



# Fiola Blum Transcript

ELAINE EFF: This is Elaine Eff. I am in the home of Fiola Blum at 11 Slade Avenue in Baltimore. We are going to talk about her life for the Jewish Women's Archive "Weaving Women's Words" Project. Today is August 20, 2001. Why don't we just start, Fiola, by your telling me who you are and some of your earliest memories of growing up in Baltimore?

FIOLA BLUM: Hi, Elaine. I'm Fiola Blum. I'm ninety years old. I have had a very interesting, wonderful life. My grandparents met in Baltimore. My grandfather had three daughters, and his wife died at the birth of the third child. So, when he married my grandmother, and they had three girls, it was a family of six children. They were very close. They lived in South Baltimore. My grandfather sold shoes. He had his own store. Then they moved from South Baltimore to North Avenue, West North Avenue, and eventually ended up in Forest Park. My mother was married – oh God – how many years ago?

EE: Did you know your grandparents?

FB: Oh, I knew them very well, yes. My grandparents were wonderful, sweet people. My earliest memory was my fourth birthday. My mother, of course – you didn't have somebody to take care of the children. So, on my fourth birthday, my mother dropped me off at my grandmother, who was babysitting, in today's terms. She put her arm around me and said, "My, how time does fly." I was four years old. That's my earliest memory. I've got a lot of memories of those days. I remember the First World War meant soldiers camping on Reisterstown Road when we lived in the 4800 block of Park Heights. That was County, believe it or not. It's a jungle now. But it was County then. I remember when the war was over, the boys hopping off the streetcars and saying, "Read



all about it. Read all about it. Buy your paper." That was way before, of course, radio and television, or any of that sort of thing. I went to Pimlico School, which was a county school. I remember that my principal's name was Miss Porter.

EE: What do you remember about –? You said your grandparents originally lived in South Baltimore. Do you know where that was?

FB: On Cross Street, right opposite the market. I had my first milkshake at the Cross Street market; I think it cost ten cents. There was a saloon next door. I can remember my grandfather coming out while I'm bending down to look under the swinging door, and he gave me a punch on my backside and said, "We don't do that." There were a lot of memories – the vegetable men, the fruit men, and all the people in the market were my friends. But I was a little girl from the country because I'm living out in the county. So, they liked it when I came down there.

EE: Well, first of all, tell me – I want to get to where you lived in the county? What were you doing –?

FB: 4818 Park Heights Avenue. My parents went there as bride and groom. I was born – my older brother, Morton, was born there. I was born there. My younger brother, Albert, was born in the hospital. He was six years younger than I. We lived there until I was about twelve years old because actually I didn't know that many Jewish people. We were the only Jewish family on the block. I did go to Eutaw Place Sunday School and made a few friends there. But the crowd that you joined in that period lived around Lake Drive. That's where most of the nice Jewish families lived. I won't say "most" because an awful lot of them were in Ashburton – not Ashburton; that was restricted. But in Forest Park and Park Heights.

EE: Tell me what that area was like. It sounds to me like your parents may have been the first people to have lived in that house.



FB: Oh, they were. It was a brand-new house. I think they said they paid four or six thousand for it – something in that vicinity. They sold Park Heights and moved to Forest Park so that I would meet Jewish people. They were very afraid that my contacts were non-Jewish. I went to Forest Park High School there. I went to 49 before that, a junior high, and I went to Forest Park the first year it opened, I think. It's a lot of years. I graduated in February of 1929. My father would not let me go out of town to college. So, I decided that Jimmy and I were going to get married anyhow. We might as well work around that. We became engaged in 1929, and we were married in 1930. Compared to today's affairs, there were thirty-five at our wedding. It was at the Lord Baltimore Hotel. We went to Canada on a honeymoon. We had planned to go to Europe. But then, that Depression came along in 1929 and prevented that. So, we ended up with a very nice honeymoon in Canada when most of our friends didn't get beyond Norfolk. In 1932, I had Jim, Jr., our first child. Three years later I had the second one, Harry, named after my father-in-law, who didn't live to see but one grandchild. We rented a house on Gist Avenue and built a house at 3507 Bonfield Road, the first house we owned and where the boys grew up. When the war started or the preparation of war, Jim and I, during that period, were wardens for the neighborhood of Park Heights and Seven Mile Lane. We also taught first-aid at high schools and at apartment buildings to large groups. Big Jim took a job down at Sparrows Point because he was told that he had only a few months until his 38th birthday and he should work down there instead of being drafted. After the war, things were a little bit rough. I became an active member of the United Order of True Sisters, a philanthropic organization, went through the chairs, and was its President in 1946. I said, at the time, if I ever worked that hard again, I was going to get paid for it. When my Presidency ended, I answered two ads from the paper. One was selling real estate, and one was selling The Book of Knowledge. Jim said, "If you think you're going out at night selling The Book of Knowledge, you're out of your cotton-picking mind. Fiddle around with the real estate if you want to play with it." Well, I sold the first house on Glen Avenue for seventeen thousand dollars in the first month of my being in the real



estate business. I worked for a man named Wallace Flowers, who had an office on 25th Street, out of my bailiwick, completely. But I was very good at selling, not so hot at listing. Anything that came along, I more or less had a customer for it. I became active with a lot of realtors -- friendly with them. B. Howard Richards was owned by Sidney Cohen. He used to have regular Christmas parties. I met an awful lot of people who were friends for many years -- non-Jewish, mostly. I was asked to be on the Board of Realtors of Baltimore and a Member of the Multiple Listing Group. I served several years with each of these groups. One year, I was asked -- the first year, I was asked to speak at the convention in Ocean City. I was on a panel of four. The other three were men from the counties. They were very dull, I might put it gently. When I got up, I had learned that to be a good speaker, you have to tell a good story in the beginning of a speech and also in the middle of a speech, stop and tell a story, and at the end. I can only remember the final story. This was about a meeting of a group of ladies' final meeting of the year. I don't know why I'm injecting this, but it's funny. A gentleman, a little, fat, old professor, was asked to speak on the subject of sex. Now, he kept looking at his watch because he had to catch a connection, make a connection. Finally, it was his turn to speak. When he said, "I have been asked to speak briefly on the subject of sex." He said, "It gives me great pleasure," and he sat down. That's the way I ended my speech. Well, it was very funny. People thought it was, after these three dull countrymen. So, I was then known as "The Sex Lady." I told another story relating to a toilet, and I was called "The Toilet Lady." Nevertheless, I pumped up the activity of that convention. Jimmy and I went to every city and state and national convention that we could get to. It was a wonderful period. We learned to travel, Jimmy and I. We enjoyed traveling. We went to Mexico every year for about seven years. We went to Europe a couple of times and cruises when we could. Wonderful life. Then what happened? Let's see. Jim, Jr. came into the picture. And he sold the land to the builder of the Imperial Apartments and got an extra bonus, I think, for renting it sooner than a year. It was a success for the builder.



EE: Tell me what, I mean, we are moving fast in time, and I'll probably want to go back and fill in on some of these details. But tell me where the Imperial Apartments were.

FB: At Park Heights and Clark's Lane in Park Heights.

EE: Was that a significant breakthrough?

FB: Oh, yes, in the business. In the business. Because Jim was very, very ambitious. He was good. He was a smart businessman. The Imperial was the largest apartment built around that time. He had it, and it was a very successful project. Later on, I was working on where the 7 Slade now appears. He got the final sale on it and rented it completely within a year. That eventually turned into a condominium. Condominium? Yeah. But we sold some apartments. We didn't have exclusives on that. Then, he got hold of the property at One Slade. He sold that to Joe Meyerhoff and handled the sale for a while. But then, he began to have marital problems, which upset the family and Jim also. So, Fiola Blum finished that session with 1 Slade.

EE: Fiola, I'd love to talk about – when did Fiola Blum Realty come into being? Why don't you tell me you got –? You said you had a choice when you answered the ad.

FB: Yes, okay. You're right. I skipped that. So, I started with the real estate.

Incidentally, the man who took The Book of Knowledge retired after three, four years, a millionaire. [laughter] Moved to Florida. Be as it may, this became a good business and a family business. Then, all of a sudden, I had a tiger by the tail. I made Jimmy come with me. He was a merchandise man in one of the department stores prior to that. So, he joined me in business.

EE: This is Jimmy – which Jimmy?

FB: Senior.



EE: Jimmy, your husband?

FB: My husband. We had a four-bedroom house on Bonfield Road. Three bedrooms were turned into offices. We at least had a place to sleep. I worked, in the beginning, for Wallace Flowers for two years. He couldn't see my way of thinking, and so we left friends. Parted friends. Worked for Hammerman for two years. I didn't get along too well with their sales manager. I liked Bud and his family; they were great. I opened my own business.

EE: What year was that?

FB: I think it was around 1959, '56, somewhere. 1950's. And Harry would know more. I opened the office in my house. Had two or three salespeople come to me. I hired them. Then, all of a sudden, I realized that there were so many cars being parked out in front the neighbors were going to complain. So, I decided we had to have – we were overwhelmed with traffic and cars and people. I realized that something had to give. We saw the property on Slade Avenue, 110 Slade, that was for sale and bought it very quickly. And then, immediately bought an apartment for ourselves at 11 Slade and sold Seven Mile, Bonfield Road. Things worked very, very fast.

EE: Tell me what it meant to open your own realty company. I mean, first of all, you were a woman. Was that common?

FB: No. I was one of the first. Certainly the first to be active on the board and be able to meet my peers on an absolute same level. They wanted me to speak. A lot of the committee meetings – I was, as I said, a member of the Multiple Listing Board for three years and the Real Estate Board for two sessions, or three sessions. It's all so far back now that I am beginning to forget about it. But I made wonderful friends and marvelous contacts.

EE: Tell me did the Multiple Listing Board do?



FB: Well, the Multiple Listing? Everybody turned their listings into one center. That was just before computers came along. Donald Grempler was an expert at computers. He was a genius at that. There were people like [Charles A.] Skirven – what the hell is his first name? I can't think. Tim Baker. Phil Chase. These were all personal friends.

Good friends. We never entertained without including them. They never entertained without including us. In other words, we were social as well as business friends. Big Jim was absolutely a genius at knowing the history of Baltimore. Any time that anybody wanted to know about any businesses or families, they would call Jim.

EE: Which Jim is that?

FB: Senior.

EE: Your husband?

FB: Yeah. We were honored – there's some mementos over at the office – on many occasions. It was a fun period. It was a great period.

EE: Tell me, how was your husband such a Baltimore expert?

FB: He liked history, and his family was in the retail business. Harry Blum, Sr., was a wonderful man, a beloved man by everybody. Everybody loved him. He was just well-known, loved, liked, and my husband Jim was sort of the same kind of a person. He would help anybody out that needed help. In those days, a lot of people needed help. Some of the multi-millionaires today weren't that wealthy in those days. Where do I go from here?

EE: Your family was in business also, weren't they?

FB: My family was in the scrap business, they call it. Junk in those days. I can remember my father driving up the front door on Park Heights Avenue in a Model T Ford.



There were three children. But the car only had three seats. However, that didn't last long, he got a bigger one. The first car was an exciting thing. He was in the scrap metal business, away an awful lot – traveled. I started dating, I guess when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old. I had to be very careful because my father was very strict. I went with two definite groups of people, most of them starting around Har Sinai Society, which met on Sunday nights. I think there were about seven marriages from that group – within the group. The other group was, without mentioning names, a group that I used to go horseback riding with on Sunday afternoon. All great guys. I had a nice social life. I really enjoyed it.

EE: How did you meet your husband?

FB: At this Sinai Society. That was one of – we were one of the seven couples. As a matter of fact, we got married in September because everybody else got married in June.

EE: Now, your family was in the scrap metal business?

FB: My father, yeah.

EE: Was his father? How did he get in that business?

FB: OK. My grandfather, his father – his name was Robert – brought over from Europe the three Shapiros that are around today. It was Morris – dead, Ike – dead. Children, both. And – Morris, Ike – Jake. Boston Iron and Metal was Morris Shapiro. He was the wealthiest. He took the name because they all came over to Boston. The rest of them were all descendants in Baltimore – a whole family divided between the two cities. They were all in what is known, in those days, as the junk business. My father was awfully smart. He once found a metal that he just didn't recognize for a while. He finally figured it out. It was – I can't even remember – well, gold, silver – what was the other one?





EE: Brass?

FB: No.

EE: Copper?

FB: No, all that he knew, beginning to end. But a good metal. The good metal. Rings were made out of.

EE: Platinum?

FB: Platinum. He recognized it in a pile of junk as platinum. Government sales were very important to the people in those days. As a matter of fact, a lot of them went into the shipyard business and that sort of thing. My father died too young. He was fifty-two.

That's when the big money was made afterwards. My brother, Morton, ran the business for a while. But then, he died on a tennis court. I just found out that – I don't know if you know; this is an aside – Bootsie Levinson lost her daughter a couple of weeks ago or last week. I don't know. They're all nice people. Lovely people.

EE: Where does Bootsie Levinson fit in to this story?

FB: Her father was Jake Shapiro. She and I.D. Shapiro — that's her brother — and the one on Old Court Road. They were all sisters and brothers — one family. Ike had nine children, I think. An oldest and youngest were boys; the rest were all girls. Morris had four children. Two in California are dead. Gertrude Cascarella is one here, and John Shapiro is the other.

EE: How would you describe your family life growing up? I mean, was everyone from your father's family fairly well-to-do?

FB: They were comfortable. No, they weren't well-to-do. They were just comfortable. The family, I wouldn't call it close. My grandmother had eight children, and she would



move from – oh, this is terrible to say – she would move from one child to the next each month, because that was when the fight broke out. She made life a little difficult for my mother because, in those days, it was a tremendous prejudice between German and Russian Jews.

EE: Well, why don't you tell me about that and how that came into play in your family?

FB: Well, it came into play because my mother was German, and my father was intolerant. It didn't make a very, real happy family. They survived, but there were times when I thought it wouldn't. I just don't know how to put it. They weren't a loving family. Within ourselves, we were okay. Not great. But okay. My brothers both were tennis players. My father took great pride in that.

EE: How would you describe the relationship or tensions between German and Russian Jews in Baltimore?

FB: Very great.

EE: Tell me how it was enacted.

FB: Well, it was Suburban Club. Those who weren't accepted were able to belong and join and form their own club which became Woodholme. It's only in the last – oh, I don't know how many years – that a relationship between them has been very good.

EE: Which was which?

FB: Which was what?

EE: Which group started which club?

FB: Well, the Suburban Club is much older than Woodholme. There were very wealthy families who were members, and everybody couldn't get in. That's when Woodholme



formed. And then, later on, Smith Avenue, when it was Chestnut – not Chestnut.

EE: Summit?

FB: Summit was formed. Even then, of course, the dues structure had something to do with it. Chestnut Ridge came along. That had a few non-Jews in it, I believe. So did Summit in the beginning.

EE: So, are you saying that these were all German-Jewish clubs?

FB: Oh yes. There weren't any non-Jews in –

EE: What are the –?

FB: Beyond a certain degree.

EE: So, what did the Russian Jews do for their entertainment?

FB: Well, they were Woodholme. They were definitely Woodholme. Still are.

EE: How would you describe the difference between German-Jews, and Russian Jews?

FB: Oh, God. That's a bad question. How would you describe Nazism? I'm trying to think of other situations where there's a step down. Look, there were the Spanish Jews. There were the – oh God, the Sephardic. Does that mean anything? That's not pronounced right. All kinds of Jews were prejudiced, I think. It's just, I guess, like the African Americans. There are different relations in family – step-downs, step-ups.

EE: How did your parents get together?

FB: Through business. My mother was somebody's secretary that my father did business with, and they met. I can remember them saying that living on Cross Street over the store, the streetcar conductor or motorman would wait until my father got there



before pulling up. My father lived in East Baltimore in a rooming house, a boarding house – whatever they called it then. He tried his best to mingle with family and friends. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't.

EE: Can you describe any of the stories you've heard about the German and Russian Jews trying to get together?

FB: No, I can't remember specifics of that kind. No.

EE: Tell me about your religious background.

FB: Well, my grandfather and grandmother belonged to Eden Street Shul. Then, they moved to Eutaw Place and Lanvale [Street]. Rabbi [William] Rosenau now used to call my grandmother “Frau Minz.” The name was M-I-N-Z. My mother and father were married there at the Temple, or by the Temple Rabbi. When Jimmy and I – Jimmy's family belonged to Oheb [Shalom], also belonged to Eutaw Place. When Jimmy and I, who adored Ed Israel, who was rabbi of Bolton Street – that's where we met – we went to Rabbi Rosenau and said that we were going to get married. He was very caustic when we said, “We want you to perform the prayer, and Rabbi Rosenau will marry us.” He said, “I am perfectly capable of performing a marriage ceremony.” Well, we still had Ed Israel. Ed Israel said, “Let me handle it.” As I said, there were thirty-five people at our wedding. It was no big deal.

EE: Where was Rabbi Rosenau from?

FB: Eutaw Place. He was “the Pope.” He was a Pope. That was in Prohibition Days because my father being able to buy a case of champagne, which was rare. Incidentally, we have belonged to every single congregation. It's ridiculous. All our background was at a temple, what is now Temple Oheb Shalom. But there was a time when we then joined Har Sinai. And then, Ed Israel died. We adored Lieberman, Rabbi Lieberman, from Madison Avenue. So we joined – our boys went to the other synagogue there. We



decided that if our boys would do – we've got to go with them. They're not coming with us. So, we joined Madison Avenue. We heard there were very few openings. Then, Rabbi Lieberman died, and we didn't like the successor. We got back to Temple Oheb Shalom on Park Heights Avenue. Now, my son, who is my only survivor, blood survivor – not really – I have a couple of grandchildren – of that generation, adores Rabbi [Mitchell] Wohlberg. We've never been in anything Orthodox, but he and his wife and most of that family are members of that. So, I am alone, absolutely the only one at Oheb Shalom. I'm in a bad spot because I can't drive because of my eyes. I like temple. I enjoy going to temple. I've got to see Jesse Harris, who is the Secretary/Manager, whatever you call it, over there, to find out if I can put a sign up, "I need a lift to [inaudible]." [laughter] I have to get the help somewhere because they're living in Mt. Washington and go out that way. And it won't work.

EE: What do you like about belonging to a synagogue?

FB: Well, I go every time I have yahrtzeit for any of my family, on the anniversary of their birth or their death. I guess it's a ritual that, I guess, I don't say that I listen to everything. But the music and the surroundings are very important to me. So, I do go when I can. I love the fact that Oheb now has a six o'clock service every Friday night. So that if a person wants to go, or if I did, I would go at six o'clock, and it's over at seven. But I was driving then. I have been sick since November. I won't say it was my first heart attack. I've had many. But that one, followed by one in December, followed by another one in December, caused me to have open heart surgery in January if I was to live. I came through it, thank goodness, beautifully. As a matter of fact, I went to the doctor today – first time in three months – and he said everything's great, except my eyes.

EE: Now, you seem great. You move really well. It's wonderful.

FB: I do pretty well.



EE: Do you ever think about religion as part of your success?

FB: No. Hard work. Oh, I guess religion is part of everybody's success. It has an importance. But, actually, to sell anything, to sell a house, you don't pray to God. I don't pray to God that this deal goes through. It's hard work and knowing.

EE: Let's get back to how you came to start Fiola Blum and what it was like to be a woman working in a man's world. I know you told me you were friendly with a lot of other – but I am also curious about how you cornered the market that you cornered.

FB: There again, I think it is hard work with personality. I think you've got to give it all. You've got to be a people person, a people person in a business like this, where you are working with everybody, and you've got to get the confidence of the people. You've got to be honest. You've got to have knowledge of rules and regulations pertaining to real estate, of the City and State, and what the people actually want. You've got to know your people, and don't belittle them, and don't underestimate their knowledge. It might take a little longer to learn what they actually want and can afford. It's a big expenditure, but it pays off when you have a happy, satisfied couple. They refer you to friends and the general public. You've got to be a good talker, but you have to know what you're talking about. If you give lousy advice, you're not going to make it.

EE: Describe how you built your business. You talked about how you sold your first house on Glen Avenue. That was before you were –?

FB: I was with Wallace Flowers for one month. They were friends of mine. They had looked at a house. Actually, I knew about this house, and I told them, and we went to see it. It was sold for seventeen thousand dollars in those days.

EE: What year was that?

FB: That's what I don't remember exactly.



EE: What did you have to do to get your license?

FB: Oh. [laughter] You had to take a written exam. You had a book to study. There were a lot of expressions that I wasn't familiar with. I talked to a friend of mine at the time. Do I have to put names in here? All right, he was a family lawyer. And he said, "Come on in, and let's go over it." So I went in, and we were going through, I think, two hundred questions. Unbelievable. Some good common sense and some very legal. One of his partners walked by, and he said, "What are you doing?" And we said, "Studying the real estate exam." He said, "For God's sake, I've got the answers to every one of the questions in my desk." Now, that doesn't mean that you can get away with that. I studied his answers, the things that I didn't know. Today, it is much harder. When I went into the business, a contract was one page. Today, it's nineteen or more pages, depending on financing, and a lot of – I would not know how to write a contract today. Yet, in those days, there were many lawyers who messed up deals because they didn't understand it. But, when I went – we went to every convention because we always learned something, Jimmy and I. It was a lot of social activity, a lot of dinners given by the big corporations, and whatnot. We were always included, one of the few Jewish groups, couples.

EE: What was Jimmy's role with the company?

FB: He was President. He took care of all the finances and all of that. I was out on the street.

EE: How did you carve out the –? What was your territory?

FB: Well, we started out all Northwest but have grown and spread out all over, all over the City. I mean, we don't have a lot in Roland Park, Guilford, Catonsville, or Columbia, but every once in a while, we do get it. We get our share, I guess. We get a certain of our share around here. Now, we have a lot of competition today that we didn't have



before. We have fewer companies but awfully strong companies.

EE: How is it that you have managed to hold onto your company?

FB: Well, that's a good question. A lot of people. Everyone has tried to buy us out, but they will only buy us at their price, and that's not one salary. I mean, it's ridiculous. All the companies that have been gobbled up by OPF and Long & Foster have been in trouble. Somebody came along – well, one of those two companies, generally – and offered them, I think, a pittance. The guys eventually go to work for the other company as a salesman. There's one company that services a lot of builders, that's related to a lot of builders, and they are independent also. But then you have companies like Hill & Company, Chase Fitzgerald – oh, God – that Greek fellow. What the hell's his name?

EE: Tsottles?

FB: Margulies, I think his name is. There are maybe eight or ten fairly strong, independent ones. [RECORDING PAUSED] The conventions were terrific. I mean, there are only a certain number of cities in the country that can handle a real estate convention. It's one of the biggest numbers of people – San Francisco, Chicago, Hawaii, New York, New Orleans – your major cities for a national. We tried to get to as many as possible.

EE: So, who was there? Who was there at the conventions?

FB: Every realtor with any prestige. I know that Jimmy and I went to Spain one year for vacation. We were approached by a couple of builders. The next year, there was six of us who went over as guests of these builders – not altogether guests. We paid our own fare, and we paid our hotels. They hosted us as nicely as they could to try to get people to come in and buy or rent villas in Spain. We had a ball with six girls and a cocktail hour every hour, every night, and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, Harry and Phyllis are doing something similar to that. In about two weeks, they're going to France. So, if





you know anybody who wants to rent a villa in France, they're the ones to contact.

EE: Tell me who your competition was.

FB: In those days? Oh God, we had a lot of competition. Lots of competition with small groups – small firms. A lot of them are no longer in business, and the names wouldn't mean anything. But, today, our competition are the two big firms, Wasserman and her group, and Berman and Yerman in that group. They're our greatest competition.

EE: Tell me about Rosalie Switzenbaum.

FB: Switzenbaum.

EE: She was one of your contemporaries. Tell me about her.

FB: Well, she was a good salesman, and she had a good firm. She was tough. When she married and moved to Florida, I got a bunch of her agents, which was good. The more agents you have, the more business they bring in. But (Fanny Bank?) was from there, who has since died. Oh God, a couple of others that have died. I mean, I wouldn't even mention their name. Again, can't think of them all. But I had a lot come from another company.

EE: Did you have any particular problems or stories that you can remember that were about you as a woman in real estate or as a Jewish woman in real estate?

FB: I can think of one incident. It wasn't as a woman, I guess. A board of directors meeting at the Belvedere Coffee Shop. Every year, the President, the outgoing President, picked up the bar bill. There was one man, and I'm not going to mention his name – I think mentioning names is rather dangerous – who had too much to drink. He started to tell a story that was quite blue. Nobody could shut him up. He was getting dirtier and dirtier. And I'm the only female at the table, only Jew at the table also. The



only thing I could do was slide in my seat and put a napkin over my head. That was when I felt gender. Even religion maybe had something to do with it. I don't know. But I felt more unhappy because I was a woman. I should have gotten up and walked out, but I didn't. You think of that later. I thought that would make a scene. Other than that, no, except – no, I didn't feel insecure in any way. I felt smarter than an awful lot of them.

EE: Now, there were quite a number of restricted neighborhoods, particularly in those early years. Why don't you tell me about what it meant and what the restricted neighborhoods that Jews may have eventually gotten into or wanted to try and get into, and whether you even had clients who tried to get into restricted –?

FB: Yes. There were clients who tried to and had even a straw man buy for them. As soon as that was found out it was, there was a covenant in the deed. That later was illegal. There could no longer be any of those restrictions. It wasn't legal after a while. Ashburton was the one that affected me the most because it was next to Forest Park. That didn't last too long, I don't think, after I was in the business. Of course, Roland Park. Definitely Guilford. I didn't pay much attention to that. We didn't have many Jewish people who wanted to go to Roland Park or Guilford. As a matter of fact, I don't think I had too much trouble. I know one case in Ashburton. Other than that, I guess it was petering out. The law was becoming tighter.

EE: Tell me what the covenant said.

FB: I don't remember. I don't remember. It was very explicit. Very explicit. And if you're a Jew – look, I can remember when my brother, Morton, was about ten years old. The folks applied to YMCA Camp. The morning, a Saturday morning that he was to leave to go to camp, the phone rang, and somebody said, "Mr. Shapiro, are you Jewish?" He said, "Yes." He said, "Well, your son is supposed to go to camp today. He can't come. We don't accept Jews." Now that goes back – 1992 – about seventy, eighty years ago because Morton would have been ninety-two. And if he was twelve, it would have been



eighty years. Came right out and said, "We don't accept Jews."

EE: Do you remember when the Covenant started to be lifted that there was any sense of liberation for Jews in Baltimore?

FB: I don't remember. I really couldn't even guess. No, I don't remember that. Some of the lawyers would.

EE: People outside of Baltimore are rather amazed at the way we live. Some people have likened it to a ghetto. How would you describe the way Baltimore has grown as the Jewish communities have moved?

FB: Oh, I think it's wonderful. I think it's the way it should have been all along. I think the war was the reason [and] what we all went through with the Holocaust and all that. Even today, with Israel and Palestine, I think that people are understanding the Jewish position much more than they would have.

EE: Describe, if you could, Jewish Baltimore as you remember it from a young girl to today, in terms of real estate.

FB: Oh, in terms of real estate. I don't know. When I grew up, my family had no prejudices. We had none at all, whether it was color, religion, or what. My best friend, when I grew up when I was a little girl, was a Catholic who eventually moved to Brielle, New Jersey. I went with her when she had Holy Communion. I knelt at the pew when she did. I never even gave it a second thought. If she wants to kneel to Christ, okay, I'll kneel too, but it won't be to Christ. We corresponded. The biggest mistake I made was not keeping her letters. We corresponded for about seventy years. At least once a year at Christmas. She was my oldest friend. One year, I didn't get a Christmas card, and I knew something had happened. I called Barney Beecher's daughter, and she said her mother, yes, had died. I didn't go to my Senior Prom at Forest Park because I would only take a Jewish boy, and I just didn't feel like being bothered. I wasn't going to go, and it



bothered me. So, don't go.

EE: Why? What do you mean?

FB: I might have been – I wasn't really embarrassed because I went with all good guys. There were five girls. We always were together. I didn't know their friends. They didn't know my friend. Just wasn't important.

EE: Well, what was the --?

FB: It was the major thing. I'm Jewish, and they're not.

EE: What was the student body like at Forest Park? When did you go there?

FB: I went there. I graduated in 1929. So, I went there from '25 to '29.

EE: Tell me what Forest Park was like then.

FB: There were prejudices. I didn't go with a lot of the Jewish girls because I just had nothing in common with them. And I never saw the gentile girls that I was close to outside of school. I was a little oddball, I guess.

EE: Describe what Forest Park was like physically. How do you remember it?

FB: Well, I got there the year it opened. It was a fun school. It was a good school.

EE: What did it look like?

FB: I haven't been past there. It was three stories. Because whenever I was late, I'd have to run up the three stories. It wasn't air-conditioned. It looked like a school.

EE: Was it a pretty school?

FB: Yes.



EE: What do you remember about it? Where did students gather?

FB: No, I don't think so. I don't remember. That wasn't an issue.

EE: Where did you meet your friends? Before school or after school?

FB: They were all in my class. The people I was friendly with were in my class. One was a neighbor on Carlisle Avenue. That's it.

EE: Now, where did you live when you went to Forest Park?

FB: Carlisle Avenue.

EE: And where was that?

FB: 3306. In Forest Park between Hilton and Dennison Street. My one group of friends all went to Park School. My parents couldn't afford it. I wouldn't have wanted it anyhow, I don't think. It was snobbish in those days. The Park School was very snobbish.

EE: Now, when did you move to Forest Park? When you lived on –? How did you move?

FB: From Park Heights to Carlisle Avenue. That was when I was about twelve-years-old. My parents thought that I needed to associate and be with and meet Jewish children.

EE: What was the house like? What was the neighborhood like?

FB: The neighborhood was lovely. It was lovely. It was a four-bedroom house. Two story. My father died there. I was engaged there. We lived a very comfortable life.

EE: What did your mother do?



FB: Housekeeper. She was a secretary before she was married. That's when she met my father. But afterwards, she just kept house.

EE: Describe your mother, if you can, how you remember her.

FB: Oh, she was a very pretty woman and conscientious about her family, did the cooking and the cleaning. Didn't have much of a social life. Played bridge. My father, as I said, traveled a lot. He liked pinochle. He played pinochle every Saturday night [at] different friend's houses. We were a pretty normal family, I think.

EE: Did they belong to a country club?

FB: No. My brothers played tennis down at Hanlon Park, which was right by the lake. They got into many, many tournaments, out of state as well as in-state. They were friendly with a lot of good tennis players. Nothing outstanding.

EE: What was Forest Park like?

FB: Forest Park was everything. That area, particularly, was completely integrated with Jewish and non-Jewish families who got along very well. It was a quiet, nice neighborhood. It was a good neighborhood.

EE: Do you remember going into town, going downtown to Baltimore?

FB: Oh, sure. Yeh. But downtown wasn't like it is today, of course. It was practically all – I mean, the only time I went downtown [was] when I went shopping. The girls would have lunch and go shopping.

EE: Where would you go?

FB: Well, we went to Hutzler's. Hutzler's always had a downstairs where you ordered chicken chow mein. They had an upstairs tearoom.



EE: Did you go to the upstairs tearoom?

FB: Did I? Yeah.

EE: I only asked that because I don't think of it much as a Jewish place.

FB: It wasn't. It wasn't. I never thought of it as being one way or the other. Religion, that way, never entered my mind. I didn't walk on the street and say, "That person is Jewish or Italian or anything." It didn't bother me. I can't remember. My grandparents lived in the 1600 block of West North Avenue right after they moved from South Baltimore. There were then non-Jews, as well as Jews in that area of North Avenue.

EE: Where was that? Near what?

FB: Near Pennsylvania. Around Carey Street and Fulton.

EE: Well, that was a pretty hopping place.

FB: It was a nice place. It was. They were row houses. Church across the street.

EE: Did they own their own house then?

FB: Yes.

EE: Were you aware that it was –? Did you think it was common to own your house then?

FB: Oh, I thought it was absolutely normal. Normal. I don't know of anybody – I never thought about it. Of course, that's pre-real-estate. I mean, people bought houses, and they weren't exorbitant in those days. You could get a mortgage. I guess everybody had a mortgage. My grandparents owned their house. Let me see. They moved eventually from there when it – I don't know when or why. They moved to Forest Park [and] bought



a duplex because my aunt and uncle lived with them on North Avenue, so they divided the duplex.

EE: Now, whose parents was that? Your mother's or your father's?

FB: My mother's.

EE: So, they moved from Cross Street?

FB: Yeah, to North Avenue.

EE: What kind of business did they have on Cross Street?

FB: Shoe store. And, my grandfather came home one day and said to my grandmother, "I just sold the store." She said, "What are you talking about?" "Somebody came in, and they offered me X-dollars. I sold it." She thought he was crazy. "What are you going to do now?" He said, "Well, we're within walking distance of the zoo. I'm going to feed the animals every day." And he did. Early memories.

EE: So what did they do? Did they own stores after that?

FB: No. No, never went back into the business. My aunts did not marry. They lived at home. Wouldn't happen today. I had one aunt who was Senator Bruce's secretary, and another worked at Hochschild's in the glove department for years and years. Aunt Sadie finally married and moved to North Carolina. I think that's when they moved to Forest Park in the duplex. All of those people are gone. Have been gone for a long time.

EE: Well, it sounds to me like your mother's parents – your father sold the store pretty well when he sold the shoe store. If he never had to work again.

FB: Well, his two daughters paid rent. They lived very economically. They might have paid the house off and not had a mortgage, I don't know.





EE: Now, where did your family go to synagogue? Your parents?

FB: Eutaw Place. The only synagogue they went to.

EE: Do you remember any Jewish rituals that were held at the house?

FB: Yeah, we always had a Seder. My brother and I would drink wine and go to sleep on the sofa. Any reason for a ritual or a ceremony, they performed. Not Orthodox at all. Very Reformed. My grandmother and aunt, I can remember, making noodles and putting them on the back of a chair, letting them dry, and then slicing them.

EE: Now, did you ever cook for any of the —?

FB: I hated to cook. I worked to pay a cook. No, I did not cook. I don't like to cook now. As a matter of fact, that's one of the difficulties of not being able to see well. I won't go near an oven or a stove. I let the danger get by me a couple of times. So, I left the oven on one night all night long. It was I don't know how high. And I still with a microwave, punch, punch, punch, punch until I can get it going because I can't see.

EE: How do you eat?

FB: Poorly.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

EE: Today is September 6, 2001. This is Elaine Eff for the Jewish Women's Archive "Weaving Women's Words," and I am with Fiola Blum. This is the second tape that we are recording at her home in Baltimore, Maryland. We left off actually talking about your cooking or the lack of role that cooking plays in your life, which really reminded me that we haven't really talked about your — we talked about your life in real estate, and we've talked about your family a bit. But we haven't really talked about your family. One of the things that I did want to get back to that we did not discuss was that you said that your



grandparents came to this country, which is unusual. I mean, they must have come quite early. I was wondering what you know about your grandparents, both your mother's and your father's, particularly where they came from, how it is that they got here to this country, how they got to Baltimore.

FB: Well, my maternal grandparents, I knew very well. I loved them. They were married. Well, let me put it this way. My grandfather was married to a lady who died at the birth of her third child. He subsequently met and married my grandmother. Her name was Betty Frank. They were both from Germany. They had three more children. So, my grandmother raised six girls, one of whom died at age eight with diphtheria. There were five girls left. My grandfather had a shoe store in South Baltimore [and] lived in South Baltimore until they moved to North Avenue. I guess I was married when my grandparents died. I was married in 1930. So, they must have died just shortly afterward. They were very, very Americanized and fun. We spent all holidays at their house on North Avenue. My paternal grandparents were from Russia. What part, I don't know. I remember my grandfather, who died when I was a very young child. His wife had eight children [and] spent a month or two with each one around the year. Always left one of them not talking. But made the cycle just the same. My mother was not friendly with her. Seemed like it was a typical daughter-in-law situation. My father was devoted to his mother and paid for vacations every year. We couldn't afford it. They lived a normal age, in those days, seventies, eighties. That's about all. They, as I said, had eight children. I believe there's one living at the moment. We didn't have close contact with that part of the family.

EE: Fiola, did you ever hear stories? Do you remember anything? Or any stories they told about coming to America?

FB: No, I don't really. The Minz's are my mother's family, M-I-N-Z. To me, they didn't talk about any of that. They had a lot of relatives in the country. It was just a question of



– I just don't know any stories about them. I only know that my grandfather came home one day from the store. Told his wife he had sold the business. She was aghast. “What are you going to do?” He said, “I'm going out to the park and feed the animals every day.” And he did. He just felt like retiring, and apparently, he thought he could afford it. So, he did. I couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old when that happened. But I don't remember anything of their younger lives, except that my grandfather's first wife died. Of course, I didn't know her. My grandmother was a devoted mother to six girls. Her three and then their own three.

EE: Do you have any idea why they came to Baltimore? How it is that they came to Baltimore?

FB: No. I have no idea. No idea at all.

EE: Did you have any extended family here?

FB: Yes. They had them. I don't remember too much who they were. I was very devoted to them. We'd go to their house frequently, particularly after Sunday School, where we went to Eutaw Place Temple. I would have lunch every Sunday on North Avenue. But my three aunts, whom I didn't even know were my blood relatives until I was engaged or maybe my late teens, were just like any other aunt would be. I mean, they were very nice ladies. Two of them never married. So, they were a little bit like Old Maid aunts. The one married. The oldest married David Hoffman from Asheville, North Carolina. She married in her late thirties. They didn't have any of their own children. He had one daughter who died quite young. I had some fun down in Asheville every Summer for two to three years. It was a happy family.

EE: Now, did you go alone? How did you go down to Asheville? That was quite a trip.

FB: It was. I was in my teens, my early teens. One year, I went alone. I was always doing things alone. Next year, my brother went with me. My parents taught me to be



very independent. I was always the policeman in the school class, giving directions to locations. We lived on the 4800 block of Park Heights Avenue, which was then a lovely neighborhood. Now, it's a zoo. My mother would put me on the streetcar, call my grandfather, who had retired, and he met the streetcar, and I got off without changing. So, I was very independent growing up.

EE: Your parents moved up to Park Heights Avenue. They were way ahead of the market.

FB: Oh, they not only were ahead – it was county. There was a streetcar. You could look from our house on Park Heights Avenue over to the Western Maryland Railroad tracks. I remember when a troop of soldiers from the First World War camped over there. I was allowed to, with a couple of the other girls on the block, go visit the soldiers while they were there for two days. And I remember a soldier picking me up, as his, I think I reminded him of his sister, while he got his mail. So, it was all from Park Heights to Reisterstown Road. There was no development. There was no housing. I think I heard my father say something about – well, they went out there as a bride and groom. They paid \$4,800, I think, for the house.

EE: Now, that was a lot of money.

FB: That was a lot of money in those days, yes. We lived there, ironically, until I was twelve years old. My father and mother thought that I didn't know enough Jewish people. I only met Jewish people when I went to Sunday School. We were the only Jewish family on the block.

EE: Yes. What did it look like?

FB: It's a block of rowhouses. It still exists, as I said, but it's just trash today. What isn't boarded up has been knocked down, I think. I haven't been down that neighborhood. It's really not safe. My folks were the only Jewish family, as I said, and at twelve – when I



was twelve, they moved to Carlisle Avenue and Forest Park near Lake Ashburton. I went to Forest Park High School. On Park Heights, I went to Pimlico. I remember the name of the Principal. I was around six – no, I started at six, and I left there when I was twelve, went to School 49, and I transferred to Forest Park the first year it opened.

EE: Right. We actually talked about this the last time, so what I really want to do is to cover some material in a little more depth that you didn't talk about at all before. I'm trying to understand what – what did you call the neighborhood that you moved up to on Park Heights Avenue?

FB: It was just Park Heights.

EE: It hadn't become Pimlico yet?

FB: Yes, it was Pimlico, you're right. You're right. The racetrack was there. That was the most important thing out there. We didn't go to the racetrack. I mean, my folks didn't go. My father, once in a while, would have an out-of-town client and take him to the track. I went with a couple of Catholic girls. I went to St. Ambrose Church when they made their First Communion. I would kneel. It didn't mean anything to me. But I would, out of respect to other people, I would do that. Where St. Ambrose Church is now, I think, there was a place called Suburban Night Club, and they used to serve crabs and have music and dance. The kids on the block would go down in the back alley, look in, and watch the dancers until we had to come home. I can remember a few incidences of that kind. After all, it's a lot of years ago. I'm going back over – well, I'm ninety now, and that's got to be eighty years ago.

EE: What was Pimlico Racetrack like then?

FB: I don't know. I was never in it. I'm sure it was somewhat like it is. The track was the same, I think. The grandstand obviously was modernized. People came from all over just as they do now to go to the track.



EE: Your father must have been quite successful.

FB: He died at the time when he was, would have become successful. He died too young. I think he was fifty-two. We had, as I said, moved to Forest Park just a few years before. That was a nice area, Carlisle Avenue. Right near Lake Ashburton.

EE: What was the difference? I actually took a drive by your house just the other day, right by Hanlon Park and by the lake. The houses are still very beautiful. Tell me the difference between where you lived and in Ashburton.

FB: Ashburton was restricted. There were covenants in the deed that no Jews could live there. That was when we were in Forest Park. There was one Jewish family that used a — I forget what you call them — straw man to buy a house for them. He did. They settled. The following day, the Ashburton Association found out that that family was Jewish. They were forced to move. But, in their deed, there was a restriction. I don't remember what year that might have been. Long before I was in real estate. I was in high school when that happened. I graduated in 1929.

EE: I mean, you lived really just across the street from Ashburton.

FB: Yes.

EE: So, how did two different groups of people co-exist?

FB: They weren't intimate. There were many non-Jews living in Forest Park, where we did. There might have been — let me see, there were one, two, three. There were six houses on our side of the street. Two were Jewish. Forest Park was a mixed school. No problem. Although I did happen to go with all gentile girls. I did not go to my junior prom or my senior prom because I didn't want to take a Jewish boy.



EE: Well, how did your parents feel about that? They moved you to Forest Park so that you could make friends.

FB: Well, I made friends through Sunday School, through Har Sinai, because of a rabbi, Ed Israel. He was a wonderful man. He had a Sunday night youth group. They were all Jewish people. I think six marriages emerged from that. The Sisterhood would prepare supper. Ed would talk. Ed Israel would talk. We would go to somebody's house about eight o'clock and kibbutz like most teenagers do. That's where I met all the Jewish people that I really was friendly with until they died.

EE: Where was Har Sinai then?

FB: Bolton Street.

EE: Tell me about that.

FB: It was most Reform – the most Reformed – because Ed Israel was the most Reformed rabbi. Rosenau was known as “the pope.” He was very, very strict. When Jimmy and I became engaged, we went to Rabbi Rosenau, who used to call my grandmother Frau Mintz. My grandfather went regularly every Saturday. We went to Rosenau to say we were being married – small wedding – and would like him to perform the marriage blessing. Haughtily, he said, “I am perfectly capable of performing the ceremony, the marriage.” We ignored him and said, “Rabbi Israel is going to.” We wanted both of them. There were only thirty-five people at our wedding. We resigned from Eutaw Place and went to Bolton Street with Rabbi Israel. He died very young. He died at a speaking engagement, I think in Chicago. We weren't too fond of the rabbi who followed up, who succeeded him. Our boys liked enormously Baltimore Hebrew's rabbi, who was Lieberman. Yes, it was Rabbi Lieberman. We joined because we followed our sons. Subsequently, he died young, and we came back to Eutaw Place, which had then moved to Park Heights Avenue, 7300 block Park Heights Avenue. I am still there. But, I



had made the circle of the Reform Temples because of the Rabbi.

EE: Why did you call Rosenau "the Pope?"

FB: The community did because he was very bright. He was very forceful. My grandparents adored him. My parents were married by him. But he was known as "The Pope" because of the austere attitude, I think. He wasn't modern enough for us younger generation.

EE: He was at Har Sinai?

FB: No, he was at Eutaw Place. Ed Israel was at Har Sinai, which is Bolton Street.

EE: Now, let's talk about your starting a family. We haven't talked about that at all.

FB: Well, we were married in 1930. Let me see, I was eighteen when I was engaged, nineteen when I was married, and I think Jimmy was born when I was – no, we were married in 1930. Jimmy, my older son, who has since passed away, was born in '33. My second son was born in 1935. I wanted another child, but I had had a difficult pregnancy, and Jimmy said, "Let's quit." So, we had no more children. I became active in charity events, particularly the hospital at Sinai, which was then on Monument Street. I volunteered there twice a week and later was asked to join an organization, a national organization, called United Order of True Sisters, which I did. Before you knew it, I had gotten to the lowest chair to graduate to be the president. I was president in 1946. And we did an awful lot of – that organization still does a lot of good work, particularly cancer. At that time, we were doing many things. The year I was President, we donated a bowling alley for the Maryland School for the Blind. Ironic that I should mention that at this time. I am not blind, but I'm legally blind.

EE: Now, were the True Sisters exclusively a Jewish Organization?





FB: Yes. Formed in New York in the 1800's by comfortable people. I won't say all wealthy to help immigrants and people into New York that needed guidance of all kinds. They spread out all over the country. The Baltimore Chapter is number 35. I don't know how many more there are now. I know there are several. Quite a few in Florida. That was an education. Because I was, as I said, nineteen when I was engaged. Oh God, I am confusing the years. I didn't go to college. My father wouldn't let me go out of state, and I didn't want to go to Goucher. I knew I was going to marry Jimmy anyhow, so why postpone? I worked at a department store for six months in order to benefit a discount for my trousseau. Also, it kept me occupied. In September, we were married. That was the end of my working years. I was very fortunate. Jimmy was comfortably fixed, and his parents were. I had a maid from the beginning. I hated to cook. And I mentioned that, I believe. I always had a cook. When I went into the real estate business, I said that would be my work if I had to pay my maid because of my real estate. Well, it's still going on that I can have that luxury. Mother wasn't a great cook, and she wasn't able to teach me that much about cooking.

EE: Do you remember anything that she cooked?

FB: Not particularly. She cooked every meal, but I mean there are some people who just – they're known for their kind of family cooking. Well, we didn't have that kind of family cooking. There were the three children and my parents. We had our meals regularly – very well done. My father had his idiosyncrasies. He loved seafood – crabs, lobster, oysters – but he wouldn't allow ham or pork in our house. So, we grew up with that kind of thing. I remember my mother going to Lexington Market every Saturday. It was her birthday. I baked a cake. In those days, they didn't have packaged cakes, so I baked it from scratch [and] hid it in the pantry so that I could surprise her. And, when we were finishing dinner, and we were all at the table, I went in to get my cake, and they heard her scream. Because we had a little dog, and the dog had eaten the cake. [laughter] My mother cut it off, so that she could have some. Everybody felt sorry for me.



My surprise was a great disappointment. Oh, I remember the Block had a Fourth of July party. Everybody came out and did things. I had measles and chickenpox at the same time. I must have been five, six years old, crying that I couldn't get outside. And my mother said, "Let me show you something." She took a mirror for me to hold. I pushed it aside. "If you were as ugly as I am, you wouldn't want to see yourself." So, that was the end of my Fourth of July that year. I mean, those were just a few of the childhood memories that – I remember my fourth birthday. My mother took me to my grandmother's on North Avenue, to baby-sit, while she went downtown, and my grandmother hugging me and saying, "My how time does fly." I'll remember those words forever. That's eighty-six years ago. I remember the World War, the First World War being over. The boys got off of streetcars – "Extra, Extra, read all about it." But we heard about it because of a neighbor's son working for Western Union, and he got the message and phoned his mother, who told the neighborhood. But those boys piled off the streetcars. What's that? 1918, I guess. What else do I remember? I don't remember too much. I think if all children would dig deeply in their heads, there would be some outstanding – maybe not the World War's over, but a hug from a grandmother on a birthday.

EE: You had two sons.

FB: Yes.

EE: Tell me about what kind of a mother you were, what it was like to raise your children, and what you did with the boys. How it was to give birth?

FB: Well, the birth part, I think we forget that, more or less. I had difficulty carrying Harry. I hemorrhaged, and that sort of thing. And those days, it was more important than it is today. The boys went to camp. They went to Camp Kennebec in Maine. A lot of boys from Philadelphia, New York, Chicago. They made good friends – they still do. Harry was at a convention just this past year. It was a great



camp. We sacrificed to send them. Because even those days, it was a lot of money; it was around a thousand, fifteen hundred dollars a year with clothes and whatnot. We sent both of them. They had a senior and a junior camp. I can remember when Harry went for the first time. He was terribly homesick. After they couldn't console him, they sent across the lake for Jimmy to come over to talk to him. He talked to him. He threatened to throw him in the lake if he didn't behave and appreciate what we were doing. So, that calmed him down. They had great memories of camp. We joined the Suburban Club. We lived on Bonfield Road. It was within easy walking distance. So, it was a period of them going to camp. And then, afterward, we joined the club because the family benefited [from] it.

EE: What was the Suburban Club like then? What year did you join? Do you remember? How old were the boys?

FB: Oh, let me see. The year we joined the club, Eli Frank was president. Our good friends, Jacqueline and George Hess, urged us to join. That's about sixty-five years ago, I guess. We've been members a long time. There were a lot of things for the boys out there. But we felt camp for a few years was very important, and it was.

EE: Where was the Suburban Club then?

FB: Right where it is.

EE: Where is that?

FB: Park Heights and Slade. Park Heights and Slade Avenue. They have good memories, and we do too. They've rebuilt a couple of times since we joined. It's gotten very expensive. I go there about, oh, two or three times a month for dinner. I'll quote a friend of mine who once said he figured at that time, it cost him about \$2.95 for a portion of string beans. That's the way it's getting right now because they're talking of a big assessment. And if they assess, I'm not remaining. I don't play cards. I don't golf or



swim. I used to. So, it might be the end of the club for me.

EE: So, tell me, in the early years, what function did the club serve for you?

FB: Oh, golf, swimming – all social activities – dancing, meals. It was a hub of real happiness. It was fun. Almost all of our friends belonged at the time.

EE: Now, you used it really as a social base, not as a professional base?

FB: Oh no, it wasn't professional at all. No, it was strictly social and athletic.

EE: Did you have help at home with your children? How did you raise the children?

FB: They were raised well. I had a wonderful maid who did marvelous things with the children. Then I had two, one to sleep in, and I want to tell you, this girl who slept in got six dollars a week, and the cook got twelve dollars a week. So, it was affordable, even in those days. That's when I was president of the True Sisters, also. As I said, I hated to cook. And it was great to come home to a well-cooked meal. Later on, I got a couple to live in. They came from North Carolina. They got eighty-five dollars a month for two.

That was during the Second World War because I remember we had coupons, books of coupons for sugar and other things. We had the benefit of theirs also for our immediate family. So, we were four, and they were two. We had a badminton court with lights on an extra lot that we bought. Once a month, at least, had a night game – served hot dogs, ice cream, whatever it was. Very social. Let me see. When was it that I –? When money began getting tight, I answered two ads. One selling The Book of Knowledge. Did I happen to mention this?

EE: Yes.

FB: So, I won't go into that again. And one selling real estate. That's when Jimmy said, "Fiddle around with real estate."



EE: Now, when you say that "money was getting tight," what was happening?

FB: It was during the War, and it was more costly to live. I wasn't producing anything. Our income was just less. All of my friends were working. I decided at that time I would get to work, too. So I started, and when I started real estate, I sold one, the first house in less than a month. That was great money. I'd worked for Wallace Flowers for two years, and he was non-Jewish. Again, I was the only Jew in the firm. I then went to work for Hammerman until I had an argument with his sales manager. I knew that I was capable of running my own business the way I needed – the way I wanted to. So, I left Hammerman after two years and worked from my house. I was known in those days as "a kitchen broker." I had one girl work with me until she moved out of state. That was Hilda. Then Kay Schiff came to work for me. She just died last year. She worked thirty-some years with me. We grew and grew, and it was very successful. Then, I knew we were living in a house – we were working from a house. It was not a commercial area, and I was conducting a commercial business. There were too many cars parked out front, so I knew that we were going to be reported.

EE: Yes, we discussed this.

FB: We discussed this?

EE: So I don't want to go there again.

FB: Okay.

EE: But I do want to talk about what Bonfield Road was like when you moved there.

FB: We were the first house, the first one to buy a lot on Bonfield Road, owned by a man by the name of Ruff, Seymour Ruff. He skipped a lot on each side of us and built two more houses, and he went broke. So, they were auctioned, and of course, Jewish people bought them. Across the street, there were three houses. On my side were three



houses. Private road. I mean, it was a public road, but it was secluded. It started at Seven Mile Lane, and it curved around at Seven Mile Lane. We bought it very inexpensively when I think in terms of real estate today. We had an option on the lot next to us. A friend of ours, who was a lawyer, called and said it was going to be auctioned. We told him to buy it for us, and he did. That lot cost us, at that moment, two thousand dollars. It was a 120-ground rent. Today, that lot has got to be worth – I don't know – a twenty, twenty-five thousand dollars, I imagine. So, it was a completely different era. Today, we're way up there in costs. Real estate, particularly. The market today has just been fantastic. There was an article there – it was just a couple of weeks ago – where I was called by – it's out of the real estate section. On the right-hand column, I was called by somebody from the Sun paper and asked my opinions about Ranchleigh. Well, Ranchleigh was a very popular area at that time, just growing. Ralph DeChiaro was building it. I gave him all I knew about it then and now. All of a sudden, I got a call one day. I forgot all about it. I mean, I didn't even get the girl's name who wrote it. I got a call that I had a good write-up in the paper. I didn't know what she was talking about. I had really forgotten. I couldn't read it anyhow. So, she brought it over. My son came over that afternoon, and he said, "When were you interviewed by the Sun paper?" I said, "I'll tell you something funny. I don't even know what the article says because I can't read." But it was a telephone call. Simply a telephone call. She wrote a very nice article and a very flattering article. I compared the fact that the houses cost twenty-three thousand with a 120-ground rent, or twenty-one with a 120, depending on whether they were the split level or a rancher. Today, they sell for over a hundred. So that made an interesting story, and she wrote it very well. I don't know why I got on that subject.

EE: Well, we were talking about Bonfield Road.

FB: Oh, Bonfield Road.



EE: Well, tell me how you, who designed the house? Who built the house you moved into?

FB: I have no idea what his. – Lawrence Menefee.

EE: Did you have to design it yourself?

FB: No, he was an architect. He designed for Seymour Ruff. There were many errors in that house, but it was a good stone house. It had a garage. It had three nice-sized bedrooms. It had a den on the second floor, a beamed ceiling den. Living room, dining room, kitchen, laundry – no, laundry was in the basement. It was a good house for the money. We sold it when we moved here. We more than doubled our money.

EE: We're talking about where you live now. Why don't you tell me because I think that Eleven Slade meant a lot when it was built?

FB: Yes, it did.

EE: Tell me about where we are now and what it meant [inaudible]

FB: Well, it was the first condominium, and there were private homes – the rest of Slade Avenue. We found this little house over on Slade Avenue - -that was perfect for an office. As I've said, we were realizing that pretty soon, we had to move – that our business was too big for our private home. We bought that on a Sunday afternoon. Came over here. We knew what a condominium was. We had never investigated it, though, for us. We spoke to a Mr. Al Sugar, who was one of the owners; there were three. They had to buy the remaining unoccupied apartments among the three of them. He had two, this one and one over there by the elevator. We took this because it overlooked our office. Right now, I wish we had taken that, because that has a beautiful view, and we have Reisterstown Road. That was thirty-four years ago, I think. So, these folks from New York last night came in, and they said, “You don't find rooms this size in



New York unless you pay an arm and a leg.” We got a very good buy because Al Sugar wanted Fiola Blum and Jim Blum in the building. And it meant one less apartment that he had to sell.

EE: What did this development along Slade Avenue mean to the Jewish Community?

FB: Oh, it's very important. It's very important and very popular. Let me get back to Ranchleigh for just a minute. Ranchleigh, at the time, had some gentile families there. Now, it is very Orthodox. Any new buyer is going to walk to the shul. The old people who are still there, well, they do what they want. But I would say that is a hundred percent Jewish, Ranchleigh. There, I don't remember any non-Jewish people in here. Except in the last five years, I guess or so, when an African-American and his wife moved in. They are lovely people. She has since died. He lives here happily. He's a man, I think, in his eighties. But I see his friends come in every once in a while. Next door, I don't know if they ever had a gentile family there – Seven Slade. And One Slade is one hundred percent Jewish. So, this is that. Now, across the street, we will be handling a building at 6 Slade; it's being built by out-of-town men – one local. It will be a condominium also, but it will be different. It won't be a one-building residence. I think it's going to be several sections. I haven't seen the plans, completed plans. It'll be several styles of architecture, but that's going to be very expensive, and it'll sell.

EE: Who's going to live there?

FB: Jews. Only Jewish people.

EE: Do you think people will move out of these buildings and move into that building?

FB: I doubt it.

EE: Is the Jewish real estate market any different than any other market?





FB: I'll tell you, when I was on the board of directors, there was a man, a very popular man, Donald Grempler, who has died, who, when trying to design the space for the city, like Baltimore City, Baltimore and Charles is the line break of the North and South and East and West. For the whole area of Baltimore, 83 going from North to South would be the dividing line and the Beltway, East and West. He said, "After all, that has to be the [dividing line]. All the Jews live over here. The non-Jews live over there. Excuse me, Fiola." And I ignored it, but that was a conception: the Jews lived on this side of 83 and Towson and Riderwood, but that doesn't exist anymore. Jews have gone, many of them, have gone on the other side to buy, to rent. I don't know what the percentage is on the big apartments on Charles Street. Yeah, Charles Street, north of University Parkway, and the apartment right across from Hopkins. But that's completely mixed. All of those buildings are mixed. Some more with Jews than others. The newer ones have many, many Jewish families.

EE: What does that say to you about –?

FB: That says that a lot of people in the Jewish community don't want to live in what they call "the ghetto," And Park Heights Avenue, oh God, years ago, had forty-two religious institutions, Jewish, from Park Circle to Slade Avenue. It might have gone beyond Slade Avenue because Chizuk Amuno was there – Chizuk Amuno, Beth El, Beth Tfiloh, Oheb, Baltimore Hebrew, Har Sinai – all within a couple of miles. "Rue de la Shul" is what it was known as because then, when you got lower than that, it became very Orthodox synagogues. Maybe on Seven Mile Lane, there were a couple. One down there, one up here. I don't know how many religious institutions are here now. People don't want to live that way. Now, when we moved here, I had the house listed next door, and my biggest, biggest prospect was Beth Tfiloh congregation. The rabbi begged me to get that contract. They wanted to buy it so badly – Rabbi Rosenblatt. We dilly-dallied a bit. But all of a sudden, three members of Beth Tfiloh, who were in Florida, bought the land on Smith Avenue for Beth Tfiloh. They bought it in their own name, regardless of what the



congregation would do. Well, the congregation went along with them, and we lost that. So, my son, as a matter of fact, Jimmy, Jr., sold that to four men, and they built that, it was a rental at that time. We rented it completely within less than a year.

EE: Tell me what it is that you are talking about. Which building?

FB: Seven. 7 Slade. Then, he sold the land at Clarks Lane and Park Heights to the people who built the Imperial.

EE: Right. You told me about that.

FB: Did I tell you about that one? And then, One Slade. So, we were responsible for three of the big buildings that went up. Not that other people couldn't do it; we were just fortunate to have gotten them. Incidentally, the Imperial has a lot of Black families. African-Americans. Har Sinai, who is now building out in the Valley after a big fight – let me see. The Har Sinai has been sold to a very, very Orthodox group, and I don't know what they – I guess it is another shul. That down there doesn't have the prestige that north of here does.

EE: What do you think about the northern movement of the Jewish community?

FB: Well, an awful lot of Jewish people are out in the Valley and in the developments that are out there. They want to escape all of this ghettoism, what they call that anyhow. There's one very active synagogue. I forget; it is off of Owings Mills Boulevard. Yale Gordon has a big organization out there. There are schools that are very good. There are a lot of young people that are buying houses, and they're running out of them in this area. It's spreading. It's going out.

EE: But when you say, when someone says to you "Jewish Baltimore," what do you think of?



FB: When they say, "Jewish Baltimore," I think of northwest. It's one of the few, believe me, where there is as much prejudice as there is. But many, many, many cities have areas that are primarily Jewish and primarily non-Jewish. It's a problem. The apartment houses and condominiums of that kind are adjoining. Now, you can also say something about retirement homes. One just opened up on Towson I hear that is like a country club. I know somebody who put a deposit down for one for when she's ready. But she said, "I'll be the only Jew out there." Just like there were a number of non-Jewish people who bought at North Oaks when it first opened. They've all moved out – all the non-Jews.

EE: How did you think that Pikesville has changed during the years?

FB: Pikesville was a hundred percent, well, not a hundred percent, Harry Wolf lived where Baltimore Hebrew is now. Mose Hecht lived where Temple Oheb Shalom is. They were all big houses down Park Heights Avenue owned by wealthy Jewish families. That's why the county line is at Slade Avenue. I don't know why. Until Dumbarton was built, there weren't many Jewish people beyond there. And then, the development started.

EE: Well, tell me about Dumbarton. I think that's fascinating.

FB: Dumbarton was a very exclusive neighborhood. When I mentioned before something – Ashburton had their restrictions. The Dumbarton restriction was no house could cost less than twenty-five thousand dollars when it was built. Today, you can't build a garage in some of them for that. They were very wealthy people who lived there. There was the Maguire, who was a florist on Hooks Lane and Reisterstown Road. He had a house – it faces the Suburban Club – and they were non-Jewish. I don't remember any other non-Jewish family.

EE: How would you describe Dumbarton? Was that [inaudible]?



FB: Oh, it was a very restricted, nice, fabulous, prestigious area of homes, of individual homes.

EE: And who lived there?

FB: Oh, God. Jeff Miller lived there. George Hess lived there. All rich families. One of the Hechts. I think two Hechts. A Hoffberger. I mean, the names in the city that represent money. They were not cheap by the standards of that time. I don't know how – God, I guess some of them are over fifty years old. But let's see, I think we have one for sale right now. I don't know of any other houses out there. There's never more than one or two at the most. They're gobbled up, and they get big prices. Just the same as all the developments out there now. Out Park Heights Avenue to Caves Road. Not Caves Road – Green Spring Valley Road. And then beyond, there are many, many more developments, yes.

EE: Are you happy to have spent your career primarily in Jewish real estate?

FB: Oh, I love it. I loved it. No, I'm very happy. Yes, I'm very happy. I'm pleased with the success that we've had and the reputation. The two main realtors around Baltimore now are Long & Foster and OPF, O'Connor, Piper & Flynn. They have bought up every, every, every small company. They've offered us – everyone has been to us, but what they want to do is steal. They can't buy us for what they want us. If they did, they would guarantee – we'd have to guarantee that certain salespeople would go with them because it's a salesperson who – no, it's the company who comes first, but the salespeople keep the company growing unless they're successful. An individual can't make it on his own.

EE: How many companies that actually specialize in Jewish –?

FB: Everybody does now. REMAX. They all come – both sides of the town. Both sides. We have quite a few signs on the other side of town. As a matter of fact, my son and



daughter-in-law are in Europe and my secretary was there, alone this morning and she got a call from somebody who said, "Do you want to sell your house?" She used a very broken English accent. Ida said, "Who is this?" She gave a name, and Ida said, "She can't repeat it." She was just riding up and down streets and liking certain houses. So, she called about it and wanted to know if she wanted to sell her house. Ida said, "Give me your phone number, and I'll call you back." In the meantime, she gave that name and number to one of our agents and said, "Call her up and ask her what she wants. Ida's not selling her house." But she obviously drove up and down to be near that Seven Mile Lane shul, within walking distance.

EE: Is that a change in the market, the way that people are buying now?

FB: Yeah. Because in many houses, they'll pay over the asking price, way over, or you'll get two and three contracts that's way over. You have to decide what's in that contract, to make a choice – what conditions, what restrictions, and whatever. Contracts, when I went into the business – I don't know whether I ever mentioned this – were one page long. They're now nineteen and twenty. So, it's very involved.

EE: It sounds like it's a good time to get out of the business.

FB: It's a good time? [laughter] Well, it's a good time for me. But I know several people who are making way over \$100,000 a year. It's a good time for them to stay in business. Usually, they're female, too.

EE: So, you've seen quite a bit of change in terms of –

FB: Oh God, yeah.

EE: I was told long ago I should have written a book. And I said, "Well, I've forgotten more than then I know." Then I remember. Every night, I'd come home with another story. You meet all kinds. It's a people business – all kinds of people. I had friends who



had a house. They put a price on it, I'll say, twenty-five. I don't remember it. I brought a contract of twenty-one, and he practically threw me out of his house. I went back and told the people it was rejected. They'd have to come up. They came up to twenty-two. He said, "Now that's more like it." [laughter] They apparently had time to think about it. If I had come back again with \$21, they would have taken it too. People have such egos. They say "no" fast. Then they think about it and realize they've got a profit there. Why are they turning it down? I had a house in Mt. Washington, a little house. Very little, old-fashioned, and the man wanted twenty-five. That's exactly why I'm thinking of it because I brought him a contract of twenty-one, and he rejected it terribly. And I said, "Let me take you for a ride and show you your competition." So, I showed him Ranchleigh. It was at a sample house. I said, "Go inside and take a look at it. They're asking twenty-tree plus ground rent for the big one and twenty-one for the little one." He went in, and he came out and sheepishly said, "I just bought that house." So, I said, "All right, here's the other contract for yours." He signed it. I mean, you run into people -- "I want this, and nothing else." Then, a lot of them turn that down and end up taking fifteen or sixteen when it has been on the market for a long while. There's a house on Caves Road right now, every broker in the City, every big broker, has had it listed. The people who own it -- the man has since died -- have a house at Brightwood. You know, the retirement home? The house has been vacant for about three years. They've had offers. It has many faults. That house is going to be sold after the lady has died. Now, they're paying monthly expenses on Brightwood, taxes, maintenance, and all. They will not budge from what they want. When you say to them, "You just bought your house back for twenty-two," or whatever it is -- this particular case it is over two hundred thousand dollars. That doesn't bother them. They have money, and they are going to get it, come hell or high water. But he has died, and she's going to die. Their sons will sell it for whatever they can get.

EE: So what's the lesson there?



FB: The lesson is that the realtor generally knows the market, and an honest realtor will give them an honest price. If an offer comes and another offer, and it is all below or below what they want, they've got to either recognize it or recognize that they just bought their back.

EE: Well, that's great. I'm going to let you rest. I think we'll wrap it up for today. It's been great. Is there anything that I forgot to ask you about?

FB: Oh, God. I don't think so. [laughter]

EE: This has been a treat. I've enjoyed it. I've learned a lot.

FB: You've learned a lot about real estate.

EE: And about you.

FB: And about me.

EE: And about Baltimore.

FB: Oh, I could talk to you about Baltimore forever. I understand that Elsie's going with you.

EE: Yeah.

FB: On Monday?

EE: Let me just say thank you.

FB: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]