

Robert Feinberg

0:00:00 to 0:58:20

Herb Selesnick: My name is Herb Selesnick, and I am interviewing Robert Feinberg via Zoom at his home in Niskayuna, New York, on July 11th, 2022. This interview is for the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center's Oral History Project titled Jewish Neighborhood Voices. Good morning, Robert.

Robert Feinberg: Good morning, Herb!

Selesnick: I have a few questions for you, as you can imagine. First of all, refresh my memory; where were you born?

Feinberg: I was born in Chelsea, Mass, on April the 6th, 1931, on the eighth day of Passover.

Selesnick: Oh! [laughs] What a blessing!

Feinberg: I was born in the Chelsea Memorial Hospital, and the doctor delivering me was Dr. Reinhartz [sp].

Selesnick: Well, he did a good job! I can see that. How many were in your immediate family?

Feinberg: My immediate family was my mother and father and one sister who was four years older than me.

Selesnick: Where did your ancestors immigrate from?

Feinberg: On my mother's side, the Melameds—M-E-L-A-M-E-D—the Melameds came here in the year 1900, and they came from a place called Ritzon [sp] in the Ukraine. There were three brothers. There was my grandfather, Abraham, and his two brothers, Louie [sp] and Jacob [sp]. The three of them came as stowaways on a ship and they landed by themselves in Boston, in Chelsea. One was a painter, one was a carpenter, and one was a plasterer. They worked very hard for two years saving up money so that at the end of two years, they had

enough money to bring into this country their wives. My mother was born in Russia in the year 1900, and she came to the United States in 1902. In the year 1902, they brought their wives and they settled in Chelsea. They did very well because plasterers, painters, and carpenters were needed at that time. They purchased tenement houses. They purchased a brick three-story tenement house on 227 Chestnut Street, and also a brick three-tenement house on 217 Chestnut Street, and then a complex of apartments, so-called tenements, around 12 or 14 of them off of Williams [sp] Street. The thing was, they took care of them, and they had the money to take care of these places. The person who took care of recording the rents, et cetera, was my grandmother, Ida. She couldn't write. She used to sign her name with "X," everything she did. But that's how they came here, at that time.

Selesnick: Do you know where they lived when they came here? Did they live in one of those buildings you mentioned?

Feinberg: I think they lived on 227 Chestnut, but I'm not sure. I think they lived in that brick tenement apartment, at 227 Chestnut Street. It was a three-family, three-story building, and it had seven rooms on each floor. There was a center hall and off of the center halls were seven rooms, including a very large dining room and a very large living room. They lived in that seven-room tenement apartment with—they had four children that lived with them. They had two daughters and two sons, and my wife is the third daughter, who was married. When my mother was married, her two brothers and her one sister lived with the grandparents in that seven-room tenement house on 227 Chestnut Street, which still exists, and is in good condition. I can tell you about what went on in there, later or now, because every one of these immigrants believed in music, and every one of their living rooms had a grand piano. They got the grand piano by taking out a living room frame window, and having a hoist on the roof, and they'd hoist up a grand piano and it would go into the living room.

Selesnick: About what year would you say that happened? Around what time?

0:05:06

Feinberg: It had to happen before 1936. Their children learned how to play the piano, because that was the thing for Jewish kids from Russia to do.

Selesnick: Did your mother learn how to play the piano?

Feinberg: All the kids learned the piano. Some did it well; some didn't. They had a so-called rabbi, with a beard, come in the house and teach them Hebrew. I was told that usually the rabbi with the beard would fall asleep as he's teaching my aunts and uncles their Hebrew there. It was very unique. They lived there until I would say 1950ish. As the two sons and the daughter got married, they left that apartment, but my grandfather lived there—my grandmother passed away early. I was five years old when she passed away, which means she passed away around 1936. I remember only a couple of things about her. She died probably at the age of 65 but looked like 80. But I do remember all of us would get together on Sundays at the grandparents' house around noon time.

Selesnick: What year were you born?

Feinberg: I was born in 1931. I remember, in 1936, being in the apartment there with all the relatives, as a routine on Sunday morning. I remember my grandmother sitting over a black stone frying pan, frying herring. This was a big thing, to have fried herring. People ate herring because it cost five cents for a herring, and it was low-priced. I remember her making the herring at that time. I do remember she passed away, and the funeral. I was only six years old at the time. Funerals in those days took place in the living room. The living room was cleared out and the pine box would be placed in the center of the living room, and there would be elderly other Russian women sitting around on chairs crying, and that's how the funeral took place. I remember my sister telling me, as she was ten and I must have been six or five, "Do you know where they're putting Bobie? They're putting her in the ground." She was saying that to scare me. I do remember those things. Most every Sunday, we'd get together as a family, and we'd have

lunch there, and then play penny ante poker. We did that for years, and it kept the family together.

Now, if you'd like me to go over to my father's side, the father's side was—are you watching me now? My father's side, the story about the Feinbergs is written in the book *The Jews of Boston* that was put out several years ago. There's two pages there. The Feinbergs, they're different. My great grandfather had seven sons. The oldest of the seven sons was Jacob, my grandfather. Benjamin, the originator, was born in Pliskov—P-L-I-S-K-O-V—in Russia in 1840, and he worked in the cattle business. He left Russia with his wife and his seven sons in 1888, and they settled in Boston. They became rag pickers. They set up the rag business, and they ended up—there's a history about where they lived in the West End of Boston, but they became New England's premiere rag business. They became very wealthy, millionaires at that time. Except for one, the oldest, my grandfather, was not one of the millionaires. The other sons did it. I always got myself into the wrong line.

Selesnick: [laughs]

Feinberg: The Feinbergs became very well-to-do, very well-known, and very well educated in Boston. There's a whole history about the Feinbergs getting together every Thanksgiving in formal attire at the Copley Plaza in Boston, for something like 85 years, since the death of my grandparents, and my great grandparents, in 1905. I can keep on going and going about the Feinbergs and what they did and how they made sure they get together.

0:10:05 What happened was my great grandparents, Benjamin and Yente [sp] died in 1905 and left a little bit of money. Rather than give the money amongst their seven sons, they formed in 1905 the Feinberg Estate, a formal corporation in the state of Massachusetts. But one of the requirements of this so-called Feinberg Estate was all Feinbergs will get together every Thanksgiving in formal attire at the Copley Plaza to celebrate the Feinbergs on Thanksgiving Day. So, every year up until—I have it in front of me here—this was the 70th anniversary

of the Feinberg Estate, was from 1915 to 1985, we would get together, all these Feinbergs, several hundred of them in Boston, and they became very well-to-do and very well-educated and very well-Jewish. A very Jewish family.

Selesnick: Did you go to any of those gatherings?

Feinberg: Yes, we went to those gatherings, several of them, when I was more or less—well, when I was of age. So, we have these two—the Melameds and the Feinbergs are as part of my past.

Selesnick: How did your family end up in Chelsea?

Feinberg: There's two stories that are given. One story is that the three sons—Abraham, Jacob, and Louie—were stowaways on a ship and went to Argentina, and from Argentina, they worked their way up to Boston and into Chelsea. That's the way one story goes. Now, they ended up in Chelsea because that was the place to go, Chelsea being all Jewish at that time. That would have been in the year 1900. So, they did their work in Chelsea, and when they brought their wives over, which included at that time only my mother, in 1902, they settled in Chelsea where they were working, and they lived in Chelsea all their life until they passed away. Of course, my mother was the first to be married, and she lived in Chelsea because her parents were in Chelsea. My father had lived in the West End. My father was born in this country.

Selesnick: Where did your mother and father live in Chelsea?

Feinberg: I was born in 1931, which would have been—they might have been married eight years, then. I was born near the Shurtleff School. It might have been on Congress Avenue on Shurtleff Street. I think it was on Congress Avenue. That's where they lived. Then we moved from there, I think a very short time, to Winnisimmet Street. I went to the Shurtleff School up until the fourth grade. That's where we settled. From there, we went to Walnut Street. On Walnut Street, I went to the Williams School. I went to the Williams School in the beginning of the fourth grade. On the first day of school, a young boy comes over to me—he wasn't big—and he says to me, "If you don't give me a penny,

I'll beat you up!" So I gave him the penny. And that fella, his name was Albert DeSalvo. In later life, he became the Boston Strangler.

Selesnick: Oh, yes, I've heard about him! I think you made a wise investment by giving him the penny.

Feinberg: I gave him the penny. And he really wasn't that big. I don't think he—he was an odd boy. He wasn't crazy. He was bullyish. But he was odd, okay? He was different than everybody else. I don't believe he graduated the Williams School with me. Now, we lived on Walnut Street, 128 Walnut Street, in a three-tenement apartment building. That was around 300 feet away from the Walnut Street Shul.

Selesnick: What did Walnut Street look like back then?

Feinberg: Walnut Street in that section didn't change too much from what it is now. We were there a year ago, and I have pictures of it.

0:15:02 It was all three-story wooden tenement houses, all lined up, all along the street, on the side of the Walnut Street Shul, and across the street of it. Then the street next over had the Williams School. So, we lived there. But it hasn't changed. Now, the building that I lived in, the three-story building, that came down, and it had to come down during I would say the past ten years, only, because I was there around ten years ago and it was still standing. They threw that building down, plus another, and put up two modern small apartment buildings there.

Selesnick: What was neighborhood life like then?

Feinberg: The neighborhood and Walnut Street was Jewish. It had non-Jews there, but I would say it was at least 70% Jewish, and it was across the street from the big shul. The Walnut Street Shul was the premiere shul at that time.

Selesnick: Did your family go to the Walnut Street Shul?

Feinberg: Well. My family went to the Walnut Street Shul for the High Holidays, but I had been going to the Chelsea Hebrew School since I was very small. So, the Chelsea Hebrew School had—I was very religious. We were Orthodox. So, I went to services every Saturday at the Hebrew School since I was very small. Sometimes I may go to the Walnut Street Shul, and I would walk home with the rabbi and with a couple other kids after the service on Saturday, and he gave us a couple pieces of candy. The services were held at the Hebrew School on Saturday for everybody, and I went there religiously every Saturday, all the way through. I went to the Hebrew school, and I went to the Hebrew high school there. And I have, from the *Chelsea Record*, a copy in front of me, of my graduation. Can you see that?

Selesnick: Yes!

Feinberg: My graduation from the Hebrew School. It was headed by—Reverend [sp] Leo [sp] Mazavetsky [sp] was the principal and a cantor, a very modern fellow. We had around 20 graduates in cap and gowns. I must have been around 17 at that time. So, everything centered around the Chelsea Hebrew School, and it also had High Holiday services. I do remember going with my father to services at the Hebrew School.

Selesnick: Was there a synagogue chapel inside the Hebrew School building?

Feinberg: Yes. The Hebrew School had a main auditorium, a very big auditorium with a stage. Very big. That served as the chapel. It was big. My father died when I was 17, but I remember going when I was younger. You bought seats to a shul, to go for the High Holidays. I would go there with my father, since I was part of the Hebrew School.

Selesnick: How did you get from Walnut Street to Chestnut Street?

Feinberg: Oh, what do you mean? Walk?

Selesnick: You walked?

Feinberg: Oh, yeah! Of course. The Hebrew School was like three blocks from Walnut Street.

Selesnick: I see, okay.

Feinberg: Later on, after my father passed away at 17, I observed Kaddish at the Walnut Street Shul. I went for a whole year to the Walnut Street shul, and I led the davening at the Walnut Street Shul, and became a part of the Walnut Street shul for many years, until I left Chelsea. I left Chelsea in 1954.

Selesnick: While you were still in Chelsea, what did your father do for a living?

Feinberg: My father was in the textile business. He was a salesman selling textiles and cleaning wipers. Because that's what the Feinberg family was in. The Feinberg family had, on Marginal Street in Chelsea, the Beaker Wiper Supply Company. Big, five-story building, where they packaged and sold wipers, cleaning cloths, especially during the war effort.

Selesnick: Was there any relationship between their wiper business and the rag district in Chelsea?

Feinberg: Yes. They were in the rag business and the wiper business. We called it the same thing.

0:20:00 They were professional. They had a big business. It was big. Many employees, many facilities.

Selesnick: One of the employees was your dad, I gather.

Feinberg: No, he was not part of them. He was on his own.

Selesnick: Oh! He was? Okay.

Feinberg: Now, remember, I was born during the Depression. Things were very rough in those days. Very rough. Nobody was wealthy. Everybody was poor.

Selesnick: Were there poor people on Walnut Street?

Feinberg: Yeah, everybody was in the same thing, striving to make ends meet and to get the basic essentials. I had a very good experience in the Williams School.

Selesnick: What was good about it?

Feinberg: The thing is, I went to the school, and I was a student, an A student in the school, but I also was an artist. So I would paint all the bulletins and flyers and signs that have to do with school sports events. Anything that went on, anything that required signs and paintings, I was the painter. The principal of the school was I remember Mr. Williams. I'd be in my Latin class with Miss Kennedy when over the PA system would be, "Would Robert Feinberg come to the principal's office?" People would think, well, I did something wrong. Then he'd tell me, "Can you make a sign for me for the following thing for tomorrow?"

Selesnick: [laughs]

Feinberg: So I was more or less the school artist. Miss Kennedy, she was older and white-haired, and she'd flip and say, "You're going to flunk Latin." She taught Latin. She couldn't stand that the principal would take me out of her classes. I was the school artist at the time.

Selesnick: That's a positive memory for you, I guess?

Feinberg: Well, yeah, I was an A student, and that was my thing at the school, during that period of time.

Selesnick: What was the relationship between your family and other people who lived on Walnut Street?

Feinberg: We weren't that sociable. We did not mix a lot with the people, okay? We did not. My father passed away when I was 17, when we were living on Walnut Street maybe just for a couple years. We were sociable with the people upstairs, Sidney Spiegel. He was a postman. We have a very good story about—he became president later on in life of the Walnut Street Shul. But we were sociable with the people upstairs. But not too much with the rest of the people

on the—people really stood with their own family, and were very close. The Melameds were very close. My two uncles and my aunt and my mother, the four of them were very close, and very close with my grandfather, who had lived up until maybe 1949 or so. They were very close. Everybody knew everybody else's business and they got together.

Selesnick: Are you familiar with the meaning of the word Melamed in Hebrew?

Feinberg: Yeah, it means "Teacher." Learned.

Selesnick: Yes. Was that a good name for the family?

Feinberg: It didn't make any difference.

Selesnick: [laughs] Okay.

Feinberg: It didn't make any difference that way. They were just close, and they got together on Passover for seders, and for the New Years, and we would be all together for many years, very close, well-knit, on the Melamed side. And we still are.

Selesnick: What did you eat on Passover?

Feinberg: We'd have our family seder with the grandparents on 227 Chestnut Street every year. We also would get together all the time on Thanksgiving. We had things together of a religious nature or a non-religious nature. My grandparents were Shomer Shabbos people. I grew up Orthodox up until maybe when I was 12 or so, and very close to Walnut Street Shul.

Selesnick: What does it mean to be a Shomer Shabbos person?

Feinberg: You keep the Sabbath completely. You don't put on lights, have somebody else to do it. You don't cook. You observe everything you're supposed to observe to keep the Sabbath.

Selesnick: And your grandparents were observant?

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Feinberg: Yes, my grandparents were observant, and they spoke Yiddish. My parents did not speak Yiddish, but my grandparents did. I have pictures of my grandmother, portraits of her, right here, if you'd like me to put it on.

Selesnick: Yes.

Feinberg: I'm going to stand it up and put it where I'm sitting.

Selesnick: Okay.

[pause]

Feinberg: I don't know if you can see this? Can you see this?

Selesnick: I can see it. Who is that?

Feinberg: That's my Grandfather Melamed. It's Abraham Melamed.

Selesnick: I like his moustache.

Feinberg: This must have been taken around 1920. I'm going to give you my grandmother. Here's Ida. Ida Novasholsky [sp]. This must have been around 1925 or so.

Selesnick: Very attractive woman.

Feinberg: Okay. These two portraits were in a dining room of their apartment on 227 Chestnut Street. Now I have to find out who I'm going to pass it on to, to keep, because we can't throw it out.

Selesnick: Tell me more about the neighborhood. What stands out in your mind the most about the neighborhood where you spent the first 15 years of your life?

Feinberg: After we lived on Walnut Street, we moved to 259 Chestnut Street, a brick building which still exists, at the corner of Chestnut Street close to Washington Avenue. Walnut Street was—my area was a quiet area, nice people, no riff-raff. People worked hard. They observed the Jewish holidays. It was a calm neighborhood. We didn't really mix that much. My time up until I was at 15 was at the Williams School, which was really a block away from where I lived. I have

my grammar school picture with me here. Maybe there was around 200 or 150 students there. A good percentage was Jewish. Not large, but we had a good number of Jewish kids there, and you associated with these Jewish kids after school. Many of them went to the Hebrew School right after the Williams School each day.

Selesnick: Aside from Albert DeSalvo, how would you describe your relationship with non-Jews?

Feinberg: Very good question. I think that the quality of student at the Williams School was anti-Semitism was almost nil. I had a very good relationship with the non-Jewish students at the school. The president was Paul Briber, he became a postmaster later on. We became friends. So, our relationship with non-Jewish kids was good, congenial, and everything worked out well. Not only that, but we had several Black students in my class. I would say we had around three or four Black students, and they got along very well. I think what stood out in Chelsea or at least around where we were, was these Black students had families that were working and were growing up with the same kind of culture that the white students had. So we did not have, I would say, a so-called Black problem, in the school, whatsoever. But it was a very congenial situation. Felt comfortable with the non-Jewish kids, and I worked with the non-Jewish kids. Of course, I stood out as the painter and as a good student, with the non-Jewish students, including some Orientals.

Selesnick: Oh, really.

Feinberg: Yeah.

Selesnick: What role, if any, did your family play in Chelsea's civic or political life?

Feinberg: The Melamed side, we didn't, to the best of my knowledge, play much at all.

Selesnick: Do you regard yourself as more of a Melamed or more of a Feinberg?

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Feinberg: Very good question. I have to say to you: both. I have a very good strong following on the Melamed side. I have a moderate following on the Feinberg side.

Selesnick: Do you feel that you have inherited traits from one side or both sides equally?

Feinberg: I would say I have traits from both sides. I was the first member of the Melamed family to go to college. In those days, that was a big thing. If you went to college, that was a big thing. I started college in 1949. That was a big achievement to go to a college in those days. While the Feinbergs, they had gone to Harvard in 1935, for the first time. The intellectual things that I have come from the Feinberg side.

Selesnick: I see. When you started in college, did you live at home or did you live in college?

Feinberg: I was admitted to MIT. Five of us got into MIT after taking a technical course at Chelsea High. Four went; the fifth, me, I didn't have any money, so I went to a lesser school which was called Boston College. At Boston College, I lived at home, and 95% of the students at Boston College in 1949 and on lived at home and commuted either by car or by subway.

Selesnick: When did your family leave Chelsea? Or when did *you* leave Chelsea?

Feinberg: I left Chelsea in 1954.

Selesnick: Was that after you graduated Boston College, or while you were still at Boston College?

Feinberg: No, I went to Boston College from 1949 to 1953, and graduated with a B.S. degree in physics, the number one student in the class. And I want you to know there was only nine Jewish students and the rest Catholic students in my class of 1,000.

Selesnick: Wow!

Feinberg: Then I stayed at BC another year, got my master's degree. I left Chelsea in 1954 and went to the University of Rochester, and from the University of Rochester, went to the Oak Ridge School of Reactor Technology. So, I left Chelsea in 1954, but my mother and my sister lived at that time on 259 Chestnut Street.

Selesnick: Before moving into the rest of your adult life, is there a member of your family who stands out as having a great influence on you?

Feinberg: Yes. My mother. She was a great soul. Everybody loved her. Tremendous amount of courage, tremendous amount of can-do-something. She ended up having one leg removed being a diabetic, and then both legs. Tremendous courage. She had the most influence on my life, which was "You can do anything if you work hard."

Selesnick: Thank you for sharing that. You mentioned that you had very little anti-Semitism experience and no Black problem. Did you ever have any anti-immigrant experiences? Did your parents have any anti-immigrant experiences?

Feinberg: No, not that I recall, in any way. I never experienced any—I don't believe we had any anti-immigrant. Remember now, the people in Chelsea, 90% were Jewish, and 90% were immigrants, so there wasn't any place for anti-immigrant situations to develop.

Selesnick: What were the quality of your friendships as a young person?

Feinberg: What do you mean by that?

Selesnick: Do any friendships stand out in your memory that you made as a young person?

Feinberg: Me personally?

Selesnick: Yeah. Personal friendships for you.

Feinberg: During which period of time?

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Selesnick: I would say from the age of eight to eighteen.

Feinberg: I had some friendships when I was in high school with some of the students who were there. Jake Pinkowitz, who passed away, was another fellow [0:35:17]. Jake Pinkowitz was a close friend of mine. There were a few people along those lines. But the friendships were related to mostly being in the school.

Selesnick: When you were very young, did you have any part-time jobs?

Feinberg: Yes. From what year to what year? I was a newspaper boy in Chelsea when I was young. I had two of the most important newspaper routes—Chestnut Street, which had all the doctors, and the other one was Broadway. I have here a circular—*Chelsea Record*—carriers rated most outstanding. This is an article of *Chelsea Record* carriers. For several years, I had these two big routes and really did very well, especially on Chestnut Street, because they had all the doctor's offices, and the doctors gave you good money and good tips. That was in Chelsea. That's my time then, yes.

Selesnick: The newspaper route in Broadway, what was Broadway like back then?

Feinberg: Broadway at that time had all stores. The whole length of Broadway had stores. Millinery stores, hat stores, all kinds of stores. Quality stores with nice glass fronts. People walked down during the weekend, almost shoulder to shoulder, down Broadway, doing their shopping there. Broadway had a lot of people, especially on weekends, walking the streets, going into these very nice fine stores, quality places.

Selesnick: What was the ethnicity of the store owners?

Feinberg: I would say probably 80% of the store owners were Jewish.

Selesnick: Did the store owners subscribe to newspapers?

Feinberg: Yes, and it was very easy to deliver papers on Broadway because I just had to bring it into the door, and they gave good tips. They subscribed to the newspapers.

Selesnick: Did your paper route run from Bellingham Square to Chelsea Square?

Feinberg: My paper route on Chestnut Street ran from where the Hebrew School is, all the way down to Second Street, past the Polish church. On Broadway, it ran from where the post office is, all the way up to where the police station is.

Selesnick: That's Bellingham Square to Chelsea Square. You had two very long paper routes.

Feinberg: That's right. I was a hard worker!

Selesnick: You must have been! Thank you for sharing that detail. What did leaving Chestnut Street mean to you?

Feinberg: It's leaving home, but you see, I went to the University of Rochester afterwards, and then Oak Ridge School of Nuclear Technology in Tennessee. I would come home every now and then and stay at my mother's apartment. I moved to Schenectady in 1956, and my mother lived in Chestnut Street until 1965.

Selesnick: Wow.

Feinberg: Her apartment building really was still my home. I used to visit my mother every other weekend, even when I lived in Schenectady.

Selesnick: It sounds to me like you were a devoted son.

Feinberg: Extremely devoted. And I supported my mother.

Selesnick: Tell me a little bit about your career.

Feinberg: My career? I went to Boston College with a bachelor's degree, graduated number one in my class in physics, got my master's degree in physics from Boston College. The following year, I was a graduate teacher. I taught the mechanics and acoustic courses. I got an Atomic Energy Commission Fellowship in radiological physics, which was given out to four schools. The University of Rochester, I spent a year there and got another master's degree, in radiological physics there, as an AEC Fellow.

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Then I received the best scholarship you can get, the AEC Fellowship in Nuclear Technology, to attend the Oak Ridge School of Nuclear Technology, where only the geniuses in nuclear energy were there. There were 16 students on fellowships, which paid your tuition there, and also gave you a livelihood. This was the only place to go to learn nuclear technology, was at Oak Ridge. MIT did not give courses. I graduated there with [0:40:32] of engineering. I spent time before then working summers for Picatinny Arsenal in Dover, New Jersey, on military propellants. The next year I spent at National Bureau of Standards working on a new type of geomagnetic mines that were used in Korea. The next two years, I spent at the Air Force Research Center on nuclear bomb explosives. Then I spent time at Brookhaven National Laboratory as a physicist and then at Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

I finally took a position at the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory in Schenectady, which was run by the General Electric Company, for Admiral Rickover. We designed and developed the nuclear propulsion plans for nuclear submarines in ships. I spent 39 years there. I was a manager of nuclear technology for at least 35 years there, a very senior position. I was Rickover's expert in the effects of radiation and radiation explosions that take place on submarines, and was known as the father of nuclear safety at the Knolls Atomic Power Lab. I did very well there, extremely well.

Selesnick:

It sounds like you did, and that you made a national contribution as well in the military area.

Feinberg:

I've been with the military all my life, and I'm listed in the [0:42:02] and around 12 other biographies. I had an exceptionally strong relationship and work with Rickover himself and the president of KAPL, who was Kenneth A. Kesselring and became my mentor.

Selesnick:

Did growing up on Walnut Street and Chestnut Street affect your adult life? How did it affect it?

Feinberg: I think I was in a—culture—of students that believed in achievement and doing well, to be independent. You were down financially; you wanted to climb the mountain and do well. All these people were achievers, hard workers. That was the culture that I grew up in.

Selesnick: So that's what shaped part of your life. How did living through World War II influence your adult life?

Feinberg: The war started in 1941; I was ten years old. At that time, you knew that the war was going on. You followed the newspapers and what went on, and the fighting in Europe, day by day. You had tests for bomb explosives. If bombs would be dropped, you had these blackout tests, et cetera. I think we lived—oh! I was in Boy Scouts. I was an Eagle Scout and also was the scoutmaster of the biggest Jewish Boy Scout troop in Greater Boston.

Selesnick: Which troop was that? Do you remember? Which number?

Feinberg: That was from 1944 on. We used to do things to support the war during that time.

Selesnick: What kinds of things?

Feinberg: Oh, we had people selling war stamps in the various stores. There were a number of things that were devoted to helping the war effort in a way. I remember getting the Eisenhower medal type of thing.

0:45:00 The war really settled you down, that it was a serious matter. You were scared. You were scared of what could happen if we had war in this country and it came here. It influenced you in terms of you wanted to study and do well. I think that it created an atmosphere of achievement, of doing well, that life has value, you're in this together, and you're paying attention to what's going on throughout the world. You became educated that way. You became more cosmic. Your small little place in Chelsea now was blown up into you're part of a bigger cosmos.

Selesnick: I see. How did marriage and parenthood influence your life?

Feinberg: I got married late. I got married when I was 33, in 1964. I married a girl who had a master's degree out of Columbia and was a school teacher, and was a very pretty woman. She was identical to Liz Taylor. In fact people used to ask—my boss used to say to me, "How's Liz today?" She looked like Liz Taylor. When we went to a movie house, during intermission, people would be, "Is that Liz Taylor?" I have a picture here. She's still alive. So we both were into the intellectual area. We had two sons, three years afterwards. In 1967 and 1969 we had two sons, who were students. We were very good parents, and we watched them closely and were part of their development. They went on in life to become very successful.

Selesnick: What do they do?

Feinberg: Both were admitted to the advanced medical degree program. This is where you are admitted to medical school when you're in high school, and you only go to the regular college for two years instead of four; then you go to the medical school. There's only six schools in the United States that had that program, and the total was 60 students that graduate on the accelerated program every year out of around 50,000. You had to be pretty good.

My oldest son, Curt, went to Penn State for two years, and then he went to Jefferson Medical College for four years and went on, got the Air Force medical scholarship, spent four years in the Air Force as an anesthesiologist, did very well, and left there as a colonel. He's an anesthesiologist in Phoenix. He married Tanya [sp], a Jewish girl, who is also a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, and he lives in Phoenix.

My youngest son went to Lehigh for two years, and then the Medical College of Pennsylvania. Then he did his residency at Duke University Medical Center for two years. Then he went to Harvard and did his residency in cardiology there. He is a director of cardiovascular research at Harvard, and Brigham and Women's Hospital. He is also director of their fellowship program. He is well-known universally. He's a full professor at Harvard Medical School. He has made

it. He married Laurie [sp], who is also Jewish, who got her bachelor's at Princeton, her medical degree at Cornell, and she also got a PhD degree at Rockefeller Institute, and she is also an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, an internist at Brigham and Women's Hospital. So we're stuck with four doctors! [laughs] That's not too good! Really I tell my second son, "Three doctors? Come back if you marry a woman with a lawyer or something we can use."

Selesnick: [laughs]

Feinberg: They're both doctors, and very close. They're very Jewish. We kept the Jewish religion going. They've all been to Israel. They've gone to Hebrew school. They do Jewish things. The Boston crew keeps kosher, a kosher house.

Selesnick: Do you have grandchildren?

Feinberg: I have five grandchildren. I have four granddaughters and one grandson.

0:50:00 One granddaughter is at University of Arizona. The other granddaughter will be entering Fordham University this fall. I have two granddaughters that are twins; they're traveling the world looking at colleges, looking at Cornell, Penn, Johns Hopkins. They all got all A's. My two high school granddaughters. My grandson who is 14, 15, got all A's this year as they do every year. They're all students.

Selesnick: Given the family that they come from, they wouldn't dare get a B! [laughs]

Feinberg: Yeah. Well, hey, that's the way it goes. You create the atmosphere for your students, and they'll roll. But you have to create the atmosphere. My sons were packaged and marketed in a way for success.

Selesnick: I gather that none of your grandchildren are old enough to be married?

Feinberg: One is 20, one is 18, two are 17, and the grandson—I have a problem with my grandson. He's 14. He's into sports, okay? But the thing is, he lives in Boston, and one day he came to me and he said he is no longer a Red Sox fan; he's a Yankee fan. And boy, right away, I took him out of my will!

Selesnick: [laughs] I can understand your feelings. Would it be fair to assume that you have not had to deal with any interfaith issues in life? Interfaith marriages, or interfaith issues of one kind or another between Jew and non-Jew?

Feinberg: No, not really, in a way, but don't forget I went to Boston College, where you were taught by Jesuit priests, and you were required to major in Jesuit philosophy. This means you got 13 courses in Jesuit philosophy during that time. I got all A's. I had a very good life at Boston College. My mentor was Father Michael Walsh, who later became the president of Boston College. I had a very good relationship with the Jesuits at BC. The only non-Jews at that time—including Leonard Nimoy was my classmate—

Selesnick: Really!

Feinberg: —I experienced at BC not one anti-Semitism situation at any time. Later on in life when I retired, I became chairman of three Jewish cemeteries out here, large cemeteries. I was chairman of cemeteries for 22 years. I've buried over 350 people. I'm the last guy to let you down!

Selesnick: [laughs]

Feinberg: But I was involved—we set up an intermarried section of our cemetery, and that involved some intermarried relationships with the non-Jewish community in setting this thing up.

Selesnick: As you have proceeded through 91 years of life, what feelings do you have about Chelsea?

Feinberg: Chelsea is my home. Chelsea is my beginning. Chelsea is like my father. It is part of me. I belonged there. I grew up there. It gave me the skills, the tools, the atmosphere, the culture—very important—and the set of traditional values that I carried forward in my life. It means something to me. It's my beginning.

Selesnick: That was eloquent. Thank you for that. Lastly, are there any questions you wish I had asked you that I didn't ask you?

Feinberg: [pause] Well, you could have asked me, “Did you expect Chelsea to end up the way it is now?”

Selesnick: I’m asking you now. Did you expect that?

Feinberg: No. Absolutely, no. Chelsea was known in my time to breed high-quality students who became professional people—doctors, lawyers. All the people during my time became successful professionally, all the way through. I expected Chelsea to continue to grow, to continue on in that way.

0:55:02

Selesnick: The title of this project has in it the phrase, “Chelsea Then and Now.” How would you describe Chelsea now? How do you experience it when you visit?

Feinberg: I went to Chelsea a year ago, with my five grandchildren. We have pictures; I have them all here. I visited Chelsea and gave a tour of Chelsea with where I lived, and we went into the Walnut Street Shul. I have pictures of the Walnut Street Shul with my five grandchildren and my two sons and daughters-in-laws. Chelsea right now is memories. It has decayed. It has gone down. What it was is no longer there. In terms of Jewishness, it is just plain history. But it does have the Walnut Street Shul, and Temple Emmanuel, to keep it going, and it should be preserved. But it’s all really a memory, unfortunately.

Selesnick: Speaking as one physicist to another, you are clearly a very bright and thoughtful person, and I would welcome your thoughts about whether the Hispanic peoples who currently live in Chelsea can make Chelsea great again.

Feinberg: It can be made great again. It has to have a plan. But it has to have a culture. I come from the corporate world. We had a culture in the General Electric Company, of you have to be number one. You have to be better than the best. You should never lie. Or you're out. Chelsea can grow if it has a plan, but it also has to have a Chelsea in its culture. The culture has to be one where the people say, “We want to make it great, and this is our plan to do it.” And it has to have leaders to do that, and it has to have managers to do it. I don’t see it now.

Selesnick: Thank you for sharing that. More importantly, thank you for taking the time out of your day to share so much detailed and good information about your life and your formative years. It has been very, very helpful and will make a solid contribution to the Jewish Heritage Center's online exhibit about Chelsea then and now. So thank you, and it has been a pleasure talking with you, Bob.

Feinberg: Thank you. L'chaim! Am Yisrael Chai!

Selesnick: Am Yisrael Chai! [laughs] That one, I know. Be well, take care, and I think I'll follow your advice and join the gym.

Feinberg: Thank you. Good day!

[End]