



# Frances Berman Sulsky Transcript

ELAINE EFF: Today is April 30th, 2001. And this is Elaine Eff, oral historian for Jewish Women's Archive in Baltimore, Maryland, and I am interviewing Frances Berman Sulsky at her home in Pikesville, at 4001 Old Court Road, apartment 511. And why don't we start with the stories that you remember best about your family; of your parents and their coming to America. Can you tell that?

FRANCES BERMAN SULSKY: I don't remember anything until I must have been about five or six years of age, and I don't think I would be interesting. (pause) How do you want me to answer that question?

EE: Tell me about your...

FS: My mother came to America at age of 14, and she met my father. In those days, if you didn't have the gift of doing things, you went to work in a cigar factory. And that's where she met my father, and they were married. And they lived down on the East side; all the people that came from abroad—usually Jewish people—all went down to the East side because they spoke only Jewish at that time, or their native language, and consequently, I wouldn't remember anything of my earliest years except from the time that I went to school. And I remember one incident when I learned that I could borrow books from the library. I did, and I came back and sat on “the stoop”, as they called it then, and I went through, and of course after all the printing was so large it didn't take long to read, and I went back to the library and I told the librarian, “I would like to have two other books please,” and she turned the page and she said, “But you just took these out.” I said, “Yes, but I read them already.” She says, “Well, we're not permitted to give you any more than two a day but being that you're here I will do this: I will allow you to take two others, but do remember you can only have two in one day.” And I thanked her,



and I left. That was my introduction to reading. Why and how I started to read so very young, I don't know. But I've always been an avid reader. And beyond that, I went to school.

EE: Do you remember growing up in New York? Could you tell me a little about your parents? What they were doing?

FS: My mother had to be domestic because she had 1 child, and then she didn't have the next one until three and a half years later. So then, she had two. You always took care of your own children. And my father, unfortunately, never provided a livelihood. He tried very hard, but he couldn't make it. So in the third grade, I found out that I had skipped a grade that year and went to my teacher, because my mother could only speak Jewish, and I said, "Miss Mc (inaudible), why did you skip me?" She said, "Because I loved your compositions." And that's when I learned that I could write. And I continued being a fairly better than average pupil.

EE: Miss Sulsky, how would you describe your parents and your family life in New York?

FS: How? As a comparison with anything else? How would I know?

EE: What kind of family did you have? Did you live in a religious household?

FS: No. My father was an atheist. The custom was in the old country that they were trying to take the older boys in the family and make them rabbis. And my father resented it. He didn't like it, and as a result of that, he went the other way. Absolutely and opposite. And when he came to this country, he became an atheist. So, I learned very little from him as far as religion was concerned. It's what my mother knew and what she abided by. And she had a sister living in an adjoining apartment house and they had four children, so that was all the family. And my father didn't want any parts of any religion, which was very sad, but that was it. So, I can't give you anything from his point of view.



EE: Did you have any Jewish upbringing?

FS: Oh sure, my mother lit candles on Friday night. She kept a kosher home. These were the things that she knew, and she abided by them. And when she needed an opinion from a male, she would ask my uncle, who was her brother-in-law. So as far as my father was concerned, there was very little he could contribute towards Judaism.  
(microphone moved)

EE: You weren't the only child at home?

FS: No, I was the first and then three and a half years later, I had a brother, and then a sister two years later, and then another brother two years later. And that was the family of children. We only had two bedrooms, and my mother had to rent one of the bedrooms out to her brother and a cousin in order to have the money that she required, and beyond that, what else can I answer?

EE: What was your home life like? Do you remember? Growing up...

FS: Very average, like anybody else's. I went to school, I played outside. I didn't have any toys. I once went to my cousin and I said, "Would you lend me your skates?" And she looked at me. She was the only girl, and her father adored her and gave her everything. And I said, "I don't have any skates," which she knew. And I said, "Because I'd like to skate, I'd like to try it." She looked at me and she said, "I'll only give you one." So I took the one, and I went to the top of a hill, and I hitched onto a bakery truck and I was riding downhill, and before we got to the very bottom, I panicked. I let go, and I went flying, and I broke a tooth. I carried that broken tooth until I was married or after, later. She just didn't want anybody to have anything that she had that was hers, and I never asked her for anything again.

EE: Did you remain close to her?



FS: No. She was more like her mother, who was my mother's sister. But my uncle was very, very kind, and when my brother came along—the youngest one—he adored him and made a big fuss about him. So, I took him over there quite frequently. So that's how I went to see them. But just average families. Nothing that I can tell you that would be outstanding.

EE: Now tell me where your mother and your father came from, and if they ever talked about the old country.

FS: Mother was Hungarian. My father was from Latvia. So they never talked about it. Not a bit. So I don't know that I could give you any information about that. I understand that my mother's mother was a woman that was very well liked, in her—what do you call these small places, small little city that they lived in? I don't know anything very much. We named children after them, after they were gone, but there was no contact, none whatsoever. So I can't help you along those lines.

EE: Tell me about your growing up and... You grew up rather fast.

FS: Yes, I think so. I didn't know that I was growing quickly—"fast", as you say. Played with the girls in the neighborhood. We didn't have any toys. There was a store on the corner that sold meats and things and pickles, and when they would use the pickle barrel up, they would put it outside for the men to come and take them away. This one time in the winter, I used to have to come home on Friday and scrub the kitchen floor and bathroom floor, that was mine to do, and my mother said, "Where were you? You're coming in so late." And so I said, "Well, we got a piece of the barrel and we all went." There was snow on the ground then. We all went to the park—we lived close to a park—and I said, "And I rode down on that as a sled. And I didn't even get killed." Of course, there was nothing to steer with. So that was something that even I thought that was funny. That's all I can say.



EE: It sounds to me like you were quite a daredevil.

FS: No, I was active. I liked to do things. We used to play a game on the four corners, where the streets came together. We used to call it, "Kick the Can." We'd get a can someplace and we'd kick it and if you got to be the first one; just a game that we made up. We didn't have anything to play with; these were for poor children, that was all. But we enjoyed it. We liked one another. And I lived there, and we were with the rest of them. [I] graduated public school, and before I graduated, my mother told me that I couldn't go to high school; I had to go to work, because my father couldn't provide. I was hungry, but I wasn't that concerned. I knew that it was strange, and my mother would never ask her sister for anything, because she happened to have a husband who provided very well. So, we just went on and did the things we had to do, and my mother had told me I couldn't go to school. I felt very sad, and she told me she was sending me down to Baltimore because that's where my father's family lived. And she was sending me to my grandmother, to live. But one of his sisters had a millinery shop. In those days, everybody wore hats. She taught me for three months, and then took me to a wholesale house for a position, and they offered \$4 a week. And she said to me, "We can't accept that because it's not enough to give your grandmother for her living there." So, we went to the second one, and they offered \$8, and I accepted that job.

EE: Do you remember where, or what any of the names of any of these milliners were?

FS: Let me see. I do remember faintly, but I can't think. I'll think of it sometime, but not at this time...

EE: Does Almond Jones ring a bell?

FS: Almond Jones was one of them. That may be the one that I went to work with. They put me in a room—this was in August—with boxes and boxes of hats, and I had to line them because they were going to be put up for sale, and they had to be complete.



And it was August, and it was hot. We didn't have air conditioning in those days, and perspiration was just running, but I was sewing. I had to make my \$8. And I did. And then when the season was over, you were told not to come back; that they'll call you for the next season. So, I went to Brager's and accepted a job to sell hosiery, just so I was making a salary. And that's the way you worked it. To do the hats when they needed you, and then you went out to work somewhere else in between. Then, after being there for three months, I went back to New York, to my family, and my mother took me. I had never been downtown, and she took me to this big building on 38th street, between 5th and 6th avenue, and when we got to our destination, she introduced me to her cousin who owned this big millinery wholesale place and the building. And he was the boy that she had come over to America with. His family—ten children and her mother—because they were related, had this person take me as an additional child. This boy would get up at five o'clock in the morning and sell papers so that he could buy milk and rolls for everyone for breakfast. And when I met him, he was a very wealthy man, owning this building and having this wonderful company. So she told him the story, and he put me in the designing room, which [given] my lack of knowledge, I couldn't understand, knowing so little, that he would put me in a designing room. This woman that I learned to know, she was the designer, and she couldn't sew, but she designed the most beautiful hats you're going to see. She was gifted. So I enjoyed [working there].

EE: Do you remember her name?

FS: No, because shortly afterwards—when I say shortly, [I mean] less than a year—something new was created in millinery; before that, all millinery was made by hand. Then they found that they could block the felt bodies and make different styles of them, and then we would have to trim them and put headbands and linings, and they were ready to be sold. So, I worked for someone. Mr. Mermelstein, who owned the place, came to me and told me he was putting me in that department, and I said, “But I don't know how to do things that she knows how to do.” He said, “You watch her and you



will learn.” So, I became her assistant. There were 10 women sewing, and I am the assistant. Still at that age.

EE: At what age?

FS: Fourteen. And this lady—I can't think of her name right now—stayed there for a year, and I enjoyed working with her. And then one morning, she didn't show. So, I went to Mr. Mermelstein and inquired, and he said, “You're taking her place.” And I said, “What?” He said, “Yes, you've been working with her, and I want you to take her place.”

She was making \$40 a week. I was making \$20 at that point, and I thought he knew the family, he knew that we needed it desperately, and he knew my age. But he said I was too young to get \$40 a week. He would give me 22 [dollars]. And I had to have the 22.

So I worked there almost a year, and my father decided then that he couldn't do anything for himself here in New York, [so] he took the family back to Baltimore. Now, my mother had never even met the family except my father's mother—her mother-in-law.

And there were eight children, and he was only one of them. So she met them all and she thought, well, she couldn't invite them all to dinner. So she started with the oldest, who was younger than my father. Is it all right if I say some Jewish words? So she said his name was Meyer, she had him and his family—his wife and three children—over for dinner. And my mother was serving, and she put vegetables on the table with the main course, and he said in Jewish, “Vos is dos?” pointing to the vegetables. My mother said, “Vegetables. They're very good for you. Eat them with your chicken.” And he said, “Vos dankstdu bin aferd?”—in other words, “What do you think, I'm a horse?” He had never heard of vegetables before. And they learned to eat vegetables at my mother's house.

They came from different countries, and their upbringing was entirely different.

EE: Your father's family was in Baltimore; why was it that your family originally moved to New York?



FS: When my mother came here, she had one sister here, and she was already married, and I don't think they were that close. She may have gone to live with her, because as it [was], she lived with this cousin who brought them over. So that was closeness, because they did have ten children, and you take someone else's, even one child, there had to be a certain, whether it was close or affection or just pride or whatever it may be, who knows. So she learned to live with them until she got married. The Baltimoreans never came to New York. My father took me down there when I was about two years, and we used to have excursions in those days. I think only on Sunday it would cost \$5, or three and a half dollars. And he didn't have to pay for a child. And my grandmother hadn't ever met any of us. So, he took me down and I met her.

EE: How did you go by excursion?

FS: On the train. And I'll never forget, she backed me up against the wall, and she put a pair of earrings on my ears. She pierced my ears herself, and I was two years old, what did I know? I went home with earrings. And I came back to her when I was thirteen and a half years of age to live there. She had to take care of her family of seven children because my father went to New York to live and try to make a livelihood for himself, of which he was not successful. But she became a cook. In those days, if [people] were married or had bar mitzvahs, they did it in their own apartments. Nobody had enough money to make an affair or have something beautiful. They did the necessary things, that was all. And so, she maintained herself and her family, and her children had to go out to work at early ages too. I don't know of any of them having an education.

EE: Do you remember where in Baltimore you first came, where you first lived with your grandmother?

FS: As everybody married, she would have her apartment—this was near Patterson Park—and then each child, as they left her home to be married, would take an apartment that they could walk to see their mother. It could be a little further, or a little bit closer, but





they all managed to live around. In fact, facing Patterson Park, I met her sister and her children, and a brother, his family, and his children. See, this was all so clannish; this was the only way they could see one another. If you had enough money to ride the bus, that was five cents, but other than that, there was no car. That's the way it had to be done. And she managed to cook and provide, and I went to visit my mother one time, and she was still in New York and I was still in Baltimore, and I said, "The way my grandmother cooked, I don't know how she could cook for affairs because her food tasted terrible. She never knew how to season properly." And my mother seasoned; she was a wonderful cook. My daughter Natalie, when she got married, asked my mother how to make gefilte fish. She now to this day makes my mother's gefilte fish, and she has the holiday dinners. I pay for them, but it's wonderful. Everybody is there. I have thirteen grandchildren who are all adults, and four great grandchildren. And we're family. I made what I never had as a child, and I wanted to be sure that my family would have it, and they do. I have three daughters.

EE: Did you feel that when you came to Baltimore, you gained more of a sense of family than you had in New York?

FS: Oh sure, definitely. Even neighbors were different here than they were in New York. Things were different in New York. It was spread out more, first of all, and there were so many more people. Their opportunities were really greater than they were down here. So therefore, I found much warmer feeling down here. Once you could establish yourself for where you lived, then you yourself met people here and there and it was an entirely different kind of world.

EE: How did you feel originally about leaving New York and coming to Baltimore?

FS: Very unhappy, because I was making \$40 a week. I left Mr. Mermelstein before my family moved to Baltimore again, and I went out and got myself a position to design hats, and I was only fifteen years of age when Mermelstein made me a designer and I made



\$40. I wouldn't have taken the position because I could have stayed there for 22. But I wouldn't do it, because I knew that if this other woman could make that kind of money and I was actually doing her work, without realizing at first that I could, and now I had to have \$40. So my mother told me that we were going to move there, I said, "No, I'm not going. I'm going to make my \$40, I'm going to live with an aunt of my girlfriend." I had a very dear friend that I had met in school when we were 8 years of age. We are friends to this day. Our children are friends and it's wonderful. And it's really something that goes back a long time.

EE: Tell me about her.

FS: Well, she lives in New York, and the children keep in touch. They were invited back and forth to all the occasions. She happens to be, unfortunately, not well, but we're here, we're hanging in.

EE: What's her name?

FS: Rose Glick.

EE: So you left Mr. Mermelstein and went to another millinery?

FS: And from there, my mother finally said to me, "You have to come home." So I had to leave my \$40 a week job and come to Baltimore and get 18 [dollars]. And I went to work as an assistant to something new. They were starting to drape hats on the head—this was in Baltimore—and I applied for a position and I was taken on to be the assistant to the woman who came from New York that could drape hats on the head. When your customer came in, she sat in front of a mirror, and we would take this body, the hood. [We] would show her four or five different kinds of hat molds. Either she was matching something or she just wanted something that she would consider pretty for herself because everybody wore hats, you never went without it, and I was to be her assistant. This girl that did this work for, she came from New York [to] Baltimore, and didn't know



anything about it. The millinery shop was Lampel's, here. And I was her assistant, as I said, and I worked for her over a year and then she disappeared. And Mr. Lampel came to me and he says, "You're going to do May's work." And I said, "Oh no, I'm not." I said, "How can you tell whether I can? I don't want to be embarrassed." He says, "I've been watching you. You've been doing May's work." So I did May's work, and he gave me May's salary. But it wasn't \$40 because Baltimore didn't pay salaries like that. If he gave me 25, it was more than I was getting otherwise. And May must have gone to him for an increase and he wouldn't give it to her. So again, I was elevated. I never had to try to get a position; it was always there waiting for me. It was amazing. I never knew as I went further forward that I was able to do all these things. But by watching, I had it within me, and I didn't have any reason to try because I didn't have materials that I would experiment with. I did as I was told for whatever they would have to do. So I was married at 18, and I went on a two week vacation. When I came back, Mr. Lampel didn't own Lampel's even though it had his name, but he decided he wanted to have a shop of his own. So he moved across the street. I can't remember what the name of the movie house was there. So when I came home after my honeymoon, I said to my husband, "Oh, I have to take my scissors, needles and thimble, because I have to go to work tomorrow morning." He says, "You can't go to work, you're my wife." I said, "Can you help me support my mother, two brothers, and sister?" He said, "No." I said, "Then I have to go to work." So I went to work, and when I came in Mr. Lampel said, "Tell me the name of this woman, gentile woman," and he said, "She is in charge of the second floor where your department will be. But you will have to go to her for anything that you want. She is in charge." I said, "She is only a salesgirl. I will be a milliner and responsible for everything that I do. How can she correct me? She doesn't know the first thing about it." And he says he was having an affair with her, of course. So I said, "Well, that is not the way I can work. My responsibility when you tell me to do something or I am committed to a customer, I have to be responsible. I cannot do it—something that she doesn't know anything about." And I walked out. [I was] very unhappy, because I needed that money.



And I went home, and my husband and I were living with my husband's mother and sister-in-law and brother, and they said, "You had a telephone call. Someone called you that opened a shop here, draping hats on the head." Now at Lampel's, the least expensive hat was seven dollars and fifty cents. She is going to run this shop at three dollars and fifty cents for all kinds of bodies, colors, anything. One price for all. I called her, went down to see her, and she told me yes, that now that she has someone that will take the position. She must have offered me a good salary. I can't remember, it could have been \$40, so she put an ad in the paper, and the next day when I came to work, you should have seen the line of people waiting. They knew me from Lampel's, they knew what I could do, and the price was just overwhelming. So I just never got lunchtime. It was terrible for me because it was just too much for me. So we started advertising for milliners, and I had two girls that were going to help me. And this one girl said to me, when I would watch her, she didn't know what she was doing. She could have been a milliner but she didn't know how to do it this particular way of working on the head, so I said something to her. I said, "You said you could do this. I'm responsible for what you're doing." She says, "Well, I am a milliner but I'm trying to learn as I watch you." I said, "Well, that's not enough." She kept worrying me and worrying me, and [it] finally prevailed upon me. I was so overtaken with work. She finally convinced me that with my success I should go in for myself. And I wouldn't have to answer to anyone. Well, I just had to break away because I couldn't handle it. And I thought, "Well, I'll do it." She says she can help me do it the way I want and there will be two of us, then we'll get some milliners to sew. So I took the shop on Park Avenue, downtown. Those days, if it was a department store on the corner, it had an Irish name; I can't think of the name right now.

EE: Was it O'Neil's department store?

FS: O'Neil. Your memory is better than mine.

EE: So where was the store that you worked in? Do you remember what it was called?



FS: At the corner, the one I worked at before... I was on Park Avenue and I was towards O'Neil's, that next corner. This lady had her shop on the second floor. I can't remember the name.

EE: But you always had your shops downtown.

FS: But I went back to seven dollars and fifty cents because I was giving them that kind of a hat.

EE: Tell me about your first store. What was it called?

FS: Park Avenue Millinery. But then I had five girls sewing. My sister finally became old enough that she could sew on the machine. In those days, if you made a hat and they would bring fabric to match an outfit, you could show a frame. You had nothing to show that would be finished, because you would have to use their material, so you would show the woman a frame and try the various frames on just as you would a hat, and make them make the choice. And my sister could sew on the machine, stitching this far apart. I never could do that; I could only work by hand. She was an excellent seamstress, so she was definitely important to me. She made a nice salary. But I had gentile girls working; I had five of them. And finally, this woman who I went into business with who finally prevailed upon me to go into business, after a couple of months, she came to me and she said, "I need \$1,000." I said I had to pay for my merchandise COD because I didn't have any credit. So anything we made we put into a bank account so that I could establish credit. And I said, "You can't take \$1,000, we can't spare it." I said, "After all, when I pay my bills, I don't really have \$1,000 left." "I have to have it," she says, "because I am buying a home." She had two children. She was a milliner, but oh, she never kept her promises. [When she] told the customer to come pick it up, she was never ready. This was before I met her. So she never could remain in the business because she couldn't maintain a reputation. It was impossible. So I said to her, "You know that if you take \$1,000, I have to take \$1,000." She says, "Well what are you



worried about? Look how busy you are.” I said, “You, where are you?” She used to come in 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock. I'd get there at 8 o'clock in the morning because I had to get started. Anyhow, I'll tell you what I said. “We're not going to make it together. Being that you had recommended that I go in, I'll give you the preference. I'll sell my half to you.” She says, “Oh no, I don't want it.” I said, “Why not? You said you could do so much and I can't do it with you.” She said, “No, no. You take it and I will not be here anymore.” So that's how I stayed there for myself. And I was there for ten years, and I had had one child after two years of marriage, and I said to my husband, “Wouldn't you like to have a larger family?” And he said, “It's entirely up to you.” I didn't realize that my husband couldn't provide. He came from a wealthy family, but unfortunately, they had some misfortune in the family. His father died at the age of 54. Things went all wrong for them. And he just only made \$35 a week. He couldn't even provide for the two of us. And I didn't realize that not only was I taking care of us, as we say, but my mother, my sister, two brothers; I was providing for all of us. So when it became mine, I did what I thought was right, and it turned out to be that way. So I had a second daughter. And the first daughter was very angry. She says, “You can't blame me. I was the only child for so long.” I said, “Yes, but I thought you would appreciate having a sister.” Now the funny part of it is, after that, when I had another child, I thought maybe we could have a son. And when we didn't—I had a third daughter—the first daughter loved that baby, and just skipped over the second one. And to this day, it's Barbara and Rikki, and Natalie is in the middle. And Natalie does things entirely different than the others... These two do things alike, and this one maybe they'll do things with her, but that's the way it remained throughout time. Barbara is going to be 70 years of age in July, and the youngest one is 57. But I didn't realize [in] all of the early years that I was the breadwinner, but I didn't care. I was happy. I was happy because I was free; I was doing things for us, and for ours, and that's the way it remained, always.

EE: What was it that attracted you to the millinery business?



FS: The millinery business? It didn't attract me. It attracted my mother because my father's sister had a millinery shop in Baltimore, and she could safely send me here to live with my grandmother and learn the millinery business. Now, she could have sent me possibly to Mermelstein up in New York, but I was raw material then. He wouldn't have been happy, she knew that. She knew the type of successful man he was. She heard from family, but I never heard of him; I never knew anything about him. So that when she went to him, she had something to offer. I was there, I was a product. And that's how I went in it. I never had to apply for a job unless as I did that one time I left him when he was giving me \$22. He said I was too young to make more than that. And when I had to apply and I told him what I could do and who I did it for, and I got my \$40. But that was different, entirely different.

EE: So, your mother played a fairly instrumental role as a determinant in your whole life, didn't she?

FS: I had to. When I was married, in October of 29, we had the—what do you call it...

EE: The crash, the stock market crash.

FS: Yes, everybody. Now, my husband's family, they had money and it was all in banks. They lost everything. I didn't have any money, so I had nothing to lose, you see. So as I was making, I was using it. This one and this one, everybody had to have some of it. So I didn't lose anything, and as time went on, I was able to just grow, that's all I can tell you.

EE: Have you always felt that your mother played a role in your development?

FS: Oh sure, certainly she did. She made the decisions. My father, he would have sent me down to Baltimore, but he didn't know what it was all about, sending me down to his sister. My mother had never met her sister-in-law yet. They didn't have money to travel; it was impossible. And of course, I was the first grandchild, and they had no reason to refuse, and they knew from my mother how poorly my father had done because he just



couldn't provide. And they were ambitious people; they had their livelihood. They worked for it. What else shall I tell you?

EE: Would you call your mother a role model? Were there other things that you learned from her?

FS: Oh yes. I learned everything from her. Everything. When I was 10 years old, she wanted knitted hats for the four children, [and] she couldn't afford to go out and buy them. So she took me into a knitting store, and she told the woman that she wanted to have four children's hats—skullcaps. Because she couldn't afford to buy them and she wanted her to teach me, she [bought] the wool, and she wanted her to teach me how to do it. So I learned how to knit or crochet, either, but I still wanted to read. I'll never forget. In those days, you had radiators. So they've had a rocking chair that came with the dining room set. I would sit in the rocking chair, put my feet on their radiator, put my book here and when you knit, you don't always have to look at it. You feel it as you go along. So I was knitting, and I was reading at the same time. I managed to accomplish that. So both of us were satisfied. And anything she told me to do I did because as young as I was, I saw the need. There was no reason to refuse. I tried anything and everything. That's how it came about.

EE: What was it that you liked about making hats?

FS: Well, it's creative. There was beauty attached to it. And you saw that you were making someone else happy and there was a need for it, because many of them came for bar mitzvahs. In those days, there was a bride that when there was more money and she could have a wedding, a nice wedding, after the ceremony and after the dinner and dancing, she would disappear, and her husband and they would come down dressed in traveling clothes, ready to go on their honeymoon. I made the hat. And the world was just revolving that way. I didn't do anything that was any different than was being done, but I did it in my way, which was without money, and I grew. And anytime I went into





business like the first time, on Park Avenue, and I was just married, my husband didn't have the money. He went out and borrowed \$300, so that could be my share of opening on Park Avenue. And there were other times when we didn't have money, but because we always paid our debts, we could always get what we wanted. And that's how we met; [we] went up the ladder for whatever we could. And I don't regret any of it. It made a certain kind of human being out of me. And I, in turn, could share it with my family who needed it, desperately. In fact, my youngest brother—the two in the middle that couldn't have cared less as far as furthering their education—because they all lived with me—I had a home on Calloway Avenue—I saw that he was very bright, and I said, “Manny, I want you to go to high school and college. I'm going to send you.” He says, “No, you're not going to.” He says, “You realize how much you're doing for us?” That was his wisdom. My oldest brother went downtown to live with my father, which was the right thing to do when my mother and father separated. And he thought he should go down there too because his brother did. I said, “But Manny, your opportunities are greater because you do something with it.” He says, “No, I don't feel that way.” He says, “I don't want it.” He just died. Eight days before my birthday. My family wanted to give me a big birthday, which I didn't want, but *they* wanted. So when I knew that he wasn't going to live long—he was living down in Southern Maryland—they wouldn't allow me to go down there. Towards the end.

EE: How old was he when he passed away?

FS: 80. Do you know how old I am?

EE: How old are you?

FS: 90.

EE: When's your birthday?

FS: July the 16th.



EE: What do you attribute to your long life?

FS: I don't know, because I've had illnesses through my lifetime. I think I always tried to do [it] not just for myself, uh uhm. I had to do [it] for others, and that became a way of life. Do it first with your own people, because this is what you have in front of you. So then it goes further. It moves.

EE: Tell me about your parents separating. When did that happen? How old were you?

FS: My father started to drink. He was very unhappy. He knew he was doing the wrong thing, as far as not bringing his family up. He wanted to bring them up; he just didn't have the ability. So he started drinking very heavily. And it was very difficult for my mother. Very difficult.

EE: How old were you?

FS: [14]. Well, when she sent me to Baltimore. He started drinking before that.

EE: Oh, so they split up in New York.

FS: Oh, yes.

EE: So did your father come to Baltimore or he stay in New York?

FS: No, he took the rest of the family. Once I had been to Baltimore and learned the trade and went back to New York, he already had determined the fact that he was going to go back to Baltimore, take the family, and maybe he would be able to manage better because he worked in a company with a lot of gentile men in the building, painting ships, things like that. And then he started on his own painting homes and things because the first time, he had a stroke. He wasn't 50 years of age, he was very young. And then, because he couldn't find himself, and I already had been put out into the working world, he had no one there that my mother could even turn to to defend herself and her 3



children that were there. So, she turned to me. I was there. Anything she wanted, I had to. So then my older brother said he'll go down to live with my father. He's been gone now maybe ten years. And he kept my father with part of the family, as far as that was concerned. And my sister, she was [a] very quiet person. She didn't tell us that she had run away with this young boy that she was going with and they were married. A year later, she told me. So I had them. I was living on Calloway Avenue then, and I had a beautiful home. I was the second Jewish family to move in on that part. What do you call that section? Not Forest Park; it was below Liberty Heights.

EE: Ashburton?

FS: Ashburton. I was the second Jewish family. And the first Jewish family was on the corner, Barrington Road and Calloway. Their name was Jacobs. They had five children; twin boys and three girls. When I would go to work in the morning with my husband, my mother was home with Barbara. They would come into my home and use the telephone and just do what they wanted. And my mother—it wasn't her place—she didn't know what to do. She was quiet. Right opposite from me, the gentile people—they were only two people, smaller home—put out a “For Sale” sign when I moved in. When I moved in, I stuccoed my home. I did it on the outside, I did it on the inside. I made a beautiful home. I really did have a beautiful home. Anyhow, they had that sign out, and they used to come out and sit on the porch and see activities. There was plenty on the corner with that family. But they were just average people. So they finally saw that I wasn't going to be like the corner, so they took the sign down and they continued living there. (EE: Ohhh.) And that whole side of that street, above Liberty Heights, on Calloway, there were Jewish people starting to buy.

EE: Now who lived in Ashburton when you moved into the neighborhood?

FS: Who lived in Ashburton? You mean...?



EE: What kinds of people?

FS: Jewish people, nice people.

EE: You said you were the second family.

FS: Yes. The first family—he was a heavy drinker and she was... a woman who didn't know anything.

EE: But who were your neighbors? What kind of people lived there?

FS: The people that lived on the right. She was Jewish, her husband was gentile, she had one son. But we weren't neighbors as neighbors. But then, here and there, people came. In fact, a couple from New York that I had met when I was working in New York, he went into business in Baltimore, he had family here, and I was so surprised when she called me to tell me that she was living just a block away. And we lived on Baltimore Street near Patterson Park, and across the street from us... Do you know Bess Fishman? Bess Fishman and I know each other for 70 some years.

EE: I get to interview Bess Fishman, so I'll be calling her soon.

FS: She hasn't been well, but she's all right. She had both her knees done. [Bess and I] talk to one another, and Bess doesn't speak as well as she writes. She's very active with Beth Tfiloh. and I have something here that she wrote about me for Beth Tfiloh. So one day, I said to her a few years ago, "You know, Bess, you write better than you talk." She laughed. She thought that was the funniest thing, and it's true. She admits to it.

EE: So you know her from the old neighborhood?

FS: When I first came. Yes.



EE: Now, what made you move to Ashburton? Why did you choose Ashburton as a neighborhood?

FS: My husband was a professional bondsman, so he knew many lawyers. He was down at the courthouse, and one or two of them told Moe about this home that was going up for sale. The one man was going to be—what do you call it? The one to sell it; there's a name for that.

EE: The realtor?

FS: No, it wasn't a real estate. Not a realtor. But anyhow, he had been given the job of selling it, and the lawyer told Moe how much he thought it would bring. I had to move when Barbara was born, and I asked my mother to come live with me. She had to come with three children, and I only had two bedrooms in the apartment, and I had to have a larger place. So when Moe came home and he said the older Cardin—he was the attorney—told them of a house that was going to be built on Calloway Avenue, going to be auctioned on such and such a day. And I went down with him, and they told him between he and Billig, who was the auctioneer. Gradually it's coming to me...

EE: The auctioneer.

FS: They wanted to make a little more out of it, so they raised the price \$2,000 more, which was a lot of money, and I needed it. But we paid it.

EE: What year was this, and what did you pay for the house?

FS: \$8,000. I didn't get much more when I sold it.

EE: What year did you buy the house?

FS: Well, let me see. I was married in '29, and I had Barbara in '31. Between '31 and '32, that's when I bought it, because we had to have a larger home.



EE: What was your address on Calloway Avenue? Do you remember the address?

FS: The 3600 block. I can't remember whether it's 3606... I can't remember. I know it was second from the corner.

EE: Second from the corner of... Barrington?

FS: Barrington was the corner.

EE: So where did you move to Calloway Avenue from?

FS: My apartment. Moe's father, before he died, had bought an estate from a man who owned the May company—there was another name before it was the May company—and he sold it to Moe's father. When Moe's father died unexpectedly—[he] had a heart attack at the age of 54—the family didn't want the estate that way. Moe's older brother built a home for himself on the corner of the estate, and they turned the home into an apartment house of 6 different apartments.

EE: Where was that?

FS: Ridgewood Avenue, Ridgewood.

EE: And what part of town was that in?

FS: Ridgewood. It was above Garrison Boulevard. And my mother-in-law said to Moe, "Come live with us for six months, and then you'll go into an apartment for yourself." So I waited the six months, then and I said to Moe, "Can't you take one of these apartments?" And in those days, you could take it. So, we had a third floor apartment, and that's where Barbara was born.

EE: Did you distinguish between people who lived in East Baltimore and people who lived in West Baltimore?



FS: I didn't know anybody in West Baltimore. That was gentile. East Baltimore was Jewish; especially Patterson Park.

[END OF CD ONE]

EE: OK. This is Elaine Eff, and I am interviewing Frances Berman Sulsky. It's April 30, 2001, and this is the second mini-disc recording on April 30, 2001. Let's pick up and talk about your family. I thought it was very interesting that your parents separated. Did they actually divorce?

FS: No.

EE: OK, well why don't you tell me about that because it is unusual for that era.

FS: You see, as I understand, in his country, in Latvia, they always tried to take the first born male and make rabbis out of them. And my father was of the opinion that he was not going to be a rabbi. So he refused to obey them, and he refused to bother with anything in the religion at all. So when he came here to this country, and he left all the family in Baltimore and came to New York, [he] thought he would do something on his own; he just couldn't find a place for himself and he didn't want anything to do with religion at all. He was afraid of it. He didn't want anyone to tell him what to do. And I remember as a child, when Rosh Hashanah would come, and then Yom Kippur. But my mother's sister lived in the adjoining apartment house, my uncle would go to *shul*, his children would go to *shul*, and I would go, too. I would trail along. I was embarrassed. I wanted to be a part of Judaism. And I would go. *He* defied them. He used to fill the vending machines with peanuts and things. They were his, and he would fill them and then pay the money and know when it was there. He would take that horse and wagon—they didn't have any automobiles in his group anyhow—and he would ride in front of the apartment houses just to show everybody that he was not going to be a Jew that day. So I pretended I didn't even know him, and I would follow my uncle to *shul* with



his family. I wanted to be a part of it, and that's the way it was. And he just became a very unhappy man. He had, at the age of 50, he had his first... what did I tell you?

EE: Stroke?

FS: First stroke. He had a stroke. So I went to my doctor. Dr. Hornstein was my doctor in those days—he was wonderful—and I said, “Dr. Hornstein, what can I do?” And he knew about the family—of course, I told him. He says, “I am going to send him out to City Hospital because they have a man there in charge who is wonderful. There are no Jewish people out there, but your father can get well. He can help him.” One of his sisters’ husbands was a doctor, and when he heard that my father was put out into this remote hospital where there [are] only gentile people, he says, “What are you trying to do?” And I told him, “Dr. Hornstein told me that this would help my father, and that's why.” Well, I found out afterwards that he knew less about medicine than anybody else, but after all, he was my aunt's husband, and he thought he was great, so I never questioned it. But he did get help, they were able to discharge him, but then where should he go? I tried to take him to my home even though my mother and he parted; I just felt that I had to, and he had to be in bed. He could not walk, and he couldn't say very much. He really had a bad stroke. So we tried to help him there. It didn't work. He got a little better.

EE: You brought him home?

FS: I brought him home. And he got a little better, and he left and he went and the doctor told him, “Don't climb any ladders, because you never know when you may have another one.” P.S., He had to work, so he did what he wanted, and he had another stroke. I took him to Levindale, and after he was there for a year, he died.

EE: Oh, I'm sorry.

FS: And he was in his very early 50s. 51, 52.





EE: Were you aware with any stigma associated with coming from a broken family? Or from a family of div[orce]...separation, of parents who didn't live together?

FS: Did I identify with that?

EE: Yes, were you aware of that at all?

FS: I wasn't happy about it, but I had to continue and go forward. I couldn't go back.

EE: How common was it at that time, when you were a young girl?

FS: Well, I was married, I had a child. I was on Calloway Avenue.

EE: When your parents separated?

FS: Before. I mean they separated before. But I don't mean that. That as far as the family was concerned, we were all together, and when there was something that had happened, I tried to do the best I could. I took care of him, and it was just not to be.

EE: Now, tell me about your husband. Tell me his name, and how you met him.

FS: My first husband?

EE: Your first husband.

FS: I was draping hats on the head at Lampel's. and I knew all the people that worked there. The salesgirls were all on the first floor. This department of draping hats on the head was on the second floor. And you meet these women, you talk to them, have lunch with them, but that's it. None of them were really dear friends. And this one woman said to me, "I have a sister-in-law that you just made a hat for." And she said to me, "Is Frances Jewish?" Because I had very light hair, and I was loaded with freckles. And she says, "Yes, of course she's Jewish." And she said, "Well, I would like Moe to meet her." So they made a blind date. Now, Moe was the youngest. He didn't have any ties except



to the family, and no one made any claims on him; he could do exactly as he wanted, and he had one dear boy friend, and Moe had red hair; dark. When I met him, it was so tightly curled. What he used to do after a day's work; he would go to his barber, and the barber would comb his hair, he would change his shirt, and with his friend they'd go out to dinner. And girls—gentile girls, of course. So, she said she would like to introduce her brother-in-law to me, being that I was Jewish. Because my mother-in-law, who was her mother-in-law too, lived there. It was actually her property after her husband died. But she couldn't do anything for herself because she was the old-fashioned type of person. So she arranged this blind date, and I'll never forget. It was on a Friday night—that was a popular night for the Jewish people to go out to the movies. The doorbell rings, and here is this gentleman, [and he] introduced himself, and I came in, [and] I introduced him to my mother. I didn't know who else was home. And we went out. And when we went out, in the car were two couples: one was his brother, and one was his brother-in-law whose wife was the one that worked in Lampel's too that made the blind date. Well, they started—after all, I was 18 years of age, I didn't know these people, I only knew the one woman who worked at Lampel's, the other one I only saw a few times because I had draped a hat for her and she liked it—and they were just ribbing us. It was a little embarrassing for me because I didn't know what to do. It wasn't as though I was accustomed to going out with the other boys and all that sort of thing. So anyhow, at the end of the evening, he took me up to my apartment and he said, "I will call you." Now, he was going to call me on a Wednesday night. See, I remember that vividly. And he called me and asked me for a date, and of course I went with him. And I liked him.

EE: How old was he?

FS: He was 26. I married older men. My second husband was 15 and a half years older than I. I was young out in the business world, where you don't expect to find anybody that young. But anyhow, we went together for six months, and then we were married in the rabbi's study—Rabbi Rosenblatt that time. And the family said, "We have room. You



come live here, and when you think you are able to, try for six months, and then you'll get an apartment for yourself," which I did. But I don't know. I went on a honeymoon. I came back, and I walked out on Lampel and this woman for \$3.50. See how that was part of it, coming along.

EE: Had you dated before you met him? Had you gone out?

FS: Oh, I played tennis at Patterson Park there. Just the usual things. I just didn't do things. I wore nice clothes only because I'd have a nice dress that I would buy for *Yom Tov*. I loved shoes; I paid more for shoes than I did for a dress. I guess I say this now, and I've said it many times, "God took away my childhood, but he gave me a talent." I didn't know. It developed. I was doing things out of necessity, and then it became bigger than that. What I could think of, it was there for me. So I just went along. I never even tried to apply for a job. If I did, it was because I saw an ad and I went to work for Lampel's, as I told you. But then from there, he did that. When I went to Mermelstein, Blossom Hat Company, he promoted me. I never had to promote myself.

EE: Did you ever question your work as a milliner? Did you ever try to rebel? Did you ever find that maybe you were getting pushed into something?

FS: I liked it because it was creative; I didn't know that I could do that. I found out that I could. I can't tell you, Jewish girls in those days were either dressmakers or milliners. And because of the connection of millinery, and I was most fortunate that way, because who in the heck would want to sit behind a machine? To this day, I tried to sit at the machine. My sister was a whiz at it. I found it very monotonous. I just enjoyed creating. And it was there for me to develop.

EE: What was the biggest shop you worked in?

FS: The biggest shop in Baltimore?



EE: No, in either.

FS: [In] New York, it would have had to be the wholesale houses. I only worked in two, and that was the Blossom Hat Company which was my mother's cousin, she came over with them, and then I worked at Lampel's.

EE: And what were the conditions like?

FS: When we came over?

EE: No, in the hat factories.

FS: In the hat factory? Well here, after I learned for three months at my aunt's place, she took me up to—what did I say? Almond? There were two places. The first one offered me \$4, and she said no, I didn't have enough to pay my grandmother. Board took me to Almond Jones; I think that was the second one. They gave me \$8.

EE: No, I'm more interested in what did it look like when you went into a hat factory. Were there dozens of people working? Were there...?

FS: Well, there could be a half a dozen women working [at a time]. And there was a forelady always, and she would give out the work. So each person had their duties to take care of. And you did. Of course, you expected to be paid for it. And that's what you had to have. Only cost you 5 cents to come on the bus, wherever you had to go. And I was on Baltimore Street, and I was able to do that. Always took my lunch in a bag—a sandwich. I remember there was a restaurant. One of the ten children—the youngest—and I became friendly and went there. We were more the same age. She no more could do what I could do. Her brother had talent—the one that had the ability to become a very wealthy man. And he had a brother; another one that I know he helped, but I can't tell you about the others. I only remember those two and the youngest. And the youngest and I, once in a while, if we had money left over and there was a restaurant



and they had some kind of biscuits or buns or something that you could go in and buy a cup of tea or coffee and you could eat as many of those buns as you wanted. You had to have 25 cents to give them, and we felt that was the best celebration of anything. We always tried to do that, once a month. So you see, I can't tell you all the things that were there waiting for us. We found them as time went on.

EE: Now, I understand that your father-in-law was involved in Beth Tfiloh congregation?

FS: There [was] a big cottage, uh hum. He helped demolish the cottage and build another, and he was one of the founders. If he hadn't died, he already had started to be a big contributor. So the name of Berman was there. He was the second man to die in that congregation. It was very sad. I never met him.

EE: So, did you join Beth Tfiloh?

FS: Automatically. The family belonged to Beth Tfiloh.

EE: So, you had never met Moe Berman through Beth Tfiloh?

FS: No, not through Beth Tfiloh.

EE: Because that's where your mother went when you moved.

FS: My mother didn't go to Beth Tfiloh.

EE: Oh no. I'm sorry.

FS: My mother didn't go to *shul*. She never learned anything in Hebrew.

EE: Your mother didn't go to *shul* when you moved up to Ashburton?

FS: No, no. Nope. She was always a homebody. That's what she had to take care of.



EE: Did she ever go to synagogue?

FS: If it was an occasion. No. I did. My brother didn't. My sister wasn't inclined to. You see, if your parents don't, and they don't take you along when you're a child, you just don't think that way. No, [as for] my sister and two brothers, it wasn't a part of their life at all.

EE: How did you introduce your children to Jewish life?

FS: To Jewish life? Well, once I married Moe, I was right in it. Because his brothers were part of Beth Tfiloh. I was married by Rabbi Rosenblatt. And I think I am now the oldest woman that is going to Beth Tefiloh for the number of years because [when I started], I was 18. Now, Bess Fishman didn't go to Beth Tfiloh in the early days. Bess Fishman, we met, and she was very nice; she was warm, and she tried. She had some of her friends come over after she told them what my profession was. So they said they would like to have a hat done. So, I don't remember all of it. But I bought a hat mold—not a mold, the body—and I cut the hats as I did, but I found that when I cut the hat at the top I cut a piece of her hair and everybody screamed. We laughed; we thought it was the funniest thing. I said [I wasn't] going to do it unless I do it the right way from then on. It was just something that we were trying and I said, "Uh uh, that's not funny." (laughs) I wouldn't want anybody cutting my hair, so I'm not going to cut theirs.

EE: Were you involved in the millinery world outside of Baltimore?

FS: No. I was in Baltimore when I owned my shops. I was going back and forth to buy in New York. First, in the earlier days, in Baltimore, the salesmen used to come once a month, each company, so you would see their wares and you buy from them. Then it started [to] drift away, and you found that they're not coming through the same way anymore. You had to go up to New York and towards the end. Well, of course I was in clothing then, and various things. The one that I opened, the first one was down on Park



Avenue. [I] came home to have my second child, and I was retiring. Customers started calling, and they [would] say, “Oh, you know me. Do this for me, do that for me.” And at first I said no. For four months I wouldn't even touch a needle. And then as some of the people that I had enjoyed knowing [came in], I'd say, “Oh well, come on out then, I'll see if I can do it for you.” And it grew. I made hats on Calloway Avenue for 20 years. After I closed Park Avenue, I told Moe that I would have children only if I could stay home and raise them myself, because my mother with her only grandchild did anything Barbara wanted. And then Barbara was so angry that she was going to have a sister, she said, “You can't blame me, I was the only child for so long.” I cried many times because her father gave her everything also. So that's why I wanted to stay home. And to this day, Barbara and Rikki are the dearest of sisters and friends, and Natalie is in between.

EE: Tell me how you expanded your business after that, and what made you do that. After Calloway Avenue, what happened? How did you go back into business?

FS: My husband Moe died three weeks after Natalie was married. My home was up for sale. I told the realtor, “Don't put the sign on the lawn until after the funeral because I don't want any interruptions.” And after the funeral, they put the “For Sale” sign up. This was on a fourth of July weekend. Moe said he didn't feel well. He had already had his first heart attack, and at the age of 57, he died. He had his first heart attack at the age of 50. Now, his father and his brother both died immediately. We were at Grossingers—remember Grossingers?—with another couple. And Moe got up and he didn't feel well. We still had about four days left. So for three days, Moe and I walked, trying to get rid of that terrible pain he had. [We] went to the doctors there and all. So the couple, they said, “Let's go home. We think that's what you want to do.” They were the ones that were driving, and I just said, “Yes, I think we should.” So we did, and we went into the doctor. Moe would never go to a hospital. [We] always went home, [and I] took care of him there. And he got better. He had to go to a psychiatrist because the dread of dying so rapidly for his brother and his father, he felt sure it was going to happen



to him. But he lived for seven years. He got better, but never completely well. So, we were still on Calloway Avenue when that happened, and we were supposed to go out to the club for the fourth of July. (sighs) In those days, you didn't have central air conditioning, but I had put units in the bedrooms, so after Moe had been in bed for a number of hours, he said, "Maybe I'll feel better if I go out on the glider out on the porch. Maybe I can breathe better there." We had a dog. The dog was lying down on his side of the bed. When Moe got up and went downstairs, the dog went, and he put half of his body under the glider. When Moe came in for lunch, the dog came in. [When] Moe didn't eat, the dog didn't eat. Moe came out again, he got on the glider, and there was the dog. The phone rang. It was getting towards the evening, and it was for me, [from] the couple that we were going with, and I told her that we couldn't go because Moe was not feeling well. And as I was walking out towards the porch again, my mother had her hand on the doorknob and she said, "I don't like the way Moe sounds." And I went over and he was, I guess they call that 'the death rattle,' I don't know. He was going. I called the doctor. He came over. He was gone. That was it. That was Fourth of July. That was the end of it. So, what was the question that you asked me then?

EE: How you started the business, the next business?

FS: Oh, so then I decided I could never stay home. We hadn't selected an apartment yet. I had seen something, but I said I would go out of my mind if I tried to stay home. I couldn't do it. Impossible. I had bought all of Natalie's linens for her trousseau from Ella Samuelson, and Ella had to move because they were putting a road through the shop. So when I heard that she was going to move into another place, I approached her and asked her if she would share a building. And she said, "Yes." But I found out afterwards, even though she tried to be kind, she was a very determined woman. She went out and she found the place, and then she told me about it, not saying before that, "I found the place. Would you like to see it?" or something. OK. I didn't mind that someone was taking care of it because I had so many things on my mind; here I'm going into a new





business, and I was not going into it like I did before. I decided that the women are becoming interested in accessories, and consequently, I was going to open not just the millinery that I was known for, but I was going to have accessories. And one of the things that prompted me to do that was, when I would come down on the bus to Hutzler's, and I would go get off the bus and there on Saratoga Street. Hutzler's had their bake shop, and I would go in there and I would buy what I wanted and pay for it and leave it, and then come out so I could go home that way too. I would walk down through the bakery into the men's department, and that's where they had umbrellas, and they all looked alike because they all had the crooked handle like this. And I thought on a rainy day a woman should be carrying a pretty umbrella. Something that would make her feel good. A rainy day makes you feel terrible. So, I bought umbrellas first. And then I bought handbags. As I was successful with each one, I kept going back to New York and buying various things. I had a buying office, and this one woman, she would take me to the various places. I found it very interesting, because she knew where to go. And I became the first person to sell accessories. Yes. With hats.

EE: In Baltimore, or in America?

FS: In Baltimore. Frances Berman Fashions. I wasn't in business in New York at all. And one thing led to another. I have people stop me now at the Giant [super market]. Men say to me, "You closed your shop. We don't know where to go buy our wives gifts." Somebody also said to me, "I'm still wearing your lingerie, your robes." And I told her, "I'm wearing all of them myself." I have a whole closetful. And the various things that I added to accessories was jewelry—I have a very great color sense. I started with millinery, added umbrellas, and added other things. When adding jewelry, I had a certain good taste about things. I know I have some things, to this day, that look like they're genuine. And I wouldn't buy anything that didn't look good. And it just developed beautifully. Then we added sportswear. It was just great. Very successful. And then after a number of years, my daughter Barbara was part of the business. I think I had four



girls on the floor, and I had a stock girl.

EE: Tell me about the club. You must have been one of the first members?

FS: No, no, no. We were one of the earlier members, but not the earliest. No. It wasn't what it is today, and yet today, I think they're having problems with their memberships. A number of them are. Because everything is so expensive, and we who have been there a long time and who are single today can't contribute. I don't go there socially unless I go for lunch or dinner. On Sunday nights, I have two friends that pick me up and I go there for dinner. I don't even go there. I don't drive anymore. And it's just an entirely different world. But I enjoyed it for the years that I had it. And it was wonderful.

EE: So, when did you join the club? You joined rather late.

FS: Twenty-five years, we were members. I was married.

EE: First of all, tell me which club you belonged to.

FS: The what?

EE: Which club you belonged to.

FS: Bonnie View.

EE: And why you picked Bonnie View because that was a...

FS: Because this girl that was working for me, she belonged to Bonnie View. It was up and coming. Now, Moe knew some people who belonged to the other one; I mentioned the name before.

EE: Woodhome.



FS: Woodholme. And we were out there as guests, and this one fellow—very popular, very well known family, money family—he says, “Come on Moe, join here. You'll enjoy it.” Moe says, “First of all, I don't know how to play golf, and secondly, I can't take the time for it.” And of course, I wasn't playing golf then, so we didn't. But if it hadn't been for this other girl telling us by that time about the various things the club offered that we joined Bonnie View.

EE: How did your family use the club?

FS: Well, Barbara and her husband joined it, and the others were guests. Natalie's husband played tennis, and he thought he would like to join, so he did. But then he had trouble with his shoulder, and he couldn't play tennis anymore, so he dropped out. And Rikki and Louis never joined any club.

EE: What do you think of the role that country clubs play here in Baltimore?

FS: In what respect?

EE: Just for Jewish people in Baltimore.

FS: If anybody learned to play golf and really enjoyed it, it was just something that you looked forward to all the time. I played every week. I played every Tuesday morning. I loved it.

EE: One question I wanted to ask you is why you chose Pikesville when you opened the store?

FS: When I went out to Ella's [Ella Samuelson's] place, I knew various people shopping there, and then I saw other shops coming along there and I thought, “I think that would be a good up and coming area.” That's it. Just for what was there and what was to be.

EE: What was Pikesville like when you came up here in the 60s?



FS: There wasn't too much. In fact, there was a gasoline station on the corner of Old Court Road and Reisterstown Road for a number of years, and then they closed up. And I was sitting at the pool one day at Bonnie View, at the club, and—what's his name? The jewelry store that was there for a number of years...

EE: Browns? J. Brown?

FS: Brown, yes. Jackie Brown sat down next to me at the side of the pool, and he said the gas station had been demolished. He says, "What do you think of a jewelry shop on the corner where the gas station was?" I said, "Oh, I think it's an excellent idea."

EE: How would you describe your clientele at your shop?

FS: Middle class.

EE: Did it change over time? Tell me how long you kept the shop open. When did you close it?

FS: I opened it after Natalie got married, in 1960. I'm trying to think what happened. I started working full time, and I left Barbara in charge many years later.

Stanley—Barbara's husband—had a shoe shop down in South Baltimore with his father. He decided that he wanted to go into business for himself. There was another building next door to me. The building that I bought was a home, was a residence. And the person that owned that and another one next door owned the two buildings. So on Reisterstown Road, you could not find anyplace that was for rent. I couldn't rent anything. It wasn't available. So I had heard that the second building had an office in it now, so that made it partially commercial. So I had my attorney get in touch with them, and I only wanted one building, and the man said he had two, and if he sells it he's going to sell only two. So I bought two. I had to borrow money. Anytime I went into business, I didn't have enough money for myself. The reason I didn't have the money, the Berman money, [is] my brother in law; he controlled it. My husband was gone. So I didn't have



any money out of the Bermans at all, so I had to go borrow money. I went to the bank, and they gave me what I needed. And I went into business, but Stanley didn't go into business until later, and then he decided that he wanted to go in for himself instead of working in South Baltimore. He had children, and he wasn't making enough of a salary. And he happens to have a very likeable personality. If he meets you once, he never forgets who you are. He remembers your name, and he talks to you all the time, and he makes you feel like you really know him. To this day, that's the way he is.

EE: So, what business did he buy?

FS: Shoes.

EE: Where?

FS: Right next door to me.

EE: And what's the name of his business?

FS: [post-interview edit: M'Lady] What was it originally? He's not in business now. They live in Florida. He had heart surgery. And he found that he couldn't take the winters here. I know I sat next to him in a car, we were all out to dinner together, and his body was trembling just like that. I knew that he was not up to it.

EE: Tell me what it was like to be a woman in business in the 60s. It wasn't...

FS: I did everything because it was necessary.

EE: Was it difficult? I mean, wasn't it more of a man's world in the business world?

FS: Well, I think it always was, but I was still dealing with women. So I didn't feel strange about it.

EE: And you didn't have difficulty with the banks?



FS: No. Never. I always paid. I didn't know how to do it any other way. [chuckles] I never had anything. But I realized that I have obligations.

EE: Were you involved in any organizations of business women or of business people?

FS: No. I had to contribute to certain ones, like the Associated [Jewish Charities], naturally you send money.

EE: So, what year did you sell the store?

FS: Did I sell it?

EE: Did you go out of business?

FS: I forgot. Because that was a general thing that was happening; it wasn't just an individual thing. I don't remember the year. Barbara would know. Barbara would know. [post-interview edit: 1990]

EE: So, how did you feel about [it] when you closed down the store?

FS: How did I feel about it? I must have had mixed emotions. No question about it. I didn't have an income anymore. I don't know. I can't even recall.

EE: So, did you sell the real estate? You sold the buildings?

FS: Yes. The Giant bought my buildings. Now originally, see the height of where the Giant is and where mine was, I thought originally, they were going to be able to bring it up and have the parking because they could use it. But they didn't; their employees are using mine. Now, the Giant now has purchased all the way down. They are getting ready to renovate the entire thing. I sold them a small piece while I was still there that they wanted to attach to the building that they had for things that had to be kept cold. So it didn't bother me, and they gave me money for [it]; it was really no more than this. They



needed it to fill in on something. And then, the young man that worked for them, his parents and Moe and I, were very good friends. After he married, he's living close to Washington. I think he's still with them because he was very good. And he told Louis, he handled things with Louis, my son-in-law, because he was with the Giant. And I can't remember the sum of money, I can't remember what date, but I know that Louis and this young man took care of everything. And I trust Louis. Because he's that kind of a person. His mother worked for me. His father had a store downtown—a men's shop down on Baltimore Street years and years and years ago.

EE: So, what do you think of Pikesville now?

FS: Now? It's questionable. Some of it is exactly as it was like the delicatessen store. The various stores there have changed ownership. I don't go to any of them there. In fact, I had some money in the bank there, [and] I think we finally withdrew it. It wasn't that much. So I don't have anything there.

EE: But where did you live when you sold your house on Calloway Avenue? Where did you move to?

FS: Went into an apartment.

EE: Where?

FS: Doverdale Road. Small apartment. Rikki was in college. She went to College Park. The funny thing [is], a very dear cousin of mine became housemother for a sorority there, and Rikki lived in the sorority house. This cousin of mine and myself, we were dear cousins. Unfortunately, she died, too young.

EE: So, which apartment did you live in? Do you remember where you moved when you sold Calloway?



FS: I can't even think of the man who owned it. He was in Bonnie View. They don't belong there anymore. I know where it is, but I can't think of the name. He built some apartments, and I took one of them. But it was small, and it was nothing.

EE: Were you in the city or in the county?

FS: Oh no, city. It was off Park Heights Avenue. And I didn't live there too long. What did I do? What did I do from there?

EE: I think you might have gotten married again.

FS: I can't remember in between to the time that I did get married. Well, my husband that I married, we were friends. In fact, my husband never had children; he was religious, and... What was I trying to tell you? My children and grandchildren loved him so dearly that he got all the happiness that he didn't have earlier in life. Because to them he was 'Pop Lou', and that's all there was to it. And he just adored them, and they adored him. Now we have two babies—new babies named after him. So he should be very happy.

EE: Now what was his name?

FS: Louis Sulsky.

EE: And what made you decide to get married again?

FS: We were friends for years. He and Jean were members of Miriam Lodge, and Moe and I were in Miriam Lodge.

EE: I asked you why you married Louis Sulsky.

FS: Oh, yes. My children loved him. I felt that he was a little bit old for me, but I had known him for so long, so I agreed. The first five years were great. I had never traveled before. We never had the money to do it. So he made all the decisions, and we traveled





for five years. He sold and rented men's wear for weddings. He had a very successful place. He had a partner down on Baltimore Street. So I had never traveled, [and] he had never traveled until Jean died. And so we traveled for five years. But then he had a heart attack, and he just wasn't the same anymore. He just kept going down, down, down.

EE: But you were married for quite a long time.

FS: Yes. I can't remember right at this second for how many years, but it was for a long time. [post-interview edit: 30 years]

EE: Do you remember what year you did get married?

FS: What year? I can't remember. [post-interview edit: 1964]

EE: You mentioned that you met your husband—the new one—through the Miriam Lodge. Tell me about the Miriam Lodge; what was that?

FS: Well, I belonged for social reasons. And then Lou's wife and other people that I knew belonged as well. Lou didn't have children. The family always went to him because he was religious and he would take care of all the things when the person died. Take care of the burial and all, everything that had to be done. He didn't talk about all his family because I never met many of them, but he always talked about his mother and Jean. I only met one cousin of Jean's. We liked each other very much. He always, always went for *Yiskors* and through Beth Tfiloh, of course. And he had so many who I didn't know, they were only names as far as I was concerned, and I was not going to establish that for myself. But it was unimportant. So, I retained Jean and his mother. And of course, I sent for my part of the family. And so one day, I get a letter from Beth Tfiloh, "What is your relationship with Jean Sulsky?" I laughed. And I sat down and wrote them a note and told them that [I] was Lou's former wife, but [Jean was] also a friend of mine, and we were very fond of one another, so she was satisfied. But she had



to know. I thought that was so funny. So that's it. I don't know of anything else.

EE: What is your connection now to Beth Tfiloh?

FS: What's my connection?

EE: How do you participate?

FS: At holiday time. When Natalie married, after Moe died, for the holidays, I would buy the seats for Rikki and with Natalie and Louis and—who was another one? I know I bought two men's seats, and I think I bought three women's seats, and I paid for all, and I do every year. Barbara had to join Stanley's. His grandfather was a member of Oheb Shalom, so she felt very strange when she first went there, but the thing that she liked most of all that kept her there was—she didn't want to leave Beth Tfiloh—but the thing that kept her at Oheb Shalom was that you could sit with your husband. And that's the way they always went to *shul*. But now, because we have the kind of Rabbi that can, when he gives you a sermon, he is fantastic. Barbara, when she's in around the holidays, comes to hear his sermon. This past holiday, I wasn't well, so she sat in my seat. I have an end seat. And everybody wondered where I was, but at least she was there. And Rikki. And Rikki's one daughter. Yes. I have one, two, three, and five seats. And they are not inexpensive. But I've always paid for them.

EE: [Would you like to talk] about what the responsibility of your generation is to your children's generation in maintaining ties to Judaism?

FS: What do you want?

EE: Well, you mentioned that you buy the seats for high holidays. And I was wondering if you have a sense of [responsibility]. And you pay for the food for the *seders*.



FS: Oh, do I. You know I didn't mind paying for the food. Well, I used to have it naturally, but when I had my home, I couldn't seat more than 14 people, and I opened up the tables. I was from the living room window to the dining room window. But what was I trying to tell you?

EE: We were talking about the responsibility...

FS: So, I would always have the dinners. Naturally, as it should be. And then, I guess when Lou died—no, before—the three daughters got together, and they said [that] I work every day and then to come home and cook, [and] that they were going to. One of them was going to take it over for the holidays, and they decided on Natalie because at that time, Natalie had the largest home. See, I didn't mind buying food, doing everything.

And paid for two girls to serve. But once you hit that third girl, I said, “What do you need the third person for?” She says, “Well, mother, I usually have about 20 people or more,” and she said, “And I start cooking a month in advance and freezing everything.” And she does, and she's a terrific cook. Rikki is a terrific baker, and she is a terrific cook, and she says, “I don't mind doing all that.” But when it comes to night, when everybody has to be served, she says, “I want to sit down like a lady and be served also.” I said, “Well, Natalie, you're right.” And that's the way it's been. She's entitled to it. But when I get the bills, *oy vey ismir*.

EE: Can I just ask you one question? [Then] I think we'll close up. When you think [about it], since you were in the clothing business and dressing women, accessorizing women, how would you rate Baltimore, or Baltimore Jewish women as dressers?

FS: As dressers? Well...

EE: How do you think that they were style-wise?

FS: Well, you have different groups. You have some with a great deal of money, and they can buy the most expensive [things], and they do. It's all [about] the dollar sign and



good taste. It depends on what you have, or how fortunate you are to have both, and that makes you able [to], for less money, [be] as well dressed. Now, you have Ruth Shaw. She has, I think, mostly gentile people, hundreds of dollars for things. She has a young man there working for her, and he knows I don't go in there. I went in there one time, and I backed out, because I knew that it wasn't for me. I knew the value of some of the things that she had, and it was not for me. And even knowing some of the things that were so excellent, I couldn't afford them. I wouldn't be able to. So I wasn't trying to show off; I was just trying to be me. And that was it. Now, the one that was there for so many years that just left there—what's the name of it?

EE: Octavia?

FS: Octavia. I'm wondering how they're going to do up where they are now, because I can't see them getting as many gentile people up here as they did down in the other place.

EE: What's your favorite store to shop in?

FS: For department stores, it's the one—what's the name of it? The newer...

EE: Nordstroms?

FS: Nordstroms.

[END OF CD 2]

EE: OK, this is the third tape with Frances Berman Sulsky on April 30, 2001. This is Elaine Eff, oral historian for the Jewish Women's Archive in Baltimore, Maryland. And you were just going to tell me about how you got your name...

FS: I said to my mother, "How did you get the name of [Fay-ga?]" because my Jewish name is Fay-ga. And in those days, they used to have their children in their apartments,



and after she delivered, evidently he was so capable, and she was grateful to him that when he said, "Mrs. Horowitz, what are you going to name your baby?" And she told him, "Fage," and he says, "May I name your child for you?" And she said, "Yes," because she would have said "yes" to anything he asked. So, he put down Frances. I said to her, "Could you give me his address? I'd like to write to him." She says, "I don't know where to find him now." I want to shake his hand. My God, I don't think I could be a Fanny under any circumstances. Fay-ge's there, but Fanny, no. And that's it. All these little things that crop up in a lifetime; isn't it amazing?

EE: You actually told me something interesting. You said, about the one thought you had about the hereafter?

FS: Meeting my husband.

EE: Why don't you tell me that, say how you...

FS: It sort of calms me, and it doesn't give me as great a fear of dying, because I'm hoping that I'll be able to possibly meet him. Because that was the love of my life. It's wonderful to have somebody. He was very special.

EE: What made him such a special person?

FS: His personality was just wonderful. Anybody that knew Moe Berman only spoke highly of him. He was the youngest in a family of five, and he was just a very special man. I mean, you would meet him, you would remember him, and you would enjoy being in his company. And he was witty, he was dear. In those days, they gave dinner parties. We gave dinner parties. You would get in a cook, and you would know how many people you were going to have, and all that sort of thing. And he would get a few drinks in him, and he would say, "Do you know... When Barbara was born, Frances asked her mother to come and stay with Barbara for two weeks," and he says, "It's now been three years." (laughter) That's how my mother just stayed. I rented an apartment for her



before Barbara was born, and then I did ask her. Otherwise, I couldn't have gone to work. And I said, "If I buy a home, would you live with me?" And she was crazy about her granddaughter. She spoiled the hell out of her. Her father did the same thing.

EE: What was she like as a grandmother?

FS: My mother was quiet. She was very efficient as a cook, and I think she was grateful as a mother. But then I heard from a cousin of mine, when we were very close, she [told me that] my mother came up to visit her sister. They were not that close as sisters. Well, my mother came up to visit and she said to her sister, "You know, I worked for Frances, I cooked, and I took care of the children." She really took full care of Barbara in the early years. And she said, "I think she should give me a salary." She said this to her sister.

Her sister turned to her and she said—because her daughter told me this—"You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Do you know of anybody that has a maid? You have a maid, you have everything that's wonderful. You wouldn't have had it on your own. Even if Frances had taken and paid for these things, you wouldn't have had them." My mother got angry, packed up, and came home. (laughter) Because the two sisters never get along. But I thought that was the funniest thing. She spoke her mind. But my brother, who never married, he always gave her money. And when she would go down to visit him—he lived with my father when he was living—she would always bring something that would be his favorite that she had cooked in the years that we all lived together. And he was so generous with her. And it was wonderful. But she felt that I should give her a salary. (laugh)

EE: Did you ever sense that your mother questioned your being a full-time member of the workforce? Working full time?

FS: Me or my mother's working?

EE: Yours.



FS: Well, she wouldn't have had even what she had if it hadn't been for that. (uhum) If she thought that way, I thought she would be entirely wrong, because she wouldn't have had it. She wouldn't have met the people. She wouldn't have had the money, the wherewithal. She was quiet; she was never a woman that could laugh and talk with you. She could listen to you, but she had her own thoughts. No, she wasn't an asset for laughter. She was wonderful as a mother, a grandmother, a cook; she didn't want for anything. I don't know what she wanted. She had a brother who lived in New York, and he had two sons, and he married a cousin. You know years ago—and they still say it—if you marry someone of the same blood... they're not normal. Well, he married this cousin. She was very outgoing; he was quiet. And when the boys had got older, someone advised him to buy an automobile gas station down South or West.

Somewhere so far away. And he went down there—the family did—and he didn't know how to run it. He lost his money, so he called me and asked me if I would take the four of them in, but of course he would like to buy a grocery store and that he could live in the same building, and then that's the way he would be able to provide for his family. So of course, I said yes. Oh, you don't know how many people I used to have. The family used to talk about it. I never said no to anyone, because I had the room, and I wanted them to be happy. So he came up with his two boys, and I gave them the third floor.

They had the two bedrooms [and] bath; my mother did the cooking, I provided the food. He was very happy. He's not making any moves; he's not looking for anything, he's so content. I guess it was appeasing his soul because he had lost his money down at this place of business. So, finally it was months, [and] I said, “Uncle Irving, are you still looking for a grocery store?” He says, “I'll get right on it tomorrow.” He went downtown and next to the market—the big market—[and] he bought a place. It wasn't a grocery store, but it's a place that sold all kinds of objects, and it had living quarters upstairs, and they moved in, and he made money. He did very well. So you see, it can be done; you have to have the will, and just get into it. If I hadn't said anything, he'd live with me forever. Unfortunately, this one son—the younger son who was brilliant—something



happened to him mentally. It was there and it was sad. It was very sad. They didn't put him away, but they kept him. They moved to Florida, but he died a very young man.

EE: That's very sad.

FS: And that's because the blood and whatever else that they used to talk about an illness like that. Mental.

EE: That's not unusual. It's sad to hear. What do you think you learned about raising children or even being a businesswoman from your mother? Were there some of those values that...?

FS: Well, I knew what she could do because I was the oldest, and I had three other offspring in my family. And she really did a good job; she did her very best. And she really had problems while never having enough money to even feed her children. So it was anything but a happy life for her. It wasn't at all. And I tried to give her whatever I could when I was able to, and she appreciated it up to a certain point, and then she felt that she was worth more. Of course, I was so surprised, because my brother was supplying it. But she felt that because she was doing it for me, I should recognize it even in another way and that money was a thing that she wanted. So listen, it's like anything else in life. When she died, she had a bank account, so I said to my brother Sam, "Put it in your sister's name. Give her the money." So family, listen, it's forever.

EE: When did your mother die? How old was your mother when she passed away?

FS: I was married to Lou, and we were in Europe, and the airlines weren't functioning properly. And I forgot what country we were in when I got a call that my mother had died. She had awakened one morning and she just went about what she had to do, and she had an attack of some kind, and she died. And they were trying to get in touch with me because they didn't know whether they could make the funeral. [If] they could get in touch with me and I could get home, they could make the funeral for the next day. If not,





they were going to have to do it for the following [day]. So I forgot what country I was in. I had gone upstairs. We had breakfast downstairs. I had gone upstairs, and the phone rang, and if I had left from the restaurant, I wouldn't have gotten the call, so it would have been two days. But as it was, they caught me and we had to try to get a flight home. And they were on strike. But fortunately, I was home in time for the funeral for the next day. So, I mean...

EE: So how old was your mother?

FS: Well, according to today's world, she wasn't too old. She had to be a woman in her sixties. Of course, today when you read [the news, it's] eighties, eighties, eighties, constantly. When they speak with anything less, it's unusual. Because I do read the whatchamacallit. So it goes. What else may I tell you?

EE: Well, I'm just wondering if there's anything—since this is about Jewish women, this interview—if there's anything in particular we might want to talk about before we close up.

FS: No.

EE: Do you want to say anything about your girlfriends, women as friends?

FS: No. You have dear friends at different stages of life who for one reason or another cease being your dearest friends, and you enjoy what you can with them while you can, and other than that, it's your family. And you must always be doing something for your family. I never stopped. Fortunately, Louis takes care of me financially. I don't have to pay anybody. Rikki gives of herself wholeheartedly. Completely. She gives of herself to her friends, to her friends' parents. There are very few people in life that do that. She is one unusual woman. She is a joy. And whoever knows her just loves her. And she's vivacious. She just wants to do [things] for anyone and everyone. She's just very special.



EE: That's wonderful. I want to thank you. I think we should take a break. I enjoyed this tremendously. It was—

FS: Did you? I enjoyed it. I didn't think I would ever do this for so long.

EE: Who would have guessed you had so much to say? But it's been very worthwhile, and I really enjoyed it.

FS: So you better take the credit for it.

EE: It's all yours. And I thank you because it's wonderful.

FS: It was just wonderful talking to you and being in your company. And I didn't feel that it was a problem or a chore. It was just easy going.

EE: Wonderful. All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]