

**INTERVIEW WITH SORA E. LANDES**

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## INTERVIEW WITH SORA E. LANDES

**INT:** We're recording on January 28, 1998 with Sora Landes, who is the principal of the Forman Center of the Raymond and Ruth Perelman Jewish Day School, a Solomon Schechter affiliate, which is located on the Mandell Education Campus in Melrose Park. Sora is the principal of the school. The main theme of this oral history project is to interview Jewish women who have lived in the Delaware Valley Region for a long time and who are pioneering or noteworthy in their fields and who represent a variety of achievements. Our specific focus is on women and how they have integrated being a woman and Jewish in the twentieth century. First of all I'd like to ask you Sora if you agree to the interview and to the recording of the interview.

**SORA:** I do.

**INT:** I certainly appreciate your agreeing. Let me just start out by saying I have known Sora Landes for many years and have deep respect for her commitment to Jewish education and to the Jewish community. Her husband, Rabbi Aaron Landes, has been rabbi of Congregation Beth Sholom for over thirty years. Basically I would like to start out with asking her chronologically when she was born and where and a little bit about her family background. So Sora, let's begin with your date and place of birth.

**SORA:** I was born on February 25, 1933 in Brooklyn, New York.

**INT:** And if you could tell me a little bit about your parents, their names, what they did, and a little bit about what the home was like. What kind of home did you grow up in?

**SORA:** My parents are Azriel and Rose Eisenberg. My father, at the time of my birth, was the educational director of the East Midwood Jewish Center. My mother was a Hebrew teacher and a kindergarten teacher, which she resumed doing after I started college. I am the older of two children. My brother Judah is six years younger than I. My parents came from immigrant families, each a family of four. My father was born in Europe, in Dembrovitz, which was either Russia or Poland, depending on how the border moved, and he came to America when he was about ten. My father was the second of four children, and the only one...his older brother Lipman-do you need all that? You don't need all that.

**INT:** Let's concentrate on your parents. Let's hear about your parents. I know they were deeply involved in Jewish education.

**SORA:** My father came to the States, was misplaced in elementary school. He was placed in two lower grades. He was mixed up with his younger brother. They assumed the younger was the elder and vice versa. So somewhere along in his education he dropped out of high school, then went back and took the high school equivalency test, went to NYU undergraduate and Columbia Teacher's College graduate and got his doctoral degree from Teacher's College.

**INT:** About when was that?

**SORA:** I think he completed...he tells me he completed his doctorate while I was screaming in the background, so he must have finished it in '33 or '34.

**INT:** So at the time you were born?

**SORA:** Yes. I was an infant. His doctoral thesis is on the effect of radio programs on children and was still a text that was used at Columbia that you were recommended to read when I later went to Teacher's College. However, he also went to the Teacher's Institute of the Seminary, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and decided to make Jewish education his field. He did not do anything with communications, where he really wrote a pioneering text. My mother was the youngest in her family, and she and her older sister were born in America. The two older boys were not. She is the only member of her family who went to college. She went to Normal School and Teacher's Training Normal School and became a certified kindergarten teacher and also a Hebrew teacher. I don't know where she got her Hebrew education. It must have been in a Talmud Torah.

**INT:** So you were surrounded by people who were very deeply interested and committed to Jewish learning and Jewish education.

**SORA:** That's true. And the other thing that I think is interesting about my parents is that the level of commitment that they had, and thank G-d my mother is still living, was much beyond that of the members of their family, so that my cousins were not from traditional families. My aunts and uncles-yes, they were Jewish in their commitments but their observance was different from that in our house and their commitment to Jewish education was far different. So my brother and I were fairly unique in our family constellation of cousins and aunts and uncles.

**INT:** We were talking a little bit about...you said you had a younger brother, is that correct? Judah. And what is he involved in?

**SORA:** I will tell you about my brother Judah but I have to tell you about my growing up because it was unusual.

**INT:** Sure. I definitely want to hear about that.

**SORA:** So what sequence should we go in?

**INT:** Let's talk about the early years. What was it like in your home? Tell me about it.

**SORA:** My father left Brooklyn when I was a year or two old and we moved to Cincinnati, where he was the director of the Bureau of Jewish Education. My early elementary school years were in Cincinnati and that's where my brother Judah was born. Then my father was invited to

head the Bureau of Jewish Education in Cleveland, so we moved to Cleveland when I was about seven, seven or eight, and I finished my elementary education in Cleveland at a very unusual school. It was what we would today call a magnet school. It was a school on one floor which had a division of gifted education for children who had been identified as able and also children who either had visual problems or were temporarily on crutches or permanently in a wheelchair and so forth were sent to that school. So it was a very unusual type of education and it incorporated the study of foreign language from second grade on, but I got to the school in third grade. So I began studying French in an oral approach from third grade on.

When I just began junior high school, my father was invited to head the Bureau of Jewish Education in Philadelphia. This was after the war. There was no housing in Philadelphia and so he came up alone and we were left in Cleveland alone and we were very, very lonely. So after about six weeks or two months of this loneliness, we moved to New York, my mother, my brother and I, and moved in with my aunt and uncle in the Bronx so that we could be nearer my father and he could come home every Shabbos. I remember in those years you didn't get on the plane and fly so readily.

**INT:** But your father came home every Shabbos.

**SORA:** Well, when we moved to New York.

**INT:** So you must have looked forward to that time.

**SORA:** Yeah, we missed him terribly. And so I had one semester at a New York public junior high school. I detested it. Because I had such a fine background from Cleveland, they skipped me and after this six month interim in New York, my parents were successful in finding a house in Philadelphia and we moved to Philadelphia and I entered Girls' High in 9B.

**INT:** What part of Philadelphia did you live in?

**SORA:** We lived in West Oak Lane.

**INT:** And Girls' High was at what address?

**SORA:** :Girls' High was at 17th and Spring Garden, now the Masterman School. And I went to Girls' High and then had a problem because I had gone to a five-day-a-week intensive Hebrew school and I didn't fit in to the Hebrew high school. There wasn't really a program for me. Akiba had just started but the students at Akiba were coming in not knowing Hebrew. And so I took the entrance exam to Gratz College and I was placed in the college when I was thirteen with the understanding that I would not teach until I was at least nineteen. I had to sign some kind of agreement. I think it was nineteen.

**INT:** Were you anxious to teach? Did you know that teaching was your chosen career at that age,

or when did you...?

**SORA:** I don't know that I thought about it. But Gratz College was the place where I really felt that I came alive.

**INT:** And Gratz College was located where when you went there?

**SORA:** It was at Broad Street and York.

**INT:** And now it is on the Mandell Campus where you teach as well.

**SORA:** That's correct. And I just loved Gratz. We had wonderful teachers. We had a wonderful cohort group of students, and there was one other young women, Cyrille Gell, who was also thirteen. We were a couple of months apart in age and we were in the same class. It was a class of extraordinary people, and there was quite an age range because among our classmates was now Rabbi Lewis Kaplan, who had come back from serving in the army and was very patient with us silly kids. He was very serious about his studies and we were less serious about our studies.

**INT:** But it sounds like you enjoyed that stay at Gratz.

**SORA:** I loved it.

**INT:** How long were you at Gratz?

**SORA:** I was there three and a half years.

**INT:** From what age to what age?

**SORA:** From thirteen to sixteen. My father had promised us, since we had already moved numerous times, that he would remain in Philadelphia for ten years at a minimum. He also, in addition to heading what was called the Council on Jewish Education here, was the acting dean of Gratz College, which was not so happy for me but I stayed out of his way. We worked it out.

**INT:** Would you say he was a strict parent? How would you describe, emotionally, psychologically, your parents and your relationship with them?

**SORA:** My mother was more the disciplinarian, I think. She also raised us. My father was not home much. His avocation was writing books, so if he was home he was researching or writing.

**INT:** Did you know not to disturb him when he did that or did you walk in sometimes and ask him...

**SORA:** We took walks. My father was a walker, and I learned something very important from him. Taking walks with your children at night is a very powerful vehicle for confidences, because you don't see each other face to face. You don't see the blush. So we took walks together frequently. He also checked up on my Hebrew homework. He would check in to see if I had done my Chumash. My parents were clearly very, very much interested in learning. My father would come in and turn out the lights and say it's tenebrous in here. He had a terrific sense of humor. He did lots and lots of word plays in Hebrew and in English. He would say there were three things one does in the bathroom-ruminate, urinate and cogitate. Of course, for years I had the wrong impression of what some of those words meant, but he insisted upon stretching our vocabulary. He insisted upon our reading. He used to give us what they called in those years dummies. That was the format of the book that was about to be published but with blank pages. He would give them to us and say write, write. He really wanted us to write.

**INT:** So he encouraged you to write. And did you, in fact, you and your brother?

**SORA:** I guess we did. He also spoke to us in Hebrew mostly. My mother did not. She was not fluent in Hebrew but she understood. But she was the person who was home. She was definitely the family anchor and it was never said, I don't think, but we understood that we were expected to do very well. Judah and I have talked about this since and we never tested to see what would happen if we didn't. We knew we were expected to do well. Judah, my brother, really is a genius. He was identified early on. He was in Columbia at fifteen. He knew he wanted to be a physicist. He had gone to Brooklyn Tech High School. Columbia accepted him at fifteen. He went from Columbia to MIT for his Ph.D. in theoretical physics and he was an assistant professor at the University of Virginia at twenty-two. He rose there to have an endowed chair of physics and he left to go to Israel, to make Aliyah. He is the Yuval Ne'eman professor of theoretical physics at the University of Tel Aviv and the vice rector of the university.

**INT:** And when did he make Aliyah?

**SORA:** About sixteen years ago.

**INT:** And does he have a family?

**SORA:** He has three children, also highly gifted. My oldest niece is just completing her-she's going to have her Ph.D. in chemistry in the spring and is married and has two children. My second niece is a computer specialist and does something I don't understand at all. She's prolific with lots of different languages. My nephew is still looking for himself but very, very bright and able.

**INT:** And how old is he?

**SORA:** He's about twenty-five, the youngest of the three.

**INT:** How about in your home? You were talking about your father encouraging you to write, to read. He spoke with you in Hebrew. He wanted to stretch your vocabulary. What about the festive times, the holidays, the celebrations? Can you describe what your home was like then?

**SORA:** Our home was very, very Jewish. It was always very Jewish. My father and mother are not-how shall I say? They were very modern and liberal in their outlook. My father's feeling was though that the religion should be transmitted intact. He wanted us to know what traditional Judaism was and my parents did not ride on Shabbat. We maintained a very traditional home. They did turn on lights on Shabbat. This was interesting-my father and my brother went to shul every Shabbat. I was certainly invited to go but I didn't enjoy it and usually had good reasons not to. That wasn't an issue but it really wasn't either a difference in roles because I never realized the significance of it because I knew nothing different, but my father counted me to the mezzuman, to the quorum, for saying the Bircat Hamazon after dinner. I was counted in.

**INT:** Is it usually the case where women or girls were not counted in in those days?

**SORA:** They were not counted in in those days. He wanted me to have a bat mitzvah. He pleaded with me to have a bat mitzvah. I did not want to. I was very self-conscious and awkward at thirteen and I just didn't want it. He deferred when I said no but he really wanted me to have a bat mitzvah.

**INT:** Did you subsequently have one?

**SORA:** No. And I never had a confirmation either.

**INT:** But you feel comfortable. Obviously being a principal of a school you're in front of audiences.

**SORA:** I've grown up. At thirteen, I was five feet nine inches tall and gawky, and by the way, towered over both my parents. I just was self conscious. I know when we moved from Philadelphia-well, I didn't tell you that.

**INT:** Where were you in Philadelphia? What address were you in Philadelphia and what shul did you go to?

**SORA:** 6534 North 18th Street, and we went to... Rabbi Hyman Chanover was the rabbi when we were there. Preceding him had been Arthur Hertzburg. Ahavat Israel.

**INT:** And was that an orthodox shul?

**SORA:** No, that was a conservative shul. My parents were raised in orthodox homes but they always belonged to conservative shuls. That's what we always attended. I had never been in anything other than a conservative shul until I married.

**INT:** Well, Rabbi Landes, your husband, that's a conservative shul, right?

**SORA:** Yes, but he came from an orthodox home and his father was an orthodox rabbi. Anyway, when I was in my senior year at Girls' High my father was invited to head the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York. It was called the Jewish Education Committee then, the JEC. It was the biggest job in the country and it created materials for the whole country, in fact for the whole world. People all over used the materials created at the JEC. My father accepted that position and I recall well protesting. I did not want to leave Philadelphia. I did not want to leave the high school six months before graduation and go to another high school.

**INT:** So you were about seventeen, sixteen at this time?

**SORA:** I was less.

**INT:** You wanted to stay here.

**SORA:** That's right. And I remember that my father's teacher, Halevi, who was living then in Philadelphia, came to our home and spoke to me in the kitchen, because I remember myself standing in front of the fridge and him saying to me in Hebrew you can't block this opportunity. You can't protest. You've got to agree. It really didn't make any difference. My father had made up his mind and we all pretty well followed along.

**INT:** So you left before graduation?

**SORA:** Well, I was very nervous about that. They moved to New York and the Chomskys, Dr. William and Elsie Chomsky, invited me to board with them and be their daughter. They had two boys. And I lived for six months with the Chomskys. They were wonderful to me.

**INT:** Friends of the family?

**SORA:** They were friends of the family and Dr. Chomsky was my teacher. He was the professor of both pedagogy and Hebrew grammar at Gratz College. Elsie Chomsky taught at the School of Observation and Practice at Gratz College and was the teacher-trainer par excellence. They were Jewish education in Philadelphia.

**INT:** So that was in a sense the first time-I don't know if you left home or your parents left home-but you were separated.

**SORA:** We were separated.

**INT:** How did you communicate with them during that time, through phone, letters?

**SORA:** I went home every weekend. I went to New York every weekend. I was terribly, terribly



homesick. When I graduated from Girls' High I was offered a scholarship to the U. of P. which I turned down. I wasn't ready to leave home. My parents had established residency in New York and so I attended Queens College and lived at home. I finished my degree at Gratz by correspondence.

**INT:** And what year did you graduate from Girls' High.

**SORA:** 1950. January of '50, and then from Gratz in June of '50, and I was to have finished by correspondence but I hadn't finished writing the paper for Dr. Sydney Fish and so when I came into Philadelphia with my father to go to the graduation, we came in by train. It was pouring. And we raced after the ceremony to the train and we opened my diploma to look at it and it was blank. So I hastily finished my correspondence course for Dr. Fish and got my diploma in the mail.

**INT:** This was your diploma from-

**SORA:** Gratz College.

**INT:** And what was it in?

**SORA:** It was in the teaching of Hebrew.

**INT:** And you received that diploma at what age?

**SORA:** I was sixteen.

**INT:** Was that the normal age to receive such a diploma?

**SORA:** Wait a moment. I was sixteen when I graduated from Girls' High and entered college. I was in college a month before I turned seventeen. I was seventeen when I got this diploma in June. It was young because this was a college.

**INT:** And what did you study at Queens College?

**SORA:** I majored in English but I also took...I came in with advanced credits in language. Remember I told you I had studied French? Well, in high school I studied French and Spanish and I came in with advanced credits and I studied French and Spanish also. English, French and Spanish, and I minored in secondary ed. so I could be a high school teacher.

**INT:** So you were reluctant to leave home.

**SORA:** And reluctant to leave Philadelphia. But Queens College was wonderful. I loved it. Now, my mother interceded. My mother said to my father she's got her Hebrew degree. Let her go to college. It's time for her to learn how to dance and do the things other girls do.

**INT:** Social life. She wanted you to have a social life.

**SORA:** My mother is a very beautiful woman. She was a very pretty girl and she danced and did all the things I didn't learn how to do, so she wanted me to learn those things. And my father didn't argue and I was a little surprised. I was in New York a couple of weeks when I got a letter from Sylvia Ettenberg, the registrar at the Seminary/College of Jewish studies, accepting my application to the Seminary which I had never made. But I knew how important it was to my father and I guess maybe...I didn't demur. I didn't protest. I knew it was really important to him. And so I went to Queens and to the Seminary/College on Sundays. I don't remember. I did not take a full program because the commute was an hour and a half one way. It really was a terrible commute. So I think I went one night a week and Sundays, but I might have gone two nights a week. I can't remember. My mother would remember.

**INT:** This was your social life at the Seminary? We kind of skipped right over that. What happened? Your mother wanted you to learn how to dance-

**SORA:** My social life was at Camp Massad in the summers.

**INT:** If I remember correctly, you met your husband at Jewish camp. Is that correct?

**SORA:** I met my husband at Camp Massad. My social life-while I was in Philadelphia, my friend Noam Pitlik, who was my classmate at Gratz and whose father was also one of our teachers at Gratz, Dr. Samuel Pitlik-Noam Pitlik extolled Camp Massad to me and I started going to Massad when I was about fifteen.

**INT:** And where was Camp Massad?

**SORA:** Camp Massad was in Dingman's Ferry, Pennsylvania.

**INT:** And Massad is a camp for-

**SORA:** Massad no longer exists unfortunately. Massad was sponsored by the Histadrut Ivrit. It was a camp that cut across religious lines but in practice was orthodox but modern orthodox. There was no mechitza but the boys and girls sat separately in prayers.

**INT:** How about for dining?

**SORA:** No. We were mixed. Oh, you were in bunks. It was separate in that sense.

**INT:** Same dining hall, different tables. So you were fifteen when you were first sent to that camp.

**SORA:** That's correct.

**INT:** And naturally it was an overnight camp, and you spent how many weeks there?

**SORA:** Eight weeks, but the thing about Camp Massad was you spoke Hebrew all the time. It was at Camp Massad that I really learned to speak Hebrew. It had a most extraordinary group of counselors and campers and to this day, there's still a group of...they put out an annual magazine of some kind. There's a group of Bogrei Massad, Massad graduates in Israel. The head of the camp. Shlomo Shulsinger and his wife Rivka now live in Israel. And you know Sara Feinstein here in Philadelphia-Sara has her doctorate in Hebrew literature. She's an expert on Bialik, but Sara was the wife of the director of the camp that I attended. I attended the second Massad, Massad Bet, in the first year of its founding.

**INT:** So a lot of the alumni of the camp have gone on or went on to Jewish careers?

**SORA:** They are distinguished in just about anything that they do. It's amazing. There's like a bond among us. I remember once going to a conference in Detroit and met an old Massadnik and it was like meeting your best friend. It was an extraordinary experience to go to Massad and it's unfortunate that it no longer exists.

**INT:** How many summers did you go?

**SORA:** I went five summers. I guess it was the third-it must have been the third summer or the fourth summer that I met my husband.

**INT:** He was a lifeguard, is that correct?

**SORA:** He was the head of the waterfront and I couldn't swim. One of the things I hadn't learned.

**INT:** Did he teach you?

**SORA:** He did, but I always tell him he didn't teach me to like it. He taught me to swim but not to love it.

**INT:** So you met your future husband when you were how old?

**SORA:** I was about eighteen.

**INT:** And he was what age at the time?

**SORA:** He's almost three and a half years older than I. He had just finished college and I was in college. He had finished college-he was valedictorian. He was first in his class.

**INT:** At what college?

**SORA:** At Yeshiva University. And he was studying that summer for his entrance exams to the Seminary. He's the youngest in his family. His father was the rabbi in Revere, Massachusetts for fifty-four years and his oldest brother, who was twelve years older-(end of tape 1, side 1)

**INT:** Did he know early on that that would be his lifetime commitment?

**SORA:** Yes. He wanted to be a rabbi. He did not want to be an orthodox rabbi. He wanted to be a conservative rabbi, although his practice was very traditional. He was studying for his entrance exams to the Seminary and he only stayed in camp one month that summer. Now I hadn't met him at the Seminary. Well, he wasn't at the Seminary yet. Thereafter, I'd see him occasionally at the Seminary but that's not where we met. We started going out pretty seriously and we were married in 1953, just before my twentieth birthday. I was nineteen when we got married. In fact, we just had our forty-fifth anniversary.

**INT:** Mazel Tov. What was the exact date?

**SORA:** January 25, 1953. I was an upper junior. I had a year and a half of college to finish, and he had two and a half years of the Seminary to finish.

**INT:** He was still a student.

**SORA:** We were both students.

**INT:** You were both students at the time. And where were you married?

**SORA:** We were married in Woodmere, Long Island, at Sons of Israel Congregation. My father-in-law married us and my father sang the Sheva Brochot. We were married there because at the time it was an orthodox synagogue and this was what my father-in-law wished. He wanted a wedding in an orthodox synagogue. Irving Miller was the rabbi at that synagogue but he was not there at our wedding. It was a family affair. Interesting how things work out. Years later it became a conservative synagogue and my uncle was the president, but we didn't know that then.

**INT:** And where was your first home as a newly married couple?

**SORA:** We lived at 515 West 110th Street in Manhattan, between Broadway and Amsterdam. I commuted to Queens and also had to go to the Lower East Side to do my student teaching. I ate lunch on the subway. I did homework on the subway. You would intuit when your stop was coming up. It was amazing. I guess at least three hours of my day were on the subway at a minimum.

**INT:** So was it a good, clean subway system?

**SORA:** It was efficient.

**INT:** It got you where you wanted to go.

**SORA:** It was very, very crowded in the mornings. I once had my hard boiled egg explode from the pressure of the people. We heard an explosion. We worked hard and we had a wonderful time and we were very, very poor. Aaron taught Sundays and I taught Sundays. My parents helped us financially. We had friends in like circumstances.

**INT:** Who were newly married, who were studying, who were students?

**SORA:** Our closest friends were Rabbi Wilfred Solomon, Zev Solomon, of Vancouver, British Columbia-just retired from that pulpit-and his wife Phyllis.

**INT:** Are they still friends?

**SORA:** Oh yes. They're in Israel now. We don't see them often but when we see them it's as if no time has elapsed. Rabbi Joseph Leukinsky, who's professor of education at the Seminary and his wife Betty. We had a play reading group. We used to get together about once a month. The host couple chose the plays and got copies for everybody and we read plays and once a year we went to a play. We'd go to City Center and sit up in the top row.

**INT:** The plays didn't necessarily have to have a Jewish theme, is that correct?

**SORA:** No. Plays.

**INT:** It could be musical, drama, anything.

**SORA:** Anything. Anything.

**INT:** Is anything memorable to you, something that you either saw or read?

**SORA:** I remember we read Cyrano de Bergerac and then we went to see Jose Ferrer in it at City Center. We knew all the lines. We had wonderful times. And New York, for a couple, you could go on the Fifth Avenue bus to the Cloisters and have a wonderful day and just pay bus fare. So you could be poor and still have plenty of free...the museums were basically free. We managed. We were too busy studying anyway to...Our work was our fun. I don't know. We had fun, but we worked hard.

**INT:** And thank goodness for public transportation. It sounds like you not only went to your studies that way but entertainment that way. You didn't own a car in those days, in that correct?

**SORA:** Oh no. Of course no.

**INT:** Did anyone that you knew?

**SORA:** First of all, you didn't own a car in Manhattan. It would have only been an impediment. Who could afford it? My father had a car. I don't know how often he used it though. My father had to visit other places. He had to go visit summer camps. The Jewish Education Committee was the agency that distributed federal funds to Yeshivot and summer camps, and so he visited them from time to time. That's when I remember his using a car, but he hardly ever used the car.

**INT:** And if you didn't have it, you didn't miss it. It wasn't part of your life.

**SORA:** That's right.

**INT:** So Aaron went on to complete his studies at the Seminary or at the Yeshiva? Tell me again where he was.

**SORA:** He was at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He finished the rabbinical course in four years. That was unusual. He came in with a very solid background in Talmud and based on your achievement in the exams, they determined whether you stayed four, five or six years. He stayed four. Our closest friend Bill-I don't remember if Bill stayed four or five, but Joe Lukinsky came in possibly not even knowing how to read Hebrew and he has risen to become professor of education at the Seminary, which is just wonderful.

**INT:** What was the day like when your husband was ordained?

**SORA:** It was a very hot day in June. We lived on the tenth floor in this very impersonal apartment building. We only knew our next door neighbors who were very, very paternal toward us. They were the ages of my parents. The thing that I remember before the graduation was the exams he had to take. He had to take an oral exam in Talmud with Professor Lieberman and Professor Lieberman studied until eleven o'clock, eleven p.m., so the exam was between eleven and midnight. What I remember was plying Aaron with coffee and staying up and worrying until he got home and what kind of condition are you in to take a major exam-your whole career rides on it-at eleven o'clock at night. But he took the exam and passed it. The other big hurdle was your senior sermon. You had to give a sermon and all your professors were seated-I don't remember whether they were seated in the front row looking at you or seated on the bimah behind you, but you knew they were there and you gave your senior sermon. Then we finally got to graduation where the ceremony itself I don't remember particularly well. We were very elated obviously. I had arranged a little reception at home and this neighbor next door had gone up and down the twelve floors of this building collecting ice for us. He said it's for the young rabbi on the tenth floor. He's graduating today. And it turned out that it seemed everyone in the building knew we were there but nobody ever said hello. That's New York.

When he graduated, there had been a terrible shortage of Jewish chaplains in the military, and the military cannot draft clergy people. Each arm of Judaism, each segment of Judaism, was given a quota by the Jewish Welfare Board and asked to provide chaplains for the military. So Aaron had signed an agreement that upon graduation, if he were physically fit, he would serve in

the military and Wolf Kelman, alav hashalom, who was the executive of the Rabbinical Assembly came to him and two other tall, well built young men in the class and asked them if they would consider going into the Navy because the rabbi who approved chaplains for the Navy was Reform and had rejected anyone who wasn't Reform, and he'd been reprimanded and they had just gotten the reprimand and they wanted immediately to bring in candidates that he would have to accept. And Aaron came home and I don't think we had ever thought about the Navy. I think you just think if you're Jewish you think Army. He came home and we talked about it and I said "you know, naval bases are always near large cities. We won't have a problem getting kosher food." So he agreed to go into the Navy. At this point, I had completed college. I graduated from college in January of 1954.

**INT:** With a degree in what?

**SORA:** With my degree in English and secondary education.

**INT:** And at that point did you know you were going into...well, obviously secondary education-you knew you were going into teaching at that time? When did you make that decision?

**SORA:** That was my backup. I figured secondary education was a good thing to fall back on. I don't know that I really knew. I'm not sure. I loved languages and I loved the Hebrew language and I was...at Queens College, it was the only city college that didn't teach Hebrew. A few of us who were students at the Seminary had organized to form a Hebrew 01 class to get it in. Aleph-Bet really. And we were not successful. We couldn't get ten people to enroll. You had to have ten people. So I decided...I graduated with a very high cumme. I was summa cum laude and I was a junior phi beta kappa. So I went to the head of the department, of the education department, and I told him that I wanted to do my student teaching in Hebrew, and he said I could do that. I wanted to create some ferment here. He said I could do that if I could find someone who knew Hebrew who would supervise me. And I went to the head of the language department, Professor Maurice Chazan, which was probably Frenchified but it came from Chazan, and he agreed to supervise me. So I was placed in the Lower East Side at Seward Park High School as a teacher of Hebrew with a very fine Hebrew teacher, an extraordinary man by the name of Solomon Feffer. I was given my own class. There wasn't much I could do to harm them. They had already failed a few times. I was given this class to work with and also-

**INT:** What were you working with them on?

**SORA:** Hebrew. They had to pass the regents.

**INT:** What age were they and what age were you?

**SORA:** I was twenty and they were of mixed ages. They were rostered into Hebrew if it fit into their program. Some of them requested Hebrew. They were not all necessarily Jewish.

**INT:** Was that your first formal teaching experience?

**SORA:** Yes. It probably really was.

**INT:** Was it what you anticipated? Were you surprised by it?

**SORA:** I enjoyed it. I was very much taken with the school and with the principal in the school. It was a polyglot school. We had Chinese students. We had Hispanic students. We had announcements on the loudspeaker in every language you could think of. The principal encouraged all of that and he asked...there was another student teacher in Hebrew, the Rebbetzin Judy Kahn. Her husband is Rabbi Chaim Kahn in Cherry Hill. Judy and I-she was Judy Rosen then-Judy and I were the student teachers in Hebrew and the principal asked us to prepare a Chanukah party for the Jewish students which was very nice and surprised us. I was offered the appointment to teach Hebrew in the high school and I realized-it was that experience, I think, that made me realize that what I loved was not the Hebrew language. It was all the things that I wasn't allowed to teach in the high school, so that I had to teach...Shavuot was mentioned but it was a harvest festival. You couldn't talk about the ten commandments. That made me realize that what I really wanted to do was to teach Jewish children to be Jewish, and at that point I applied to and got a job as a Hebrew teacher in an afternoon Hebrew school. I taught at Kehillat Jeshurin, which was an orthodox synagogue. Actually, I knew Rabbi Lookstein and his son, who is now the rabbi there, from Massad.

**INT:** So Massad followed you around.

**SORA:** In some ways. It imprints you. It really does.

**INT:** So from age twenty and on you knew that that was the direction your career path was going to take.

**SORA:** That's correct. I wanted to be an afternoon Hebrew school teacher. Well, a Hebrew school teacher anyway, and what I did was I immediately started working on my Masters degree, so that fit in well. I could go to school and I could teach. It worked out. Unfortunately, many of my classes at Teacher's College were really at night so you taught from four to six and then I got on a bus, I went up to the Seminary. This was the East Side and the Seminary was on the West Side, but there was this bus that crossed at 110th Street that I could take right up to the Seminary. Aaron would have supper for me in the cafeteria. He'd have my platter waiting. I would gulp my dinner and run down to a seven o'clock class, or it started seven ten, seven twelve. Teacher's College was two blocks from the Seminary. He would meet me after my class, which usually ended at ten, and we would walk home.

After the first semester, my first semester in graduate school, my husband graduated from the Seminary, was ordained as a conservative rabbi, and honored the commitment he had made to serve in the military. He was to serve in the Navy, which meant that he had to spend that summer



in Newport, Rhode Island, in chaplains' school, and wives were not permitted to go with the students. He was able to come home most weekends and flew in on a piper cub actually. And so I had to stay behind and I closed our apartment regretfully, moved back in with my parents and spent that summer completing my Masters degree. I remember I took twelve credits over that summer and finished the degree. When he finished chaplain school in August-

**INT:** Of what year?

**SORA:** I think we're in 1956. Maybe '55. '55 or '56. It is '55 because my daughter was born in '56. We moved to Norfolk where he was assigned as the Jewish chaplain for the Fifth Naval District, and I became a Navy wife. That was an experience. I should have stressed-I had gone to public school my whole life and really never lived in Jewish neighborhoods in the years that we were growing up, so I had a lot of contact with non-Jews, and yet the home influence was so strong that I really was not as knowledgeable possibly as I thought and it was quite an experience for me-

**INT:** Not as knowledgeable about worldly things?

**SORA:** Exactly. I remember in college getting my first C on a paper where I had to explain A.E. Houseman's The Carpenter's Son, and the piece that I was missing was that Jesus was a carpenter's son. I didn't know that and so I never understood the poem and it was clear in my analysis. This is what I meant. I knew a lot and I didn't know a lot. To become the wife of the Jewish chaplain in a totally non-Jewish environment, where you are constantly the model, the person explaining and so forth was quite an experience. And I encountered, for the very first time-and I'm happy to say the last time, anti-Semitism. I encountered it from my husband's commanding officer, the second-in-command, but the fellow on top of him, who had a lot of power over him. The Navy protocol is to call upon newcomers to town within a designated very short period and you have to be ready to receive callers between four and six, unannounced. You have to have calling cards that you give and receive.

**INT:** So there was a whole protocol for this.

**SORA:** There was a whole protocol.

**INT:** It was new to you.

**SORA:** I had a new Bible, Welcome Aboard, the guidebook for the Naval officer's wife, and let me tell you it was my Bible. I did everything it said. So this chaplain and his wife called upon us. They were Southern Baptists. He said something about Jewing the price down, which I had only read in Dickens and sort of looked at me meaningfully as he said it and I decided I'd better ignore it because I didn't know what might happen to Aaron if I didn't. And then his wife said to me, "Oh, your name is so unusual. What are the names of the people in your family?" I was happy my mother's name was Rose. Azriel was a little difficult to explain. And then I said, "And my

brother's name is Judah" and as I'm saying it I'm saying to myself uh-uh. And I said very quickly, "my brother was born on Chanukah and was named for Judah Maccabe." And she said to me, "Well, we never name our children Judah or Jezebel." That kind of remained with me. I never forgot that. He was transferred and removed actually and was reprimanded for moonlighting. He was not supposed to be moonlighting. He had a pulpit in the community which he wasn't supposed to do. He was removed for that reason and we were delighted. And in came a district chaplain who was a priest, and he became a mentor to us. I am eternally grateful to him. The only problem I had was according to the book we were supposed to call upon him, and he lived in the bachelor's officers quarters and he had said he didn't want to be called upon there. So the book didn't say I could do this, but I invited him to dinner and we became fast friends and because Aaron was the Jewish chaplain, it was also the lowest ranking, but as the only Jewish chaplain and this father was a captain, which is a colonel, when he had dinner parties he invited us and we would be with very high ranking officers and it was a real, real education. Well, it was an education for a Jewish girl who grew up in large cities to become a chaplain's wife in that kind of situation.

**INT:** So you were exposed to people of all different types of religions, ethnic groups.

**SORA:** All different religions, ethnic groups. I worked for Navy Relief and I was very conscious of the fact that to these people, I represented the entire Jewish people. It was quite a responsibility. Meanwhile though, the community, Norfolk, had a very lovely Jewish community with two lovely conservative rabbis who were very, very good to us and very nurturing of us. While we were in Norfolk, we had our first daughter, Rena, who was born in November of 1956 in the Naval Hospital at Portsmouth, Virginia. We were also fortunate that in Portsmouth, Virginia was Rabbi David Arzt, who was a friend from the Seminary and who had also served. He had served actually in the war so he had military experience. So we had a nice group of people there and it was a happy two years. It really was.

**INT:** In Norfolk?

**SORA:** In Norfolk. And we made, in Norfolk, very, very close friends who remain our very close friends and who happen to live in Philadelphia, Miriam and Bud, Samuel, Diamond. Bud, having been drafted in the very brief period that the Navy drafted-he was a member of the Pennsylvania Bar and the Navy made him a seaman apprentice. He was someone who observed kashrut and was suffering on the ships and he called Aaron and asked whether he could come and be his yeoman, which is a secretary. Aaron needed a yeoman and had advertised for that. It was two different jurisdictions. Aaron was land-based and Bud was sea-based so that was not able to be effected. However, we said to him anytime he could get off the ship he should come and have dinner with us, and from that grew a really beautiful friendship which has survived now for over forty years.

**INT:** And this was his yeoman?

**SORA:** He did not become his yeoman.

**INT:** He did not, but he became a lifelong friend.

**SORA:** He became a lifelong friend. He stayed on that ship. He went to the Mediterranean. He became the aide to a legal officer and to an admiral and toured the Mediterranean.

**INT:** What was his name again?

**SORA:** Samuel Diamond, known as Bud. We really got some very good things from the Navy.

**INT:** And being Jewish in the navy, you said, was certainly an eye-opening experience for you.

**SORA:** My next door neighbor was Jewish. She was so excited when we moved in. We lived in a little garden apartment and we walked four miles on Shabbos from the Naval base home. She said that in her whole career, and her husband was a lifelong career Navy person, she had never had a Jewish neighbor and to have a rabbi-she just didn't know what to do for us. People were very, very nice to us. And all my neighbors were worried what would happen if our child was born on Shabbat, if I went into labor on Shabbat. I said well, then he'd drive me to the hospital. They were impressed by the fact. They watched that we walked these distances. They knew. But they were wonderful to us. Everybody was just wonderful to us. After Rena was born and my husband was...I guess he applied to the Rabbinical Assembly Placement Office, knowing that we would be coming out of the Navy in the summer of '57, he applied to the placement office and was sent to Erie, Pennsylvania for an audition or whatever you call it. In Yiddish it's a pruba. He was offered the job. He actually went to Erie in February and they knew that they would have to wait for us until July and they did. So we left Norfolk for Erie in July.

**INT:** And Aaron's first congregation was where?

**SORA:** This was his first congregation. Erie, Pennsylvania. It was called the Jewish Center. It's now Brith Sholom of Erie, Pennsylvania.

**INT:** And how large of a congregation was that?

**SORA:** It was a 350 family congregation. I guess I should backtrack and say that in the Navy we got their first Sukkah built and we mobilized the families and got everyone together to decorate the Sukkah. We tried to do things with families, to educate them. I was very busy taking in this whole new culture. The military is a whole new culture and I wanted to learn as much about it as I could. I really concentrated on being a good naval wife, but that also involved some duties as a rabbi's wife. I was invited to all the sisterhoods in town to give lectures and so forth. I was blond. I was very blond until Rena was born. I was very blond and one of the places I went, I remember hearing one of the older woman saying it's not nice that the Jewish chaplain didn't marry a Jewish girl. My father was also blond. I came by it honestly. But after Rena was born my hair got

dark. So we moved to Erie, Pennsylvania. Now Erie, Pennsylvania was a very interesting community. It was a community largely of older people, many of them Europeans by birth, and most of them the ages of my parents. There was a small group of young people but the preponderance of people were middle aged. There were two congregations, the conservative, which had also a minyan from the Orthodox synagogue which had closed and joined its assets and the few remaining people with the Conservative congregation, and a Reform congregation. Erie was not a community with a great-(end of tape 1, side 2)

**INT:** It's March 4, 1998. We're in the office of Sora Landes at the Raymond and Ruth Perelman Jewish Day School, a Solomon Schechter affiliate, the Forman Center. We're continuing the interview that we began on January 28, 1998. Sora would like to add an addendum to the previous recording. Here she is.

**SORA:** Thank you, Rhonda. I wanted to expand on some of the influences in my family toward Hebrew and Jewish studies. First of all, I do not recall ever having learned to read Hebrew. My mother tells me that she attended a Hebrew study class of some kind with adults and left my father to babysit on some kind of once a week basis. He was not able to just sit and play with me. He evidently taught me to read Hebrew. He also, in the same vein, must have taught me to tell time. I came to kindergarten knowing how to tell time and to Hebrew school knowing how to read Hebrew. I have no recollection of either. I also attended a five day a week Hebrew school which met for three hours from Monday to Thursday, from four to seven after school, and on Sundays for either three or four hours. I don't remember whether I went from nine to twelve or nine to one, but it was pretty intensive. My father drove me to school. This was all in Cleveland, by the way. My father drove me to school in the morning because it was a distance from our house, being a magnet school, and would quiz me in the car on the previous day's Torah lesson or Hebrew lesson. He was apparently more interested in my Jewish education, although he checked on my language formation in English as well. He was always expanding my vocabulary with several little ditties or plays on words.

I also want to mention that in Philadelphia, in the years from 1947-50 which was when I lived here as a young high school student, there was a tremendous fervor at Gratz College around the establishment, the impending establishment and then the establishment of the State of Israel. We had two Hebrew youth groups which were Hebraic, Ivriyah and Achvah, where we met regularly, spoke Hebrew, put on Hebrew plays, did a lot of Israeli dancing. We also petitioned all the professors at Gratz to teach their classes in Hebrew, and aside from Ellis Rifkin, the history teacher, who said he wasn't fluent enough in Hebrew, we were successful in having our classes held in Hebrew. So there was tremendous fervor around Israel and the Hebrew language in those years of my high school schooling.

Now we will resume our sojourn in Erie. What I want to say about Erie is that it was a very happy experience of seven years for us, from 1957-1964. We came to Erie with an eight month old daughter and left with four children, three of whom were born in Erie, interestingly, in the Catholic hospital, St. Vincent's, which was something I chose because of convenience but

learned, when we left, that nobody had ever gone. No Jewish girl had ever had children in the Catholic hospital and they felt very honored, I guess, by the fact that the rabbi's wife came there. We had, by the way, wonderful interdenominational relationships with the Catholics and the Jews in Erie. There was an extraordinary archbishop there. But that's for another discussion.

**INT:** Was the population of Erie mostly Catholic would you say?

**SORA:** Yes. There was a Catholic majority and there were 550-600 Jewish families, all of whom belonged to one of the two synagogues. Some belonged to both, to support both of them. Because the community was small and because there was only a synagogue and a temple, the rabbi at the conservative synagogue was really able to set the standard for community observance in Erie and that was set very high. It was a very traditional Jewish community. The people in Erie were largely an immigrant population. They were very intelligent. Many of them were very successful, but they had not had a lot of formal education and there were not many who were college graduates. There were not tremendous resources from within the city for certain kinds of learning. I found myself very busy with the sisterhood in programming and on some kind of regular basis, certainly every February, in interfaith kinds of programming between the synagogue and churches in the area.

**INT:** So even though the population of Erie was mainly Catholic, you felt at home? You felt comfortable in Erie?

**SORA:** Very.

**INT:** You said there were good interfaith relations.

**SORA:** Very. I had some almost comical experiences as the rabbi's wife because they expected me to be about fifty or sixty and I was in my twenties. That is the outside community. They thought of rabbis as being old men. But they were seven wonderful years and our main motive for leaving Erie was that we wanted a higher standard of Jewish education for our children than was available there. By the way, in our cohort group of parents of young children, we were able to persuade them to have Hebrew school start in the first grade, and it did. My husband got our Hebrew school and our high school accredited by the State and our children who went to our high school got language credits in their high schools towards college admission for studying Hebrew.

**INT:** So you really emphasized Hebrew.

**SORA:** And Jewish studies. It was a community that had to draw upon its own resources, so you tried to give them as much as possible so that they could sustain themselves. Erie, in the winter, was not accessible easily. So our move to Philadelphia was governed by our desire to have day school education for our own children because it was clear there was not enough of a population to sustain a day school in Erie. There was not enough of a young population with young children.

**INT:** And where did you first hear about Beth Sholom Congregation?

**SORA:** I guess I knew about Beth Sholom when I lived in Philadelphia but I hadn't known about the move to the suburbs and the Frank Lloyd Wright building until we saw it in Newsweek magazine. When my husband received the invitation to come it was exciting. He was called directly by the congregation and he directed them, redirected them, to work through the placement commission at the Seminary, but they said they had already done that and indeed, the very next day, he was called by the placement director who said clearance had been given. And he came to Philadelphia to interview here. There are questions here about women's roles. I must say it never occurred to me to come with him. Our baby, our fourth baby, was six months old. And he went and he liked it. He came back and was inclined to accept their offer when it was made, and they made it but said that they would like to come out to Erie to see him in his own pulpit and to meet me, and in that interview they asked me whether I would be interfering with synagogue affairs and I was very taken aback by the question and said no, of course I would not be.

**INT:** So your husband passed the test, whatever the test was?

**SORA:** Yes, and I guess I did too. They were very eager to meet me.

**INT:** And obviously you both made a very positive impression on them.

**SORA:** Well, I guess. We came and we found the community lovely and the people lovely.

**INT:** So you were looking forward to coming to Philadelphia.

**SORA:** And to me it was just extraordinary that in this one synagogue there were twice as many Jews as there were in the whole city of Erie. That was quite...

**INT:** So when you came in '64, about how many families were members of Beth Sholom?

**SORA:** I suppose there were a thousand or more. It was a large congregation and it was a challenge to learn who the active people were, to know their names, to meet them. Frankly, to sell yourself. I remember those as being very busy years and I still remember I had four little children. Our youngest, Tamar, was a year old on the day we moved in.

**INT:** You have three girls and a boy, is that correct?

**SORA:** That's correct. The boy is the third child. I guess this is a very good place to say that I have felt that the role of the rabbi's wife and then later the role of the school principal is to model the importance of family, and I have always felt that the most important role of a mother and father is to be parents to their children and respectful children to their own parents. Family concerns come first and other concerns are next.

**INT:** And that was true in the home that you were raised in as well.

**SORA:** Yes. My mother devoted herself totally to her family until we were independent. I was home with the children but the synagogue activities, the sisterhood, were things in which I participated but I would bow out of if somebody was home sick. Our children are our pride and joy. I always feel that if I am accountable to anything in the "on high," that's all that I can really be responsible for. This is where I did my best. I think a woman lives her life in concentric circles. First is your family, then possibly your profession, then the next one your community. That was the way I allocated my energy, and in those years my profession was being the helpmate to the rabbi, the rabbi's wife.

**INT:** But certainly your interest in Jewish education applied to raising a family. You educated your children Jewishly.

**SORA:** Absolutely.

**INT:** And then you took it on as a profession more formally when you became what at Beth Sholom?

**SORA:** What happened to me was that I was involved in our children's education. My husband appointed me educational director of the family-at one point gave me a formal title. And as our children began-

**INT:** With pay and vacation time?

**SORA:** As our children entered Schechter, which was then in Wynnefield and we lived in Elkins Park, I found myself becoming more involved in their education, concerned when I saw a lacunae in their studies, both in general education and in Jewish education. At the time, Chaim Potok, who was both a dear friend-he had been my husband's chaver, study companion at the Yeshiva college and then later at the Seminary and they have been very good friends for many, many years, Chaim was chairman of the education committee at Schechter and Gabriel Cohen was the principal and Gabriel wasn't well at the time. I was very concerned about things that were happening in some of my children's classes and I asked, and particularly at the time in my son's class, Joshua's class. I asked for permission to observe the class and I wrote up later a memo to Chaim of concern of things that I had observed both in the class and in the school. He asked me if I would do that in my children's other classes and would I join the education committee. So I became a member of the education committee at his request after having made sufficient observations of classes, I had three children in the school at the time, to get a sense of concern about some of the things that were and some of the things that were not happening. This occupied a great deal of my time. I also, as our older daughter was at Akiba, became quite active there and was invited to a committee that was doing a self-study of the school and I was invited as a parent representative. There were twelve people on the committee-three or four from alumni, parents, faculty and I think there was one other group involved, board perhaps. We were doing a



self-study of the school at that time.

**INT:** So it sounds like your interest from early on started because your children obviously were going to the school and you wanted to evaluate their progress.

**SORA:** And Jewish education had always been an interest.

**INT:** Yes, and then it broadened.

**SORA:** So I was working very hard as a volunteer in these various committees and endeavors.

**INT:** Was it just as important for you as it was for your father that his daughter and that your daughters get a Jewish education, also get an equal or certainly equivalent to what a male would get?

**SORA:** Absolutely. And as a matter of fact, I have believed firmly that if you educate a woman Jewishly you educate a family because she is still generally the homemaker. She is still generally the person that's chauffeuring the kids back and forth to Hebrew school or to day school or to their various activities. In many cases, it's the mother who's supervising the homework and all of those things. Yes, girls need as much education as males.

**INT:** How about in its own right of Jewish education, let's say without the family. I know families are crucial, very important. Is it equally as important to educate a girl or what did you impart to your daughters? You would want them to be educated no matter what happens in their lives, I presume.

**SORA:** Of course I didn't know what would happen but you want to give them the tools for knowing who they are, for a sense of security and rootedness, and to maintain a tradition that's many thousands of years old. You don't want to be the link that breaks.

**INT:** And in fact have they continued in their own families by educating their own children Jewishly?

**SORA:** Yes. I am very proud. My husband and I take great pride in the fact that our grandchildren of school age are all in Schechter schools, some here and some in Hartford. Two here and three in Hartford.

**INT:** How many granddaughters, how many grandsons do you have?

**SORA:** We have two granddaughters, but one is six months old. One is eleven. She's at the day school in Hartford. The others are boys. I have five grandsons. Two of the children are-one is a toddler, one is an infant, so they're not yet in school.



**INT:** So they range in age from what to what at this point?

**SORA:** They range in age from almost fourteen to six months.

**INT:** So the oldest has had a bar mitzvah?

**SORA:** Not only did he have a bar mitzvah in Hartford, he led the whole service. He read the whole sedra, which was very long. It was Re'ah. He read the haftorah from a scroll of the Prophets, of the Navi. I had never seen that done. That was a surprise.

**INT:** What is his name?

**SORA:** His name is Samuel. Simcha.

**INT:** Named for?

**SORA:** He was named for my son-in-law's father. Our mechtuan, our son-in-law's father died a month after our children were married, and Samuel was named for him. Samuel Simcha, exactly as his grandfather. So I was involved in Jewish education but as a volunteer. Solomon Schechter was in the western part of the city, in Wynnefield, and there were people on this side of town who would not travel that distance, who were interested in a private school education and who were using Quaker schools for that purpose. This was something that my husband observed and was greatly concerned about.

**INT:** The Friends' School. They have a fairly large Jewish enrollment.

**SORA:** They have a very large Jewish enrollment.

**INT:** And they do to this day. They still do.

**SORA:** That is correct.

**INT:** Smaller classes, maybe greater attention.

**SORA:** In that sense, I think that the Jewish community has not yet succeeded. I think it's getting better but we have not yet succeeded. Jewish children should not be in Friends' Schools. They should be in Jewish schools.

**INT:** How about public schools?

**SORA:** Public schools are fine. I have no-

**INT:** It's just the Friends' Schools.

**SORA:** If you are going to choose a private school or you're going to choose a kind of religious education, let it be your own and not someone else's. My husband was concerned about this, spoke to the rabbis in the area who were willing to support the notion of a Jewish day school on this side of town.

**INT:** And this time period was when, when this was in its initial stages?

**SORA:** This must have been in the late Sixties and early Seventies. He approached the Forman family who were interested in a memorial for their parents. They didn't care where it was located in this area but they wanted a memorial to their parents in their name. It was the Max and Sadie Forman Day School.

**INT:** And its first home was where?

**SORA:** Its first home was at Beth Sholom. So the money had been raised. Since you're interviewing me, I don't want to go into all the history of that period.

**INT:** It's not crucial. When did the school actually begin?

**SORA:** The school actually began in September of 1973. Let me just back up a moment. What is interesting is that the committee that had been formed to start the school got the mandate to look for someone to organize the school. They called it a market study, to see whether there would be interest and so on. They were doing this in November of 1972 and the committee was formed and came to my door and that was one of the most amazing and unexpected experiences of my life. I had never realized that they had viewed me as anything but the rabbi's wife and I hadn't realized...see, I underestimated them. I hadn't realized that there was a large group in the synagogue or in the area who saw me as an individual in my own right. It truly was within an hour of their getting the mandate to look for somebody-they didn't advertise. They came to my house and invited me and I was scared to death and very, very excited at the invitation and totally overwhelmed by it.

This is where my father was a most tremendous help to me because he was at the time the director of the Bureau of Jewish Education in New York. He was very excited at this invitation to me. I was ready. Our youngest daughter was ten and could be left home alone with a cold. I was ready to look for something to do now because I felt I had been pretty well phased out as a mother of young children. Not that a mother is ever phased out, but I didn't have to be there all the time anymore. I just had to be there when they got home from school, weekends and so forth. So I went to New York. My father set up a whole series of observations for me in schools that he considered outstanding. One of them unfortunately is no longer in existence. I was so impressed by it. I went to several Orthodox schools and some Conservative schools, some of the Solomon Schechter schools. I went to some of the old, well-established schools like the Yeshiva of Flatbush. There was a Yeshiva of Central Queens. There was a Dov Revel Yeshiva that has since closed, which is a tragedy. It was a wonderful school. Barbara Streisand made a \$10,000

contribution at one point to try to keep it going, but I believe it is closed.

**INT:** So you really prepared yourself.

**SORA:** Indeed I did.

**INT:** And your father took this very seriously and wanted his daughter to probably be the best principal possible.

**SORA:** The principals were wonderful to me. They gave me advice. They sat down with me. They gave me curricula. They were just wonderful. A Rebbetzin who just recently passed away unfortunately, Lea Gelb, who was the Rebbetzin in White Plains-I can't think of the name of the synagogue. Her husband, Max Gelb, had been rabbi of that synagogue and she had founded what is now the very fine Solomon Schechter, one of our crowning Solomon Schechter day schools in White Plains. She had been the founding principal and she alerted me. She said, "Sora, if you're going to be principal of a day school and it's going to meet in your husband's synagogue, they're not going to treat you like the Rebbetzin anymore. Any time there's a finger mark on the wall they're going to yell at you." I was very glad she told me that. It was never quite that bad but I was forewarned and it's true. If the children made noise or made a mess, I was regarded somewhat differently.

**INT:** You were held accountable. (Tape shuts) This is Rhonda Hoffman. I'm with Sora Landes, principal of Solomon Schechter Day School, Forman Center. I know it has another name.

**SORA:** The Perelman Jewish Day School.

**INT:** It's June 17, 1998 and we're in her office at the Mandell Education Campus. Our last time, we ended up with speaking about when she first began her work at Solomon Schechter, so if you want to continue, Sora, about telling about some of the crucial people, important people, who helped make this into reality, helped build this school into what it is. Incidentally, it will be celebrating its 25th anniversary this September, September 1998. It started in 1973 in Beth Sholom Synagogue.

**SORA:** There are people who really must be acknowledged in this endeavor because I certainly could not have done this alone. There was an outstanding board of directors of the Forman Hebrew Day School headed by Bill Forman, Bill and Linda being great supporters of the school as were Bill's siblings, the Matzkins, Stanley and Mildred Matzkin. Mildred later passed away and Rosalyn married Stanley seven years later. Bunny and her first husband, Bunny, Bill's sister, who later married Max Berke after her first husband died. Lionel Schlank was the treasurer of the school and remained active for many, many years.

**INT:** That's a familiar name to me too. What was his Dad's name?

**SORA:** His Dad was Yehuda. J. Leo Schlank.

**INT:** I remember meeting him at Cedarbrook Hill Apartments many years ago and this man certainly impressed me.

**SORA:** He lived to be over ninety and had been a good friend of my father's. Leo Schlank was born in Jerusalem and they were Hebraists together and they always spoke and wrote to each other in Hebrew. They were very good friends. They shared books and reminiscences. Myron Sloan, Leonard Cantor, all of whom were presidents or past-presidents of Beth Sholom. Bernie Cross was active in the school for some period of time. Morton Tabas, alav hashalom, was very helpful the first couple of years before he became ill and helped us interview teachers and make educational decisions. Edward Taxin, who took me early on to visit the Kelman Academy, where he had a connection, in New Jersey. Drove me there and back. And on the way back asked me about recruitment and how was I getting people and was I promising them anything because after all, this was a marketing study and how much could I commit the synagogue or the plodding Forman Hebrew Day School because if we didn't get our full component we wouldn't have a school.

**INT:** Obviously this wasn't a one-person operation.

**SORA:** Absolutely not.

**INT:** And the list is endless it seems, and it still is not, even though you're at the helm.

**SORA:** Never. You need all the support. There are a lot of unsung heroes in any endeavor. Anyway, I remember saying to him on the way back, "Look, Eddie, I can't go up to someone and say maybe, if you send us your child, maybe we'll have a school. I say we are opening a kindergarten." And at the time, we thought also possibly a first grade, which we then abandoned. But I would say we are opening a kindergarten in September, please send your child. Through some miracle, we got twenty-one children in the recruitment. I need to tell you that part of the miracle was Mindelle Goldstein, who's been my colleague all these years. Mindelle was filling in in the Beth Sholom nursery for Clara Isaacman, who was on sabbatical with her late husband Danny in Israel. Mindelle was such an outstanding teacher and I was so impressed by what she did because she was the place where I would bring people who were looking over the facility and considering bringing their child to our new gan.

**INT:** So you brought them to Beth Sholom, is that correct?

**SORA:** Yes. We were going to be housed in Beth Sholom and the nursery was what I had to show them and Mindelle was so superior in accommodating the visitors and in handling our students that we got at least five and possibly more students from the Beth Sholom nursery into the Forman kindergarten because people knew that Mindelle would be the teacher. We also received children because of the reputation of the synagogue. The synagogue had an excellent

reputation educationally and because it was behind the enterprise, although the day school was financially separate and we rented space from the synagogue, still it was clear that the synagogue had some involvement and was supporting it. That was an inducement to other people. As I said, we thought we'd have a first grade also but we only were successful in recruiting three first graders, so Bill Forman went with me to call on all three families as we told them we were disengaging from the first grade because we didn't have enough of a demand for it. One of the families said well, we're not sure that our son is really ready for first grade, so we retained him in the kindergarten, and Scott Sheckman was a member of our first class. We engaged a lovely young woman, a recent graduate of Temple University who had studied with Uzi Adini. He had been her Hebrew teacher. That was Bunny Pilch. She became our Hebrew teacher, Mindelle was our general studies teacher and we were off.

**INT:** So how was that first year? Did anything unexpected happen? Did it go smoothly? What happened?

**SORA:** By the way, we were also lent a van by Camp Canadensis, courtesy of Bill Saltzman, alav hashalom, who recently passed away in the last year, who lent us the van and that was a very generous gesture. It just happened that we had the oil crisis that year and long lines at the pumps and the exorbitant price of oil, and we quickly discovered that the cost of insuring the van and paying for all the gas it consumed was not going to help us. We disengaged from the van the following year. What was really gratifying is that we retained almost all of those students from the first year and a lot of the attraction of the first year was that it was full day. There were not full day kindergartens then so this was a big attraction. We retained almost all of those children through first grade and we built from there, a year at a time. We had an outstanding devoted faculty. Edith Lane was our first grade teacher and she remained with us, having retired just last year. Shortly, Judy Bernstein joined us as second grade teacher and we recruited...we were not as successful in retaining all our Jewish studies teachers. Some of them went back to Israel and so on, but Zippy Shiloh joined us when we got the third grade and has been with us since.

**INT:** The first twelve years you were at the synagogue and then the move came in the mid-Eighties, around '85?

**SORA:** In the mid-Eighties, the campus, the Mandell campus, became available. The Grey Nuns were selling the Melrose Academy and all of its components. Steve Brown, who was then the head of the Solomon Schechter school, which had a northern branch which by then was located in Beth Am, only maybe a half mile from Beth Sholom, had the vision of the two schools merging together to move into the building that we're talking in now. That in fact happened a year later. We merged and moved in here. Georgia Boni who was the principal of the northern branch, became the principal at the main branch in Bala Cynwyd of Solomon Schechter.

**INT:** When you started here on the Mandell campus, how many grades did you offer?

**SORA:** We were a full K-6 school but what happened was we were able to have two sections of every grade, which neither one of us had been able to achieve on our own. That was so much better for the children. There was a much wider group of people, of peers. It was very stimulating for the faculty because they also had other peers from whom to learn and with whom to share ideas. There was tremendous desire on everyone's part for this to succeed, so everyone put his or her best foot forward and it was professionally one of the most exhilarating years I ever had. Worked hard. We worked so hard, but it was so exciting. There were major changes. The tuition scales were different. I was very proud of my Forman board because I came to them and said we have families who are going to have their tuition increased by possibly more than \$1000 because of the different tuition scales and they created a bridging fund, which was a fund to which a family could apply if they could not pay the new tuition. That bridging fund brought many families into the school and I believe we were able to draw on it for two years. When it ran out we also lost some families who could not pay the new scale, but it enabled other families to work their way into the new scale and to stay with us.

**INT:** And do you still offer scholarships?

**SORA:** Oh yes. Both schools had scholarships always.

**INT:** What is the enrollment now of the Perelman Center?

**SORA:** This year there have been 240 students, which is a little lower than we had been last year and I do think there are fewer children in this area. I have noticed that my busses from the Northeast are becoming much smaller. I think many of the families from the Northeast are moving out now to Bucks County, which is out of our bussing area, out of what the state mandates, the ten mile limit. Also, we had quite an influx of new immigrants, of new Russians, who have also moved out to Bucks County as they could afford new housing and then use the public schools by and large out there.

**INT:** When were you at the height of your enrollment would you say?

**SORA:** Probably about two, three years after the merger.

**INT:** So at about '88.

**SORA:** It was both the blip on the baby boomer's birth rate and the influx of new immigrants. We are aggressively recruiting. We're very hopeful. People from Bucks County are now inquiring about coming in, so it really may be an area that we can tap and we're prepared to help in some small measure defray the cost of transportation for them.

**INT:** Your role as a principal-you're going to enter your 25th year. I know you've always been a hard worker so I know that's not going to stop but do you see a different direction or it continuing in the same path, broadening programs at all. I know you have a wonderful array of

program here and I even attended a few during the past year, including your Israel 50 celebration and a number of others. It's not a superficial type of program. You do it in such depth and with such planning that I really have great admiration and respect for what you do here. And you see a continuation of that, a broadening of that, a deepening of that?

**SORA:** Absolutely. All of that and also we are hopeful, reaching out to children with more needs than we're presently able to accommodate, which means that we have to have more resources available which also means more costs. We are under a lot of pressure from our parents to continue to eighth grade, because for many of our parents, Akiba is inaccessible geographically. It's hard to reach. It's a long, long trip for many of our families in Blue Bell or Upper Dublin. We have quite a radius out in the northern suburbs.

**INT:** So you go out as far as Blue Bell or Ambler, that area?

**SORA:** We have a lot of kids from Upper Dublin. We have some from Wissahickon, which is Blue Bell. For them here is forty-five minutes, so you can imagine what it would be for them to get out to Akiba. So we're under those sorts of pressures and that's being discussed and contemplated, of course, with Akiba's knowledge and we hope support if we get to that point. So there are changes in the offing. We have a new head of school this year, Jay Leberman. Steve Brown left us two years ago. Sybil Levine and I ran the school, trying to keep things steady but not innovative for that year because we didn't want to commit a new head of school to programs that he or she hadn't had a hand in planning. We now have a very innovative head of school and I imagine that there will be all kinds of exciting things happening. I happen to like change. I don't like to settle into a rut. I like things to be different. I find that very stimulating. Especially in mid-life, to have a new challenge is very stimulating, so I enjoy that.

**INT:** So you see yourself continuing your role as principal here?

**SORA:** I don't know. We'll see how that plays itself out. That's kind of a family decision that involves all of us. But I have to say that I can think of nothing more fulfilling or more important than teaching Jewish children, and in some cases, in many cases, their families, how to live a Jewish life. In some cases, being of help to families in parenting skills, in helping children who have certain difficulties overcome them, social difficulties or learning difficulties. It's very, very gratifying to see a child's growth.

**INT:** It's not an eight hour a day job. It doesn't seem like that at all.

**SORA:** No. My family knows that every summer there is a kid or two or three to whom I write because either something traumatic has happened in their lives and they just need to know that there is someone thinking of them and caring about them.

**INT:** So your duties extend beyond these four walls.

**SORA:** It does. One finds oneself doing things that will help a child. You asked me about role models.

**INT:** Yes, role models when you were growing up or as an adult, who do you look towards or admire.

**SORA:** I have many colleagues, past and present, whom I admire. We've been at this process so long I can't remember what I said at the beginning. My parents, first and foremost, as models of commitment to Jewish life and to Jewish education. I have been blessed with some wonderful teachers along the way. Jay Leberman, our new head of school and people that knew him have been deeply influenced by Shraga Arian, Phillip Arian, who died quite young, untimely young, in his forties. I knew Phillip Arian, Shraga, as a young man and he was my father's pupil. It's been a great joy to me to see how he's influenced other people because I see my father's influence continuing, and Jay Leberman, our new head of school, was a student at Beth Shraga, which was Shraga's Hebrew day school, named for him after he passed away. Jay does many of the things Shraga did, which is very nice.

**INT:** I know Shraga is a Hebrew name. What does that mean?

**SORA:** I don't know that it has a particular meaning.

**INT:** I've heard of a Lubavitcher rabbi, Shraga Sherman.

**SORA:** You asked an interesting question to which I don't know the answer. But his English name was Phillip and we knew him as Phil, but later he became Shraga by choice.

**INT:** So your parents obviously you give a lot of credit to and always have.

**SORA:** I had some wonderful teachers here in Philadelphia, among them Dr. Wechter, who is Shulamith Caine's father. He was the finest Bible teacher I ever had and I had others at the Seminary afterwards, some of the famous ones.

**INT:** That was in New York, in the Jewish Theological Seminary?

**SORA:** But he taught me here at Gratz. He was a wonderful teacher. I was very much influenced by Will and Elsie Chomsky, living in their home and seeing their commitment to Jewish education and Elsie's commitment to teaching, which was outstanding. I had in New York in my first teaching position, Chemda Ruby, Lily Ruby, as a consultant from the Board of Jewish Education, who helped me so much. (End of tape 2, side 1)

**INT:** You've had a loss in your life recently, your brother who lived in Israel who I know you were close to. When did that occur?



**SORA:** Three months ago today. March 17th he died. He was a younger brother but very much a role model. My brother was Yehuda Moshe Eisenberg, Judah Eisenberg, a professor of physics, a most unusual person. A mensch first and foremost and the most brilliant person I have ever known. There was nothing that he didn't know in any field. He was one of these geniuses that was well rounded. When he was twelve, for his twelfth birthday, I asked him what he wanted. I had just started college. He said he wanted a college physics text, so I went to the bookstore at Queens College and bought him a very fat and very expensive text book which was full of squiggles that I couldn't make a bit of sense out of, and I brought it home and he read it like a novel. He taught himself algebra from my table of logarithms. He was just incredible. He taught himself. He was an outstanding Hebraist. He made Aliyah because of education for his children. He was very concerned. He was in college at fifteen. He had his Ph.D. from MIT at twenty-two. He was a full professor at the University of Virginia by age twenty-nine. He went straight to the University of Virginia from MIT as an assistant. He was even in consideration for the presidency of the university at one point and it didn't seem to be an impediment that he was Jewish. What was an impediment was that in the constitution of the university you have to be born in Virginia and he had been born in Ohio.

**INT:** Who ever thought that being born in a certain state would cause you problems?

**SORA:** But he was offered the job at Los Alamos as director of research there that Oppenheimer had had. He was incredibly brilliant. He went to Israel because of his children's education, leaving behind an endowed chair at the University of Virginia, and went to the University of Tel Aviv where he was the Yuval Ne'eman professor of theoretical physics. He also was dean of all the schools of science at one point, but relinquished that post about twelve years ago. He found it infringed too much on his research and on his teaching. He had most recently, actually in August, was elected to vice-rector of the university, which he loved. He was very modest. We didn't know a lot of what he did. But after he died, my children took off the Internet, from the Web page of the University of Tel Aviv, which they then, for a period of time-I don't know what the status is now-had as a memorial to Judah. They took off ten pages of his publications. I have three of his books which you can't read, but ten pages of publications. He was incredible. He had an association with the University of Frankfurt, which gave him a honorary degree, and I was there when he got that. It was a very moving thing for me. He contracted leukemia while in Germany. We were in Israel in February. We saw him at the airport. We were coming and he was leaving the next morning. We spent an hour together. He always met us when we came. While he was in Germany, ten days later, he had acute leukemia. He looked tired, but he looked very fit. And I told him he looked tired but he had been working very, very hard and loving it. From diagnosis to death was four weeks with very aggressive treatment, which I'm told actually prolonged his life. I don't know. It's a great loss. It's a very great loss. Not only personally for us in the family, but my nieces have since come to visit my mother singly. They've been coming this spring. It's been very moving. They brought all the letters of condolence that they have gotten. It's incredible. It's incredible. And the eulogies that were given. The Israeli physicists said that they came to Judah to find out the Hebrew roots of the technical terms they used. He was just so incredibly knowledgeable, and he knew many languages but Hebrew he knew. He

and my father, they had such a mastery of Hebrew. It was unbelievable. I thank you for asking me about that.

One of the things that my father would have not believed is the fact that Jewish education is now at the head of every community's agenda. His whole career he begged and implored communities to realize how critical it was to support Jewish education in every way possible. There was indifference. When we were here in Philadelphia, living here for three years, he wrote a weekly column for the Exponent called Dear Parents, which was about Jewish education. I have a compilation of it someplace. But now, every community and foundations are supporting- Abi Chai and other foundations are supporting and individuals are getting together and creating scholarship funds and incentive funds for Jewish education. This, to me, is a very hopeful sign. What I hope...what concerns me is that it be quality Jewish education, that we intensify. One of my father's columns was a mile wide and an inch deep. We don't want education that's a mile wide and an inch deep. We want education that is deep and that is profound. I don't want it to be...it's very important to engage a child's emotion. Very important, especially for young children. And to build nostalgia in the children, which Rabbi Arzt, Rabbi Max Arzt, once said to me, that his philosophy of education is to build nostalgias in children and I never forgot that. I thought that was wonderful. You should want to smell challah on Shabbos and chicken soup. Those are things that will tug at a child. But that does not diminish the importance of real intellectual grappling with intellectual issues in texts. We have to have really deep text study. In an elementary school we could give the tools for the text study, but that takes place much more in sixth, seventh grade and beyond, as children's ability to conceptualize matures, and their abstract thinking deepens. They haven't got those capacities much before twelve.

**INT:** So it's important to set that foundation and make them ready to pursue that.

**SORA:** And then it's got to continue beyond elementary school. So the other thing that I'm concerned about is that on the college and graduate level, preparing the kind of teachers we need. We can found lots of schools but if we don't have good staff for them it's a problem. We've got to have good, well trained and well-informed knowledgeable Jews to be teaching our kids.

**INT:** Is it too soon to know if any of the students who started with you 25 years ago either come back to visit or come back as a teacher?

**SORA:** They come back regularly. Oh sure. We had a graduate of our school as an assistant teacher with us this year, Ami Monson. He's going on to Queens College to do some outreach there for the Hillel. One of the graduates of our school was just ordained as a rabbi. Happens to be a young woman, Mira Wasserman. I don't remember Mira's married name. She was just ordained by HUC. I'm told by parents that many of our kids going through college teach afternoon Hebrew school or bar mitzvah and that sort of thing. We have another graduate doing Semitic and related studies at Princeton, so I see a professor in the making. We have had some really wonderful, wonderful students over the years. We have another graduate who we saw in Israel in February who's just finished going...he's now studying Arabic and he's finished a whole

tour of Arab countries and he also wants to do something with international relations. He knows Hebrew and he knows Arabic now and he's getting it all together and we're going to have another scholar there, I think.

**INT:** So that must be satisfying obviously to you.

**SORA:** Very gratifying. It's very gratifying to have, as we have, veterinarians and physicians and psychologists who are committed Jews. That's the goal. A lay leadership of committed Jews from which other things will come. Their children will hopefully also be committed Jews. That's what I would like to see.

**INT:** Talk about your generation. You have three daughters and a son, you and the rabbi, and how many grandchildren?

**SORA:** Seven, one of whom was introduced. We have a custom here in school that every year, on the last day of school which today was, we introduce the babies born that year to the student body and today I had the great pleasure of parading my little granddaughter around.

**INT:** She was here?

**SORA:** She was here.

**INT:** Where is she now?

**SORA:** She's home. They live in Philadelphia. They live here in Elkins Park.

**INT:** What is her name?

**SORA:** Her name is Rachel Hannah Coleman.

**INT:** And how old is she?

**SORA:** She's ten months old. She's perfectly adorable.

**INT:** Is she the youngest of your grandchildren?

**SORA:** She's presently the youngest of our grandchildren but I have hopes. Two of our children don't have children yet, but we have seven grandchildren.

**INT:** How many girls and how many boys?

**SORA:** Two girls and five boys. Two of them are below school age. Little Rachel is ten months and her older brother is three, but her two older brothers are in this school and her oldest brother

will graduate next year and hopefully go to Akiba. If not, he will go to public school and Hebrew high school but he will continue his Jewish education.

**INT:** So you have grandchildren in the school now.

**SORA:** That's correct. Two. And I have three grandchildren at the Solomon Schechter in Hartford, one of whom will be graduating the eighth grade there next year and I had the very happy problem of the possibility of the conflict of the two graduations, so I called my friend and colleague Carl Mandel at Hartford and I said have you done next year's calendar? When is your eighth grade graduation because I got to make sure it doesn't conflict with our sixth grade graduation.

**INT:** How many grandparents can do that?

**SORA:** So this proud Savta could be at both.

**INT:** So it sounds like Jewish education continues now from dor l'dor, the next generation, to your children, to your grandchildren and hopefully beyond.

**SORA:** Please G-d. None of our children is a Jewish professional and that's fine with us. Every one of them is a committed Jew, married to a committed Jew, active in the community, members of a synagogue and frequent visitors to Israel. Well, not the ones with young children. That's hard to do, but they have all been to Israel several times and of course plan to continue. Our youngest children go almost every year because they each have family in Israel. Our mechutanim are in Israel.

**INT:** So we've come full circle just about. Let me just say it was a pleasure spending time with you, Sora, and I hope our contact will continue in the Jewish community.

**SORA:** I too.

**INT:** I work here, you work here.

**SORA:** And I am honored really. I want to say that I am honored and flattered to have been one of those people approached for this project and I repeat, there is nothing more wonderful that one can do than training Jewish children.

**INT:** And may you continue to do that in whatever way you can for many years to come.

**SORA:** Thank you, Rhonda. (End of interview)