Norm Finkelstein

0:00:00 to 0:52:10

Herb Selesnick: My name is Herb Selesnick, and I am interviewing Norman Finkelstein via Zoom at his home in Framingham, Massachusetts, on August 5th, 2022. This interview is for the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center's Oral History Project titled Jewish Neighborhood Voices. To start, Norm, where were you born?

Norm Finkelstein: Obviously, born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, at the Chelsea Memorial Hospital.

Selesnick: How many were in your immediate family?

Finkelstein: At that point, it was my mother, my father, and me. Four years later, my sister came along.

Selesnick: Do you know where your ancestors immigrated from?

Finkelstein: Oh, yes. For my father's side, it was from a little village called Kilikiev, which was then in Poland. Today, it is in Ukraine, halfway between Kiev and Lviv. My mother's family came from Romania, again a small shtetl. It was called in Yiddish "Chiplevutz," [sp] "Chipuletzu" which today is in Moldova.

Selesnick: What generation born in this country are you?

Finkelstein: First. Very first.

Selesnick: Approximately when did your family move to the neighborhood where you spent your formative years?

Finkelstein: When I was born, my parents lived on 4th Street. You can know exactly where it is. If you've ever taken the 4th Street exit off the Tobin Bridge, that's where their apartment building was, right there.

Selesnick: 4th Street in Chelsea?

Finkelstein: 4th Street in Chelsea. When I was five years old, my father had bought a house on Bellingham Street, a three-decker, and that's when we moved. The only

recollection I have of 4th Street is that when World War II ended, all of the fire sirens and church bells and whatever were ringing, and I remember I was very frightened by all of that noise. That's the only memory I have of 4th Street.

Selesnick: Do you remember how old you were when you heard those noises?

Finkelstein: Well, I had to be four years old, because the war ended in 1945.

Selesnick: How long did you stay on 4th Street?

Finkelstein: Those first five years, probably, and then the move to Bellingham.

Selesnick: Do you know why they decided to buy a house on Bellingham, or your father did?

Finkelstein: That's a very good question. I don't know. They had to move, because the bridge was going to tear their apartment building down. How they ended up on Bellingham Street, I have no idea.

Selesnick: How would you describe Bellingham Street when you lived there?

Finkelstein: It was a really nice, close-knit neighborhood. It was a mixed neighborhood. There were a lot of Jewish families on the street, in fact I'd say maybe at my end of Bellingham Street, preponderantly Jewish. On Bellingham Street, we lived on the second floor, and the people above us were the Martirosyans [sp], who were Armenian. The McLaughlins [sp] lived next door to us. So, it was this mixed neighborhood, but still had a Jewish feel to it.

Selesnick: How would you describe the home in which you lived, physically?

Finkelstein: Physically, the second floor, no elevator. A typical tenement flat. We had the kitchen in the back. There was a side bedroom that I had. My sister had a bedroom that ran off the long hall when you entered the apartment. There was my parents' bedroom and the living room, and then a small storage—we called it a storage room. It was a very small room that overlooked Bellingham Street.

0:05:09 Again, we used that for storage and so forth. Later on, my sister and I both used it as places to study, with the desks and so forth. One bathroom. [laughs] When

we first moved in, there was the icebox. We had the ice man who came and delivered. Things really improved for us when we got a refrigerator; no more ice man. At the beginning, the house was heated, all three levels, by coal. I remember the coal delivery man coming periodically. Then we modernized to oil heat. That was it. We were warm in winter and we were warm in summer! No air conditioning.

Selesnick: On a slightly different note, how would you describe the quality of Jewish life on Bellingham Street and in Chelsea in general?

Finkelstein: It was a given that—if you were Jewish, it kind of was a natural thing. It was a given thing. You would walk down the main streets of Chelsea, and there were signs in the grocery stores and the butcher shops and bakeries, sometimes in Hebrew with the words "Kasher," that the food was Kosher. You just took this for granted. On the High Holidays, the streets were closed generally in front of synagogues. You knew you were Jewish. A lot of the stores, as you know, on Broadway, were Jewish-owned. During those High Holidays, Broadway basically shut down! The stores were closed. So, no matter how religious you were as a Jew, you kind of knew you were Jewish. And your non-Jewish neighbors knew this as well. To this very day, I have a few Chelsea High School classmates who are non-Jewish who speak better Yiddish than I do. It was just that kind of situation. It was a very *warm* environment.

Selesnick: Do you have any memory of some of the—you referred to some of the main streets in Chelsea—their names and what they looked like?

Finkelstein: Of course Broadway. Central Avenue was also very big if you lived in our part of Chelsea. There were small grocers. There were several bakeries. There was Mr. Pinkus, the barber, who—I credit Mr. Pinkus today for—

Selesnick: A sensitive subject for both of us. [laughs]

Finkelstein: [laughs] Basically, it was a walk-around city. Chelsea was like, what, 1.8 square miles? You could literally walk from one end to the other without any difficulty. We had our neighborhoods. For those of us who lived in the Shurtleff School

area, we knew our area. We were very familiar with our area. Again, back in those days, because pretty much all of the little stores and whatever were Jewish-owned. It was kind of like being in a shtetl, but not.

Selesnick: Do you have as clear a sense of what the other neighborhoods were, besides the Shurtleff School neighborhood?

Finkelstein: Yeah, of course. There was the Prattville area, which we all considered to be a little above ourselves. We thought the Prattville people looked down upon us. Basically, the city took its identity from the public schools. We were all local neighborhood schools, so it was basically the school district that defined the area. Whether you lived near the Prattville School or Shurtleff or Williams or Carter, each of those areas had kind of a distinctive feel to them. But we were all familiar with those different areas.

0:10:00

Selesnick: What recreational opportunities were available to you in Chelsea as a young person?

Finkelstein: [laughs] The closest one, there was a park—so-called—Boston Park, down at the beginning of Bellingham Street. The neighborhood kids would gather there as well. That was basically it.

Selesnick: Why did you call it "so-called"?

Finkelstein: Well, it was paved. [laughs] You know, we occasionally saw a tree in Chelsea, but there were no trees or grass in Boston Park. Every July 4th, the local politicians would arrange for free ice cream; always looked forward to that. [laughs] Basically, my early years as a kid, you grew up with your neighborhood kids, basically just on the street. We did not have playdates. You just went out in the morning, and whoever was around, you may have played a little stickball, or one of the most popular games was off the stairs, with a ball, which drove Mrs. Tanofsky, who owned the apartment building across the street, crazy, because she did not want those balls hitting her stairs. [laughs] But that was

basically it. It was a very low-key kind of childhood, growing up. It was nothing really exciting; it was just hanging around.

Selesnick: You mentioned that it was a very warm experience. Did you have any experiences with anti-Semitism growing up?

Finkelstein: I've got to say no, not directly, and nothing that I can remember. The only thing that I remember vaguely is—remember, because of the Blue Laws then, of no work on Sunday and so forth, Sunday was the only day my father had to do work around the house. He was very observant, so Shabbat, he was in shul; he would not do any work around the house. Then he worked five days a week, and he often worked on Sundays as well, secretly. But around the house, I remember one day he was out there doing something, and one of our neighbors—and to this day, I really can't remember his name; he was non-Jewish, but he always struck me as a stick-in-the-mud kind of guy—and he walked by and yelled at my father, "No work on the Lord's day!" I do remember that. That basically is it. There were other things, but it did not dawn on me until later on that they were somehow—I wouldn't call them anti-Semitic, but they weren't exactly Jewish-friendly. You may remember this as well, that in the public school, we had the Lord's Prayer every morning. Occasionally, depending on the teacher, there would be a little Bible reading. Of course today that's all a no-no, but we don't know what the current Supreme Court might do about that. It's only later that I realized that as Jews, we weren't quite given our right. But we didn't care. What was the big deal? I do remember sitting on Santa's lap at the Shurtleff School. Mr. Santerelli [sp], the gym teacher, was the Santa. I really enjoyed singing the Christmas carols that we all sang in the public school. I enjoyed decorating the Christmas tree. It was quite lovely. But that didn't impede at all being Jewish. Today, when I tell my grandchildren these stories, they look aghast, that how could things like this really take place in a public school. But they did, and we all survived.

Selesnick: Yes, we did. Did you ever have any anti-immigrant experiences growing up?

Finkelstein: No, because pretty much everybody we dealt with was an immigrant, or the son or daughter of an immigrant. [laughs]

0:15:04 No, nothing. Immigrant didn't even enter into the story. I mean, there were events. For example, when Holocaust survivors were coming out of displaced persons camps in Europe, there were a number of them who settled in Chelsea, and some of them were friends or relatives of our relatives, so we got to meet these people. But in terms of any hatred or whatever toward them, I never saw any of that at all.

Selesnick: In Chelsea, how did you get around?

Finkelstein: On my own two feet! We did not own a car. It was either my own two feet or the MTA, to get into Boston and so forth. But in Chelsea itself—walking. That's what we did. If we went shopping, we shlepped the bundles up the hill to get home. That was it. We didn't know any better.

Selesnick: What was school like as a young person?

Finkelstein: I enjoyed school, except, as you know, for math. [laughs] For the life of me, I still break out into terror sweats when I think of Mr. Goodkin's [sp] math classes, and being called on to do something. To this very day, I just cringe. But school was a nice experience. It really was. My classmates were friends. It was almost like a family kind of thing. Interestingly, the way they had the tracking system back then, basically once you started in kindergarten—where I met my wife—you basically stuck through all of those years in elementary and middle school with the same group of people. It was almost like a family kind of thing. It was very nice! I enjoyed those days.

Selesnick: You met your wife in kindergarten?

Finkelstein: In kindergarten, yeah.

Selesnick: Did you instantly become boyfriend and girlfriend?

Finkelstein: No, although we did go to a dance in the fourth grade, a Young Judea dance in the fourth grade. Her father drove. [laughs]

Selesnick: I'm glad you didn't!

Finkelstein: This is true. Interestingly, we reconnected—we had both gone to BU, and so we'd see each other, and occasionally we'd give each other rides home and this and that, but nothing much. But it was in graduate school, I walked into a statistics class. Again, you know me and math [laughs]. And there was Roz, sitting right there. I said, "Ah!" That's when we became serious. And she helped me with my homework.

Selesnick: I was going to ask that question. [laughs] That's interesting. On another subject, what role would you say religion played in your home life?

Finkelstein: A very important one. My family was, well, observant. My father, as I mentioned before, was Shomer Shabbat, did not work on Saturday. He was a weekly synagogue attender. I would go with him to the Elm Street Synagogue on Saturday mornings. That was it. All the holidays were followed. The house was of course Kosher; I mean, goes without saying. From the beginning, I got my religious education at the Chelsea Hebrew School. Then after Chelsea Hebrew School, I attended the Prozdor high school department at Hebrew College in Brookline. Basically, that really was my life.

Selesnick: What does the word "Prozdor" mean?

Finkelstein: The word "Prozdor" means corridor. It was established in the 1920s, basically as a feeder to Hebrew College, in other words so that Prozdor is the corridor for students to go from their local Hebrew school and then into the College.

0:20:04

Selesnick: The other mystery is, how is it spelled?

Finkelstein: With a Peh, and a Resh, and a Vav, and a Zayin, and a Dalet. Or in English, P-R-O-Z-D-O-R.

Selesnick: Thank you. [laughs] That will be helpful. How long were you there?

Finkelstein: It was four years there, which I attended while going through high school. In other words, it took up my life. It was five days a week, every afternoon. I got through with high school and then got on the MTA and headed off to Brookline. We did that for two hours a day during the week, and four hours on Sundays. Basically that was my life for four years. Then afterwards I went directly into Hebrew College. In fact, I was a junior in high school when I started Hebrew College. I was a young prodigy!

Selesnick: Yes, apparently! [laughs]

Finkelstein: That basically was my life. Later in life—and I just finished my teaching at Prozdor for 38 years—a number of years ago, one of my students—you know, the current age—"So what were your extracurricular activities when you were in school?" My extracurricular activity was Prozdor! That basically took me out of Chelsea for—I knew more about Brookline [laughs] at that point. That basically was how my life was structured.

Selesnick: You mentioned going to synagogue with your father at Elm Street, and you mentioned the Hebrew high school. Were there other Jewish institutions that played a role in your formative years?

Finkelstein: No. [laughs] That was enough!

Selesnick: You didn't have time! Right. What was your father's line of work, if I may ask?

Finkelstein: My father was a wool sorter. Back in the days before all the DuPont-created fabrics, it was wool, and wool was recycled and so forth. He was a rag picker! Down on 2nd Street in Chelsea, there were a number of these shops before one of the great Chelsea fires decimated that whole area. That was the industry. It was very hard work. That's what he did. Today we would consider my family growing up as poor; we didn't know it back then. Because of his religious beliefs, whenever there was a Jewish holiday—and there were lots of them—he did not work. And if you don't work, you don't get paid. Life was very hard. My

mother was a very good financial manager. No one went hungry. We ate well. We were clothed well. But we were growing up in an environment where pretty much everyone else around us was—maybe not quite in our specific category, but not far from it. That basically was it.

Selesnick: You mentioned that you celebrated all of the Jewish holidays. What role did secular American holidays play in your daily life?

Finkelstein: The major holidays—Thanksgiving was a biggie in my extended family, and we had a lot of extended family living in Chelsea. On my father's side, he had sisters, his own father still alive. On my mother's side, my mother was the youngest of 11 children. Consequently, I had first cousins who were basically old enough to be my parents. So, we had these extended family gatherings, on Thanksgiving. That was the biggie.

0:25:00 But the memory I have is, again, of those extended-family get-togethers. We were never far from family, living in Chelsea.

Selesnick: What languages were spoken in your home?

Finkelstein: My parents spoke English, with accents, but there was a lot of Yiddish involved as well. My grandparents spoke only Yiddish. I picked up Yiddish as well. I could carry a conversation in Yiddish.

Selesnick: Really!

Finkelstein: What killed it for my grandmother was when I started studying German at Chelsea High School, and then I majored in German in college. The new accenting drove my grandmother nuts. She did not appreciate that at all. Not at all. It was a mixture of English and Yiddish, basically.

Selesnick: How would you say that your family members related to non-Jews?

Finkelstein: Openly. There was never any kind of problem, except for that one incident that I relayed earlier. The non-Jewish neighbors that we had on the street, everyone was friendly. There was certainly no problem with that.

Selesnick: What involvement did your family members have in Chelsea's civic affairs or public affairs?

Finkelstein: They voted.

Selesnick: They did vote?

Finkelstein: [laughs] That was very important. It was very important. Even to my grandmother, who spoke not a word of English! When it was Election Day, she had to be taken to the polls to vote. This was very important to them.

Selesnick: They had become citizens?

Finkelstein: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Selesnick: What was their approximate age when they came here?

Finkelstein: My mother was 16 when she came here. My father was 14 when he came. Again, they both attended—my father attended Williams School. My mother did the high school—I forget what they called it—there was a high school program for immigrant people, and she graduated from that. They were young when they arrived. For my mother, she arrived here meeting siblings she had never known, who had immigrated to this country much earlier. I have a photo—well, that I've duplicated, and everyone in my family has a copy of this photo—the photo that was done when the very last sibling arrived in the United States a year after my mother. There was one brother left in Europe, and he arrived, and when they arrived, at Passover, they hired a photographer to take this family picture of all of the siblings—at that point, many of the siblings had children of their own—of that extended family, because they were now here, on American soil.

Selesnick: All 11 siblings were in the photo?

Finkelstein: Some of the siblings had died. There were a few that had died young, back in Europe, and all of that. The remaining siblings, seven of them. For the older ones, their spouses and children are all in this photo.

Selesnick: That's wonderful. Amongst your various family members, both immediate family and extended family, are there any particular individuals that had a very deep influence on you, that you can recall?

Finkelstein: In many ways, they all had an influence, in one way or another. Remember, this was a very close-knit family. We did things *together*. I will say that one of my uncles, who never married, had a long-time girlfriend, a 50-year girlfriend.

Selesnick: That's a good long time.

Finkelstein: For whatever reason, they never got married, but we considered her an aunt. She was American-born.

0:30:05 She basically was very, very influential on me, in directing my paths in terms of education and whatever. She knew the system. She was a college graduate. I give her an awful lot of respect for really being this kind of guiding force, because after all, when it came time, for example, to choose a college, what do my parents know about college? She was very influential then. I always respect the work that she did and the attention that she gave.

Selesnick: Do you have family keepsakes that you've kept with you? You mentioned that photo.

Finkelstein: Of course there's the photo, and of course we have lots of family photos. But I have a Kiddush cup that belonged to my grandfather, that comes out every Passover for the seder. We have a samovar. In fact, to this day, I can't even imagine how they shlepped all these things over from Europe.

Selesnick: How big is the samovar?

Finkelstein: It's a big samovar!

Selesnick: [laughs] My goodness. Is it copper?

Finkelstein: Yeah.

Selesnick: What's the Kiddush cup made of?

Finkelstein: The Kiddush cup is silver, sterling silver. But that was bought in America, in maybe 1920-something-or-other. But the samovar is authentic Polish.

Selesnick: Did you make particularly significant friendships as a young person that you recall?

Finkelstein: Oh yeah, the neighborhood kids. To this day—Ricky Sidman [sp] and Stevie Kleiman [sp] and Skippy McLaughlin [sp]. You'd go out, and there they would be.

Selesnick: At that point in your life, as you grew up a little, did you have any part-time jobs?

Finkelstein: No. As I mentioned before, my extracurricular activity was Prozdor.

Selesnick: So, no time.

Finkelstein: No. I did not work for—I shouldn't say—while I was going to Hebrew College—in fact, this is like in my senior year of Chelsea High School—I also worked at the Chelsea Hebrew School. I taught there for a number of years. In fact, even starting earlier, I used to go to help out with their Saturday morning services and so forth. That was maybe my first paid job. While I was going to BU and Hebrew College, I also taught at the Hebrew School. That basically was the work that I did. I also got to work—high school—at the office of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in Boston. I was the office boy. I got coffee. I brought lunch. I did errands. I really got to know Boston, because there were a lot of legal filings and courthouse stuff and business through lawyers. I really got to know Boston very well during those couple of years.

Selesnick: Did your family eventually leave Chelsea?

Finkelstein: Yes. My parents' house on Bellingham Street burned down in 1972, I think.

Selesnick: Were they still living there?

Finkelstein: Oh, yeah, they were still living there. And not much beyond the fire. They then moved further north on Bellingham Street, to the yellow apartment buildings

almost at the top of the hill. They lived there for a number of years and then moved to senior citizen housing in Brighton, at Ulin House, at Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly. And that was it; that was the end of their life in Chelsea.

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Selesnick: When you were growing up, what number of Bellingham did you live at before the fire?

Finkelstein: Number 71.

Selesnick: Oh, so right next door, okay.

Finkelstein: Number 71. Interestingly, when my kids were younger, we would come to visit my parents, and we'd come to visit Roz's parents, who then lived on Watts Street. And they would say, "Oh, Chelsea, that's for grandmas and grandpas!" They were very right, because at that point, the Jewish population of Chelsea was extremely elderly, by the 1970s and the early 1980s. When Roz and I got married, we were both teaching at Chelsea High School. When we got married, we moved into a brand-new apartment building on Franklin Avenue. That's where our eldest son was born. To this very day, he considers himself a Chelsea-ite, even though he only lived in Chelsea for the first two years of his life. But wherever he goes, he meets people who [laughs] are Chelsea-connected. It's really very heartwarming, that he considers myself a Chelsea-ite. There was a time—my son is the president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Jewish Federation. At one time, there were three heads of major Federations in America who came from Chelsea!

Selesnick: I did not know that!

Finkelstein: They would have this Chelsea reunion whenever they had their national meetings. Yeah. Barry Rosenberg, who was a student of mine at Chelsea High School, was the head of the Federation in Saint Lous, and Jay Sanderson was

head of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles! It's interesting, the effect that Chelsea Jews have played on the national Jewish arena.

Selesnick: That's fascinating.

Finkelstein: Yeah.

Selesnick: How old were you when you left Chelsea?

Finkelstein: We had been married. We lived in Chelsea, on Franklin Avenue, for four years. Then, I got a job working for the Brookline Public Schools, My wife and I decided, "It's time to move." First of all, the long commute over the Tobin Bridge every day from Chelsea to Brookline was not exactly endearing.

Selesnick: At that time, I think it was still called the Mystic River Bridge.

Finkelstein: Mystic River Bridge, whatever. The first choice for us was Brookline. I had grown to know Brookline very well in my years at Prozdor and Hebrew College. We spent 20 minutes with a realtor in Brookline, we all had a good laugh, and then we moved our way westward and ended up in Framingham.

Selesnick: What did leaving Chelsea more or less permanently mean to you, as you reflect back?

Finkelstein: By the time we were getting ready to leave Chelsea, Chelsea was not the Chelsea of my early youth. It was beginning to be a different city. To be quite honest, we left with great memories, but not a yearning to move back. It's funny now; we look at the real estate section of *The Boston Globe* just for fun on a weekly basis, and we see three-decker houses in Chelsea being sold for $600,000 or $700,000. To be truthful, if we wanted to move back to Chelsea now, we couldn't afford it!

Selesnick: Amazing. At the time that you left, how had Chelsea changed?

Finkelstein: There were more immigrants moving in, many people from Puerto Rico.

0:40:01 Just the city—Chelsea has always been a city of immigrants, so you know, nothing wrong with that. It's a great place to get started. But it was not my Chelsea. Mr. Pinkus had died! I couldn't—

Selesnick: —get a haircut anymore.

Finkelstein: —get a haircut anymore! Many of the stores had changed, and so forth, from Jewish-owned to whatever. The city was just changing. The synagogues were basically all closing down. The Elm Street Synagogue, which I had attended in my youth, was torn down for urban redevelopment. And all of that. So, the city had changed. Like many people of my generation, really the future was not in Chelsea. The future was elsewhere.

Selesnick: Yes. As you think back, how did growing up in Chelsea and in the Bellingham neighborhood, do you think it had any influence on your adult life, or how would you characterize it?

Finkelstein: Oh, absolutely. It shaped me for who I became. The fact that growing up on Bellingham Street or going to the Shurtleff School—we were exposed to people of all nationalities, of all backgrounds, and whatever. It basically allowed me, and I assume others as well, to have a freer association with all kinds of people. Growing up in Chelsea literally prepared me for life.

Selesnick: That's good to hear, having grown up there myself. How would you say that getting married and becoming a parent has influenced your adult life?

Finkelstein: Well [laughs], it basically—changed my life, right? When you have children, you have other obligations, and so forth. It is life-changing; it really is. The only thing that's better than being a parent is being a grandparent, because you have the full enjoyment without the worries. They're someone else's problems.

Selesnick: I have experienced that. Did living through World War II, as young as you were, have any influence on your life?

Finkelstein: Not directly, although I mentioned earlier that the one memory I have of World War II—

Selesnick: The end, yeah.

Finkelstein: —was crying in the doorway with all the noises going on. But what happened afterwards—and I mentioned this earlier as well—was there were Holocaust survivors who came to Chelsea. Although we never quite as kids got to understand at the time what had happened in reality, but still the reality of those individuals, who must have gone through some terrible things—we figured that out, too, as kids—but the details were lacking. The details of what was happening, those were not there. And it took a long time. I can remember back at the Chelsea Hebrew School, they would show films, black and white films, of displaced persons arriving in Israel, Palestine. Israel, basically; it was 1948. That gave us some kind of inkling of what had happened. But I basically grew up as a kid really almost oblivious to what had happened.

Selesnick: How would you characterize your occupation in adult life? Bear in mind we only have a couple of hours.

Finkelstein: [laughs] Got it. Basically—teacher. I began by teaching at the Chelsea Hebrew School and then moved on. At Chelsea High School, I taught German for four years, then moved on to Brookline, where I spent the next 38 years as an administrator, as a librarian. Just a great experience.

0:45:10 I began writing when I was still working in Brookline. All of that—the teaching, the writing—it has been a good life! I always told people that my years as a school librarian basically shaped me. I had the second-best job in the school.

Selesnick: What was the best?

Finkelstein: Senior custodian was probably the best.

Selesnick: [laughs]

Finkelstein: Surrounded by books. Kids came. But then they left! It was just a wonderful time.

Selesnick: What did you write about?

Finkelstein: My very first book—when we moved to Framingham, we had become members and active in the Temple Beth Shalom, a Conservative synagogue here in town. Remember, if you're a teacher, you also need a second job. I taught in their high school program and so forth. We were doing a program on the Holocaust, and it dawned on me, as a librarian, that there really were not any books for young kids about the Holocaust. We were going to put on this little play or whatever, and so I started writing out this little play that eventually turned into a book, called *Remember Not to Forget*, which is one of the earliest children's books about the Holocaust published in this country.

Selesnick: What year was that, roughly?

Finkelstein: [laughs] 1983. Maybe. Somewhere in there.

Selesnick: You started writing in your early forties?

Finkelstein: Yeah, I was a late bloomer.

Selesnick: Are there themes that run through your writings?

Finkelstein: No. A lot of my books are Jewish-themed books. One book kind of leads to another. My Holocaust book leads to a biography of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, for older readers. I did the Herzl book, and that morphed into a book about Alfred Dreyfus, the Dreyfus affair in France. There are all of these connections. But then there are also books that are not connected. Back in the early days, I did a biography of General Douglas MacArthur.

Selesnick: Not Jewish.

Finkelstein: Not Jewish. I did a book on plastics, a cultural history.

Selesnick: Would you say that your writing is a combination of biographies and histories?

Finkelstein: Yeah, it's all biography and history. I once had an idea for a young adult novel, and I pitched it to my agent at the time, who was very polite and said, "Oh, but you do non-fiction so well." I read between the lines and got rid of that idea.

Selesnick: No pun intended, right? I did want to ask you if interfaith marriage has affected your adult life in any way.

Finkelstein: Not directly in my immediate family, but in my larger family, there have been a lot of intermarried couples. The non-Jewish spouse has always been fully welcomed into our families and so forth. So, like any other Jewish family in America, yeah.

Selesnick: Was there any question you wish I asked you that I haven't yet asked you?

Finkelstein: No, I think you've done a very nice job so far! No. Basically, the sense I want to try to convey is how Chelsea had an amazing impact on my life, in many, many ways.

0:50:04 Every once in a while, when we're driving through the North Shore or whatever, we'll always swing by Chelsea.

Selesnick: Oh, really?

Finkelstein: If Katz's is open, we'll buy bagels.

Selesnick: Of course.

Finkelstein: It's kind of these reminiscences, of going through the neighborhoods. And yeah, the neighborhoods have changed.

Selesnick: How do they look different?

Finkelstein: The signs are not in Yiddish, and the names on the stores are not Jewish! But otherwise, it's pretty much—it's the same. Little small businesses. The interesting thing is a lot of the houses, as we drive through, they look well-kept. It's this certain pride that I think the current residents have, living in the city. So it's like a continuum.

Selesnick: Have you driven up Bellingham Street?

Finkelstein: Absolutely. And the funny thing is, I think the hill has shrunk!

Selesnick: [laughs]

Finkelstein: I think it was higher when we were younger.

Selesnick: Yes, of course, it looks that way. Everything looks a little bit smaller. Well, this has been very, very helpful. You've done a much better job in answering my questions than I did in just asking them. I appreciate your setting aside the time to do this. As I promised I would repeat at the end, my name is Herb Selesnick, and I am interviewing Norman Finkelstein via Zoom at his home in Framingham, Massachusetts, on August 5th, 2022. This interview has been for the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center's oral history project titled Jewish Neighborhood Voices.

[End]