

## **Estelle Ringer**

**Ellen Rovner:** Hello, my name is Ellen Rovner, and I am interviewing Estelle Ringer today, on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022, at Estelle's home in Dedham, Massachusetts. Estelle, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I think you have so much to contribute.

**Estelle Ringer:** My pleasure, if I can do something.

**Rovner:** You will, I'm sure. First, tell me a little bit about your childhood—where you were born, and your parents, your family.

**Ringer::** My birth certificate says Chelsea, Massachusetts. I don't know where, exactly. My mother had all home deliveries, by the way. They didn't believe in going to the hospital if you had a baby. If you were pregnant and you had a mother living, then they used to have a home delivery. If the pregnant woman did not have a mother, then she went to the hospital. The horror of the hospital, my mother said, was they could switch the baby, or a lot of women died. So, I was born in the bedroom, probably, she said, on Hawthorne Street in Chelsea. That's about all I know. The third child in the family.

**Rovner:** Who were your siblings?

**Ringer:** I had two older brothers, Sumner and David, and then my little sister was born.

**Rovner:** Her name?

**Ringer:** Phyllis.

**Rovner:** Your parents' names?

**Ringer:** My father's name was Abraham Kaufman and my mother was Anna Ganick Kaufman [sp].

**Rovner:** Do you know how they met or where they met?

**Ringer:** Yes, I do. Very romantic. My mother was just a kid staying at her aunt's house. Her aunt lived in Chelsea and was going to be shopping for food for her family. She had a baby in a carriage, and my mother went with her because she was just not that old, and she was like a little babysitter for this baby. They came to a market, on Arlington Street in Chelsea, and it turns out that's where my father had a market. He peeked through the window of the market, he always said between the salamis and whatever was hanging there, and he saw his cute kid who was my mother. She was only about 16. And that's how they met. He liked her looks, and that was it.

**Rovner:** And they dated, or courted, or—?

**Ringer:** Well, they didn't really date. My mother lived in East Boston with her parents and her siblings, and my father was from the same town in Russia where my grandparents came from. At that time, people felt if you were from the same town that they were from, from Russia, you were what they called a lantzman, and they took you in like you were family. So my father started visiting there, and he was very happy, because he had nobody in this country, and there was a house with parents and children, and—my mother. [laughs] My grandparents felt—well, they liked him, and they felt that girls should get married. You know, they all had their education—they studied music, and they studied Hebrew, my mother did—and then they were supposed to get married. And the boys were supposed to go to Harvard. This was the principle. So eventually my mother gets married. She was just turning 18. To me, that's just a baby, now. And that's their romance.

**Rovner:** They lived in Chelsea from the time they were married?

**Ringer:** No. The story was my grandparents got some sort of an apartment for them, and sent the other two sisters—my mother had two sisters—to clean up and shine up that apartment, but when my mother got there, she was lonesome for East Boston, so she went back and lived with my grandparents for a short while, and then went to Chelsea.

She never liked Chelsea. She never wanted to move to Chelsea. But my father had his business there, and she went there.

**Rovner:** She went there. So this was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sometime?

**Ringer:** In 1920, they were married. In 1921, they had a little boy. [laughs]

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** That was the style, then.

**Rovner:** And that was on Hawthorne Street?

**Ringer:** That's what they claimed. That's what they told me.

**Rovner:** What's a really vivid memory growing up in your neighborhood?

**Ringer:** A vivid memory? Well, I can remember the house we lived in was sort of at the bottom of a hill, called Bellingham Street, and we would take our sleds and go to the top of the hill, and cars or not, we'd come coasting down. I remember doing that as a child.

**Rovner:** That's great. What did the street look like?

**Ringer:** Well, across the street from our home, there was a playground. And now when I went by and saw it, it was really a destitute-looking playground—no grass, nothing—but it had swings and seesaws. And at the top of the hill was a hospital, the Chelsea Memorial Hospital. At the bottom, if you walked a few blocks, you came to the Square, and there was a post office, things like that.

**Rovner:** So it was convenient?

**Ringer:** Sure, it was convenient. You would walk down onto the main street called Broadway, and then it seemed to have nice stores that you could look into.

**Rovner:** Do you remember any of them?

**Ringer:** Well, I know there was a hat store because my mother's sister, my Aunt Winnie [sp], worked in the hat store.

**Rovner:** It was called Hattie's [sp]. Hattie's [sp] hat store. Hattie's [sp] hat shop, right?

**Ringer:** And we could peek in there and see what was going on. Everything had a specialty. If they needed a hat, they went to the hat store. If they needed gloves, they went to the glove counter at R.H. Stearns and got fitted to gloves. So it was a lot different.

**Rovner:** Right, right. Do you remember other stores on Broadway?

**Ringer:** I know there were two movie theatres, and one was one that you could go to, and the other was—they inferred that it was not a nice place to go, that it was not fit for young people.

**Rovner:** Where was that one? Do you remember?

**Ringer:** That was across from the regular theatre. I think it was called the Olympia Theatre.

**Rovner:** Right, that was the regular theatre. And across the street was not a nice place to go?

**Ringer:** That's what they said.

**Rovner:** But there was also a Yiddish theatre there as well, at one time.

**Ringer:** That, I never—that, I don't remember. The interesting thing—when my mother married my father, she was born in Boston, Massachusetts. I have her birth certificate and everything. But when she married my father, he had not yet received his final citizenship papers. There was a rule, then—there was a law—that if a woman, an American citizen woman, married an alien, she lost her citizenship.

**Rovner:** Oh, gosh. Wow.

**Ringer:** I could show you the proof of it.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** So she never knew anything about this, but quite a few years after she married my father, she took my grandmother, my father's mother, to get her citizenship papers, and the judge interviewed my mother, who took her, and he said, "Well, you cannot be here as a witness, because you're not a citizen!" Well, knowing my mother, the roof almost came off. She says, "What do you mean?" Because she was voting, and—that subject never came up. And then he told her she lost her citizenship. Now, if you go back late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was an article in the newspaper saying that that law was declared illegal, and they got rid of it, so it was a thing.

But in the meantime, she had to go in and become a citizen. She had to go through the whole process.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** And on her papers for her citizenship, it says, "Country of origin: Russia" and that's inaccurate. I've got that; I can show it to you.

**Rovner:** Wow, that's incredible.

**Ringer:** I mean, nobody believes it, but it was true; that's what happened. Imagine putting that on her citizenship papers. And I have her birth certificate and everything. I have to make annotations so that the future generations seeing it will not believe it and know that it's an error.

**Rovner:** It's incredible. In 1924, the federal government closed the doors to immigrants—that was it—and it didn't start up again until after the War, really, in any great numbers.

**Ringer:** Yes, and there was tremendous discrimination against immigrants, and suspicion.

**Rovner:** That's an incredible example of discrimination against immigrants. Do you remember other kinds of examples when you were a kid, or things that your mother or father talked about?

**Ringer:** No, I really don't. I mean, the two of them were always busy, but I don't remember anything else.

**Rovner:** Do you recall any kind of anti-Semitism when you were a child?

**Ringer:** No, I don't remember anything about that.

**Rovner:** Nothing?

**Ringer:** No, in Chelsea, unless I was just not aware of what was going on. All my friends were Jewish. I didn't have any non-Jewish friends. Except my brothers had non-Jewish friends.

**Rovner:** How come do you think your brothers had non-Jewish friends and you didn't?

**Ringer:** They were neighbors. They lived nearby. I don't know how big it was, but in my mind, the land that our house—our house was on the corner of Bellingham Street and Shawmut, and we had a big lot of land that belonged to the house that you drove into, and there was a garage. So that big lot of land was great for baseball, and I could always play baseball when they had a shortage of players.

**Rovner:** They let you play?

**Ringer:** My brother would bring me in. [laughs]

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** So I remember his friends were not Jewish.

**Rovner:** They were your neighbors on the street?

**Ringer:** They were neighbors.

**Rovner:** Do you remember any of their names?

**Ringer:** Yeah, I remember Arthur Bandwell [sp], he was one. He's the one that stands out the most.

**Rovner:** Do you remember the house on the corner of Bellingham and Shawmut? Can you describe what your home was like inside?

**Ringer:** I remember the house originally had a large porch in the front that went around the front of the house, with steps, and large groups of boys that had been on the playground would come and sit on the steps, and my mother and father didn't like it, so they removed [laughs] the whole porch and just had a very small way of getting into the house, so that they wouldn't have to worry about all this confusion in front of the house. The house was three stories high. My parents originally I think had the first floor when they bought the house, and then they moved to the middle floor. It had a porch in the back. I guess there were three porches in the back. The inside had three large bedrooms, only one bathroom, an entrance hall—or reception hall, my mother called—living room, dining room. Between the dining room and the kitchen, we had a room that was small but had a window, and also had a built-in cabinet for dishes and stuff. That's what my mother called the butler's pantry. Years later, when I first met my husband, he thought that it was very funny that I had a butler's pantry without a butler. [laughs]

There was a large kitchen. The kitchen just had a stove in it, and then off the kitchen, there was the pantry with the sink and the refrigerator, and another closet, where she had her washer and dryer.

**Rovner:** Oh, she had a washer and dryer?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** And she had a refrigerator when you were a child?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** You remember that.

**Ringer:** Well, originally in that closet where she had the washer and dryer, she did have some sort of an icebox. I remember that they had to empty water from it, as the ice melted. That, I remember.

**Rovner:** The ice got delivered?

**Ringer:** Yes. The ice man delivered the blocks of ice. When she got that big refrigerator, I remember my brother used to hug it. [laughs]

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** But you couldn't keep ice cream and stuff in it; it was just a refrigerator.

**Rovner:** That's so funny that he used to hug it. Such a new invention! So incredible.

**Ringer:** Well, you know Uncle Sumner. [laughs]

**Rachel Burstein:** I do. [laughs]

**Rovner:** Same with a washer and a dryer; that was really something, too.

**Ringer:** Before that, I think they sent the laundry out to be washed. They did send it out. Certain things, they'd hang on the porch. They had the clothesline. I remember my father [laughs]—in the cold of the winter, he wore these very fine long-johns and underwear, like that came to your wrist and to your ankle, and my mother would hang it out there, and it would get stiff, and as kids we would move it this way and that way.

**Rovner:** [laughs] That's great. Incredible. You mentioned earlier that your mother got quite upset to hear she wasn't a citizen after she married your father. Can you tell me a little bit more about your mother? You kind of suggested that she had a strong personality.

**Ringer:** Oh, she was. My father said if she had been a man, she would have been a general. He also said she was the best-lookin' of all of the other girls she played bridge with. Yeah, she was a very creative lady. I think if she had been allowed to pursue her education, she would have gone to great heights. She was quite a smart gal.

**Rovner:** In what ways was she creative?

**Ringer:** As she said—"What the eyes see," she used to say, "the hands can do." She could see a color and carry it in her mind and duplicate it someplace. If you were trying to match a color for a room, for a drape, she had that color in her



head, and you'd go with her, and she'd say, "No, not that. It's got more of a blue in it." Or more of a green. She was great with that. When she was 64, she had hip surgery, and it was not like they do the hip surgery now. It was completely different, so that her recuperation was quite long. She decided to take up painting, so she did painting. She was painting while she was in bed. My father called me one night and says, "I don't know what's wrong with your mother," he said. He's in the other bed, and she's painting away, and "I don't like it."

**Rovner:** [laughs] Wasn't paying enough attention to him.

**Ringer:** Well, she—I said, "Oh, let her do it."

**Rovner:** Yeah, yeah. But they lived their entire married lives in Chelsea?

**Ringer:** Yes, they did. They lived first in a—when my sister was born, and I think it was called Cottage Street. I actually remember the night she was born.

**Rovner:** What was that like?

**Ringer:** Well, I was only a couple of years old, but I can remember my father picking me up and bringing me into my mother's bedroom to say, "That's your little sister." And I saw this wrinkled little object next to my mother, and then he brought me back [laughs] to be all my myself and quite frightened in the room. I do remember that.

**Rovner:** Wow.

Your sister was how many years apart?

**Ringer:** She was a little over two years younger than me; my sister, Phyllis.

**Rovner:** Tell me a little bit about your relationships with your siblings, with your brothers and your sister.

**Ringer:** Relationship? Well, I remember the minute my parents left—and the two boys were older—and the minute the door closed and they left, and Sumner, the

older one, was like in charge, they'd look at me and my sister and they'd say, "Go to bed." [laughs]

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** And then the two of them would wrestle on the living room floor, the two of them, Sumner and David. I do remember that. One day, this lamp that my mother loved, which I hated—it had all this—oh, it's this Italian style; I'm trying to think—Capodimonte—it's got all these ornate little figures on it—tips over, and one of the little figures fell off and [laughs] hit the floor, and my brother David—I said, "Oh my god, what'll my mother say?" He said, "Don't worry." He goes into his room and he comes back with two big fat cheeks chewing away with some gum, and he [laughs] glues the thing back with a wad of gum. That, I remember.

**Rovner:** Did she ever notice?

**Ringer:** Well, yes. Some time went by and we had a cleaning woman whose name was Ethel. And my mother [laughs] was probably dusting her Capodimonte lamp and suddenly one of the little figures fell off, and she says—"Oh my," she said, "Ethel is so rough!" She thought she broke it. Yeah, she did discover it. I remember when—the minute they left the house, my brother Sumner would always try to make fudge. So he'd always be cooking up fudge, and then they would say—have to have a little ball, a little hard ball in the mixture as you're cooking it. You don't know what I'm talking about.

**Rovner:** I know what you're talking about.

**Ringer:** So we'd all stick our tongues out to get a sample of the ball. He never really made hard fudge; it was always a syrup, the way he did it.

**Rovner:** Sumner was the oldest?

**Ringer:** He was the oldest. And in the summer heat, we had a cottage "far away," in Revere. I mean, it was only three steps from Chelsea.

**Rovner:** Where in Revere was the cottage?

**Ringer:** Way at the end. It was a section called Point of Pines. When I think of it now, I mean, it was so close by. But they'd go there for relief.

**Rovner:** Did you and your siblings and your mother stay there for the summer, or—do you remember?

**Ringer:** Sure, we stayed there.

**Rovner:** What about your father?

**Ringer:** Well, he came there, too. I mean, how far was it? Wasn't that far.

**Rovner:** Not far at all.

**Ringer:** My father's market was a kosher market, and actually, when he came to this country, he was so young and he had no money. First came to New York, and then he had some cousin living in Chelsea, Massachusetts, by the same name—Abraham Kaufman [sp]. So he came, and that cousin had a meat market, so my father went into the same business. That's how he got into it. Because that cousin had the same name, and they both had accounts at the Broadway National Bank, the banks used to mix things up. So my father then added my mother's middle name to all his business, an "E" for her, so as not to have the confusion.

**Rovner:** What was her name?

**Ringer:** Her name was Anna Edith [sp]. Her birth certificate says Hannah [sp], because I think my grandfather must have given the name Chana [sp] which was her Hebrew name, so they put down Hannah [sp] on her birth certificate.

**Rovner:** But she went by Anna?

**Ringer:** Yes. She was Anna. But she had an uncle who lived in Lynn, Massachusetts, and he said to my grandfather, "What kind of a name is Anna? Bessie, that's a nice name."

He called his daughter “Bessie,” and he called his horse “Bessie.”

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** So then my mother's siblings called her “Bessie.” So all the time I was growing up, I remember when my aunts and uncles came, they all called her Bessie, but her bridge club called her Anna. And my grandmother called her Chana [sp].

**Rovner:** So in the public, so to speak, outside of the family, she wanted to be known as Anna.

**Ringer:** Yes, her name was Anna. But otherwise, they all called her Bessie.

**Rovner:** [laughs] Even though they had a horse named Bessie. [laughs]

**Burstein:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** That's what he said. He loved the name Bessie.

**Rovner:** That's funny. You said your father was a kosher butcher.

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** Can you recall some of the food you had when you were a kid? He must have been bringing meat home all the time, or—? I mean, he had four children.

**Ringer:** Well, I think in the morning, the bakery used to deliver fresh rolls. They'd actually deliver like six rolls to your house.

**Rovner:** To the house, wow.

**Ringer:** There was a man that was calling out his wares on the street, and he would deliver like a hand of bananas. The milk man delivered the milk, even in the winter. The bottle would freeze and then you'd see like the cover of it would pop off. So that all came. For lunch, we had a lot of peanut butter; I know that. We never had tuna fish. We never had anything like that. Then the evening, well, my mother made, you know, family-style meals. She would make soup, or that sort of thing. In the winter, you had the root vegetables, because we never

had fresh vegetables in the winter. She did have I think an apple barrel or something, where you could have apples all winter.

**Rovner:** Did she have any other kind of food barrels on the back porch, do you recall?

**Ringer:** No. Just that.

**Rovner:** Some people would keep pickles or herring or something like that.

**Ringer:** No, that was it. She never had—I never saw anything—well, we never had like soda in the house, like ginger ale. We had water. The first time I had ginger ale, I came from my aunt's house and I told my mother about this wonderful [laughs] drink. But we never had that in the house. And we never had anything like hot dogs or salami in the house—

**Rovner:** Really!

**Ringer:** —because my father claimed that Morrison & Schiff [sp], who used to make that sort of product, would go all around to the various markets and buy their scraps and put it into the hot dogs and stuff, and he said it wasn't clean, so we didn't have it. And I never saw lox until—she wouldn't bring it in the house.

**Rovner:** Why not?

**Ringer:** Because to buy things like lox, they used to go to a store that was called a creamery, and they sold the lox and stuff like that, and it was all out on the counter, and flies were zoomin' around. I remember they had these long pieces of sticky paper hanging to collect the flies, but it wasn't very efficient, because some of them were on the food. So that never came into the house.

**Rovner:** Never?

**Ringer:** No.

**Rovner:** So you never had any smoked fish when you were growing up?

**Ringer:** No.

**Rovner:** Nothing?

**Ringer:** Never had that as a child, no.

**Rovner:** No. Did you have a lot of meat because your father was a butcher?

**Ringer:** Well, we had chicken. On weekends, I guess she used to make chicken. And during the week, she'd make meatballs or stuff like that.

**Rovner:** Did she do Shabbos every Friday night?

**Ringer:** Well, Friday, she would do a lot of cooking and baking, and then they'd have it for the next day.

**Rovner:** Do you recall some of her preparations for Shabbos? Did she do anything special in the house or—?

**Ringer:** Well, no, except she cooked a big meal Friday night, and she lit candles, and there was challah, which she didn't make; it was bought. She used to make noodles. That's right; she made her own noodles.

**Rovner:** She made her own noodles!

**Ringer:** Yes, until you could buy them in the store.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** Did your parents speak Yiddish or English or a mix of both?

**Ringer:** No, they spoke—she spoke English in the house. I did hear Yiddish every once in a while.

**Rovner:** What about your father?

**Ringer:** Same with him.

**Rovner:** He spoke English?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** But he was a native Yiddish speaker?

**Ringer:** Well, from his background, he was born in a town called Shepetivka in Russia. So he spoke Russian, he spoke a little German, he spoke Yiddish, and they had to learn English. The language in the house was just English.

**Rovner:** Did you know any Yiddish growing up?

**Ringer:** Well, I know certain words you'd hear, after repetition. And my grandmother, my mother's mother, she spoke English, because she had come here as a little girl. So that's what I heard. She was not a cookie grandmother.

**Rovner:** No?

**Ringer:** She was a business lady. [laughs]

**Rovner:** Can you describe her, tell me a little bit about her? What was her name?

**Ringer:** Yes, her name was Dora Ganick [sp], and, oh, she was a lot of fun. She loved to sing and she loved to dance, and she was part of that—there was some sort of a dramatic Jewish group along the Charles River that she belonged to so she could sing and dance. And she loved to march in a parade, and she was very active in being a suffragette.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** So I sort of think that perhaps it wasn't a true feeling for women's right to vote, but she loved to march in a parade.

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** Because she would go with a big pot, and a stick, and she'd march by. And my grandfather would sit outside in his Sears Roebuck's chair—your know those?—and he's say—"Let her go, let her go." [laughs] And she was very enterprising. When she was first married to my grandfather, they lived I guess in—where did all the Jews live, in the West End of Boston? She had just had a baby—that was my mother—and she noticed that people had pushcarts and they had like a business. My grandfather's business was, he and another man were involved in some sort of iron business in Dedham, Massachusetts. That was very far away.

So in order to go to his business, they said he left when it was dark, and he came home when it was dark. Years later, that's the business that grew with their children, and they were involved in doing that Mystic River Bridge that went over Chelsea.

**Rovner:** Oh, boy. Wow.

**Ringer:** That's what they say.

**Rovner:** Wow, wow.

**Ringer:** But my grandfather was out of the business by then. Anyway, she takes a look at all these people with merchandise, and they have a business, so she finds a house in East Boston and she moves there, without telling him. She gets someone to—well, how much did she have of her possession? She had a bed and pillows and pots and pans. And somebody moves her over there, without her husband knowing. She just moves there, and she moves into this place in East Boston. It was a small house on—I think it was called Chelsea Street, in East Boston. In the front of the house, there was like a little store—at least it had a glass window—so she could have a business. You can imagine when my grandfather got home from work, he was frantic, because she wasn't there. The place was empty. Anyway, she opens up this little store. It was small.

**Rovner:** What did she sell?

**Ringer:** She sold fabrics, ribbons, underwear.

I mean, the whole little store, as I recall, couldn't have been any bigger than my bedroom here. But I do remember as a child there was a counter with like, oh, a display case with the convex glass, where she had the ribbons. Also there was a drawer and you pulled it out; that's where she kept the money. So much money, I thought! Change and stuff. Then leading from that little room, which was the store, there were steps that went up to the kitchen. Anyone coming in, a bell rang—a bell jingled on the door, and she came running down from the kitchen. [laughs] So she had a business.



**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** That was her business.

**Rovner:** So she had that while your mother was growing up.

**Ringer:** She raised the children there. So they all went to the high school there.

**Rovner:** In East Boston.

**Ringer:** And they went to the bank that was there. Eventually the bank—because Joe Kennedy worked in the bank, then. You know, the Kennedy family was there. So she knew them. She knew the Kennedys.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** But that's so long ago, they knew everybody. They really knew everybody.

**Rovner:** Right. So, your mother had this great role model in terms of being an independent-minded woman.

**Ringer:** You mean her mother?

**Rovner:** Well, your mother, her role model was your grandmother.

**Ringer:** My grandmother?

**Rovner:** Yeah.

**Ringer:** Well, she was critical of my grandmother, because my grandmother was so free about everything. Like I say, she wasn't a cookie grandmother like my other grandmother. My grandmother Lilian [sp], she made cookies; every one looked the same. But not Dora [sp]; she rolled it out and she took a knife, and she went [laughs] like this. And that was the cookies. Not one cookie looked alike. She died very young.

**Rovner:** Ohhh.

**Ringer:** But she was a lot of fun. I remember that. She was a lot of fun.

**Rovner:** Wow. And so your father's parents also came here? The Kaufmans came.

**Ringer:** My grandfather, my paternal grandfather, came here probably in 1898 or 1899, and he was very—he actually was very young. And it’s an interesting thing, because he was a Lantzman, then he knew my grandparents, my mother's parents, so he would visit there, and he actually was at the baby ceremony when my mother was born. He probably held that baby, that eventually married his son. He left his wife and children in Russia, and he came to this country, in the hopes of getting established and then he’d bring them here. But he must have had some sort of flu, or maybe he had appendicitis, and he died very young. He’s buried in West Roxbury. He was 32 years old.

**Rovner:** Ooh, yeah.

**Ringer:** That was young. So my father really didn’t have a father.

**Rovner:** And what happened with your grandmother?

**Ringer:** What my father did when he came here and started a business, then whatever he earned, he brought his mother and his siblings to this country. When she came to this country, they eventually introduced her to a man so she could marry him. I didn’t know he wasn’t my grandfather. I just thought—as a kid, I remember looking at him and saying, “How could such a funny-looking man be my father's father?” He looked just like Pappy Yokum in *Li’l Abner*.

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** He looked just like Pappy Yokum.

**Rovner:** What was his name? Do you remember?

**Ringer:** His name was Harry Margolis [sp], and they lived in Medford, in one of the oldest houses in Medford. It was very, very old. So, she was married to Harry Margolis [sp] but I didn’t know he wasn’t my grandfather.

**Rovner:** Wow, wow. Earlier, we talked a little bit about Shabbos, and your mother lighting the candles. Can you talk a little bit about your family’s connection to Jewish traditions and rituals, religion?

**Ringer:** Well, the house was kept as a kosher home. We had two sets of silverware, for meat and for dairy, and the same with the dishes. For Passover, all of that was removed and we had Passover utensils. Everything was separate. I remember it was a lot of work for my mother. Then one day, my grandmother said to her, "How absolutely ridiculous," she said, "to change dishes and go through all that work when you have such a clean home. It isn't even necessary." So giving her the right—we stopped doing that.

**Rovner:** [laughs] Your free-thinking grandmother.

**Ringer:** That was my grandmother, yeah.

**Rovner:** Did your family belong to a synagogue, or were they active at all?

**Ringer:** We belonged to Temple Emmanuel in Chelsea. I guess my father originally belonged to that old synagogue that we went to.

**Rovner:** Walnut Street.

**Ringer:** Yes. When he was young, that's where he went. He remained as supporting them, but when we were very—well, all I remember is going to Temple Emmanuel.

**Rovner:** As a child?

**Ringer:** Yes. Although it was a Conservative, so it was completely different than something that was more Orthodox.

**Rovner:** Do you remember the rabbi?

**Ringer:** At Temple Emmanuel?

**Rovner:** Yeah.

**Ringer:** Yes, his name was Sidney Guthman.

**Rovner:** What do you remember about him?

**Ringer:** Well, he was young, and he wasn't like these old rabbis. When we had a temple picnic, he was out there playing ball with all of us, that sort of thing.

**Rovner:** Nice. Did you have a Bat Mitzvah?

**Ringer:** I had a Bat Mitzvah. My brothers had regular Bar Mitzvahs. They had their education in a rabbi's—I don't even know if he was a rabbi. But anyways, this rabbi had a home, and I guess he had long tables, and they called it a cheder. That's where the boys had their instruction for Bar Mitzvahs.

**Rovner:** That was in Chelsea somewhere?

**Ringer:** That was in Chelsea. But what they learned was by rote; they didn't know what they were reading. But what I learned at Temple Emmanuel, we learned what the Hebrew meant.

**Rovner:** Oh, you did! Wow!

**Ringer:** Yes. And we learned Hebrew as a classical language, just like you learn Latin, where you have words where the adjective has to be masculine or feminine. So it was a different education.

**Rovner:** Wow, wow. And there were boys and girls in your class, or just girls?

**Ringer:** Well, for the cheder, it was just boys. But for Temple Emmanuel—I don't remember if it was boys and girls, but our Bas Mitzvahs were Friday night. That was it.

**Rovner:** Was there a party or anything after your Bas Mitzvah or your brothers' Bar Mitzvahs?

**Ringer:** My brothers, there was. We had a big party. They cleared the whole house out. They moved all the furniture so that the living room and the dining room could be used for people to sit in and congregate in.

**Rovner:** Who did all the food?

**Ringer:** For my brothers, they brought in a woman that did the cooking in the house and prepared for the party.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** I remember, quite an ample woman.

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** That's all I remember, that a real big lady came.

**Rovner:** She came in and just cooked for everybody, just for the party?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** Wow, wow.

**Ringer:** That's what I remember. No, for my Bas Mitzvah, it was Friday night, probably we went home and we had ice cream and cake or something .

**Rovner:** Yeah. Not such a big party.

**Ringer:** No.

**Rovner:** But it was really unusual for girls to have a Bas Mitzvah in those days.

**Ringer:** Yes, it was. But Sidney Guthman brought that in.

**Rovner:** That's great. You and all your siblings went to Chelsea schools?

**Ringer:** Yes, we all matriculated right through. When my brothers were in elementary school and junior high, they were giving some students the opportunity to skip grades, so Sumner skipped two grades, and David skipped two grades.

By the time I was in school, they stopped doing it. But as a result of this skipping, my brother Sumner graduated from high school—he was like turning 16, I think.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** I mean, he was so immature, he didn't know what he wanted to do, so they enrolled him in Boston Latin School for like a postgraduate course. So that's what happened with him.

**Rovner:** I see. And then he went off to college?

**Ringer:** Yes. The boys were young when they finished school. When I went to school, they didn't have kindergarten; you just went to first grade.

**Rovner:** Oh!

**Ringer:** So when I went to first grade, what happened then? Oh, my brother Sumner was supposed to hold my hand and take me to school and not let go. But he let go, and I ran [laughs] in the middle of the street, and the cars were very high, and I was right there in the middle of the street, and the car went right over me! [laughs] I still remember that!

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** I remember the feeling being—lying on the street with this thing going over me! And then when it finished going over me, people came running and screaming to see what happened to the child. So then I get home, my brother got hell for letting go. And I was kept home from school, because they wanted to make sure I was okay. So I lost that part of the first grade. No sooner did I get back to school than my brother David gets scarlet fever. And they used to quarantine the house. They put a red sign on the front of the house, and people couldn't go in or out. So nobody could go to school, and I couldn't go to school. My brother Sumner got around it, that he went to live with my grandparents in East Boston, and then he went to school from there. But I think it was way, way into spring, almost time for promotion day, when I finally get to school, and my teacher was sick. Her name was Miss Holgate [sp]. So we had a substitute, who turns out to be my mother's cousin. She takes one look at me, and guess what she does? She puts me—they used to put the children in groups. The best readers were maybe “Bright Eyes” or “Robins” or something. So she takes me and puts me in all the high groups. Well, Miss Holgate comes back to school, and she sees I am

in the best groups. [laughs] I couldn't read or do anything! So she sends home a note to my mother that it would be preferable if I repeated the year. Well, my mother got very upset, and she went—I mean, she was like on fire. She went there, and she said nobody in her family *ever* had to repeat a year or wasn't smart enough to go ahead. She said, "Just give her the books"—and I'll be ready. So that was a very, very difficult time for me, as a kid, I remember, because whatever my mother was doing, the books were there, and I was standing and reading, and if I didn't finish—and when I finished, then all the siblings in the family would get a treat. So there I was reading, and Sumner, David, and Phyllis, they're looking, making sure, because they were going to get something. But she got me up to snuff, and they put me in the high second. That, I remember.

**Rovner:** That's great. And so you were a good student.

**Ringer:** I was a good student. Well, I was studious.

**Rovner:** Did your parents talk about education much to you?

**Ringer:** Well, yes, the boys were going to go to college.

**Rovner:** What about you and your sister?

**Ringer:** The same was true, was to prepare and go to college and better your life. My mother and father felt very strong about it. They didn't allow the boys near my father's business, and my sister and I never went down to see where his store was.

**Rovner:** You never went to Arlington Street?

**Ringer:** No. Maybe a few times, but he didn't want his children there. That was it.

**Rovner:** They wanted more for you.

**Ringer:** Well, they figured they wanted the boys to go on and succeed in life, in a profession.

**Rovner:** Was your family involved at all in—what was their social life like? Did they go to the YMHA, or did they have clubs that they went to, or—?

**Ringer:** I know they were Zionists.

**Rovner:** Now, how do you know they were Zionists?

**Ringer:** Because they attended big meetings, and they went to some big—when World War II was on, and there were rumors about what was going on to the Jews, there were some very big rallies that they went to, that I remember, and how upset they were when they came home. And the radio. We had a small radio in the kitchen that was always on, just to the news. Yeah, they were very tuned into that.

**Rovner:** You were in high school at that point?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** What do you recall of that time?

**Ringer:** Well, I just know that all the boys had to register for the draft, and my brothers went into the service.

**Rovner:** They did?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** Were they in college at that point, or—?

**Ringer:** When they went in, yes, they were in college. Sumner was in medical school. He had to go into the service. He went in. By the time he graduated medical school—they used to go over to Brooks Brothers and get fitted for their uniforms. So he went over, and he was fitted for his uniform, and then a short time later, they needed doctors in the Navy, so they switched him; he had to go get a different uniform! [laughs] It's true. He ended up in the Army, the Navy, and then in the Marines. He had three outfits for the three things. And he said he never got on a ship, because if was in Boston, and his ship was on the West Coast, by the time he got there, the ship was gone. But anyways, he was there.



My brother David, he was in the service, and then he had finished his undergraduate work, and they said he could go on to medical school so they were putting the boys up—they still had to wear uniforms, and they put them up in some hall in Boston. I forgot the name of it. it was on Mass Ave. They all had to sleep like in one huge open area. I remember my mother found out that David was sleeping on a cot there and going to medical school, and he had gotten—he was sick. The type of person she was, she went there [laughs] and she saw her David lying on a cot with a fever, and she said she's taking him home. They said she couldn't do it, and she said she was taking him home. She told him to get dressed, and she took him home.

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** She actually did, and he recovered in the house. I remember students coming from his class bringing him material from school, so he would catch up. But she took him home.

**Rovner:** Wow.

**Ringer:** That was Uncle David.

**Rovner:** What year did you graduate Chelsea High School?

**Ringer:** I think I graduated in '44.

**Rovner:** Did you have a lot of friends when you were in high school?

**Ringer:** Well, I had my girlfriends. Chelsea High was divided into college curriculum or technical or general. All of my friends were from the college group. When you look at what was going on then, practically everyone in the college group was Jewish. The same was true for the group that the boys were in.

**Rovner:** Did you continue relationships with any of your high school girlfriends?

**Ringer:** Well, we had moved away to—my parents had moved to Chestnut Hill afterwards, and then everybody sort of went different directions.

**Rovner:** You went to college. Where did you go to college?

**Ringer:** I went to the College of Liberal Arts at Boston University.

**Rovner:** What did you major in?

**Ringer:** I majored in romance languages and psychology.

**Rovner:** Great. Did you have thoughts about a career, or what you were going to do with this education?

**Ringer:** Oh, I thought I would become involved in some sort of an embassy, that I'd see a lot of the world, or do a lot of things. Because when I was in college, there was a drama group from Montreal, Canada. They came, and Professor Myron [sp] had said he thought that I would be good to associate with them and be their translator, because they didn't know English. For instance, they were putting on Molière plays, and I'd go along—there was one hotel in Copley Square, the Copley Square Hotel—

**Rovner:** Copley Plaza?

**Ringer:** Yes. They had very nice period furniture in there, and I remember going in there with these Canadians and speaking and trying to get furniture for the plays. With that little experience and a few other things, I thought I would have a career, somehow or other, with the language. But I didn't. I went to Cleveland, when I graduated, where my husband was finishing school.

**Rovner:** You had met him while you were in college?

**Ringer:** Yes.

**Rovner:** This was during the War, or was the War just ending at that point?

**Ringer:** No, it was still during the War. He had been in the Navy, and he had acceptance to medical school. He was supposed to be going to Yale Medical School, then the Navy decided that it would be better if he went to Boston and went into Boston University Medical School, which he had never heard of. But anyways, he went. He got there late, because everything had—he was there about two

weeks late from the start of school. That's how I met him, because he was in Boston.

**Rovner:** You were an undergrad?

**Ringer:** Yeah, well, he walks into the medical school late, and he was very [laughs] studious, and always achieved, and here he had missed two weeks of school. He sat down in a lecture hall right next to my cousin Sy [sp] and that's how I met him.

**Rovner:** Oh, so Sy [sp] introduced you?

**Ringer:** Yes. I wanted my cousin to go out with one of my sorority sisters, and he said that he would go if I would go out with his friend Morrie Ringer [sp]. So I did. And then it was interesting, because I went out with my husband—and he was such an old man; you know, he was three years older than me—I remember one of these sorority sisters that was a couple of years older than me, she said, “I don’t think it’s right for you to go out with Morrie Ringer [sp]; leave it for us girls.” The older girls. And from then on, I hated her. [laughs]

**Burstein:** [laughs]

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** So it was real funny.

**Rovner:** Did you like him right from the beginning?

**Ringer:** Oh, yes. I had never met—he walked in, he was wearing his Navy uniform, he was good-looking. First he walks in and he rings the bell, and my sister, who was younger than me, she answers, and he walks in, and then she runs over to me and she says—“Oh my goodness,” she says, “Hubba, hubba!” I'll never forget that! [laughs]

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Burstein:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** And my husband was so excited, he thought—well, Phyllis was so cute; he thought that was his date!

**Rovner:** Wow, that's great. When did you decide to get married? While you were still in college or—?

**Ringer:** By the time I was ready to graduate from undergraduate, but he had two more years of medical school. By then, he had decided he's transferring to Case Western to finish his medical education.

So I went out to Cleveland, and there was nothing there for me, in any sort of occupation related to what I was interested in. And we had nothing. [laughs] So I remember I went over to *the* Jewish temple—Abba Hillel Silver was the rabbi there—and I figured I'd get a job there. So they gave me a job teaching Hebrew. I figured I could keep a few pages ahead of the kids, and meanwhile I'd have whatever they paid me. I'd have some income. Then I contacted this professor of mine from BU, and he gave me some leads, and he said there were jobs in education; they needed teachers. So that's how I happened to go into teaching. I was started out in high school and then they thought I was too young. I was there a couple of months teaching French, and the veterans were coming back, and they *were* older than me, and I *was* young, so they decided they needed teachers in the elementary school, so they'd take me and put me down in a lower grade. Well, I never had experience in education. They said, "Do you think you could teach first grade?" I said, "Why not?" Then, first graders knew nothing. It isn't like now; when they come in, they're ready for their SATs. So, they demote me to the first grade. My feeling was, if I could teach someone a foreign language and they know nothing, then I could teach kids, too. I remember coming home that day and my husband sees me, and I says, "You will never believe what they did to me! They put me in the first grade!" But it was fun, with the kids.

**Rovner:** Great. So, you were a teacher?

**Ringer:** I taught first grade there. Then when we moved, he had his training in Boston, I was teaching in Newton.

**Rovner:** Also first grade?

**Ringer:** First grade.

**Rovner:** That's great.

**Ringer:** We got paid less than the men, you know. We were protesting. The female teachers got less than the male teachers. And a married teacher got less, too.

**Rovner:** Right. And you became pregnant?

**Ringer:** Well, after a few years, I was pregnant with a daughter, and I left teaching.

**Rovner:** Yeah, you had to leave. Yeah.

**Ringer:** It wasn't anything I would have stayed in, because it wasn't what I intended to do.

**Rovner:** I think we've covered quite a bit.

**Ringer:** We go off on a tangent!

**Rovner:** No, but that's good. Those tangents are the best parts! I just want to ask you, was there any member of your family who really influenced you, who really impacted your life, when you reflect back on it?

**Ringer:** You mean my immediate family?

**Rovner:** Yeah.

**Ringer:** I thought my brother Sumner was so important, because he graduated from undergrad, and he had a Phi Beta Kappa key. As a matter of fact, when I first met my husband, I'll never forget that night, he took his keychain out, and what did I see hanging from it? A Phi Beta Kappa key! I says, "Oh my goodness," I says, "My brother has one of those!" So that impressed me with Sumner. Until I got my own. [laughs]

**Burstein:** [laughs]

**Rovner:** You got your own! That's great. That's so great. Now, anything you want to add to this, about your life in Chelsea, and your life beyond Chelsea?

**Ringer:** Well, I think we were happy there. We never could have a bicycle, because you could get hit by a car; things like that. I think we led a very sheltered life. We had a lot of no-no's that we couldn't do.

**Rovner:** How come?

**Ringer:** That's how my parents raised us.

It isn't like now; children are very free. You went out on a date; you had to be home by a certain time, or else you had a nickel in your shoe, you could always make a call so they wouldn't worry. That sort of thing.

**Rovner:** Did you date in high school? I'm just curious.

**Ringer:** I don't really think so, no. I think we went out with groups of girls, that sort of thing.

**Rovner:** Where would you go?

**Ringer:** We went to each other's houses. We'd play games. We used to listen to certain radio programs. The girls used to dance, just with themselves. That, I think was a main activity.

**Rovner:** Great. Anything else you want to add?

**Ringer:** What else? Well, you see what happened. [laughs] After all these generations, I got Rachel.

**Burstein:** [laughs] "You see what happened." [laughs]

**Ringer:** And I've got ten great-grandchildren. [laughs]

**Rovner:** Fabulous. It's great.

**Ringer:** It's really quite a thing, isn't it?

**Rovner:** Yes. Tell me how many children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren.

**Ringer:** I had three children—Donna, Steven, and Pam. Then each of them had three children, so that's nine grandchildren. And so far there are ten great-grandchildren.

**Rovner:** Wonderful. Great. A blessing.

**Ringer:** Yeah. And fortunately, they have all been achievers. Don't you think, Rachel?

**Burstein:** Absolutely.

**Ringer:** And each one went, and the grandchildren, they—like with Rachel, I mean, who would think of going into what she chose? [laughs] But they all have like different interests.

**Rovner:** That's great.

**Ringer:** And they've all done well, so I think that's something to be proud of.

**Rovner:** Absolutely.

**Ringer:** The little ones are so smart now. I can't get over that. I just came back from being at the Cape, and my daughter Donna had to have surgery. She had hip replacement surgery.

**Rovner:** How is she doing?

**Ringer:** She's doing beautifully. So she decided to do her recuperating at the Cape, because it's all on one floor and it's easier. I was there visiting, with all the little kids, and spent most of my time with Noah [sp] playing chess. Every time I moved, he said to me, "No, no, you can't do that!" [laughs] Do you play chess?

**Rovner:** Wow, wow.

**Ringer:** He was so—he won every game!

**Burstein:** That's so funny. That's cute.

**Rovner:** So great.

**Ringer:** So, that sort of thing. They're all very nice. Everyone has been very nice to me. They're all considerate.

**Rovner:** Well, they're all blessed as well to have you.

**Ringer:** Well, I hope so. [laughs]

**Rovner:** They definitely are.

**Burstein:** Very much so. Very much so.

**Rovner:** Do you want to add anything, Rachel?

**Burstein:** I'm not sure what I would add. But my grandmother is an amazing matriarch of our family, and I think that every single one of us, her kids and grandkids, and great grandkids, hold her in extremely high regards, and aspire to be like her, every day.

**Ringer:** Oh, well!

**Burstein:** Honestly. I'm not just saying that.

**Ringer:** My philosophy with my own children—I never believed in their getting pleasure out of the material things in life. This is something I always had to fight. I saw it when I started to teach in the Newton school system. Certain children that I had, their lives were dominated by material things that they could have. My children weren't raised that way. I took them to classes at the Museum of Fine Arts or deCordova, and music, and things like that. I would spend whatever I could on that. But to get them the latest toy and that sort of thing, I didn't do it. And I don't like it. Even my great grandchildren, they all seem to have a love in creating and painting and doing things.

Right now, they're making pillows. Even the little ones, they're making—well, little pillows. They're sewing them, and they're putting stuffing in them.

**Burstein:** The whole family is very, very artistic. I hear about my great grandmother—who I was lucky enough to have in my life through my Bat Mitzvah—



**Rovner:** Wow.

**Burstein:** —which was amazing. And my grandmother, who's an incredible artist. The whole family, there's a lot of art, and there's a lot of creativity, combined together with—everyone has professions, and on the side they also do all of this amazing art and other things. It's very cool. You see it strongly carried down throughout the generations, for sure.

**Rovner:** That's great.

**Ringer:** My grandmother had—I told you—“The girls go get married and the boys go to Harvard.” But one, Bill, wasn't going to go to Harvard—he would go to art school—and he did. That little house that she had in East Boston, on the second floor—probably it was a separate apartment—her boys would live there. That's where they slept. That's where Bill would hang whatever he did in art school. She never went up there. And one day my mother, her phone rang like crazy; it was my grandmother. She went upstairs to where the boys were, and what she saw on the walls that Bill hung was—not pornography; she had a Jewish word for it—all over, this dirty stuff.

**Burstein:** [laughs]

**Rovner:** [laughs]

**Ringer:** Nudes. [laughs]

**Rovner:** She was shocked.

**Ringer:** She was absolutely shocked. It was Bill's work.

**Rovner:** That's so funny. That's great. Well, thank you very much. Thank you. This has been *incredible*.

**Ringer:** Well, I hope you got something out of it!

**Rovner:** Oh, a lot, a lot. Thank you.

[End]