Catherine Kahn Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: – interviewing Cathy Kahn at her home at 7920 Walmsley Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Tuesday, October 17, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Cathy, do you agree to be interviewed? And understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Cathy Kahn: Yes.

RH: I think we can – if we can just begin with setting your context here and your attachment to this region, this city, and explain that a little bit.

CK: Okay. Well, it's very simple. I'm a fifth-generation New Orleanian. All of my grandparents are Southerners, and great-grandparents were southerners. My great-great-grandfather, Abel Dreyfous, came to New Orleans from Belfort, which is right on the Alsace border of France. At nineteen, in about – it was 1834 – and the reason he came to New Orleans: he first went to New York and found it very inhospitable but was told by relatives – nobody is ever the first Jew to get anywhere. They always have an uncle or something that got there before them. He was told that in New Orleans, the language in the streets was French. The legal documents were in French and English. The newspapers were in French and English. And since he was studying to be a notary, the fact that it was the Civil Code, which is usually called the Code Napoleon, was the law of the land – made it very attractive for him to come here. He came to New Orleans and felt like he was at home. That's the same story, although this was the first one – this is the same story of Theodore Danziger, who came from Paris, and my husband's family, the Dennerys, who came from Alsace/Lorraine. All of them came here because they were French. Actually, they felt part of the population instantly. It was those Americans

who spoke that foreign language, English, who were the outsiders. For an immigrant Jew coming to the United States to be so easily accepted because the language was the same, there were no ghettos. The early Jews were actually more accepted by the Catholic Creoles than were the Protestant Americans. They weren't much into marriage because these men came alone. But by the 1830s, when Abel got here, there were some Jewish women here, and he had actually two Jewish wives who had been born [in Lorraine?] near where he was – near that part of France that is Alsace/Lorraine.

RH: So, he met them here?

CK: Yes, he met them here. And Leon Cahn, my father's grandfather, Leon Cahn. C-A-H-N. I'm a C-A-H-N married to a K-A-H-N. Leon Cahn came from Lorraine, Sarreguemines in Lorraine. He'd been in the French Army, and he came over – he'd had enough of the French Army. As you know, the French Army is notoriously antisemitic, so he came over to the United States, speaking French, of course. So they all settled here in New Orleans. Only my mother's father's family were foreigners. They came from Meridian, Mississippi. [laughter] Not too far. But they had family here, and that's how that happened. So all of my eight great-grandparents were from this region, and nobody left. We've all stayed here. Edgar Cahn, my grandfather, went to – got his law degree from Tulane in 1888. And he was in the same class with Abel Dreyfous' son, Felix. It's incestuous. That's my mother's family and my father's family. They were in on the founding of Temple Sinai. They first belonged to Gates of Mercy. But when the Reform movement came to the United States, they were progressively Reform. They were all involved very early on in Temple Sinai. Oh, I'll tell you something else. Two of my great-grandfathers fought in the Confederacy. Two. One of them was wounded very seriously wounded at Vicksburg. That's Solis Cohen, my father's maternal grandfather. And the other one, Isidore Danziger, who was my great-grandfather on my mother's side, was in the Orleans Guard and was in the battle of Shiloh.

RH: What type of businesses were they in?

CK: Okay. Well, the Cahns – the C-A-H-N – Cahns and the Dreyfous family were all lawyers. Notaries and lawyers. And a notary in Louisiana is like a solicitor would be in Britain. It's an office lawyer. They do everything but try cases under the Napoleonic Code. So Abel was a notary, but his son went to law school. Oh, and Alfred Danziger also – the Danzigers. Alfred Danziger was an attorney. So most of them were attorneys. Isidore Jacobson, who came from Meridian, was in the tobacco business, and I'm trying to think if there is anybody else. Oh. Solis Cohen, I don't know what he did before the war, but I know he wasn't an attorney. That I do know. I think he was probably in some sort of merchandising.

RH: So they helped found Temple Sinai, and where was that located?

CK: Temple Sinai was first located on Carondelet Street, with its back to Lee Circle.

RH: Okay.

CK: And that was in – the contract was 1870. The building was dedicated in 1872 with the grand opening. It was the place to be because all of the St. Charles Avenue Jews and Canal Street Jews were in on the founding and the beginning of Temple Sinai. If they weren't, they joined immediately after. So, that was a very classy place to be at that time. Then, in 1929 – ’28? – ’28 – Temple moved uptown, where it still is on St. Charles and Calhoun.

RH: So it moved that early to St. Charles and Calhoun? In '28?

CK: '28.

RH: Wow.

CK: But now Touro Synagogue moved uptown in 1909 to where they are now on St. Charles Avenue near Napoleon.

RH: Okay.

CK: So that building is even older. But of course, they trace their ancestry back to 1828. Did I say 18? What did I say? I'm going to have to retract something. Temple Sinai moved uptown in 1928. Did I say that?

RH: You did say that. You did say that.

CK: Okay.

RH: I was even surprised at that date, though.

CK: Okay. Well, Touro Synagogue traces its ancestry to Gates of Mercy in 1828.

RH: Yes.

CK: So that's our oldest congregation here.

RH: Is there kind of a difference of who attends one over the other? Or was there at one time, and has that continued?

CK: A little bit because Sinai has – what happened was the members of Gates of Mercy, that oldest congregation, and of Dispersed of Judah, which started out as a Sephardic Congregation, lost so many members when – because they remained Orthodox when those members who wanted to be Reform left and went to Sinai. And then also the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878 decimated the Jewish population just like Katrina has. We're doing it again. I mean, we've lost so many members from both congregations. About every ten years, they talk about mergers, but they never seem to do it. There's not that much difference now. Sinai has always been a little more Classically Reform.

But not a lot. Not a lot.

RH: When you say, "classically Reform," what does that mean?

CK: All right, dear. Classic Reform Judaism has rejected keeping Kosher – all of the things that were not just the spiritual movement. Keeping Kosher. Wearing Yarmulkes and prayer shawls. When Jews came to America - of course, the Reform movement started in Europe and Germany – but when Jews came to America, especially the ones who were immigrating, they wanted to be like everybody else. Especially these Western European French and German Jews. Eastern European Jews are a whole other ballgame. They did not come here in great numbers. They stayed more in the Eastern cities and other cities. But not New Orleans.

RH: Do you have a sense for why that was?

CK: Sure.

RH: Okay.

CK: At the time that they were coming in the 1880s, what's called the "Third Wave" of immigration, New Orleans was several things. It was notorious for Yellow Fever epidemics, cholera epidemics. It was hot as blazes, and of course these – especially Russian Jews were used to cold weather. And we were in an economic depression. So it wasn't too inviting a place. Now, Memphis got a huge influx of Eastern European Jews after their Jewish population was wiped out by Yellow Fever, but they really welcomed them in, and they lived in a ghetto called "The Pinch." They were not so welcomed here. The Canal Street merchants and the Western – those French and German Jews were not really too anxious to welcome them. I think there was a lack of welcoming. In fact, one fairly notorious Rabbi – and I won't mention his name. He has family around, still. [It wasn't Max Heller; I can tell you. Not Max] – but was famous for giving out – when they would come, he would give them enough money to get the stagecoach to go west.

RH: They'd send them on their way.

CK: That was it. That was his method.

RH: Is there something distinctive about the New Orleans community, the Jewish community –?

CK: Absolutely. They're not southern. They're not southern.

RH: Okay. Explain that.

CK: We're like Marseilles. We are a seaport. All right. Southern Jews, in general, have an experience, and it's – but we're different. So, if you count Texas, that's the Kinky Friedman-type cowboy Jew, and then Charleston has the nine generations of aristocratic Jews who have been there forever – mostly Sephardic – we're different. But the small towns across the South – the biggest difference is they are the Bible Belt. This is Bible Belt. This is Baptist, Protestant, mostly Baptist communities that set the tone for how the Jews move, who you were, and how you grew up. Bible Belt communities keep Sunday as a sacred day. The difference is the Christian community which welcomed these Jews into New Orleans were these free-wheeling Catholic Creoles, and Sunday was the day the whorehouses and the gambling joints and the restaurants and the theaters really cleaned up. We didn't have Blue Laws. Now, for a population that particularly did not want to have their stores open on a Saturday, it was nice to be able to have your store open on a Sunday. New Orleans is different. It's not just that New Orleans Jews are different. They are different because of the host community that welcomed them. Also, as I mentioned, the whole bunch of French Jews – I don't think there are any Jews left – that's not true. There are plenty of Jews left in Alsace. I just went there. But I used to say, "I bet there are no Jews left in Alsace. They all came here."

RH: So, is there something significant or distinctive about the fact that it's also this large French Jewish population as opposed to an Eastern European Jewish –?

CK: Absolutely.

RH: Do you know –? Can you think of how that plays out today?

CK: Much less today than it did in the past, but the Eastern European Jews came over having lived pretty much under a terribly restrictive government. I've never known a Russian – a family that came from Eastern Europe that said, "Oh, I miss the homeland so much." Now, we French Jews have never gotten Paris or France out of our system. Our allegiance is to the United States, but our nostalgia – we're all very French. The Dennerys used to spend all of their summers in France, and they used to import French wine into their basement in great casks. Then they bottled it to serve at the table. If my family did not want me to understand them, if they said something that I should not understand, they couldn't say it in French because they knew I would understand them. I grew up hearing it. Even though I'm a fifth-generation, they've been here forever. But they spoke – not that they spoke French at home, but they used a lot of French idioms. I can just hear my grandmother right now. She wouldn't even – it even translates into English. She would say – I'm going to make my groceries. I'm going to throw myself down on the bed. It's a reflexive verb in the French. I'm going to wash myself. It's a reflexive verb in French. So it carried over into English. We all love being French. We got very angry when the Bush administration got angry at the French for not joining in attacking Iraq because we just got angry. How dare you attack the Motherland? I think a lot of us do it just for fun, but we all do love Paris. And we love – I now love Alsace. It was my first trip. And I went to – I saw the grave in Belfort of Abel Dreyfous. He was born in 1816. He was the one who came over at nineteen. I went and saw the grave of his parents in a cemetery called the Israelite Cemetery of Belfort. There's a real tug there. Actually, they lived very nicely in Alsace – in France. It wasn't like "Fiddler on the Roof." You didn't have Cossacks coming in and killing you. So there is a lot of nostalgia. What else can I say? Why are we different?

RH: So, it seems like perhaps the Jewish population has been underrated in how it has preserved New Orleans French traditions.

CK: Oh, definitely.

RH: Would you say that?

CK: Well, I think we feel very much – well, we weren't Colonial like the Jumonvilles and the Villarys and the ones who came over in 17-something. There were Jews here in 1755. A Jewish family named Monsanto – now that is Sephardic – got here in 1755. Of course, the Spanish threw him out in 1769. But he came back. That's the earliest known Jew here. And that's a long time. That's not late 19th Century.

RH: No.

CK: But my family, as I said, got here in the 1830s. The Godchaux got here in the 1830s. Some of the K-A-H-N Kahns were here in the 1830s. It's not unusual, and what also – what's also not at all unusual is that I've got a ton of half-Catholic, half-Jewish relatives from generations back. And so do the Godchaux. There is so much intermarriage. I don't think you're going to find that in a small town in one of Eli Evans' stories. Eli Evans is the – he's not a poet, but if he were, he'd be the Poet Laureate of Southern Jewry. He writes very well. He was born in Durham, North Carolina. This is how he explains how Jews found their way into small towns in the South. And this is true of Bible belt Jews, and it's absolutely not true of New Orleans. This is a good story to tell you the difference. He interviewed a fellow that was in a little crossroads town in South Carolina. He said to him, “You're the only Jewish family in town. How did you get here?” He says, “Well, my grandfather was a peddler, and first, he started out on foot. But then he got a horse to do the cart. And he got here, and this is where the horse died.” Jewish peddlers just scattered themselves across the South. French Jews came to New Orleans on purpose to be part of the French population. None of this is telling you much

about Katrina.

RH: We're going to go there. But I couldn't resist getting a little more of the New Orleans history from you since I'm speaking with a historian.

CK: Sure.

RH: Tell me about where you grew up. The neighborhood where you grew up and what that was like.

CK: Well, I grew up not far from here. 330 Audubon Boulevard. My grandparents built that house, and then my parents lived there. It's uptown New Orleans. I went to Newman School.

RH: Now, tell me a little bit about Newman because you're also on the Board of Governors?

CK: Well, I used to be. Now I'm on the alumni board.

RH: Okay.

CK: Yeah. I was on the Board of Governors when my kids were there. But my mother went to Newman. My mother graduated from Newman. My kids graduated from Newman. Newman was founded by Isadore Newman to educate the children in The Jewish Children's Home. The Jewish Children's Home, which is where the JCC is now, on the corner of Jefferson Avenue and St. Charles Avenue, was founded right – in 1854 to take care – because right after the terrible Yellow Fever epidemic, it was called –

[break in audio]

RH: Did we get –? Go back to –

CK: Start with Newman?

RH: Newman School. So just talk a little about –

CK: Yeah. Newman School was founded in 18 – I mean, 1903. Let me do that again. 1903 by Isadore Newman to educate the children of the Jewish Children's Home. Jewish Children's Home was founded in 1854 to take care of the widows and orphans of the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1853. It was to give these children – the purpose was to give these children a marketable education. It was called the Isadore Newman Manual Training School to begin with. Well, the school was so good, and the education so superior, that those families – what I call the St. Charles Avenue Jews – decided that that's where they wanted to send their children, too. So it became a very interesting combination of kids. Because the most wealthy and the most needy went to school together.

RH: So, when you were there, was it primarily a Jewish –

CK: It was very quickly, not primarily Jewish. It is terribly non-sectarian. They are a very, very – definitely – non-sectarian school. It's not anything like a Jewish Day School. The money is Jewish. Not anymore, but it used to be. In the beginning, the money was Jewish. But there were children immediately from all over because the education was so good. It was about the time families were beginning to think in terms of the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters to send their sons and daughters away. Newman was a prep school, a college preparatory school, very quickly. It was called "Manual" until 1931. But there are pictures in the Newman Archives with a big "M" for Manual on their jerseys. The next year, 1932, there is an "N" for Newman. They just changed their name because it was no longer Manual Training School.

RH: So what was it like to grow up in New Orleans as a Jewish woman and –?

CK: Well, my father was a successful, prominent attorney in a law firm – first, he was in with his father. Then he was in a law firm that was a Catholic and Protestant and a Jew. We've never been – we've never had ghettos unless somebody voluntarily just wanted to live like that in a – wanted to live in a Jewish – the closest thing to a Jewish neighborhood, I guess, would be the Dryad Street area, and that was Eastern European Jews who were used to living together. I mean, Audubon Boulevard, outside of the Hellers living across the street, I don't think there were Jewish neighbors around me. I don't know. My parents were friendly with the Christian neighbors on both sides of them. They were very friendly. And I grew up – when I went to Newman, I had Christian friends. Up until eighth grade, my best friends were a couple of Christian girls. Eighth grade was the line of demarcation. That's when, what we called, the five o'clock curtain came down. That's when those high school fraternities and sororities kicked in. There were Jewish sororities and fraternities and Christian sororities and fraternities. I could pal around with my Christian friends in school all day, but when five o'clock came and we went home, all of our parties were either Jewish parties or Christian parties. That is not the way I grew up because all of my birthday parties were my good friends, and I went to all of theirs, too. But that's why I think high school sororities and fraternities are a very bad idea.

RH: So, were you in one in high school?

CK: No.

RH: No? That's unusual.

CK: That's another story. There were five or six of us. We were bid to LT, which was what we thought was a nice Jewish sorority at Newman. We were pledged to LT. We were told to do such ridiculous things that we decided – by girls – we didn't care for. We thought we were the cat's pajamas. We were a very attractive, smart, popular group of freshmen. I think we were being bullied by some upperclassmen. Not at Newman. Not

at Newman. They were mostly at McMain. The ones that were giving us grief. LT was at several schools – at a couple of schools. But it wasn't the Newman ones. So we got together and decided, nuts. So we wrote letters of resignation. All of us. All eight of us together. We went together and put them all in the mail together so nobody would chicken out. We just basically broke up the sorority. After our pledge class resigned, a bunch of our Newman upper-class friends resigned. I'm very proud of the fact that if I – if my little crowd destroyed something as oppressive as the Jewish sorority system basically at Newman, that's something. I'm like Thomas Jefferson. I'd like that on my tombstone. Rather than President of the United States, I would rather be the Founder of the University of Virginia and author of the Declaration of Independence. And author of what? Author of Religious – the Statute of Religious Liberty in Virginia. I am prouder of busting up a Jewish sorority than I am of some of the accomplishments I've gotten awards for. So there.

RH: So how did you –? Where did your religious –?

CK: I haven't thought of that in years, by the way.

RH: I'm glad you shared it. So, what was the center? If it wasn't the sorority, and I've talked to a few people who it was, what was the center of your Jewish life?

CK: I guess my friends at Newman. Now, we were just about worse than a sorority because we were a clique. But there was no pledge class, and we didn't humiliate anybody, and we still were dating boys in TBPhi, and ZBT. The Jewish high school and college fraternity. But that was funny. I really have not thought about that in a long time.

RH: How about your religious education?

CK: Ah-ha. Okay. I couldn't get away from that. My father was President of Temple Sinai. He was also – and my grandfather was involved in Temple Sinai. My great-grandfather was involved in Temple Sinai. So I was made to go to Sunday School. I

didn't learn anything, but I was made to go to Sunday School. And I got confirmed.

RH: What was confirmation like?

CK: It was just like graduation. It's nothing like a bar or bat mitzvah that they're doing now. You didn't have to learn a thing.

RH: Yes.

CK: You did it as a whole group instead of by yourself. We never learned one word of Hebrew. Not a word. Except the Shema. I only knew the Shema, which is saying, "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is One." The most sacred words in Hebrew: "Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai E?ad." Anyhow, that's all I knew. And then we had a little memorized speech at the confirmation that somebody else wrote for us. And wore white dresses and got presents. Then, after that – I wasn't really all that involved in temple. My father was. My mother wasn't. Until much later. I made my kids go to Sunday School, and they didn't learn anything. In the ’80s, when Ed Cohn came to Temple Sinai and when I got involved with the Southern Jewish Historical Society, I was really working on the history of Judaism in New Orleans. I left the Historic New Orleans Collection and went to the Touro Infirmary as Archivist. This was a whole different ballgame because the history of the Jewish community was my baby. It had to be. I had to do some fast learning. A lot of it from my own family. And Ed Cohn was such an appealing, spiritual leader – now, I have to go back many leaders ago. Rabbi (Feivelman?) at Temple was one of my parents’ – he and my cousin, his wife – my cousin Marianna, whose family is Dreyfous, were my parents’ close, close friends. They were delightful. But it was never because so much of the temple. It was just because of his personality and their friendship. But Ed Cohn got me involved. Ed Cohn got me on the board of the temple. He did it. He wanted me on the board. Once I got on the board of the temple, I got very involved. I'm still involved. I've rotated off the board. You can only be on so many years, and then you go off. Well, I've been on and off and on – you

stay off a year, and then they put you back on. I'm off at the moment, but I'm as involved as I ever was. I don't have to be on the board to be working for them.

RH: Did it move you –? What type of work did you do, and did it move you to a deeper appreciation of this spiritual life of Judaism?

CK: Yes. Without a doubt. Okay. Not the work I was doing because I was chair of the art committee and things like that. I'm working on preserving the temple archives. So, it's more of my professional work just – it's what they pay me for at Touro, I'm doing for free. However, I started going to temple on Friday night. I started going because I enjoyed it. I dragged my husband along. He'd go because he loved me. Not because he enjoyed it that much. But he'd go. I would go, oh, I would say, two or three Friday nights out of a month. I got kind of addicted to Shabbat. It was the end of my working week, and I could go, and whatever was on my mind, I could kind of let go. Without a doubt, with all that happened during Katrina, just – my very basic, simple Judaism, which has no props – it's just a basic belief. There are no props. There are no prayer shawls. There are no yarmulkes. There are no kosher two sets of dishes. There is no ritual. I just go because it makes me feel good. I love the service. Some of the service. Some of the new service has gotten a little undignified. When it gets undignified, I don't like it.

RH: What do you call undignified?

CK: Dancing in the aisles and clapping hands and all that. It's not for me. I like a very quiet, cerebral form of Judaism, which is the old classic Reform that I was brought up with. When it gets to be a little rowdy, I really don't like it. So, I look to see what the service is on Friday night. If it looks like it's going to be a little bit too much guitar playing and handclapping, I don't go.

RH: So, why don't we then, now, get into the Katrina story since we're starting to move there anyway.

CK: Katrina. Okay. We're moving there anyway. Because it is definitely what held me together. I know it. I was fortunate. Well, I'll start at the beginning, but I was fortunate to evacuate to a tiny Louisiana town that just happened to have a synagogue, a temple. That was my good luck. I could have gone somewhere where there wasn't anything.

RH: So, let's go back to the 28th or before that. When did Katrina –?

CK: I've got to go back a little bit before that because my husband – at the beginning of August, we were back in Touro Infirmary with my husband desperately ill again. He had had heart surgery. He had had a valve replaced. Heart valves replaced five years ago. He had done pretty well after that until he got endocarditis, which then did a number on those heart valves. If he'd been well enough, they would have done another replacement surgery, but they never could. So he was going downhill. In the beginning of August 2005, we were in Touro with Freddie very sick. He then had another bout of endocarditis, and the heart valves were truly just about destroyed. We went home on the 12th of August with oxygen and sitters and talks of hospice. I knew how sick he was, but he was always so optimistic and cheerful through it all. When the hurricane was coming, I had said, well, we can't evacuate. Fred's too sick. There's no way in the world I could take Fred. I could put Fred in the car and evacuate him with the oxygen. Oh, the oxygen – and a walker and et cetera, et cetera. Well, that was true up until that Saturday, which would be the – that Saturday, which would have been the 27th, I guess. Is that right? Anyway. When it was perfectly obvious it was taking aim and the mayor said the city should be evacuated. I was thinking, “Oh my God. What am I going to do?” My son-in-law and daughter-in-law – I won't – it's too complicated to explain. They're a couple – called and said, “You're evacuating.” I said, “I am?” They said, “Voluntarily, or we're kidnapping you. You're leaving New Orleans. You're not going to stay.” So, I said, “Okay, I'm starting to pack.” What I had to pack was Fred's medication because it was all on refrigeration. Oh, I forgot to mention, we came home from Touro with intravenous antibiotics, which had to be changed – which he got a dose of every day. They had to be

kept cold. You can see why I didn't plan to evacuate. Well, I packed up all that and the obligatory two pairs of blue jeans, four T-shirts, and some underwear. Because we were going to be gone the usual three days. At most. I packed Fred's medication, and we started out Sunday morning early to New Iberia, where my daughter and son-in-law live. It took us only eight hours this time. The last time, for Ivan, when we evacuated, which was – Ivan was a false alarm. It took us fifteen hours. But this time, it was only eight hours. Fred was cheerful and wonderful through the whole trip. We got to New Iberia. My daughter had a vast vat of gumbo on the stove waiting for us. And Steve and Elizabeth and Fred and I and two other friends of my daughter's from New Orleans moved into their, thank God, big house. And then the storm. The storm came. We watched it on television on Monday. We went to bed Monday night saying, “Oh, thank goodness we missed the bullet. We'll be able to go home as soon as we know it's safe to do so.” My son-in-law gets up very early. He got up very early Tuesday morning because he teaches. He goes to school at like seven o'clock. He came and tapped on the door. "Cathy, come quick." And so I did. I watched with him the city underwater. He had waked up and watched the television and saw the levees had broken. During the day, as we watched on Tuesday, we could see our neighborhood. We lived right across from the Archdiocese. There is a house on the other side of Carrollton that was on fire, and it's now being torn down. It's totally destroyed. A big, big house on the other side of Carrollton from the Archdiocese. And everywhere, there was water. We knew we were flooded. There was no way we were not flooded. So, I said to my husband, "Well, dear, I don't think we're going home any time soon." So we stayed in New Iberia. I was able to find sitters to help me out and a wonderful doctor. Then I realized, “Okay, I'm missing my spiritual support system.” My daughter's household is not a Jewish household. First place, she's an indifferent, if not just non-practicing Jew. The old Temple Sinai Sunday School confirmation didn't take as I guess it really didn't with me. But I came back and she didn't. Her husband is an Episcopalian. The girls are nothing. So she was not much help. But about five blocks down the street is a tiny synagogue. It's called Gates of

Prayer. It's been there since about the turn of the century. It doesn't have a Rabbi. Once a month, a visiting student rabbi comes by and practices on them. And that's a big occasion. And then about thirty people show up. But on regular Friday nights, I practically doubled the congregation when I started going. I arranged with the sitter who now – the sitters – I have the sitters from about eleven in the morning until about five in the afternoon so that I could get out and do the family grocery shopping and all that sort of stuff because Fred could not be left alone at all. But on Fridays, I kept the sitter until seven so that I could go to temple. I started going every Friday night. Services were at 6:30, I think they were. They lasted about twenty minutes. All in English with a lay – the temple members reading the service. But when the candles were lit – I just felt that I wasn't alone. Whatever burdens that I had, whatever I had to do, I was not alone. So it was tremendously comforting. So things went on like that. As a matter of fact, before I went to temple –

RH: Did you get to know some of the Jewish families there?

CK: Well, I already did.

RH: Oh yeah?

CK: My good friend Leezie Silverman who I grew up with and who was part of my little clique – who got out of LT with me, had an older sister, Caroline Lehwold, who lived there. The Scharffs from New Orleans had evacuated there, and I knew them. It was their daughter who lived there, whose husband became my husband's physician. And there was a Dr. Jahansky, who was there every Friday night as I was. He was a pillar of the congregation, and a couple of times, he would ask me to read part of the service, which made me feel very welcome and very included. When we went – when we went to hospice, he turned out to be Fred's hospice physician. It was wonderful. There were many, many sweet and wonderful people in New Iberia. The Cajuns are warm and friendly and welcoming. The people at my son-in-law's school – faculty and parents –

were wonderful, warm, and welcoming. But there was something marvelous about having somebody to go to temple with. I would pick Caroline Lehwold up, and we would go to temple. On the night where there was a 7:30 service – that once a month where they have the student rabbi – I would pick her up at 5:30, and we'd go eat together at a restaurant, at Clementine's, right across the street from the temple. Then we'd go to services together. It was wonderful to have her because I've known her – she was an older sister of my good friend. I'd known her – she'd known who I was when I was a little girl. Anyway, that was a very wonderful thing.

RH: So, what did you think, just backing up a little bit, when you saw the TV, when you – can you kind of give me the emotional part of what you saw and the thought that here you are with your husband, and you may not get back into –

CK: I immediately knew, for whatever little lifetime he had left, we couldn't go home. I could tell that instantly. I was panicked about my hospital, where I worked. I was terribly worried about Touro. And then, the stories started coming out about the hospitals being attacked by gangs because of drugs. And Touro is right there. Right there. Of course, so is Tulane. And the stories about the Superdome. I was frantic for Touro. Because of e-mail, Touro immediately set up a network, and so I could hear from Les Hirsch that they had gotten everybody out. The hospital had been evacuated successfully. Everybody had performed really, really well. They'd set up – it was like a combination of MASH and Ms. Saigon on that roof. Getting patients out alive with the choppers and all. Les will tell you that story. It's his story. But it's wonderful.

RH: Were there other people that you thought about getting in touch with or – I mean, sometimes when you're in a crisis like you were with your husband, it's like –

CK: No. I was worried about people who I'd thought had stayed. I thought my friend, Eve Hirsch, had stayed. She's like a sister. I'm an only child. She's an only child. We're like sisters. She told me she wasn't leaving. I did not know that she had gotten out or

where she was. But she knew to call me at my daughter's and let me know that they had gotten to Natchez and they were fine, she and her son. I was terribly worried about them. I was worried about my friend Bob Hirsch who is an invalid, but I was afraid that he had stayed, and I knew that Versailles Boulevard had taken on water. But most of all, I was worried about my hospital. I really was. Because I thought – we heard rumors of gunfire. None of that was true. They heard gunfire in the hospital, in the streets, but they were not under siege in the sense that maybe other places had been. Again, with the influence of people like Steven Kupperman, they had police on guard. That's the difference between a local hospital and one that belonged to a national chain. Now that I look back on it, Memorial, when it was Baptist Hospital, it would have been – had a local board taking interest in it. Once it got sold to Tennant, it was on its own.

RH: Interesting.

CK: I'll finish my – let me finish my Freddie story.

RH: Okay. Do. I want to hear it.

CK: He was cheerful. Sick, but cheerful. Always a good sport until the morning of the 21st of October. So that's two good months. It was lovely because we were there with my daughter and son-in-law and my other son-in-law and daughter-in-law, who are a couple, and good friends, one of whom was a physician. One of the other two who had moved in is a doctor. It was comforting to have him around. And that morning, Freddie just woke up cross. Now, we're married fifty-five years, and he has never been cross in the fifty-five years of his life. He woke up unhappy, cross, and nothing was really cheering him. And so, I felt “Uh-oh.” He wasn't in pain. He wasn't short of breath. He was just unhappy. And that was so unlike him. So, what I thought – okay. So, all day long, I was just hanging around trying to keep him in a good mood, and I really didn't want to leave, but it was Friday, and the sitter was there until – for me to go to temple. I thought, “Okay, I really need to go. This has been a horrible day.” And the kids – Mary

was home by then. My daughter was home. And the sitter was there. So I went to temple. I just sat there and said, “Okay, God. If this is time, I accept that. I understand that. But please make it easy.” The next day, Saturday, Freddie was still cross, but it was football. And we were sitting together watching – I think it was Alabama-Auburn or something – it was a really good game, and I know it was the Southeast Conference. Watching football – he had not felt like eating, but I had bought some Butter Brittle Ice Cream, or Butter Pecan Ice Cream, which he likes, and I said, “Would you like some ice cream?” He said, “Okay, wait until a timeout.” Or something. I went and got him some ice cream, and he ate his ice cream, and he smiled and handed – gave me a little half smile. It was just about the only smile that day. Handed me the dish. The way Mary's kitchen and sort of family room is set up, it flows. I was in the same room, basically. I took the dish and stepped into the kitchen part. Put the dish down – rinsed the dish in the sink. Turned around, and he was gone. Just closed his eyes like he had gone to sleep sitting in front of football, sitting in front of a football game. That was it. He didn't make a sound. He never had a moment of pain, of fear, or – he just slipped away watching football. And nothing did we like to do more than watch football. So, I just felt like, “Oh, not only had God heard me, but he sent his response Fed Ex.” So quickly, before we had moments of shortness of breath, of pain, or of Fred feeling sick, he just went. My daughter just had pulled up that moment, and she was going – the sitter was going to stay a little while, and I was going to look at something for the house. Now, I never left Fred to come to New Orleans to do anything about the house. To hell with the house. But my son, who lives in Atlanta, Frederic, and Mary, met in New Orleans, met with my contractor, got him started, and he had, by that time, ripped out everything. He'd done the tearing out, and the house was waiting for me to make some decisions. Mary was going to take me to look at something. So, she pulled up just at that moment, and I ran to the porch and said, "Come quick, honey." She was there with me. We called hospice, and they sent a nurse over. I didn't have to have that nurse with a stethoscope. I knew. But you have to do that. And Doctor Jahansky, my friend, signed the death

certificate. Mary knew to call the funeral home, and everything was done so quietly, so easily. I am so grateful. So, that was Saturday. Monday morning, Mary took off from work. She's a journalist in New Iberia, writes very well, marvelously. Mary stuffed me in the car, and we went straight to New Orleans to see the house. We came back that night but she wanted me to see what was done, to meet with the contractor, make some decisions, which I did – make some arrangements for me to come back in the next week, which I did and stayed – by this time, my son-in-law and daughter-in-law had come back. They live on the sliver by the river, so they had moved back. I stayed with them for a couple of nights, worked with my contractor, went out, and put in some orders for a kitchen. It was like eight weeks from order to kitchen in those days. Made some amazingly quick decisions. And you see, it looks like nothing ever happened. And then I had another miracle. One of my friends from my high school, grammar school/high school days – Jane Mansberg-Schwartzman had a house – had gone, evacuated to Dallas. Her husband has Alzheimer's. She made the same decision I did. She's still there. She could not come back because there were not enough facilities to bring Mel back, and she had found someplace wonderful in Dallas and did not wish to come back. But she had a condo at 1750 St. Charles Avenue. So she called me. "Cathy, I hear from the Jewish Information" – the JIS – the Jewish Information Service – better, faster than the CIA. "I hear Fred passed away." I said, "Yes." She said, "I hear you want to come back and work at Touro – get back to Touro." I said, "Yes." She said, "Would you do me a favor? I'm going to put my condo on the market. But would you come back and stay in it." I said, "Well, I'll rent it from you." She said, "No. It's a win-win. I would like you there to see what's going on. To make sure everything is okay. And it would be a good deed for me." And so I said, "I'll take you up on it."

RH: We're going to wrap up right now on this tape –

CK: I'm done.

RH: – and then we'll move –

[Recording paused.]

RH: – Katrina's Jewish Voices, and you were talking about that you decided to come back to New Orleans, really, as quickly as you could, to get back to work at Touro.

CK: Absolutely. There was never a moment that I had thought that I would not come back to New Orleans. There was not a second. That was just not in my thinking. It wasn't whether; it was when. And the when was two things. I couldn't come back while Fred was alive, and I was going to just stay there. And Touro was very nice about it. They were going to put me on medical/family leave. But I was going to stay there with him because there's no way I could have brought him back. Two, I had to have a place to stay because my house was flooded.

RH: How much water did you have in your house?

CK: About a foot. We're up a little bit. I'm on the Carrollton Ridge. It's a little high right here. We're not in that bowl that Broadmoor is in. Carrollton Ridge goes about as far as Audubon Boulevard. And while we got water, we didn't get four feet. We got, say, about a foot. Yeah.

RH: So, where did you – where's your husband buried?

CK: Here. When we went to New Iberia, I said to Fred, "Okay, honey. You never know what's going to happen. I want you to understand what I want, and I want to understand what you want." I knew his days were numbered. I mean, that was made very plain to me because of the heart valves, but it was better to put it to somebody like that than to say, okay, I'm going to stay here until you die, and what would you like me to do with you? I said, "If I die while we're evacuated, do not bury me in New Iberia. Cremate me. Take me home. I want to be buried in the Dennery plot, Hebrew Rest Cemetery, with

our daughter." We have a daughter who passed away when she was thirty-three, and she's there. He said, same here. And that was that. I knew just what he wanted. So, he was cremated. Actually, he was being cremated while Mary was driving me to New Orleans. That frantic Monday. I just did what I was told. I was not functioning, making decisions. I have very bossy children anyway. And they're wonderful. Anyway, so, on Tuesday, when I got back, David (pronounced Dah-vid), David – spelled David, typical New Iberia – Funeral Home delivered a little box with Freddie's ashes. And I kept it with me in New Iberia – it came with me to 1750 – and sat on the dresser until the fourth of December, which was a convenient time for my children, the Atlanta children and the New Iberia children, to come in and we had a memorial service at Temple Sinai. The night before – they all got here the night before, so I said to myself, "What would Freddie like?" I know Fred liked – typical Frenchman – good food, good wine, good times. So, I took them all to August [a restaurant], the night before to celebrate Fred's life. And the memorial service was lovely.

RH: Were your friends able to come? Were different friends able to come to the memorial service?

CK: Some, but some of my closest and dearest, including Fred's first cousin, who is like my sister and who happened to be on the West Coast didn't make it. But she had been – she was in Alexandria and she had come to visit while Fred – New Iberia – Alexandria, Louisiana – she had come to visit while Fred was alive and the day – he died on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning she was on my doorstep in New Iberia. So she was there when it mattered. We had this lovely little service, and then – what else are you going to ask? The one thing I wanted to say was that getting back to Touro – I was really needed because there are so many stories – doing just what you're doing. Talking – I've interviewed Les. I interviewed Dr. Kevin Jordan, the one who ran the MASH unit. I've interviewed many people. That was so important to get back there.

[Telephone rings.]

RH: Do you want to stop it for a minute? And then we'll –

[Recording paused.]

RH: You were talking a little about how your job has changed in some ways because you're interviewing all of the staff now.

CK: Well, it has, in many ways. Katrina changed everyone. I interviewed some of the patients, as a matter of fact, who had stories to tell. In fact, I want you to talk to Sam and Jesslyn Zurich if you haven't.

RH: I haven't yet, but they're on my list.

CK: They're over at Willow Wood. So I heard their story because Jesslyn was a patient in Touro, and Sam and Jesslyn were telling me their story when I went to see them. They stayed in their house around the corner from me through the whole thing.

RH: Let's get back to you and tell me what it was like to be in New Orleans. Because you came back pretty early.

CK: I came back early in November. Okay. Being at 1750 was like being in a halfway house for me. It was wonderful. For the first place, I had never lived alone in my life. I went from my parent's home to college, from the college dorm to being married to Fred. I had never lived alone. Never ever. Also, right before Katrina, our thirteen-year-old standard poodle died. So, unfortunately – because Freddie missed her so much while we were evacuated – but there were three dogs in the house. Just not ours. So, it was a different world. But 1750 is filled with people I know who were wonderful to me. I could have – I had to struggle to eat a meal by myself. I don't think I ate dinner by myself in that condo more than three times in the three months I was there. If I wasn't eating with

somebody in the building, we were going out together. People were wonderful to me. It was very safe. They had – they have a little – it's a gated garage. So I could pull in at eleven o'clock at night by myself and feel perfectly okay. I also learned that I'm not cut out for condo living. It was wonderful while it lasted when I needed it. But I need my house and my yard and my dog. My new dog. But it was marvelous. I felt safe. And also, I have to tell you – I didn't get that fear gene from my mother. I got that nothing is going to harm me. It wouldn't dare – Sweeney Todd – from my father, who was afraid of absolutely nothing. My mother was afraid of everything. So I am much more my father's daughter. I was never frightened. My friends are frightened. They still are. I'm the one who drives at night. I pick them all up. It isn't because they so much don't want to drive. It's that they don't want to go home, and they don't want to be the one driving the car home alone. I just pull in my electronic gates, and I feel very safe. So, I'm not having a problem.

RH: Tell me, through this whole year, what the Jewish community has meant to you through this experience.

CK: Oh, everything. Okay. Touro has become much more a Jewish hospital than it was before in the sense that they are very much aware that they're based on the ethical and moral principles of Judaism. They weren't doing that before. They're so much more spiritual – they have much more of a spiritual commitment/mandate in their mission statement. Immediately, the place I went when I got home was Temple Sinai. And that's my home away from home. I have often told them I should just put a cot over there because that's – most of my volunteer work is done at Sinai and Newman School. Newman, professing to be non-sectarian – I'm on their alumni board. And they have been very active. Federation was very good to me. I got that nice little grant for coming home, which was very, very nice because there was a big gap between my insurance and what it cost. Again, I feel surrounded by the Jewish community. I do. I feel like they're very much there for me. I have to say, between Touro, Temple, and my friends,

that they're very much – I do feel very surrounded and very – I don't feel alone. None of my children live here except my daughter-in-law and son-in-law, but they're like children and have treated me that way. But the Jewish community is very important to me. I'm off to tell that story at the Southern Jewish Historical Society next month with you.

RH: Are you concerned in any way about the size of the Jewish community post-Katrina and about how it will rebuild?

CK: No. It's in proportion. Look at the rest of the community. The city is much reduced. The Jewish community has always been very small. There were about 12,000 Jews before – we all argue about the numbers, about whether there were 10,000 or 12,000 or 13,000. It depends on whether you count unaffiliated and Jews who think they're Episcopalian. But it's always been tiny in comparison to the city. So maybe now, percentage-wise, it might have gone up because the city, so much, shrunk.

RH: Do you see any changes in the Jewish community?

CK: Well, some of my oldest – yeah. Some of my friends, the very young and the very old, have decided not to come back. Some of the young ones don't want to come back with their children. Some of my older friends are terrified. But they're the ones who haven't come back. They wouldn't be terrified if they came back. My friend Barbara Jacobs lives in – is coming back. They're working on her place. She's living in Baton Rouge. Whenever she comes down, she talks about how scary it is. I keep telling her it's only scary because you're living in Baton Rouge. It's not scary for people living in New Orleans. [Telephone rings. Recording paused.] I don't think it's scary. I'm not worried about the Jewish community. Maybe this is the time Sinai and Touro might get together, might decide for the sake of staying alive that they need each other. They won't be – they've always been so competitive. They've always had dueling rabbis. They've always had – been very snotty to each other. I'm not putting the blame on either congregation; it's just how it is. Maybe the time has come where that won't be. Maybe

we'll need each other. So that might be good.

RH: Does it aggravate you or – how do you feel about friends who don't want to come back, who say they're scared? Are you angry?

CK: Oh, that doesn't aggravate me at all. I just wish they weren't scared. I miss them. But I think, if they don't want to evacuate, if they don't want to go through this again, their sense of commitment is not to the community, is not what mine is. Many of them are retired. I'm not retired. I've got a job. I have a job that's practically a calling. I mean, I love what I do. And they can take me out of Touro Archives only either into the ICU or into the morgue. If I can stand up and still work, and my brain is functioning, if I decide to retire, I'll be back there as a volunteer. Or I'll be up at Tulane at Special Collections straightening out their Jewish Collections, which definitely needs somebody to work on. They're sitting there going, “When you decide to retire, we have a job – we have a volunteer job for you.” I love doing that. I'm not trained to do it someplace else. This is what I know.

RH: It seems like it has not crossed your mind that New Orleans or the Jewish community won't make it.

CK: They'll make it. They'll make it. Of course, they'll make it. There's no doubt in my mind they'll make it. Maybe we'll get – maybe not with this mayor, but we'll make it.

RH: Other than your father's genes –

CK: And I've got them, including the hollow leg. I can drink Cantor Colman, at three hundred pounds, under the table.

RH: That's a good skill to have in New Orleans.

CK: Yep. Yep.

RH: – is there anything else you attribute your optimism to? Your sense of –?

CK: Stupidity. I'm like Nellie Forbrush, a cock-eyed optimist. I know it's going to make it. New Orleans is too good not to make it. It's too unusual not to make it. We've been through so much. Take Touro. Touro has been open for 154 years. It closed twice in 154 years. Once for the Civil War, and it stayed closed for eight years. For Katrina, it stayed closed for 27 days, and then they re-opened their emergency room. So, you can't keep them down. And I don't think – I think the Jewish community is going to play a tremendous role in bringing New Orleans back because we're fighters. And life is good here. It's very good.

RH: Talk about that.

CK: New Orleans has been a very good place for Jews. We have not encountered – I don't care what I read from other sources, we have encountered very little prejudice. Very little. If you call not being able to go to Comus Ball significant, I don't. Carnival balls are the most boring thing I've been to. There's nothing nicer than having an excuse not to go.

RH: So, now that you've brought up New Orleans and the larger community, how do you see the Jewish community interacting with the larger New Orleans community?

CK: Like they always have. Like religion didn't matter. Like they don't know they're Jews. Or don't know it's not – they don't know it's not wonderful to be Jewish. We've never learned that. We just feel like we're as good as anybody, and we've been here an awfully long time, and we've worked – we've lived in the same neighborhood as everybody else has. We've been very successful. We've poured tons of money into all good causes in New Orleans, and we're here to stay.

RH: And so if we talk about New Orleans, how do you see the response of the city, the state, and the federal government and Katrina?

CK: Horrid. It's very disappointing, which means that we're not going to get help. We're going to have to help ourselves. Like Touro rescued itself. We're going to have to bite the bullet and rescue ourselves as best we can. It would be nice if our representatives in high places fight for us. I think they are. I think they are, even the one that I didn't vote for, Bobby Jindal seems to be working hard for us. So, I think in spite of our elected officials, not because of them. It's certainly in spite of our national government, not because of them. We'll make it. Slower than if we had had the help we should have, but we'll make it. Because we're stubborn. And where else would we go? Life is good in New Orleans. Where would you go? I don't want to go to Atlanta. And God knows I've had all the New Iberia I can take. If I left here to go anywhere, and I thought about this, where would I go if I had to go – I would find another little sleepy, southern town that had a really old and entrenched Jewish population. Like Charleston and Savannah. And they're on a seacoast that gets hurricanes, too. But that's my kind of town. So I might as well stay here.

RH: So you don't see yourself with the next – if there is another hurricane. Or if there's a tipping point where you would leave?

CK: I don't want to draw a line in the sand. I think if my house flooded again and I had to go through all that again, I might move out of my house. I don't think I'd move out of my city.

RH: We are approaching the end here.

CK: Okay. I've enjoyed it.

RH: I wanted to ask you a little – a tough question. Sometimes it's hard to talk about race.

CK: Not for me.

RH: But this is the only chance –

CK: Ask me.

RH: – this is the only chance we have for New Orleanians to be heard, and I just want to know what your thoughts are on race and the storm and Katrina.

CK: Well, anybody who wants to say that it was a racial issue is looking for a racial issue. If you want to – of course, people with means come back easier than people without means. But again, I have to quote Rabbi Kushner from the other night here at Temple Sinai – "God is not in the hurricane. The hurricane is without conscience, without purpose. God is in the still, small voice that tells you how to react to the hurricane. That teaches you how to deal with what the blows are that you get." Okay. If you want to see a devastated street, go down North Line, and Metairie Club Gardens, the highest real estate section, money-wise, in the New Orleans area. North Line got from four to six feet of water in every one of those homes. Only three or four of them, the lights are on, in that whole Metairie Club Gardens area. Now, do those people have the means to come back if they want to? Yes. Do they have the means to come back in the poor, Black neighborhoods? No. Therefore, the help – the hurricane did not hit just Black neighborhoods, but that's – the funds should go where they're needed. And I have a couple of friends who, not anybody on North Line, but I've got a couple of friends who hardly got touched by the hurricane but think they should take anything from FEMA they can get. And I said to them, “You don't need it. Why would you take it? You're taking it away from somebody else.” Sooner or later, the well is going to run dry. Oh, no, it will just go into the politician's pockets.” I said, “I'm sorry. I don't believe that.” I believe: if you don't need it, don't take it. I'm lucky that I had the means to augment my insurance, but that's all. As far as race is concerned, walk through the halls at Touro. We have Black leadership there – Dr. Jordan, the one I was talking about who was our MASH and Miss Saigon leader who evacuated us, is a Black man. He is, next to Les Hirsch,

probably the most respected man in the hospital. I've been brought up that way. My father believed that. My mother believed that. I can't say that they were as kind about Eastern European Jews, but they were very – they were very, very strong on integration and courageous. Not my mother. She'd say, Leon, don't talk so loud about that in a restaurant.

RH: Did you have a housekeeper or anyone who was personally affected by –?

CK: Sure. Yes. I have an elderly housekeeper who Katrina just knocked the pins out. [Doorbell rings] That's picking me up, but aren't we about done?

RH: Yes.

CK: I'll just – if I can let them in –

[break in audio]

RH: So, Katrina's Jewish Voices again. And I guess, to wrap up, I just want to know – you've been through a double loss in this past year. Unlike a lot of people. Has there been anything or things you learned about yourself this past year?

CK: Yeah. My grandmother always said – I would fall down, and I cut my knee, and she said, “You're bleeding.” Of course, she said, “Don't bleed on the Oriental rug.” But she said, “You're bleeding.” And I'd say, “Where?” And she'd shake her head and say, “Where there's no sense, there's no feeling.” I'm tough. That's what I've learned about myself. And also that I draw a tremendous amount of strength from my religion, which, if you had asked me about that a while back, I would have said I'm very interested in my religion culturally, and I enjoy it, but I never realized what a tremendous strength it was for me.

RH: And are there any things that you're grateful for from this past couple of years?

CK: Yes. I am grateful we evacuated to where my daughter lived and my husband spent the last two months of his life with family. My son flew down from Atlanta and saw him. He enjoyed that. But we were in the bosom of family. I'm grateful, most grateful of all, with how easily his illness ended. It could have been – I won't even describe how bad it could have been with congestive heart failure, which he had, and Alzheimer's. He was a little confused, but it never made him – it didn't get that bad. I am so grateful for the support of friends. I'm so grateful that Jane – I had this miracle of having a place to live. I'm grateful that Touro wanted me back. I'm grateful for the marvelous contractor who got me back in my house in record speed. People cannot believe how quickly I got back in. I was back in my house on the first of March. I'm grateful that I'm still healthy and can do my thing, that I don't need to – I can take pretty good care of myself and that I'm not a burden on anybody. Those are the things I'm really grateful for.

RH: Anything else you want to conclude with?

CK: Well, the only thing that I'd want to conclude with is I think New Orleans is a wonderful place to be. It's got its faults but I like its faults and its virtues, and that I think the Jewish community here is tough and strong. And it will make it. And I've enjoyed talking with you.

RH: Thank you very much.

CK: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]