh, he says, "I vav you."

EM: I vav you. Oh. from the vav.

HF: That's how I taught vav with the Hebrew.

EM: I see.

HF: By the way, how is Adele? Is she feeling better?

EM: I think so, yes.

HF: Good. Because I bumped into her flu/sickness that she had, but I talked to her; she seems fine. Sydney said so, too. “I vav you.” I was just melted, just like that.

EM: I vav you. It showed that it was working.

HF: If he didn't remember anything, he remembered that.

EM: You said that you met him at Rosh Hashanah. So, you went to Temple Israel on Rosh Hashanah.

HF: Oh, he belongs to Temple –

EM: But you. You went to Temple Israel.

HF: Always.

EM: But that must have been quite a difference from your Orthodox background.

HF: I know, so I rebelled. I'm always fighting the battle of Temple Israel, didn’t you know? In Israel, I fight the battle of Israel, I really do, because I very often come across stuff that shouldn't be. That's not coming out of me. I don't want it. And if I hear anybody say anything detrimental to Temple Israel, and there are a lot of people who would agree with me, I speak right up, just like I would to anybody who was praising antisemitism or not

praising antisemitism. Even if I felt they shouldn't be talking about it, they don't even – most of the time, they don't have the background for it. A whole lot of bosh.

EM: Tell me, Helen, do you remember any of the other teachers you taught with in the ’40s and ’50s?

HF: Yeah, Rose Flax. She’s still there.

EM: Of course, Rose Flax is still at Temple Israel.

HF: She’s still there. She has to be in her sixties.

EM: In her sixties?

HF: Yes, she does.

EM: Rose Flax is older than that.

HF: Or, and I was going to say, maybe older. You know her?

EM: Sure, I know her. Rose Flax is probably your age, maybe a little younger, but not much.

HF: Not much. Yeah.

EM: And who else did you teach with?

FH: I taught with – Charlotte Feldman did music. She had somebody make me – oh, there it is – the darling wood carving.

EM: Oh, yes.

FH: And G’Dee.

EM: That's G'Dee. Well, now you're leading into my next subject: your books. How did you become inspired to write textbooks in Jewish education? When did you become inspired, and tell me something about that experience for you?

HF: Well, I went from Belmont to –

EM: Temple Israel.

HF: – Temple Israel. I wrote some things because there was no material, no material in those days. So, I wrote my own material, and I –

EM: And you used that for teaching Hebrew.

HF: And I taught Hebrew.

EM: You used your own material.

HF: [inaudible] is for something that I don't remember.

EM: I don't know. You have to tell me.

HF: But I don't remember. Listen, I think I'm doing a job on my brain. It probably won't come on that normal for a long time after this.

EM: You're doing wonderfully. So, you created your own materials, and then you used some of these materials.

HF: For programs and [inaudible] one of my plays. I think one of his children was in it.

EM: What were your plays besides the Wild West?

HF: Shushan and Shenanigans.

EM: Shushan and Shenanigans. That was also for Purim.

HF: Right.

EM: What else?

HF: I wrote one Hanukkah one, and after that, it was all Purim.

EM: All Purim?

HF: I enjoyed doing Purim stuff.

EM: And you were the director?

HF: Everything.

EM: Everything.

HF: Even the costume designer.

EM: Really?

HF: I used to [inaudible] I didn't say dress as Mordecai. I used to give them detailed instructions on what to do, but I always tried to keep the money down. I don't know why I did that. That was so stupid. But anyway.

EM: Who came to see these plays? All the parents?

HF: Every one of them.

EM: Everyone?

HF: [inaudible] couldn't come, they –

EM: And you performed them once or more than once?

HF: Well, for a while there, I ran out of Purim plays, so I changed them into puppet shows.

EM: Puppet shows?

HF: Yeah. [inaudible] puppetry.

EM: And did you do those for the congregation? Or you did it just for the classes?

HF: For the children. And the congregation came en masse because their kids were in it. This was the best thing to attract – and it's funny how so many of them remember this or remembered that.

EM: So, what was the first book that you –?

HF: Oh, one of the best things was Judy – her mother passed away. They passed away shortly before – Berenson.

EM: Judy Berenson, yes, yes. Helene Berenson's daughter, yes.

HF: Right. And Helene Berenson's daughter?

EM: Is Judy. Helene and Jimmy. Their children were Judy and Larry.

HF: I remember now. I remember now. I was having a play, and Judy was in it, and suddenly she left the stage and walked out – I knew what happened – the middle of the show. So anyway, in intermission – I think there were three acts that time – she came to tell me she had to go to the bathroom and she couldn't keep it in any longer. I said to her – oh, but then there was another one who gave me the – let's see. Oh, maybe you heard this in one of my talks.

EM: You can say it again.

HF: I don’t remember. Oh, dear. Oh yes, this little kid – all of a sudden, I'm looking up, I'm directing the play. Everybody is dancing and having a wonderful time, and suddenly I'm looking down, and I said, “Oh my God.” A stream of water came towards me. It was Judy. Judy, as if by ear, [inaudible] she's standing there with the [inaudible] to avoid the water, but she's got her finger up there. Everything's going to be all right.

EM: How old was she, about, would you say?

HF: Oh, eight.

EM: Eight.

HF: Eight or nine. Oh, and there are more, I think. [inaudible] –

EM: So, this is in the early ’50s?

HF: – giving you people an awful time with this pausing and hesitating, but you can just – anyway.

EM: So, you gave plays right through the ’50s and ’60s, would you say?

HF: Oh, no, not fifteen, sixteen. No, younger.

EM: The 1950s and the 1960s.

HF: I would say maybe. 1945, maybe.

EM: You started.

HF: The war ended in 1941.

EM: No, it began in ’41. It ended in ’45.

HF: ’45. That’s right.

EM: You taught Hebrew until about three years ago. So, that was about –?

HF: Oh, no, no, I've been away for more than three years.

EM: Have you?

HF: Oh, yes, I've been away –

EM: Seems like you're still there, Helen.

HF: What?

EM: You're still there to all of us.

HF: Well, thank you. I wouldn't have given permission for this because I know I hesitate a lot when I talk.

EM: I don't think you're hesitating at all.

HF: But see, I'm so conscious of it.

EM: Not at all. I want to talk to you about your books. You say you started to develop your own materials for teaching Hebrew.

HF: Let me tell you this. This is a personal [inaudible]. I was engaged to a very [inaudible] man whom I was very much in love. And he died. He had multiple sclerosis, and he did away with himself because there was no hope for him, there's no life for him, and he killed himself. It was all a traumatic situation for me. That's when I was offered the job in Belmont, a sort of replacement, and the replacement worked because I was able to get back into the swing of things and do my thing, so to speak. But over a period of three or four months – for a year, I just thought I'd never –

EM: Recoup?

HF: – get through, but I did. I'm a pretty strong character, but you didn't know that.

EM: I did know that. What year did you do your first book?

HF: Well, listen, there it is, over there. See the green book? That's the first book.

EM: Right here?

HF: Yeah. You know it, don't you?

EM: G'Dee.

HF: That's in 1940 –

EM: G'Dee was a goat.

HF: Right.

EM: Tell me about this book.

HF: Well, it's a whole story in itself. I wrote –

EM: This one here was copyrighted in '58. That was your first book. This is the fourth printing in '71, but I'm sure there were more printings after that.

HF: Do you know that I got a beautiful check last week?

EM: Really?

HF: A royalty check.

EM: Still?

HF: Still.

EM: It’s still a popular book. I just wanted to read –

HF: You know what Vorspan says? It’s a classic. It’s a Jewish classic. That’s Albert Vorspan. You know him.

EM: Yes, Albert Vorspan.

HF: He’s such a wonderful man.

EM: Yes, he is. He is. This book was dedicated to the children of Temple Israel.

HF: Oh, absolutely.

EM: – whose wonder brought G’dee to life, and to your mother, who knows the wonder of love.

HF: Sure, that’s pretty good.

EM: I read this book as a child. I remember it distinctly. I must say, I don't remember it now. This was your first book. And this was inspired by your teaching at Temple Israel.

HF: No, one day, it was twelve o'clock at noon, and there wasn't enough time to start a new project or a new thing, so I told them a story about a little white goat called G’Dee, and I did it to pass the time away.

Ellen Meisel: You wrote Camp Kee Tov?

HF: Yes.

Ellen Meisel: I love this book. I wouldn't put it down.

HF: Thank you. They put it into paperback. That was something. Wait a minute.

EM: Go on.

HF: So, I wrote the story of G'Dee – I told the children the story about G'Dee, and I made it up as I went along. Once upon a time, there was a little white goat, and he liked to eat, the [inaudible]. When I finished, for the next week, the kids came in – "You going to tell us another G'Dee story?" So, I said to them, "Oh, I can't, but Hanukkah's coming, and I'll make one up for you. Would you like that?" Oh, they were so thrilled. I said, "Nobody be absent, because if you're absent, it'll be trouble." So, I read it to them. No, I told it to them. And then the next week, and the week after that, I wrote it for Hanukkah. Hanukkah was for the best chapter, actually, that they thought. Well, anyway, so I wrote a story for every single month until the end of the [year], and all the kids – none of them would be out of school. They could be dying, but they came to school because there was something doing. Roland heard about it. He says, "What's this I hear you that you're writing a book?" So, I said, "Yeah, you want to come?" But anyway, he took it to New York for me.

EM: Rabbi Gittelsohn took the book to the UAHC [Union of American Hebrew Congregations].

HF: Yeah.

EM: They publish all of your books?

HF: All of them.

EM: Yes, go on.

HF: I've done a lot of other work too, like programs for women.

EM: Let's talk about the books first.

HF: All right.

EM: After you did G'Dee, you did At Camp Kee Tov.

HF: Right.

EM: And that was a few years later.

HF: Five years.

EM: Five years later. And what's that one about?

HF: Ethics.

EM: And it takes place at one of the Union camps, at one of the supposed Union camps.

HF: Yeah, right. See what's at the end. What makes it a powerful book is that what has happened at the end, there are exercises and all kinds of things to do, but not just educational things, but things that are involving. I had any number of parents calling me up. “Where is this camp Kee Tov?” Really. And [inaudible] disappointed.

EM: Well, Rabbi Gittelsohn was the chairman of the Commission on Jewish Education at the time.

HF: Yes, right. He really dragged G’Dee. These, I did on my own.

EM: What’s interesting is certainly these two books, and I know your third book also –

HF: Oh, the third book is my favorite.

EM: – [inaudible] survived years. They’re as interesting today as they were in the ’50s when they were written. So, this is a book on ethics.

HF: [inaudible]

EM: I know we used it at Temple Israel.

HF: I don't think anymore.

EM: You don't think we use it anymore. And what about G'Dee?

HF: G'Dee, it's been off. No, they don't use it anymore. They're coming up with other ideas that are not, as I say, teachable. They're not teaching.

EM: I see.

HF: It's better that I don't talk about it.

EM: Unfortunately, that's what happens as time passes.

HF: Let me see, let me show you what –

EM: Camp Kee Tov was written in 1961.

HF: I have ninety-five Haggadah stories in this book at the end of each chapter.

EM: Ninety-five?

HF: Yes, and [inaudible].

EM: Tales, legends,

HF: And I match them up with ethics. Yet the word "ethics" is not used at all.

EM: At all in the book?

HF: It's just, you plow it into them when they're not looking.

EM: It's a brilliant book.

HF: It is. This is my favorite book.

EM: This is your favorite.

HF: Because that was something to do when I used to work into the night and teach public school.

EM: Public school, Hebrew school, and you were writing.

HF: And I was writing.

EM: And those were the days before computers.

HF: My mother would come to the door, and she'd say, "Let me make you something. How can you do this?" She really worried for fear that I was working too hard, but I was so happy with it. "How could you [inaudible]?" There was no worrying. Okay, see, this is – what do you think? This is the discussion. I've had children change – I remember a little – what's her name? – Morse. She married Levy.

EM: Jeffrey Levy.

HF: Yeah. I bar mitzvahed him, too. Oh, by the way, I did bar mitzvahs.

EM: You did bar mitzvah tutoring?

HF: I did. I trained them.

EM: Trained. That's what I meant. Bar mitzvah training.

HF: I don't know that this is it, but there's discussion there, and there's involvement.

EM: Why don't I read one of these stories just so we have it down? The Talmud tells us that one of the best forms of tzedakah is that which is offered in secret, so that the one who receives the help is not embarrassed. The Talmud calls this kind of tzedakah Matan B'seter.

HF: Yes. Ba-seter, yes. Given in secret. Seter is secret.

EM: Just before the auction, (Aaron?) received an envelope containing twenty-five dollars.

HF: See, this is (Aaron?) who was –

EM: The donor did not identify himself. The only thing written on the envelope was “For Shelanu.”

HF: Shelanu was the name of the camp.

EM: Who at Kee Tov might have sent it? Give the reason for your answer. There are several children whose parents do not pay for camping at Kee Tov. Their parents can't afford it. The money for their scholarships comes out of a fund created by several men who are interested in helping children who can't afford to attend Kee Tov. No one of Kee Tov knows who these children are, except (Aaron?). Nearly every synagogue has children at school that attend without pay. Is this Matan B’Seter? Why is this a good way to help the needy? Why is it important to help these children go to camp? So, that's one example. And there are several examples given here in the book.

HF: Have you got one of these at home?

EM: Yes, we do.

HF: All right. So, I won’t –

EM: Yes, we have all of your books at home. Now, let's talk about your third book, which, before you said, is one of your favorites.

HF: That’s a real favorite.

EM: This is a history book.

HF: Social –

EM: A history book in Israel.

HF: It's a social –

EM: Social history. Behold the Land. Tell us how you got started on this book, which was 1968.

HF: No, it was that they asked me to do it.

EM: UAHC asked you to do it?

HF: Oh, yeah.

EM: I see. And did you go to Israel for the research?

HF: Oh, several times.

EM: Several times. What age group would you say would be reading this book?

HF: Fifth grade.

EM: Fifth grade. And you did the research here, or you did the research mostly in Israel?

HF: In Israel. Summers. Five summers.

EM: Five summers.

HF: And, of course, editing, and all that sort of thing at home. I worked with Alex Schindler. He was my editor.

EM: He was your editor.

HF: And then G'Dee was Gene Borowitz.

EM: Who was your editor for Camp Kee Tov?

HF: For Camp Kee Tov? Gene.

EM: Gene Borowitz.

HF: Yeah. He said to somebody – they told me that he never in his whole life worked with a person like me who was so full of ideas and could think of things in the minute. You don't have to worry. Now, he wouldn't say that. Isn't it awful to reach the stage that way? You see, you don't notice it.

EM: Nothing. I think you're right on target today. You're right on target,

HF: All the times I have to – well, it's okay. Friday night, the honoring answered all the questions.

EM: Tell us something about that.

HF: Well, Anne –

EM: Anne Abrams?

HF: No, no, I think it was Sandy. She told me the thought of the idea of having –

EM: Sandy [inaudible].

HF: – it read, chapters read.

EM: Yes. Would you like some water?

HF: It's here.

[Recording paused.]

EM: Okay, Helen, now that we've had a sip of water, we'll continue. We're talking now about that wonderful Friday evening at Temple Israel.

HF: Wasn't it something with all that rain? [inaudible] weather.

EM: Yes, it was. A wet night. And so many people came. It was really remarkable. I would say there were maybe five or six hundred people there, wouldn't you?

HF: No, no.

EM: You don't think so?

HF: Maybe three hundred.

EM: No, there were more than three hundred.

HF: Were there?

EM: I think my numbers are better than your numbers. And as part of the program, Sandy, Anne, and a young child from the religious school –

HF: That was a lovely idea.

EM: – read from your books.

HF: From G'Dee.

EM: From G'Dee.

HF: Just G'Dee.

EM: From just G'Dee. Well, G'Dee is the most whimsical of your books.

HF: I love good G'Dee, but I really am proud of Kee Tov.

EM: And what about Behold the Land?

HF: I love both of them, don't get me wrong, but Kee Tov has a special meaning to me because it's for ethics, and I think that's it. Boy, some of the discussions that I had with the kids through the years that I was teaching Kee Tov fourth grade, I'm going to tell you some of these things these kids think about are unbelievable.

EM: Do you remember anything specifically?

HF: Well, I remember, I was a bug on tzedakah, and anyone that didn't bring tzedakah heard from me. I remember one parent took issue with me because of forcing the children to bring tzedakah. So, I said, “Well, if this is too much for you to give tzedakah, I don't know what you're doing here at Temple Israel.” He didn’t like it. Anyway, I don't think I was his popular friend. But Kee Tov was really something. I don't think they use it at Temple Israel anymore, though.

EM: It's still for sale. I believe I saw it at the Israel bookshop. I think it's still for sale.

HF: No, but I would prefer – I would like to have it taught at Temple Israel, as Helen Fine’s book. That’s it.

EM: Of all your books, that's the one that you would like to be your living memorial.

HF: It’s a real memoirist. Did you read all the people that were on the list?

EM: No, I didn't. I didn't. You say that you did lots of other articles.

HF: Yeah.

EM: Were they subjects for children or for adults or what?

HF: For adults.

EM: What subjects did you write on?

HF: Well, let's see. I did a couple of programs for Hadassah, and I did a couple of adult programs for Temple Israel Sisterhood.

EM: Yes, no, I know that, but I meant in terms of your writing. Did you do any other writing besides the three books?

HF: I had teacher guides for all of them –

EM: Teachers' guides.

HF: – that thick, my dear. And pupil workbooks.

EM: You wrote them yourself.

HF: Yeah. I wrote them on my own. And then there were things that – [inaudible] all around the country lecturing. I forgot about that. East of the Mississippi, I must have gone out, oh, I'm sure, twenty-five times. The furthest was Waco, Texas, and I was the rabbi in – you know what I mean? Nobody even knows that. I don't even think I told anybody I was coming to Texas. All I knew is that I had a lot of work in front of it, but I loved every minute of it.

EM: And you went to different synagogues?

HF: Maybe that's one of the reasons I don't mind being alone. Now, that's the chief complaint here: it's so lonely. It's so lonely. Nobody talks. That hasn't happened to me, even here.

EM: Why should it? I mean, you have so much to give.

HF: Why should it? But it should.

EM: You have so much to give.

HF: It should, in a way, but it hasn't happened to me because I still read, thank goodness.

EM: Have you done any programs here? [Recording paused.] We were interrupted briefly. Have you done any programs here at the Hebrew Rehab Center? Have you yourself led any discussions?

HF: Yeah. Well, what we had on Friday night, there were ten residents there, too. Did you know that?

EM: I thought there were twelve. I heard there were twelve.

HF: All right, maybe twelve.

EM: Twelve residents from Hebrew who came that night.

HF: Who asked to go. I didn't even say anything to anybody.

EM: Do you give a regular class here?

HF: No.

EM: What have you done here?

HF: I've just done that – no, I haven't done anything to speak of. I'm going to courses, though. I'm not ready for – I have some – oh, how about my slide lectures? Oh, my goodness, I forgot about my slide lectures.

EM: Tell us about your slide lectures.

HF: Well, every time I went to Israel, I came back with a slide lecture.

EM: And you gave it at Temple.

HF: I gave it at Temple Israel. I gave it all over. All over. They loved my lectures. You know why? Because it wasn't all description. I put information in, and I put little stories in it. Now I have that material here. I took it out.

EM: You did.

HF: Yeah. Right now, I don't need it, but come a time that I do, it'll be there. And I also have a manuscript that was refused.

EM: Really?

HF: Called Negev.

EM: Negev? You wrote that in the last few years?

HF: Child and the Negev, yeah. But that wasn't accepted, and the reason was [is] was too one-sided. Just about the Negev, and I have already written about the Negev –

EM: In Behold the Land.

HF: In Behold the Land. But not as much as what I have here. So, I have that here too. If I get myself up, I might [inaudible] –

EM: I don't think there are many authors who can say they've had only one rejection.

HF: Well, I had two.

EM: What was the second one? What was the first one?

HF: The first one was the story of Abraham. It was good, but it wasn't for children, and I knew it.

EM: When was that written? What point? At what point in your writing career was it written? Between some of these other books?

HF: Yeah.

EM: In the ’60s, would you say?

HF: ’60s, yeah.

EM: Did you submit all these things to the UAHC?

HF: Yes. Well, I didn't have to pay an agent. They took care of everything.

EM: Yes, they took care of it.

HF: It made a difference. I got a check, a royalty check, just last week.

EM: So, obviously, they're still selling the books.

HF: [inaudible]

EM: Which has been the best seller of the three?

HF: Gee, I don't know. I don't think there's a best seller. They're on different levels.

EM: I wanted to get back to something. You were a Temple Israel for both as a member and as a teacher for more than forty years.

HF: That’s right.

EM: You lived through the establishment of the State of Israel.

HF: And how. And worked hard, too.

EM: And do you remember those days? And can you tell me something about those days of the establishment of the State of Israel in Boston? What was happening in the American Jewish community? What was happening to you? You said you worked hard, so what were you doing to work hard?

HF: Well, the Zionists, of course, was predominant. Zionism was predominant for the Jewish people. I'm trying to see if I did any –? Did I do any programs on it? But I was writing the books. I couldn't be doing everything.

EM: You're writing the books. Yeah. What about Temple Israel itself? I can see in the – it's just exactly fourteen years to this week practically that Rabbi Mehlman and I are here. It's just fourteen years.

HF: Oh, fourteen years.

EM: We're just beginning our fifteenth year. In those fifteen years, things have changed at Temple Israel. So, what can you say?

HF: Well, what has changed – the first Hebrew has come in, and that was through Rabbi Liebman. He was the guiding force.

EM: Hebrew was –

HF: He was the one that hammered it to people, too, to have bar mitzvah, too. So, in Hebrew –

EM: Did you know Rabbi Levy?

HF: No.

EM: No?

HF: No.

EM: You never knew Rabbi Levy.

HF: I didn't know him because I wasn't old enough.

EM: And Rabbi Klausner? And of course, you must have known Rabbi Klausner.

HF: Yeah, I knew him, but not in any way that you could talk about. He was there for three years, I believe. It wasn't a happy time. I understand he does much better in New York.

EM: He's been there for many years now.

HF: Yeah, and I went to one of those conventions that they have, the UHAC convention, and I was sitting – this man with a beard was sitting beside me, and suddenly I heard, "Well, how about it?" And I looked at him, and I said, "I don't know what you're talking about." He says, "Rabbi Klausner. You remember me?" I didn't [inaudible].

EM: Isn't that something?

HF: Yeah.

EM: Now, when you started at Temple Israel, I guess they had Sunday services.

HF: No.

EM: No? That was over.

HF: [inaudible]

EM: That was over. I see. I see. Well, of course, it's been –

HF: Because I used to go on Sundays. No, it was over.

EM: It was over by then. Helen, I think we've come to the end of our stay here today.

HF: Are you going to have some more, or you’re all through?

EM: No, I think we're all through for today.

HF: How about for tomorrow? I mean, any tomorrow?

EM: If there's something else you think you would like to say, you can call me, and I’ll come back.

HF: No, I think I’ve talked enough.

EM: Today is December 24, 1991. I'm Emily Mehlman. Ellen Meisel, who was a graduate student at the Hornstein program in Jewish communal service, has been in the room with us at the time. She's also an intern at the Combined Jewish Philanthropies and was interested in participating in this interview with you. Both of us want to thank you very much for –

HF: It was my pleasure.

EM: – offering your wonderful stories and your wonderful life to those of us who are going to listen to it for many years. Thank you very much.

HF: Thank you very much.