

**Sara Lee Callahan**

**0:00:00 to 0:43:17**

**Herb Selesnick:** My name is Herb Selesnick. I am interviewing Sara Lee Callahan via Zoom at her home in Swampscott, Massachusetts, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022. This interview is for the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center’s oral history project, Jewish Neighborhood Voices. Good afternoon, Sara Lee.

**Callahan:** Good afternoon.

**Selesnick:** I’d like to start by asking you where you were born.

**Callahan:** I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Selesnick:** How many were in your immediate family?

**Callahan:** There were four of us: my mother, my father, my brother Ben Martin, and me.

**Selesnick:** Do you know where any of your ancestors immigrated to this country from?

**Callahan:** Yes, I do. My parents were born in this country, so they were first-generation American parents. My grandfather was born in 1984, in Riga, Latvia. He was a glassblower there. When he was 17, he came over by himself, sponsored by—everyone had to be sponsored—sponsored by a “fetter” who was the man with the long, long beard that lived in Burlington, Vermont. He eventually sent for his parents and the rest of his family, and they all came here. My grandmother was born in 1878 in Poland; I’m not sure exactly where. They got married in 1900. My grandfather—just to share some of the history that’s so interesting in change—all employers expected you to work on Shabbos. They expected you to work Monday through Saturday. He couldn't do that, so that’s where the pushcart started. My grandfather, to oversimplify it, grabbed a pushcart, and he started to collect scrap woolens, and he became a rag man, and he opened up a rag shop, I believe it was on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, in Chelsea. I have a picture of everybody standing in front of his rag shop. Not to be deferred by the term “rag shop,” he actually sold woolens to Brooks Brothers and places like that, who used the

reprocessed materials to make suits. He also had ordered some materials that were supposed to come on the Titanic and obviously didn't quite make it here.

He and my grandmother got married. My grandfather in 1910 bought a single-family house, which was built in 1859, when Lincoln was, in fact, campaigning in the area to become president, after Buchanan. He converted it into a three-family house at 19 Clark Avenue, which is at the end of Lawrence Street, and it's a center-entrance colonial with a mansard roof. My grandmother and grandfather, very Orthodox, lived on the first floor. So typical.

The three-family house in that area was to me an expression of what the history was. The Orthodox people lived on the first floor. My parents, my brother, and I lived on the second floor. And we were so into Judaism—Hebrew school six days a week, and everything else, and Girl Scouts, and the YMHA. We went shopping on Saturday, God forbid, in Boston, at Jordon Marsh and Filene's, and would come home, and my grandmother would say, "Gicher [sp], Gicher [sp]", go upstairs, make dinner for dein [sp] mann [sp]." "For your husband."

**Selesnick:** Who was on the third floor?

**Callahan:** The third floor, when I was little, was Mr. and Mrs. Hesse [sp]. When I was about ten, it was Mr. and Mrs. Doherty [sp]. Both of them were involved with the church across the street. In fact, the Dohertys—Mr. Doherty was the deacon of—I believe it was a Universalist church, which was across the street on Clark Avenue.

**Selesnick:** So the third floor was non-Jewish?

**Callahan:** It was non-Jewish, but I learned more from that, because my brother would go—Ben Martin would go out under the lamppost, if it was snowing, and he'd tell me to tell them to look out the window, and he'd be playing "Silent Night" on his trumpet. He didn't play it very well, but he did, and they appreciated it. So I learned from my Orthodox grandparents and my parents how to accept everyone, and that the world was a blend.

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And it was not unusual on a Friday night—my mother had three brothers—everyone was born—eventually lived downstairs—and it wasn't odd on a Friday night to have Reverend Schooley [sp] from Rhode Island come up with his wife, with my grandparents, and eat dinner. One Friday night, I remember Dom Dimaggio was there with my uncle. So, Chelsea was a blend, and it was a pleasure, particularly that area of Chelsea, where everyone just accepted everyone.

**Selesnick:**

Were your grandparents your mother's parents?

**Callahan:**

They were my mother's parents, yes. My father's parents were born in Poland, and I think died when they were about 60, as so many people did, from different viruses and different things. So I never met them.

**Selesnick:**

Can you describe Clark Avenue and the neighborhood in general to me?

**Callahan:**

Yes, I can. I wrote a few notes. I'm not trying to be distracting; I was trying to think of everything, and all the nice things. We knew everywhere on our block. We lived on the first block of Clark Avenue, where the houses were separated by a full lot, as they are today. That brought even more of a mixture into my yard, because basketball players—white, Black, everybody from the city—would come and play in our yard. If they weren't playing basketball, they would play baseball, but they would pay something called halfball, which was when you cut a ball in half and use a broomstick. Everyone had grandparents that lived in their homes with them. With no air conditioning at the time, the windows were wide open. I remember Helen Sharrow, two houses down, playing beautiful piano music that flowed out the windows.

Right next door to us was Dr. Murdock, and in the house with him was Rita Consela who was a very famous music teacher in Chelsea. Next up the hill on the other side of Helen Sharrow was the Orthodox yeshiva, on the corner. Around the corner was Dr. Burke [sp]. Across the street was the priest from Saint Rose Church, which was close by, and their families including David Riley, who went to Chelsea High School with me. Across the street on Crescent

Avenue was the Onichtsta [sp], which was one of the Orthodox shuls in Chelsea. But that was a little bit of a mixture, because the women sat on the right—six or eight seats—and the men sat on the left, but in the middle was a place where men and women could sit together. So that must have been the beginning of something.

**Selesnick:** Yes.

**Callahan:** That was basically—oh , the Gopens—the butcher, Mr. Gopen, lived across the street from me. And my best friend, Connie Brown, when I was a little girl, was Protestant. I remember my mother supporting me in this: I would sit on the second floor on an angular sofa, that was across from Connie’s house, and my mother would have me sit there on December 24<sup>th</sup>, and I would eventually fall asleep. I was sitting there to see if I could detect Santa Claus and his sleigh on her room. Every day, when I woke up—I fell asleep, and when I woke up Christmas morning, my mother would say, “You missed him by five minutes!”

**Selesnick:** [laughs]

**Callahan:** Then I’d go across the street and have Christmas dinner with Connie Brown’s parents, and the mother would give me a few things that Santa left for me.

**Selesnick:** I see. The neighborhood where you grew up, would you describe it as a Jewish neighborhood, or as a mixed neighborhood, or how would you describe it?

**Callahan:** It was very mixed. There were very Orthodox people, very religious people who went to Saint Rose Church. I remember my mother buying me what was called a topper, which was a little jacket, and an Easter bonnet, and I would stand at the end of my driveway to greet the people that came out of Saint Rose, so I wouldn't miss out on Easter.

**Selesnick:** [laughs] That’s wonderful. What recreational opportunities were available to you as a young person?

**Callahan:** Just a bicycle with training wheels to go around the block, and things like that. I didn't do a lot of recreation like you'd see in other parts of Chelsea—sports, et cetera. It was mostly in my yard playing with friends and relatives.

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**Selesnick:** Did you have any anti-Semitic experiences when you were growing up?

**Callahan:** I had none. I feel embarrassed to say that because evidently, some people might have. But no, we were all accepting. In fact, I remember on the basic holidays with parades, there would be the Polish girls in their white embroidered dresses, and it would be the Chelsea High Band, which had maybe less than 20 kids, and we'd walk from the Hebrew school; we'd have a little—so everyone was involved. That was part of the reason that Chelsea was such a wonderful place to live.

If I could just stop and say a little bit of the history, Ellis Island, much to my surprise when I looked it up in later years, didn't open until somewhere between 1892 and 1894, when it was fully open, so Boston was a port of entry. The Boston Floating Hospital was actually a boat across from Mass General. People went to Chelsea. I think in the 1940s, there were 60,000 people, and 30,000 were Jews. So, it was a very mixed community, especially considering that it was only—what is Chelsea, a mile and a half square, or something like that?)

**Selesnick:** A little bit more, but not much more. You mentioned your bicycle and you mentioned walking. Were those the main ways you got around the city, or were there other ways to get around?

**Callahan:** You could always take a cab. As a five-year-old, a six-year-old—I went to the Carter School, which was a few blocks away. Even though my parents were very, very careful with me, it was considered fine to walk down Lawrence Street and up Cary and everything, all by myself, when I was that young. I did have to turn around and keep waving to them, because they were in the second-floor

window in the front of the house, and I kept waving, and waving, and waving.  
[laughs]

**Selesnick:** What was school like for you?

**Callahan:** School was wonderful. The Carter School was very well-known. It went up towards Forsyth Street. It was strict, but it led into Cary Square, and Maxi's [sp] candy store, et cetera. I remember one naughty thing that I did. My brother was in the school; he was probably in the fourth grade when I was in the first grade. I remember I was in charge of the coatroom that week, and I put the doors [sp] up on the coat, and I saw a dollar on the floor. I put it in my pocket, I'm embarrassed to say, and I went to Maxi's [sp], where I usually had seven cents, which bought me seven things, and I bought about 63 things. [laughs] I brought them home, and my mother caught me in our den, and she said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I bought this candy." She said, "Where did you get the money for it?" I said, "I found it." She made me pack up what I had left and walk down to Maxi's store and return it all. She must have given him a signal. Then I had to go up to the Carter School, in the front door, into the office, and confess.

**Selesnick:** Oh my goodness.

**Callahan:** Yeah. That was I think the naughtiest thing I did. [laughs]

**Selesnick:** What about more advanced grades in school? How was that like, beyond the elementary?

**Callahan:** It was very nice, but Carter wasn't an elementary. All those schools that, quote, were "elementary" all went through the ninth grade. The high school at that time was only three years, not four. So, it was wonderful. What we had in Chelsea were even sororities and fraternities. They were kind of divided by the schools, a little bit. Then we all went up to the high school, where we all met and worked together.

**Selesnick:** Did you belong to a sorority?

**Callahan:** I did. I belonged to Eta Chi.

**Selesnick:** Was that high school or junior high school?

**Callahan:** It was a combination. It started in junior high. I think it started in the eighth grade, and legitimately you were taken in in the ninth grade, and it went through high school. I also remember Alvin Toltz, who was the music director. I remember the glee clubs. We used to go into the church on Clark Avenue across the street from me, and we used to put on Christmas/Hanukah programs. I remember a couple of people that you know, Herb, that were singing solos, and we were on what's like the bima in the church, and it must have been the steeple had a draft, but every time we lit the Hanukah candles, the candles would go out, and we were whispering, "God doesn't like this." [laughs]

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**Selesnick:** [laughs] It's a church!

**Callahan:** Yeah, it was in a church.

**Selesnick:** I understand. What kinds of friendships did you make as a young person?

**Callahan:** My best, best friend, as I got a little older was Peddie [sp] Korn, who came here as a four-year-old with her older brother Marcel [sp] and her parents. They escaped going to the concentration camps—they were in Romania—by hiding under chairs. She came here when she was four, had relatives who owned Steuben's restaurant in Boston. She and I stayed really good friends through high school.

**Selesnick:** Did you have any part-time jobs when you were growing up?

**Callahan:** I did. I worked in Jordan Marsh on Dollar Day. Another job that people had—after they were freshmen in college, they went back and they could be park directors in the summertime, at different places. I worked at the park that was near the library.

**Selesnick:** What role did religion play in your home and family life?

**Callahan:** It played a large role. My grandparents, we would walk around and we would collect the chametz with a feather the night before Passover. Rain or shine, we'd be out at a barrel the following morning, and we'd be burning the chametz in a barrel in the backyard.

**Selesnick:** Just for our listeners and readers, what is chametz?

**Callahan:** Chametz is anything that isn't Kosher for Passover. You really couldn't afford or didn't have the time to take out every crumb and every speck of bread from your home, but symbolically, by putting little pieces of bread in reach room, and following each other around each holding a candle, you could brush the little pieces of bread into a bowl, with a feather, and then you burnt the chametz, and it symbolized cleaning your home.

**Selesnick:** Did your parents do that?

**Callahan:** Yes. My parents followed us. We all went around Bobie and Zayde's house. Every Friday night, we ate downstairs with chally that my father picked up in a bakery on Broadway. Walking to the bakery, walking everywhere. We always had the major family events downstairs in Bobie and Zayde's house, and every year we would have first seder.

**Selesnick:** What were the major events?

**Callahan:** We did the seders. We did Hanukah. We did Purim. We did all the major events. But my grandfather—being Orthodox didn't matter—he loved Christmas. [laughs] He used to put up some Christmas lights in our fir tree in front of the house, and he actually had a sweater that had some Christmas decorations on it. [laughs]

**Selesnick:** That's—different.

**Callahan:** Yeah!

**Selesnick:** What role did Jewish institutions play in your daily life?



**Callahan:** The Chelsea Hebrew School was the strictest place to go. It was every day of the week except for Friday afternoons. The temple also had a Hebrew school, Temple Emmanuel, but that would be like three days a week. The first three grades of Hebrew school, I think we went earlier in the afternoon, because elementary school got out early. Then we'd be there from 4:00 to 6:00 at night and then on Saturdays. So, Hebrew school played a really big part in our lives.

**Selesnick:** Were you Bat Mitzvah'ed?

**Callahan:** You know, I had such a big graduation from Hebrew school in the eighth grade—my Bat Mitzvah would have been in the ninth grade, and my mother, particularly I remember, she didn't want me to have a Bat Mitzvah because I had gotten so many *gifts* the year before, that I did not have a Bat Mitzvah. My brother did, because we didn't want to invite everyone again and have them feel obligated.

**Selesnick:** I understand. What was your father's line of work?

**Callahan:** My father was a lawyer. He had graduated from BU Law School. He must have been a starving lawyer; my parents lived on County Road when my brother was born. My father remembered having to borrow \$20 for his rent from his mother-in-law and father-in-law. [laughs]

0:20:00 So he and his brother-in-law and two brothers went into a business. They were called jobbers [sp]—Champion Glove Company on Kingston Street in Boston. He retired from that.

**Selesnick:** Did secular American holidays besides Christmas play a role in your daily life?

**Callahan:** Yes. Every secular holiday did. We went up to—Columbus Day, we celebrated. We celebrated everything. We even brought my grandparents to all the things that we celebrated.

**Selesnick:** What languages were spoken in your home?

**Callahan:** It's interesting, because at a very young age, I knew Yiddish totally. Part of the reason was not exceptionally [laughs] nice, but my Bobie and her sister that lived in Everett were very Orthodox. They didn't wear makeup, they had buns on their heads, and they wore the nylons with the garters below the knee. Well, on Shabbos, their younger sister, who lived in Brookline across from where Kennedy was born, would come over, and the three of them would lie down to rest in the middle of the afternoon, and they would gab in Yiddish. And they would discuss everything. And some of it was [laughs] a little—they had no idea that I learned Yiddish, little by little, and understood everything that they were saying. They would have just died! [laughs]

**Selesnick:** What kinds of things were they discussing?

**Callahan:** They were discussing how the rabbi wasn't married yet and he was still a boy, things like that. [laughs] Anyway, there was a little gossip going on there, a little Bobie gossip. And I kept it myself that I—and I just smiled that I understood everything they were saying. [laughs] So I learned to speak Yiddish at about five years old.

**Selesnick:** Interesting. What involvement did your family members have in Chelsea's civic affairs or public affairs, if any?

**Callahan:** They weren't politically involved. My father wasn't politically involved. They were more involved with the synagogue, with the temple. My father was a very active person at Temple Emmanuel. In Chelsea, there were so many synagogues that my grandparents and my parents went to the Onichtsta [sp] and Heard Street Shul and Walnut Street Shul. With the Tanofskys, their best friends, they went to the Shurtleff Street Shul. Because I guess every time that someone had a little argument, they opened up another shul [laughs] so—we certainly had a lot. When my grandfather—my grandmother died first, and when he was 98, he came with us for Rosh Hashanah to Temple Emmanuel because my mother insisted that he not go somewhere by himself. He came in and he sat down,

where the men and women were sitting together. He looked to the right, and he looked to the left, and he said, “Nisht shlekht, sitting with the women!”

**Selesnick:** [laughs]

**Callahan:** That means “Not bad.” [laughs]

**Selesnick:** Did a particular family member influence you more than others? If you had to single out a family member who influenced you significantly, would there be any individual that stands out in your memory?

**Callahan:** It’s one of the quietest people in my family, but I learned by watching my mother and father, and my Zayde and my Bobie, that both my mother and her mother were very—they gave—my father gave my mother a lot of freedom. I learned from them to pursue your own interests. My father and I loved sports together. We loved opera together. We would go to the opera; we would go to sports. My mother did other things. It was the same with my grandparents. So, my grandmother, even though she wasn’t the noisiest person in the house, she used to call me down to thread the needle, and to put the thread in her treadle sewing machine. But I remember her saying to me—she opened the door, and I saw little handmade satin pouches, and I remember her saying, “When the time comes, if anyone poor comes to the door, there’s a little money in here that nobody knows about, and this is to help people.”

**Selesnick:** In each pouch?

**Callahan:** In each pouch, there might have been like \$40, \$80 or something—

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**Selesnick:** Wow.

**Callahan:** —that she would give people when they came to the door.

**Selesnick:** She was generous.

**Callahan:** She was generous. She was quiet. She would call me at 5:00 in the morning to tell me there were heysa [sp] kuchens [sp], warm kuchens [sp] that she made,

with sugar instead of onions so that I would like them, and they would come up the back stairs, so I would go down.

**Selesnick:** What is a kuchen?

**Callahan:** A kuchen is almost like a bagel, but filled in, in the middle.

**Selesnick:** Oh, okay, got it. Did you keep any family keepsakes or photos that you've retained?

**Callahan:** I have a lot of photos, and I have menorahs and things like that from my grandparents.

**Selesnick:** When did your family leave the Chelsea neighborhood that you grew up in, or when did you leave it?

**Callahan:** I basically left, not formally, but when I left to college. Because after college, I did come home and sleep for about three months, and then I went into Boston and lived in different apartments, first with a cousin, then with friends. I really stayed in Boston, off of Commonwealth Avenue in Allston and different places. Then from there, I moved to Saugus and moved different places. But it was just really when I was in college in the summertime did I come home.

**Selesnick:** Did your family at some point leave the neighborhood as well, and leave Chelsea?

**Callahan:** No. As a matter of fact, we still own 19 Clark Avenue, and it might be temporary, but my daughter and my son-in-law live there.

**Selesnick:** What did leaving Chelsea mean to you, as you reflect back?

**Callahan:** Leaving Chelsea?

**Selesnick:** Or leaving Clark Avenue.

**Callahan:** You know something? I don't really feel like I ever left Clark Avenue. It doesn't really matter what you physically do; it's where your head is at. A lot of people who started out in Chelsea might be living in Marblehead or Newton or

Wellesley or whatever, but they're still connected to Chelsea, because that's what made them who they are, I really think.

**Selesnick:** Could you describe for me how Chelsea made you what you are?

**Callahan:** I really didn't think about it until you asked me to plan for this. I think I'm very, very accepting of all different types of people. I'm not sure if that's why I have not experienced a lot of anti-Semitism. I was brought up to be very accepting of everybody and intrigued by everyone's differences. But the basic things of loving family and—there were many people that didn't get a chance, that didn't get from their parents what I got from mine. But I think that everyone needs family or needs love. And it doesn't even have to be someone who's blood related. But I think that we lived on love. I thought I was wealthy. I wasn't wealthy, but I thought I was.

**Selesnick:** What did you do for education and work after high school?

**Callahan:** After high school, I went to Tufts, Jackson College for Women at Tufts, and I started in math and then I went into psychology. I graduated with a degree in psychology and then went for a master's after that. But I wound up calling my brother and saying, "What should I do with this? I don't want to soak off mom and dad anymore and keep going to college." He said, "Become a computer programmer." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Just do it." So, I did that for ten years and I worked for IBM and John Hancock. Eventually—my mother had been a renowned teacher at Williams School, an elementary teacher. Of course, we never want to do what your mother did, you know? [laughs] But that was my second ten years, and I worked at a vocational high school teaching computer programming, and found the love-of-my-life job. I just want to point out I did upside-down life. I did those things and then adopted two babies.

**Selesnick:** Ah! Okay. Do you want to say anything about that, the experience of adoption?

**Callahan:** Yeah, I found out very, very quickly that—and I kind of opened my eyes and noticed that every single married couple just lives on love and not blood; that's not what connects them.

0:30:08                   And I found very, very early that what connects you to—whether it’s children or your wife or your husband—it’s love. I have a wonderful family, and we chose. We chose to adopt, and we adopted each other.

**Selesnick:**               That’s wonderful. How did marriage influence your adult life?

**Callahan:**               I had written a couple of notes down. When I married Michael, he was not born Jewish, but when he met me in Boston in a restaurant, he said, “I know Jewish. I had three Jewish roommates at Penn. [singing] Aruch [sic] atah Adonai [end singing]” —

**Selesnick:**               [laughs]

**Callahan:**               —and he forgot the “Buh!” So what happened was we married; he has a wonderful, wonderful family; and he decided that the only way—he wanted the children brought up Jewish, and he decided the only way he could be a good father is if he converted. So he went through a year and a half of conversion north of [sp] Boston. He had his first aliyah five minutes before my daughter at her Bat Mitzvah had her first aliyah, and then we threw candy at both of them.

**Selesnick:**               That’s a good story! So then intermarriage influenced your adult life because you *are* intermarried, as it were, at least that’s what we used to call it.

**Callahan:**               Yes. But I found out that a lot of my friends who are Jewish and born Jewish and blood Jewish didn’t practice religion and all the traditions as much as I did. Very few girls or boys that I knew in school. My house was very unique, and the upbringing I had was very unique. So I found that I feel closer to Michael and the things that we practice. Even if you just marry someone who’s Jewish, they might not have had the same upbringing. I found that Judaism is a very individual feeling, and what you've been raised to do is very individual.

**Selesnick:**               True. Reflecting back on the neighborhood where you grew up in Chelsea, and Chelsea in particular, how has that neighborhood and Chelsea changed since you were young?

**Callahan:** First of all, I couldn't afford to live in any of these [laughs] apartments! They're so expensive. But I'm not sure it has changed much. I think that part of Chelsea is a very mixed neighborhood. I think people are very accepting. Visually, it doesn't look like it has changed a tremendous amount. The church is gone, and the big house at the corner that Dr. Deragopian lived in is gone. But I really think that more than other parts of Chelsea, this part has remained relatively the same.

**Selesnick:** When you were growing up, did Chelsea have a city center, a commercial center, or a downtown type of place?

**Callahan:** It did. All of Broadway had wonderful stores. I remember Sid's Mend Shop, and you might, also. And it had bakeries, and it had five-and-ten-cent stores. A relative of ours had Sislavsky's [sp] furrier with a big bear in the window. But Jews and non-Jews all collected at the original building that Temple Emmanuel had built on Crescent Avenue. What was it called?

**Selesnick:** YMHA?

**Callahan:** No, no, no. It became the YMHA. But the first synagogue, the opening of Temple Emmanuel, which was done in the basement of the Chelsea Hebrew School, was opened—it was called Temple Beth El, and it was opened in 1929. Ten years later, they took over the church that they're in now, the church building, and the Temple Beth El became the YMHA. So much of my social life was spent at the YMHA in different clubs and basketball and all different kinds of things. People collected there from all different cities and came to the dances. So that was on my block, walking distance around the block.

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**Selesnick:** I've asked you a number of questions, but maybe I didn't ask you a particular question you wish I had asked you. Are there any that you wish I had asked you about?

**Callahan:** If I'll just glance. I was talking about my father going to the temple, and Zayde would walk to the Onichtsta [sp]—oh, this you might not realize, or people might not—that often Bobie stayed home, and my mother stayed home, and they would cook the Shabbos lunch. Even the rabbi, Rabbi Red [sp] Wolden [sp], from the temple would come over for Shabbos lunch. But it was not considered a sin for the men to go to shul and the women to stay home and prepare. That was perfectly fine.

**Selesnick:** Women's preparation was not considered work?

**Callahan:** It was considered being just as Jewish as going to the synagogue.

**Selesnick:** I see. Devotion—

**Callahan:** Oh, I remember something when you're talking about that. My grandfather built a sukke, and he built it attached to the house, and it had a sliding roof, so that when the roof slid down, you could see the stars through the bands of hay that were above on the ceiling.

**Selesnick:** And what is a sukke?

**Callahan:** A sukke, or a sukkah, is for the holiday of Sukkot. It's when people are supposed to sit and eat and pray in a little side place that might be in the yard, might be under a tent. My grandfather would have maybe six or eight rabbis from the city come. Some would have long beards and some would be shaven. They would eat my Bobie's lunch and stay in the sukkah, and they'd be discussing things of the Bible, and they'd be singing, and they'd be banging on the table and asking questions. That was one of the most interesting things to me; I used to always sit in the sukkah with them.

**Selesnick:** That does sound interesting! Sounds like a miniature yeshiva.

**Callahan:** Yeah. And some of them came from the yeshiva.

**Selesnick:** Any other things that you'd like to discuss that I haven't asked you about?



**Callahan:** Let me just think. Oh, yes, I wanted to talk a little bit about my mother, and also something historic that you might not know. This varied city by city. But my mother Rose Ayovitz [sp] was a renowned teacher in the Williams School. She was a first-grade and a fifth-grade teacher.

**Selesnick:** What made her renowned?

**Callahan:** She was a wonderful teacher, and she did everything from teaching in the classroom to taking barefoot children down Broadway to Hye's [sp] or Harry's [sp] and buying them shoes. Everything. I found out what people thought of her when I went to a reunion once at the Williams School. Some guy looked at her, and it's as if she was 50 years younger and he knew her instantly. She looked at him and said the same thing. This guy at the time was bald and whatever. She says, "Nelson!" Like they recognized each other just looking at their eyes.

**Selesnick:** You said the Williams School, so she must have gone to the Williams School.

**Callahan:** She *taught* at the Williams School.

**Selesnick:** Oh, I see.

**Callahan:** At that time, most women got married when they were 20 or 21, and she didn't get married until she was 32, *because* she loved her teaching job so much that as primitive as it sounds to us now—you didn't need to be pregnant; the minute you got married, you lost your teaching job, if you were a woman. She got married May 8<sup>th</sup>, and wasn't allowed to finish until the end of June.

**Selesnick:** Oh my goodness.

**Callahan:** What she did was she turned her life around and totally devoted it to charitable things, to being president of this and that, and a luncheon at Boston at the Statler, and here, and she devoted her entire life to volunteering, and got just as much nachus out of it as if she had gotten a salary. But she converted her life. I mean, I had no idea that women had to—I thought maybe when they were pregnant they had to leave; I had heard of that. No, the minute you got married if you were a woman, you had to leave. You lost your job. So she

devoted her life in many different directions that weren't necessarily a salary. I think that was the biggest lesson I learned from her, was that you don't need to be paid with cash; you can be paid with nachus. You know what I mean?

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**Selesnick:** Nachus meaning—?

**Callahan:** Nachus meaning heartfelt enjoyment. Was it Steve Jobs, about ten years ago, when he was on his death bed, he said he was realizing that a \$3,000 car will take him the same place as a \$300,000 car, and the most important thing in the world is not cash.

**Selesnick:** Aha.

**Callahan:** But I think that's a big thing I learned from my mother.

**Selesnick:** It sounds like your mother as well as your grandmother had a big influence on you.

**Callahan:** Yeah, as well as my father. We all did different things.

**Selesnick:** And you have a son and a daughter, right?

**Callahan:** I have a son and a daughter. I'm just looking for anything else that I might have—yeah, I have a son and a daughter. My son is now 28, and my daughter is 31. I'm very lucky. I'm a lucky person.

**Selesnick:** Your daughter and son-in-law on the very street in the very house where you grew up?

**Callahan:** They actually just moved from the third floor down to the first floor, and they're actually having a party on Monday night, the 15<sup>th</sup>, when they're going to show what they did and how they retained things that are there, but they're in the process of moving to the first floor.

**Selesnick:** From your description of this three-decker, it sounds like moving down is moving up.

**Callahan:** [laughs] Yes. That's true! [laughs]

**Selesnick:** Just want to ask you if there's anything else you would like to discuss before we wind this down.

**Callahan:** No, I just want to say thank you. I'm sure a lot of people, if you wiggle them a bit, have a lot of wonderful stories to tell. I'm not naïve; I've now lived in Boston, I've lived in Saugus, I've lived in Swampscott. My daughter actually said a very interesting thing when she graduated from Swampscott High School. She came home, and there were a few things she mentioned that she had noticed that day, which I won't go into details, but she said, "It doesn't matter where you grow up. We could still be living in Bobie's house in Chelsea." And then she said the smartest thing she'll ever say in her whole life: "It's all the same." And what that means is, it comes from either your upbringing or your family or your difference. You can be just as close with your friends as family.

**Selesnick:** So you carry some of what you learned with you throughout life, is that it?

**Callahan:** I think so, I think so.

**Selesnick:** Thank you so much, Sara Lee, for carving out the time to talk with us. As I said, and I will repeat, my name is Herb Selesnick. I am completing an interview with Sara Lee Callahan at her home in Swampscott, Massachusetts, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022. This interview is for the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center's oral history project, Jewish Neighborhood Voices.

[End]