Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Rita Roher Semel

Rita Roher Semel: Fixing a Broken World

Interviews conducted by
Anita Hecht in 1998 and Basya Petnick in 2020

Senior Editor: Basya Petnick

Associate Editor: Julie des Tombe

Donated to the Oral History Center by Basya Petnick

Since 1953 the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

****

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Rita Roher Semel, "Rita Roher Semel: Fixing a Broken World" conducted by Anita Hecht in 1998 and Basya Petnick in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2021.

Rita Roher Semel

Abstract

Rita Roher Semel is a community leader who has worked tirelessly in the fields of public service and interfaith relationships. She was born in New York in 1921 and graduated from Barnard College of Columbia University in 1941. From there she went on to pursue a career in journalism and became a "copy boy" at the San Francisco Chronicle. She then became the associate editor of the Jewish Bulletin in 1945. Semel held a number of positions during her time in public service, including director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, co-founder of the San Francisco Interfaith Council and the United Religious Initiative, and board member of the Graduate Theological Union, Catholic Charities, Grace Cathedral, and Temple Emanu-El. Through her advocacy work, Semel also became connected with public officials such as Dianne Feinstein, Art Agnos, Gavin Newsom, Ed Lee and London Breed, as well as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Semel's most recent focus includes attempting to provide solutions for the homelessness crisis in San Francisco. In this interview Semel discusses her early family history, education in New York City, work for the San Francisco Chronicle, marriage to Max Semel, Israel's statehood, joining Temple Emanu-El, the Jewish Community Relations Council, interfaith work, benefits of community service, and attempts to solve issues related to homelessness.

Table of Contents

Dedication and Acknowledgments

Dedication by Rita R. Semel

I dedicate these memories to Max, my late husband of fifty-one years, to my late daughter, Jane, of blessed memory, and to my daughter, Elisabeth, whose devotion is unwavering and whose accomplishments for justice make me proud.

Acknowledgments by Basya Petnick

Gratitude to Lynne Newhouse Segal for conceiving of this project and for infusing it with the strong determination necessary to make it happen.

Gratitude to Rabbi Stephen Pearce whose enduring kindness and willingness to help are almost supernatural.

Gratitude to John Weiser, generous patron of the Rita Semel Oral History Project.

Gratitude to George Marcus, generous patron of the Rita Semel Legacy Project.

Gratitude to Elisabeth Semel for her assistance in the collection and organization of research documents and for her kind encouragement of our work.

Gratitude to Anita Hecht, Don Green, the Edith Green Oral History Project, David Goldman, and Temple Emanu-El for their generous permission to use two interviews recorded between Anita Hecht and Rita Semel in this work.

Gratitude to Hallie Baron and the administrative staff of the Jewish Community Relations Council for their help with fiscal responsibilities.

Gratitude to Martin Meeker and the staff of University of California's Oral History Center for the final production and archiving of Rita Semel's oral history.

Gratitude to the far-flung staff of Books & Lives: Julie des Tombe, line editing; Dana Vinicoff, initial proofreading; and Claudette Allison, typist.

Gratitude to Rita Semel for sharing her valuable time and patience with this project.

Introduction

By Basya Petnick

I have been a longtime supporter of Rita's while she has promoted the Interfaith Council's agenda. I feel she is one of the most genuine, caring, and socially-minded individuals I have ever met. Her mission to unite all people to work for an equitable world based on love and peace is truly admirable. – George Marcus

It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either. – Pirke Avot

As she approaches her 100th birthday in November 2021, Rita Roher Semel is still working. Her accomplishments and contributions in the fields of public service and interfaith work are immense, her imprint on the civic life of San Francisco deep and long lasting. The pages of her CV are too many to count. She has been honored at more luncheons and dinners than one could name, and through it all she remains as she has always: focused, on task and available to all who need her from the pre-dawn hours of the morning to the fading light at end of day.

Dedication to the repair of a broken world, called in Hebrew "tikkun olam," is what motivates her service. Tirelessly seeking housing for the homeless, food for the hungry, and improved understanding between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Semel is the undisputed chief of a rare tribe of people. These are the "doers and fixers" of the world who are more determined to get along amicably and help those in need than to waste time quarreling over real or imaginary differences.

Born in New York in 1921, Rita Roher Semel graduated from Barnard—the women's college of Columbia University—in 1941. Aspiring to a career in journalism, she landed a job during WWII as "copy boy" at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Intelligent and likeable, Semel was mentored by a well-connected *Chronicle* reporter who steered her toward the *Jewish Bulletin*. There she became associate editor in 1945. Early in her career, she married Max Semel and had two daughters, Elisabeth and Jane.

She has held many paid and volunteer positions during her decades of service, including director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, co-founder the San Francisco Interfaith Council, co-founder of the United Religious Initiative, board member of the Graduate Theological Union, board member of Catholic Charities, board member of Grace Cathedral, and board member of Temple Emanu-El to name only a few of her community roles.

It would appear from her organizational affiliations that Semel is a very religious person, but to understand her one must know that her religion is service. And serve she does—day after day, year after year. Mayors of San Francisco from Dianne Feinstein to Art Agnos to Gavin Newsom to Ed Lee and London Breed, as well as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and scores of other public officials have benefited from Semel's help, advice, and vast network of community connections. At age ninety-nine she is still attending online meetings and trying to attain one of her highest goals: solutions to the problems of homelessness in San Francisco.

Interview History

By Basya Petnick
Interviewer

Say Little and Do Much

Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, independent scholar Valerie Yow, PhD wrote an important paper that was first published in the *Oral History Review.* Her essay, "Do I Like Them Too Much?" discusses the effect of interviewer on narrator and narrator on interviewer.

I admit it: I did like Rita Semel too much, and so I allowed this small, almost one-hundred -year old woman, who most would agree is as fragile as steel, to get away with a lot. I often let her not answer the questions I asked, and I pretended not to notice when changed the subject and cleverly transformed the topic I proposed to one she liked better.

With the authority of her age and her background in journalism and public relations, she was able to keep the interviews tightly taped to her own agenda. It's hard to describe what a sweet and dear, and yet fiercely determined person she is, but she is all of that and much more.

This project began with Lynne Newhouse Segal who, in late 2019, discovered that no one had recorded Rita's oral history. Concerned that a record of Rita's life work—both as a paid professional and a volunteer—might be lost, Lynne contacted Rabbi Stephen Pearce at Temple Emanu-El for advice before calling Dr. Martin Meeker at The Bancroft Library's Oral History Center. When the Rita Semel Oral History Project was still struggling to come into being, Rabbi Pearce mentioned the importance of preserving Rita's life story, personal philosophy, and accomplishments at a dinner party. John Weiser and George Marcus immediately offered their generous support and soon the idea for project idea became a reality.

At a meeting with Rita's daughter Elisabeth Semel, Director of the Death Penalty Clinic at Berkeley Law, Lynne and I learned a lot about Rita's family life and longtime dedication to social justice and community service. Elisabeth talked about her mother's fierce commitment to *tikkun olam,* a Hebrew phrase meaning to repair a broken world.

Rita's parents were not religious, but once married and about to have children of her own, Rita chose to join Congregation Emanu-El, an influential and progressive bastion of Reform Judaism. In today's world, there are many ways one can be a Reform Jew. Since Rita's life is one of continual service, it seemed to me that Rita is what might these days be thought of as a *"Tikkun Olam* Jew." These are God's partners on earth. They are "Fixers" on the highest level imaginable. Got homeless? They'll help you. New refrigerators for the Food Bank? Of course. Take non-Jews to Israel? There's a program for that.

During my research I uncovered two one-hour video interviews of Rita with oral historian Anita Hecht recorded more than twenty-years ago. In those interviews Rita delivers a straight-forward account of her life, so I contacted Hecht and she agreed to allow me to include her two interviews with mine.

Both the Hecht-Semel interviews and my interviews are tinged by Rita's characteristic reticence. There are stories which Rita readily tells in great detail, but in response to questions outside the parameters of those stories, one sometimes hears the sounds of silence. From the first it seemed to me that Rita loved talking about politics and community but did not like talking about herself. She is especially careful to say little about other people, a courteous practice that no doubt has contributed to her popularity and trustworthiness over the many years.

In the wintry days of early 2020, interview sessions with Rita were progressing on schedule at her Washington Street apartment until the coronavirus went global and changed everything. As I write, vaccines have emerged and therapies are in progress; still, worldwide two and a half million people have died, more than five hundred thousand men and women in the US alone. Often hospitals have been pushed beyond capacity. Morgues have sometimes filled to overflowing. Elderly and persons with pre-existing conditions have been most affected, but no gender, race, or age group has been spared.

As the virus first began to spread, San Francisco Mayor London Breed issued a "Stay-at- Home" order, and we were asked not to go out except for essential needs. Thus, my in-person interviews with Rita abruptly ended after we recorded Interview 8, about a week before the mayor's order went into place. During the summer, Rita and I recorded interviews 9-13 on the telephone. We did our best, but the effects of distance and other circumstances on the interviews are profound. On the telephone it was impossible to establish the sort of warm bond that nourished the earlier interviews recorded at her dining room table, and Rita's responses became more succinct than previously. The effects on the interviews and on this project by major global and national events: the pandemic, early fall wildfires and their smoke, the death of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter demonstrations, plus the drama of the presidential election and its violent aftermath cannot be underrated.

Pandemic or not, there was so much more I wanted to know about Rita, especially more about her deep intentions, challenges, and impacts she met in her years and years of organizational work. But unless she happens to be drafting a grant proposal, Rita doesn't think or talk about intentions, challenges, and impacts. She thinks about the goods and services people in the Bay Area need to be housed, fed, and educated. She thinks about how seemingly very different religions can find common ground, respect one another, and join forces for the common good. Rita Semel celebrated her 99th birthday this past November, but she still spends hours at her desk each day—eyes bright, mind alert, answering emails, attending Zoom meetings for the Interfaith Council, the board of Grace Cathedral, the board of Emanu-El or bringing people and resources together to accomplish whatever is necessary to repair an increasing broken world. With Rita Semel thus engaged, the Talmud's admonition to "Say little and do much" is perfectly fulfilled.

Foreword

By Stephen S. Pearce
Senior Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Emanu-El
San Francisco, California

Eyes Wide Open

Rabbi Israel Salanter once overheard a conversation in which a man moaned in Yiddish: *Das leben is a chalom*, "Life is a dream." Annoyed at what he had heard, the rabbi interrupted and said: "That is only true if you are asleep all the time." For sleepwalkers oblivious to the world around them, the Talmud provides a terse judgment: "If a person closes his eyes to avoid doing righteous deeds of charity, it is as if he had committed idolatry" (Ketubot 68a). Psalm 121:4 describes the alertness of God as the One "who neither slumbers nor sleeps," and that's how I think of Rita. I imagine her as one who sleeps with one eye open, all night seeing the needs and hearing the cries of those who sleep in the dust.

We may hear what we listen for, but there are people who God endowed with more than the usual abilities. They have sight, but they also have insight; they have hearing, but they also have acute listening skills; they have taste, but they also have judgment; they have touch, but they also have strong feelings; and they have a good sense of smell, but they also they also have keen sensitivity.

All this reminds me of Rita, as does the story of the zoologist who was walking with her friend on a crowded business street. Suddenly the zoologist stopped and said, "Listen to the sound of that cricket." But her friend could not hear it and asked how she could detect the insect's chirping through all the tumult. The zoologist, trained to hear the sounds of nature, reached into her pocket, pulled out a coin, and tossed it onto the sidewalk, whereupon a dozen people began to look all around. "We hear what we listen for," she said.

Rita hears what most others cannot hear in the din of daily living. She hears Simon and Garfunkel's "sounds of silence." She belongs to that group of extraordinary people who have an intuitive faculty and awareness not explicable in terms of normal perception—a true sixth sense, ESP, extrasensory perception.

Like everyone else who knows and loves Rita, I could write a long list of her decades of accomplishments, but that is what these interviews conducted by oral historian Basya Petnick provides. What I was looking for are the qualities that make Rita unique, more awake and aware than most mortals. I looked thoroughly, searching even below the usual visible spectrum of Rita's massive achievements to try to determine why she is just plain different. Today I will share a few of her personality traits that you might not know about. Some will shock you. Today I reveal the truth about Rita:

Rita is **selfish**—although she likes to get a good night's rest, when necessary she will stay up nights worrying about people who go to bed hungry, who do not have proper health care, and who are marginalized by the rest of society. The next day you will see her at meetings, her appearance as a well-dressed and cordial woman masking a grumpy insomniac with rings hidden

under her eyes, peeved at those not doing their part to change things and who are once again disturbing her sleep. I suspect Rita is taunted by the promises of Isaiah: "If you draw out your soul to the hungry, and revive those in misery, then light shall dawn for you in darkness, and your most gloomy hours shall be as bright as the noon." (58:10)

Rita has a **bad temper**—she becomes enraged when children go to school without breakfast because there is no food in their homes. She becomes furious when some children are provided with inadequate educational opportunities and are made to attend schools that offer inferior education. Rita wants children to properly grow and develop, and only then can her terrifying temper be assuaged.

Rita is **ruthless**—when it comes to giving and caring for others, she stops at nothing and takes to task those who only care about themselves. She searches them out and cleverly forces them to be supporters of her worthy causes and multifarious organizations, which they do willingly because NO ONE says "No" to Rita.

Rita is **confrontational**—she will not allow those who say, "I am only one person, what difference can I make?" to sit back and let others step up to an albeit empty plate.

Rita is **clairvoyant**—she can see into the souls of those whose generosity is unending, but she can also take to task those who promise but never deliver and those who never promise and never deliver.

Rita is a **doubter**—when someone comes to her for help, she does not say, "Have faith, God will help you." Instead she acts as if there were no God and help can only come from her and her multitude of deputized admirers. Rita fights her doubts by repeating the lines spoken to Eve in George Bernard Shaw's play *Back to Methuselah*: "You see things and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were, and I say, 'Why not?'"

Rita is **impatient**—the Deuteronomist reminds the reader "there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and the needy kinsman in your midst." (Deut 15:11) Although the biblical author dreams of a day when "there shall be no needy among you," (Deut 15:4) dreaming is not good enough for Rita. She wants people to wake up, act generously, and act now.

Rita is an **obsessive-compulsive**—she attends meeting after meeting, all the time muttering to herself and repeating a few Hebrew words over and over: *tzedek*, *tzdakah, tikkun olam*—justice, charity, fixing a broken world. She's dangerous—she leads by example and accomplishes through charity what justice alone cannot do.

So, if you would like to help Rita reform and improve her lousy personality traits, please contribute your time and energy to her many issues and causes. You will not be sorry because she will become a much better person and, by the way, you will too. She's going to be one hundred years old any day now, so my rabbinic advice is this: Don't delay. I hope we have a deal.

Foreword

By Rabbi Doug Kahn
Executive Director Emeritus
Jewish Community Relations Council

From Family Friend to Boss and Inspiration

Rita in action: I learned a great deal from my predecessor, mentor, and friend, Rita Semel. When I was executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), I called upon her on more than one occasion to help resolve community issues. For instance, a downtown San Francisco restaurant had decorated one of its walls with quotes from famous people and there was a quote from Adolf Hitler that upset some of the patrons. Before reaching out to JCRC, some patrons had complained to another Jewish agency about it to no avail. I knew Rita was friendly with the restaurant owner, so I asked her if she could help. Others had tried for weeks to have Hitler's quote removed, but the owner argued free speech and the value of provocative quotes as conversation starters and would not remove Hitler's words. Rita got it taken care of in an hour. She explained to the owner that patrons would literally feel physically ill from seeing quotes of Hitler at the restaurant, and the offending quote was removed from the wall within a day or two. Case closed.

Rita in action. When Rita was executive director of JCRC, she learned from the San Francisco Food Bank that they could not provide fresh produce to hungry families because of the high cost of produce and their inability to refrigerate it. She called her good friend Ken Colvin, who had a place at the SF Produce Market and who, like Rita, was a "can do" kind of person. Within days a lunch meeting was arranged at the Lake Merced Golf Club with Ken, the president of the Produce Market, representatives from the US Department of Agriculture, San Francisco Food Bank executives, Rita, and me. Seated at a round table, we learned what the needs were, and within an hour we accomplished this: the Produce Market agreed that the produce that was physically damaged—and thus couldn't go to stores, but was still absolutely healthful—would not be thrown away; the representative of the US Department of Agriculture agreed to approve its distribution to the Food Bank; and Rita committed to writing a grant proposal to the Jewish Community Federation Endowment Fund. Her effort resulted in funding a refrigeration truck for the produce for two years. Ninety minutes: issue presented, issue solved, and thousands in the future benefitting from one meeting Rita arranged.

Rita in action. When for the first time an archbishop in San Francisco (William Levada) was named a Cardinal by the Pope, Rita was involved in putting together an interfaith delegation to go to Rome for the installation ceremony. I was privileged to join with the delegation. The ceremony was held in St. Peter's Square, with a huge platform where the Pope, top church officials, and Rita Semel sat. As far as I know she was the only Jew sitting on the stage. And just to be clear, Rita had not arranged the seating. It was a sign of enormous respect on the part of the Catholic community in San Francisco, where she had built so many important relationships over the decades.

Here's the thing about Rita. I've given three snapshots, but one could draw on hundreds of similar examples of Rita in action—with the media, with public officials, with ethnic leaders, with interfaith leaders. Although small in physical stature, she is a giant in the arenas of interfaith relationships and bridge building. It is no wonder that religious leaders, mayors, and other community leaders continue to call on her for her counsel, even though she is nearly one hundred years of age. Rita defines tireless, but she also defines exceptional competence and great heart. She can put on a steely gaze, she can—and will— exhibit annoyance and impatience at any grandstanding. But at the end of the day, Rita is motivated by her passion for *tikkun olam (*Hebrew for repairing a broken world), her ultimate sense of optimism, and a huge heart which includes great love for her family, friends, and community.

I came into JCRC with both an advantage and a disadvantage. Rita knew me from the day I was born. My parents were closest friends of Rita and her husband, Max, of blessed memory. I will always remember that day in college when I learned that their daughter Jane had died in an unforeseeable accident. Some people emotionally withdraw after such a tragedy, but over the years, I've watched Rita express great love for her daughter Elisabeth and her accomplishments, and for her whole family, including her nephew Paul Resnick, who now serves as president of the JCRC board.

At the same time Rita never plays favorites. Either you are competent and genuine, or you are going to have a hard time meeting Rita's incredibly high standard of professionalism. She makes you want to do your best and you are not permitted to coast, because there is too much work to be done. And that is why, absent a pandemic, it's hard to find Rita at home.

Rita is tireless and unflappable. One issue that was hard to manage was the Jewish community's response to Pope John Paul II's visit to San Francisco in 1987. There had been many issues of concern to Jewish community members, including the Pope's meeting earlier that year with Austrian President Kurt Waldheim, whose Nazi past had been revealed. The JCRC's Committee of Remembrance urged greeting the Pope with "dignified silence." Some activists led by other Holocaust survivors thought that the term "dignified silence" was reminiscent of silence during the Holocaust and that there had to be loud protests. It was messy, it was protracted, it was powerful personalities. Nevertheless, Rita navigated the strong currents, and although there was never full agreement about the best approach—some protested and others greeted the Pope with dignified silence—Rita remained calm throughout.

Rita was and still is an organizer. She started a signature JCRC program that has now been going strong for nearly forty years to take non-Jewish community leaders (public officials, ethnic and religious leaders, university officials, etc.) on a ten-day educational seminar to Israel. The impact of the program, based on a good idea she had noticed on one of her travels, has been demonstrated time and time again. I joined Rita on some of the trips and led trips after her retirement, and I witnessed not only how Rita shared her love of Israel, but the tremendous respect and affection for Rita from every sector of our community.

The establishment of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, simultaneous with her retirement from the JCRC, is another example of her ability to recognize a need, figure out how to address it, reach out to the key people to get it done, and stick with it until it is a reality and beyond.

She tells the story in one of her oral history interviews of getting a call from Reverend Cecil Williams about a civil rights march in Georgia and reaching out to Bob Kirschner, then senior rabbi at Congregation Emanu-El. She asked him to participate and persuaded him to do so even though the march was on a Saturday. Rita did not necessarily foresee that on the march Rabbi Kirschner would build a relationship with Reverend Amos Brown, Senior Pastor, Third Baptist Church. Nor could she anticipate that out of that relationship would develop the Emanu-El-Third Baptist Back on Track tutoring program and an annual pulpit exchange on Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Weekend, two programs that continue more than thirty years later. Almost nobody connected with these programs would have a clue that it came about because Rita planted a seed. And that's more than fine with Rita—she never would seek the credit—she just wants to get the job done.

When I started at JCRC, Earl Raab was the executive director and Rita was the associate director. Earl and Rita lived close to each other and staff meetings consisted of the two of them discussing business during their daily commute to the office in Earl's old Dodge. Naomi Lauter of blessed memory and Sydnee Guyer were both on the staff then as well.

We were a small group and each of us had specific portfolios for which we were responsible. Earl, known as the dean of community relations in the country, entrusted Rita with the responsibility of being the chief implementer and shaper of many of the JCRC initiatives—a role she had proven to excel at since she first staffed the Conference on Religion and Race for JCRC.

Rita walked into the office every day committed to living Jewish values—from *tikkun olam* to Rabbi Tarfon's dictum, "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from your share."

It is hard to find anyone who has done more of her share than Rita Semel, and we are all the beneficiaries of her mentorship, example, and passion for a better world. When people say, "Rita is a community treasure," they are telling the truth.

Foreword

By John Weiser
Former Chairman of the Board
Graduate Theological Union

For the Greater Good

Rita Semel is a doer.

I first met Rita at the Graduate Theological Union. We were both members of the board of directors, and I was still new. On that day I was attending a committee meeting, and several times when the committee was discussing potential action with a third party, I heard a quiet voice in the back of the room say, "I know the man responsible for that. I'll take care of it."

A day or two later, we were again in a committee meeting, and this time, the lady with the quiet voice reported on accomplishing the task she had volunteered to take on. No wonder people were happy when she spoke up. She not only volunteered. She delivered.

I decided I had to meet the woman with the quiet voice and the willingness to take on multiple tasks. It was Rita Semel, a short lady, friendly, and open. We soon discovered we were both from New York. A friendship began.

Sometime later the board chair resigned because of a serious illness in his family. I was elected to succeed him and arranged to have Rita become the vice chair. I wanted her at my side. It was a good choice. Rita had a wealth of experience and was a font of wise advice. We often had lunch together and got to know each other better and learned about each other's families. I learned she was a widow and had also suffered the tragedy of losing one of her two daughters, when the daughter was a young woman. But Rita did not feel sorry for herself. She took life's challenges in stride and continued to work to make the world a better place.

Her talents were recognized by many. I was only slightly surprised when I found out that this wise Jewish woman was a member of the board of Catholic Charities and served on multiple committees and commissions around the city. She is still a key participant in the San Francisco Interfaith Council and has served as a mentor to its executive director, Michael Pappas.

Rita had been the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council and as such had been deeply involved in the political life of San Francisco. She makes friends and admirers wherever she goes and people active in the community keep asking her to join them in new ventures.

One of her acquaintances was Bishop William Swing, the Episcopal Bishop of Northern California. He was himself an extraordinary individual, getting deeply involved in the AIDS issue in the Bay Area, to the point that he was sent regularly to the White House to brief them on what was being learned on the front lines of the crisis.

Bishop Swing had also been asked to handle the religious component of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations being celebrated in San Francisco where its charter had been signed. This task led him to pursue the idea of an organization which would bring the religions of the world together. After an around the world trip to the leaders of major religions, the bishop concluded that his initiative had to be accomplished at a grassroots level. There followed several years of hard work hammering out basic documents and an organizational structure; thus, the United Religions Initiative (URI) was born.

The bishop, a wise evaluator of talent, asked Rita to serve as the inaugural chair of the Global Council, the governing body of URI. Rita later recalled it as a wonderful experience, dealing with people who were leaders in their communities but who often had little or no experience working in a group with Western governance structures. She fondly remembers someone asking, "What is a chair?"

In spite of initial differences, Rita's wisdom and decency won over the members of the Global Council, and with her deft hand and light touch she succeeded in helping to fulfill the bishop's vision.

Rita continues to serve at URI. Even in her late nineties, she regularly attends meetings of URI's finance and operations committee, and there we often hear that she had just come from some other governmental function or committee meeting. She is indefatigable.

The San Francisco Interfaith Council annually gives an award to a distinguished citizen recognizing their valuable services to the community. One year Rita was the deserving recipient, and I attended the breakfast at which the award was given. There was a stellar list of individuals who spoke in honor of Rita. I was amazed, but should not have been surprised, when the first speaker was Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, in from Washington, DC, for the occasion. Another speaker was a former mayor of San Francisco. It was a gala array, recognizing Rita's significant contributions to the city.

When I hit term limits for service on the board of the Graduate Theological Union, it was Rita I sought out for advice about where to serve next. She told me she could help me at Catholic Charities or at United Religions Initiative. After some discussion, I asked her to introduce me to Bill Swing at URI. She did, and I was launched on a new adventure and happily got to see Rita regularly at URI functions.

I have met countless people in my life, but Rita stands out among my many acquaintances. She is a remarkable woman who does not just talk; she is a woman who takes responsibility, a woman who acts year after year for the greater good.

Foreword

By Michael G. Pappas, M.Div.
Executive Director
San Francisco Interfaith Council

The Matriarch

Those who know, revere, and love Rita Semel have their favorite Rita memories.

As one who has arguably spent the most concentrated time with Rita over the past thirteen years, I've been blessed with many memories. My favorite Rita memory, though, is seeing her beam when she meets an unsuspecting victim and gets to tell the story of the birth of the San Francisco Interfaith Council (SFIC).

Having been asked to give an account of Rita's role in the development of the SFIC for her oral history, allow *me,* for a moment, to tell the story!

As a repository of institutional memory, Rita reminds us that during the Civil Rights days of 1963/64, before there was a San Francisco Interfaith Council, there was the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race, which later became the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns. That entity met continuously for twenty-five years but languished in its latter years because there were no particular crises to address.

However, December 1988 was particularly cold and wet, and San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos called a group of clergy to his office to help with the homeless. As Rita, who was then director of the San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) is quick to remind us, because she was not clergy, she was not invited to attend. But Rabbi Malcolm Sparer, who was then the President of the Northern California Board of Rabbis, went. With great urgency, he rushed back to the JCRC and reported to Rita that the Mayor had asked for help because there were more homeless than the City could handle, and he needed congregations to provide meals and shelter.

He went on to say that the Catholics and the Protestants had said yes, so the Jews had to say yes, and of course they did. Thus, was born the term, "*interfaithmanship!*" With that, Mayor Agnos set up a committee and invited Rita.

During that winter some congregations provided extra shelter and others provided meals. When spring came the committee dissolved, but the shelter program—now a collaborative effort of the SFIC, Episcopal Community Services, and the City's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing—continues to this day.

In October 1989, the Loma Prieta Earthquake devastated our city. Rita, along with a number of congregation leaders, tried to figure out how they could help those impacted by the quake. As providence would have it, Rev. James Emerson, then Pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church on Fillmore Street, received a call from the humanitarian aid agency, Church World Service. The person who called said, "We want to give money to San Francisco to help with this current crisis,

but we don't want to give it to Protestants alone . . . we want to give it to everybody, no matter his or her faith."

With that, Pastor Emerson called together a committee to decide who needed the funding, who should get it, and how it should be distributed. To nobody's particular surprise, the same people who served on the committee to provide shelters ended up on this committee as well.

When the crisis was over and the committee of faith leaders had done everything they could to distribute the money fairly, making sure that it went to the right places, somebody said, "We can't keep setting up committees every time there is a crisis in the city—every time something needs to be done that the faith community ought to be involved in."

Rita suggested reviving the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns, and someone immediately said NO, the current nomenclature is "Interfaith Council… Interfaith Councils are being formed throughout the nation and we need one here in San Francisco." With that, in the true American spirit, a committee emerged to organize the San Francisco Interfaith Council we know today.

By the time the organization was ready to begin its work, Rita had retired from the Jewish Community Relations Council and was called to be the de-facto executive director. Rita, who eventually became famous for being willing to take an unpaid position, assumed the role and, along with first chair, Rev. Richard Schaper and dedicated board, embarked on what is now a thirty-one-year adventure.

Thanks to Rita's inspired vision, passion, tenacity, sacrifices, and tireless efforts, the San Francisco Interfaith Council has been true to its mission, "Celebrating our diverse faiths and spiritual traditions, bringing people together to build understanding and serving our community." As a result, the Council has become the portal to give voice to the rich interfaith presence here in San Francisco.

From our core work with the homeless and disaster preparedness, to being there for our constituent faith communities and the city, in good times as well as times of crisis, we owe a great debt of gratitude to our founder. She has truly earned the title, "Matriarch of Interfaith Work in San Francisco."

As the one who stands on her shoulders and has been called to stewardship of her rich legacy, I think the gift she would most like from each of us is to renew our commitment to just do what comes naturally—to do the business that as her colleague, the late beloved Fr. Gerry O'Rourke would say, "is all about relationships."

On a personal note, Rita has been so much more than a colleague. To me, she's been a mentor, a confidante, mother, and friend. Like so many others she has touched, my life has been enriched and been made the better for it.

Foreword

By Elisabeth Semel
San Francisco California, 2020

My Mother—Rita Semel

Writing an introduction to an oral history—a responsibility entirely new to me—calls for a particular insight into the subject. In my case, it is the perspective of the daughter of a public figure, one who is beloved in the interfaith community, and more broadly, in progressive political circles. (In another era, I am sure she would have been elected to public office.) My view is multi-faceted and has shifted over time, as the relationship between parent and child often does.

At an early age, my younger sister, Jane, and I knew that because our mother worked, she was unlike every other mother in our group of relatives and friends. In the 1950s and early 1960s, "work" did not include what mothers did at home. The fact that our mother had a career also made her different from most of the mothers of the children at West Portal Elementary School in San Francisco. This was evident in several ways: we were among the handful of students whose mothers might not retrieve them immediately in the event of a nuclear alert; she was not always waiting for us when we got home from school; during the week, after nursery or grammar school, Bertha Robinson took care of us as she did her grandchildren.

Our mom was often late picking us up from school to drive us to Brownies or Bluebirds or ballet class. For reasons I can no longer recall, her tardiness frustrated Janie more than it did me, and led her to announce that my mother's headstone would read: "She's not here. She's in a meeting."

Notwithstanding Janie's observation, we missed out on nothing, and undoubtingly had more because our mother led the life she wanted.

My sister and I were never too young to stuff envelopes for mailings for causes and organizations my mother supported. These were many, and included the San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Israel Consulate. In 1964, our family bore witness to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s exhortations at an interfaith civil rights rally at the Cow Palace. And well before that, our mother was on the front lines of efforts to integrate the city. When Caryl Chessman was executed in 1960, I remember the newspaper headline and my father's distressed attempt to explain the iniquity to his nine-year old daughter. All of this—and too much more to write here—is how my sister and I learned that pursuing justice is central to what it means to be Jewish.

We belonged to Congregation Emanu-El where my father was active. Social justice was then not the stuff of Saturday religious school. That responsibility came to us through the preoccupations of my parents and their friends. Anyone acquainted with my mother through her public service also knows that she frequently refers to the Hebrew expression *tikkun olam* as her guidepost—her responsibility to do her part to "repair the world." This mission fuels her inwardly as much as it aids every cause she has championed.

My mother is one of the most adventurous people you will ever meet. She inherited her father's cultural curiosity and his passion for the arts of every kind. On the other hand, our father, Max, a child of working-class immigrants, was scarred by the Depression in ways that made him more risk averse than our mother. In our family, growing up in the city meant trying food from every conceivable basement restaurant in Chinatown. It meant musicals, plays, and museums. When Jane, who was gifted with an exquisite voice, wanted to sing in the choir at Bertha Robinson's church, there was no question that she would.

Between the American Veterans Committee (the liberal alternative to the VFW) and Sunset Cooperative Nursery school, our parents made life-long friends—friends with whom they got together almost every Saturday night for decades—friends whose children played together long past nursery school—friends with whom we shared Jewish holidays—friends who remained close until the end of their lives. This unique circle joined two generations, and some friends from that time are my sisters to this day.

My mother did not sew my ballet costumes like the other mothers did. She did not sit through my ballet classes. She did not bake from scratch like her mother, or her best friends. (I became the keeper of our grandmother's recipes—all requiring substantial, but mostly unspecified amounts of butter and sugar.) Yet, as children, our friends saw our mother exactly as they did their own, which is to say that her professional side was largely invisible. On the occasion of my mother's ninety-ninth birthday, several of those friends remarked that growing up they associated my mom with kugel, gifts of books, bridge games, knitting, Fairyland, and the Lair of the Bear (UC Berkeley's family camp).

Family—our mother's and father's—was at the center. My mother, who relishes every opportunity to celebrate, never forgets a birthday on either side of the family. Throughout our childhood, we spent at least one weekend a month with our aunt (our mom's sister) and uncle and our three cousins at their home in San Jose, which was then referred to as "down the Peninsula." We also had regular sleepovers at our grandmother's apartment near Laurel Village. For our cousins, my sister, and me, she was our principal connection to Jewish cooking and Yiddish—though Yiddish was my father's first language. More than that, our mother's mother was very present in our family's life: opinionated, stubborn, wise, and devoted to her grandchildren. When we were growing up, our father's family was mostly in New York, but our mother, as much as he, nurtured those relationships. Her capacity for connection is as evident a marker of her personal life as it is her professional achievements.

Balancing a woman's occupation and family life was not a topic of discussion during our childhood when most white, middle-class women did not have what would have been called a "real job." (Of course, for working class women and millions of women of color, there was no option and no conversation about how to "have it all.") I only learned as an adult that more than a few of our father's male friends criticized him for "allowing" our mother to work. According to my mom, his response was to say that it was not up to him. My sister and I were oblivious to our father's role in our mother's career until we were in high school, when we began to understand what it can mean for a woman to have a partner who supports and admires her.

Neither of our parents conveyed a sense that our gender was a limitation. As we got older, we became of aware of the sex-based expectations and boundaries that were pervasive for women of

our mother's generation. I ran up against many of them as a criminal defense lawyer, especially in the mid-1970s and 1980s. While I was fortunate that my closest male colleagues were also my allies, I was even more fortunate to have had both parents as role models.

I cannot count the number of women and men who have told me, "When I grow up, I want to be Rita Semel." I did not, however, grow up wanting to become my mother. An account of my rebellion—which my mother insists lasted from adolescence into my late twenties—does not belong in this introduction, except to explain how it turned out and why it turned out well. I always had an anchor. It was my parents and their belief that our lives do not belong to us alone. No matter how close to the edge of the cliff I ventured during the political turmoil and cultural experimentation of the 1960s and 70s, I usually intuited where the ledge was. If I became confused about it, I knew enough to step back in the direction of my family. Privilege and luck also figured in, but I would never discount my parents' (or my sister's) influence, especially in my own career as a capital defense attorney.

I am the only surviving child. I became the surviving child at age twenty after Jane, then eighteen, was killed. In the oral history, my mother touches on the cause which was called accidental at the time. Janie was, in fact, killed as a result of gross negligence, which added emotional layers to our grief. I have never asked my mother whether she believes that Janie's death in 1970 reshaped her. I did not need to ask, any more than I needed to ask my father. The occasion, however, of writing this introduction is an opportunity to reflect on how my mother coped with this indescribable loss.

It would be a mistake to conclude that my mother suffered less than my father because she pulled her outward-facing self together more quickly than he. It would also be a mistake to underestimate my mother's fortitude and her capacity to redirect her grief into a semblance of healing for them both. Over the years, I have learned that parents who lose a child do not go through it, or come through it, in the same way, and that, unlike my parents, they do not all invariably survive it together. My mom also held my dad up through a difficult decade, when due to his grief, he was no longer the most thoroughly engaged, warmest, and often wittiest man in the room. Several years before he died, my father caught pneumonia and was hospitalized. One of his lungs was severely damaged, his condition grave. My mother was with him at the hospital throughout. During one of my visits, a couple of the nurses told me that when they watched my parents together, they could feel the decades of love between them. This was true. It was equally true that my mother's determination gave my father a few more years with us.

My mother's relentless drive to advance civil rights and protect human dignity also reflects her need to see her daughter Jane's infinitely generous soul and her husband's loving heart live on. Her sense that there is no time to waste became more acute with each loss.

It is rare for any of our parents to reach their ninety-ninth birthday. It is more remarkable still to reach that age with their intellect intact, not to mention their inquisitiveness and their need to be of service to others. My mother has an understandably ambivalent relationship with her longevity; it carries many losses—the deaths of family and dear friends and, in degrees, her independence. These years have been an almost indescribable gift to me. I am more fully able to appreciate the repairs my mother has made to the world—unfinished though they are. The joy of

being Rita Roher Semel's daughter comes from being with her now and from reflecting in my life—as much as I am able—what she and my father gave to their two daughters.

If I were to anticipate three pieces of advice my mother would give, they would be these:

Cherish your family and friends and find in them your greatest joy.

You are never too old to be an optimist and make a difference.

Above all, believe in and act on the goodness of the spirit that is within every human being and transcends every faith.

Interview 1: December 23, 1998

Anita Hecht: Let's begin this interview with you telling us your full name at birth and your year of birth.

Rita Semel: My name at birth was Rita Roher. I was born in 1921.

Hecht: Where were you born?

Semel: I was born in New York, New York.

Hecht: In a hospital?

Semel: Yes.

Hecht: Any knowledge about your birth?

Semel: I don't really remember. I know I was there, but I don't remember it, exceptthe things that I was told.

Hecht: What about the origin of your name, "Rita."

Semel: My mother wanted to name me for my great-aunt Rebecca, but in 1921 Bible names were not the fashion, so my mother decided to fancy it up. I think she named me for the song "Rio Rita." I'm not sure, but it was probably something like that. I've always wished she had kept "Rebecca." I think it's much better.

Semel: In fact, my husband never called me "Rita" because he didn't like the name.

Hecht: What did he call you?

Semel: The usual, "Honey," "Dear," or whatever, but never "Rita." When he calledme "Rita," I knew he was mad, and I was in big trouble.

Hecht: I see. Well, Rita, let's talk about your maternal family history.

Semel: My maternal grandmother was the only grandparent I ever knew, and she died when I was fourteen, so I remember her clearly.

Hecht: What was her name?

Semel: Her name was Sarah Pearl Silverstein. That was her married name. Her maiden name was Shubin. She was about four-feet-eleven and a dynamo, a formidable little woman.

Hecht: Where was she from?

Semel: She was from one of those places in Poland. I regret to this day that I didn't care enough, or I didn't know enough, to ask her where exactly. When I was in Warsaw and Kraków last year, I kept thinking about her and regretting that I didn't know more about where she came from.

Hecht: There's an interesting story about her coming to the US.

Semel: She used to tell a story that fascinated my sister and me. My grandmother was the oldest child in the family, and when she was sixteen her father died, which left her mother to raise three or four children alone. As the story went, her mother had given Sarah's dowry to the village grocer for safekeeping, but he later emigrated to America. Don't forget, this was in the 1870s … 1880s when there was a big wave of emigration to America. So, Sarah's mother sent her off to America to find the grocer and her dowry. She never found the grocer or the dowry, but she found my grandfather. Imagine going off on your own at sixteen, incredible!

Hecht: Do you know if she ever saw her mother again?

Semel: I know she never did. My grandfather had a similar story, although he didn't come here to find a dowry—he came to escape the czar's army. He came from Russia and he was sent off by himself. He made friends with a family on the ship coming to the United States. His name was Cassell, but the family that befriended him was named Silverstein. As the story goes, when they got to Ellis Island he was taken in with the [Silverstein] family as one of their children.

My mother was always upset that her name wasn't Cassell instead of Silverstein. Don't ask me why, but that was the way. One of my nephew's middle names is "Cassell," named for that grandfather.

Hecht: How interesting. They met in New York.

Semel: Yes, and they married in New York.

Hecht: How did they make a living?

Semel: I never knew that grandfather, so I'm not sure—[he] probably worked in the garment trade. So many Jews of that period did. My mother was one of five children, and she was the only daughter. She had four brothers—two younger and two older. She was sandwiched in the middle.

Hecht: What was her name?

Semel: Her name was Henrietta.

Hecht: She was born—

Semel: About 1896. That would have brought my grandparents here in about 1880 … My grandmother always used to say she came to America the year Garfield was shot.

Semel: My oldest uncle was born during the blizzard of '88, so she came to America obviously, I would say, six or seven years before.

Hecht: Do you know anything about the level of observance in the family?

Semel: My grandparents, I think, were Orthodox. My father's father came from Berlin and his mother from Vienna. Again, they came [here] at an early age. My father's father had been trained as a rabbi but never practiced as one.

My parents never kept a kosher home, but during the few years that my grandmother lived with us, my mother did make a stab at keeping kosher so my grandmother would feel comfortable. After my parents were married, although my father had had such an unhappy childhood, he was determined not to stop being Jewish—that was not possible. However, he was determined not to be involved with organized religion of any kind. The result was that neither my sister nor I had any formal religious upbringing.

Hecht: His name was … for the record?

Semel: My grandfather was Judah Roher and my grandmother was Miriam Roher. (My sister was named for her.) They married and had three children, my father was the middle child, and he had an older sister and a younger sister. My grandmother Miriam died in childbirth while giving birth to that younger sister. Since my grandfather was a scholar and didn't really know how to earn a living, he was quickly married off for a second time. That second marriage caused a great deal of unhappiness among my father and his two sisters. My oldest aunt married at sixteen so she could get out of the house—she took my younger aunt with her—and my father ran away from home.

Hecht: They didn't like their new stepmother?

Semel: No. The family stories were replete with cruelty when I was a kid. Of course, I thought of Cinderella. She had two children with my grandfather, my two step-uncles. They were the favorites and the other three got short shrift, at least that's the way I was told the story.

Hecht: Do you know how they made a living?

Semel: I think my grandfather did something in the garment business, exactly what I'm not sure. The step-grandmother set up a small business of some kind.

Hecht: Were they religious?

Semel: Again, it was the same story. They were Orthodox, but my father had abandoned it all.

Hecht: Tell me about his running away from home.

Semel: My father had had a pretty strong religious education as a child. He ran away from home. (This was in the days of vaudeville, something few people remember. However, I remember as a kid being taken to the Palace Theatre in New York to see the vaudeville acts.) He had a beautiful singing voice. He joined a vaudeville act called the Gus Edwards Boys and traveled around the country. Among the Gus Edwards Boys were Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor. Jolson and Cantor made wonderful successes of their lives in show business, but my father left the troupe when he met my mother and they decided to get married. My grandmother—the same formidable Sarah Pearl—said that no daughter of hers was ever going to marry an actor because they were all bums. So my father left the stage and what might have been a promising career. Shucks. I could have been the daughter of a movie star. He did make one movie in the old silent days, I'm told, but I 've never seen it.

Hecht: How do you think each one of your parents influenced you?

Semel: I think they influenced me enormously. My father influenced me in many positive ways and a few negative ways. He influenced me because he was charming, and everybody loved him dearly. He also was a bit of a ne'er-do-well, I have to say, if I want to be completely honest about it. He never had any education to speak of. He never finished high school. But he was enormously inquisitive and curious, read a great deal, loved opera, loved the theatre. I was taken to the theatre when I was four or five years old to see *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *The Student Prince*, *Naughty Marietta*, all of which influenced me a great deal. To this day I love the theatre.

Hecht: What did he do to make a living?

Semel: You name it and he did it. He was in and out of businesses, and he made lots of money. It was steak one week, and bacon and eggs the next, which was difficult for my mother because she was much more of a conventional person. I suppose the signs were there that this marriage was doomed to fail at some point, although as a kid I didn't realize it. Growing up I felt I had a marvelously stable and wonderfully devoted set of parents, which I think I did. The marriage did break down, but that's later in the story—twenty-five or so years later.

Hecht: Your mother was much more of a stable, conventional force in your life.

Semel: Yes, but she, and my father too, were also were loving and giving. Somebody asked me once why I feel as if I have to be so involved in the nonprofit and charitable world, and I think it was an example that was set. Even though I grew up in the Depression and money was hard to come by, my parents were still

involved with organizations and giving. I think that was part of my growing up; I got it with my mother's milk, as the saying goes.

Hecht: That was one of the values of your family?

Semel: Yes.

Hecht: And it sounds like education was as well.

Semel: Oh, absolutely. Don't forget, my father was way ahead of his time. He insisted that my sister and I had to go to college and learn how to do something. Because while my parents hoped we'd both get married, he always felt it was very important that we would be able to have a way of earning our own living should that become necessary. I don't think he quite expected the drive for a career that my sister and I have. We both went to college even though it was the Depression and college tuition was not easy to come by.

Hecht: We'll get there. I did want to inquire about your life before college, your childhood. You were born November 15, 1921. Do you have an earliest memory?

Semel: One of my earliest memories is of being a flower girl when I was four. The eldest daughter of my father's older sister got married when she was eighteen and I was the flower girl at her wedding. I have a lovely picture of myself in a colonial outfit, the only problem is there's a bit of blood on my knee. I was a tomboy and I fell, ruining the effect of the white satin dress.

Hecht: Was this a Jewish wedding?

Semel: Of course, yes.

Hecht: Even though your family didn't belong to a temple—

Semel: All the rituals were carried out. We had family seders with Aunt Esther and her family, and my younger aunt, who never did get married. They were wonderful fun in my growing up years. The singing genes went to that side of the family. My sister and I were never able to sing, but my three cousins and my two aunts and my father sang. The seders were a fun and influential part of my life growing up.

Hecht: Do you remember feeling anything in particular about being Jewish or being told anything about it?

Semel: When I was in junior high, lots of people in my class were going to be confirmed, and I wanted to be confirmed, although I had never been to religious school at all. I told my parents, and I remember my father saying, "If that's what you want to do, go ahead and do it," and I did it. But when you

don't have the support of your parents or when they're not actively involved in it, it turns out to be a pretty meaningless thing in the end.

[Telephone ringing]

Hecht: Did you study? Did you go to classes?

Semel: Yes, I did go to a synagogue and I did participate in confirmation, but it didn't really mean anything to me. Growing up in New York—I suspect it's much the same today, but certainly in those days—you were Jewish by osmosis because it was in the air. There were so many Jews there. Even then it was a very Jewish city, although there were obviously lots and lots of people who weren't Jewish. But there were Jewish neighborhoods. Even in my public schools, a lot of the kids were Jewish. There's a picture in my bedroom of my junior high school class. There are about thirty of us, and I would say maybe fifteen or so were Jewish. That certainly doesn't happen in San Francisco—or probably any other city—maybe in certain parts of Los Angeles. In New York that's the way it was, and it probably still is. When you say did I feel I was Jewish, of course I felt I was Jewish, but it wasn't a conscious thing. It wasn't something I had to learn—you sort of absorbed it out of the atmosphere.

Hecht: Did you feel any particular way about that? Proud or—

Semel: I certainly didn't feel ashamed, but I don't think pride was what I felt. I think I was fine with it.

Hecht: The neighborhoods that you grew up in, were they also primarily Jewish?

Semel: Mostly.

Hecht: Where did you grow up?

Semel: I grew up in many different parts of the Bronx and Manhattan. This was a time where people moved much more easily than they do today. There were no rental shortages, and [as my mother used to say], sometimes it was easier to move than to paint. If you moved into another apartment, it was freshly painted, and you didn't have to go through a trauma about your furniture while your apartment was being painted.

Hecht: You went to public school.

Semel: I went to public schools.

Hecht: What kind of student were you?

Semel: I was a pretty good student. My sister was the real student in the family. I was always busy with too many other things, but I was a good student. My parents were hard taskmasters about grades. They thought grades were very important.

I remember years and years later finding a cartoon in *The New Yorker* with a little boy showing the report card to the father and the caption [was], "B-plus is not good enough for a Zimmerman." That's the way it was in my family. B-plus was never good enough—it had to be A. If I came home with a ninety-eight, my father would be sure to ask, "Whatever happened to the other two points?" Yes, that was definitely a problem.

Hecht: What were the other things that you were busy with?

Semel: I had lots of friends. I got into lots of trouble. I was much more adventuresome than my sister. What specific things I got into trouble about I don't know, but as I think about it—and I haven't thought about these things for years—New York was an exciting place to grow up. I can remember going on the subway with a friend downtown at the age of ten. Nobody would dream of doing that now, even in San Francisco, which is too bad because I had lots of adventures. My mother never worried about me. [She thought] nothing was ever going to happen and it didn't. That's a wonderful kind of thing to look back [on].

Hecht: Sure. It's different today.

Semel: Very different.

Hecht: You also told me that your father would take you on great excursions.

Semel: My father was proud of being a New Yorker; he loved the city and he knew it extremely well. He felt that my sister and I—and the kids of a close family friend—needed to know it too. During the summer he would take a day off every week and take us someplace different. When people who don't live in New York go to New York and say they've been to the top of the Empire State Building, or to Ellis Island, or to the Statue of Liberty, or to the floor of the stock exchange, well, I've been to all those places too. I knew them before I was eighteen. They were great adventures. Some were places most New Yorkers haven't heard of. Have you ever heard of Fraunces Tavern? That was the place where Washington gave his farewell address to the officers of the Continental Army. I've been there.

Hecht: You could run a [tour] service, probably.

Semel: I don't know. It was a long time ago.

Hecht: When did you graduate from high school?

Semel: I graduated in June of 1937.

Hecht: You grew up right in the middle of the Depression.

Semel: Yes, I certainly did.

Hecht: Any memories about [that]?

Semel: Yes, I remember when [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt was elected, and I remember listening to his "Fireside Chats." My parents were ardent Democrats and I became a Democrat. I've always been one, and I still am, in spite of the unpleasantness in Washington at the moment.

Hecht: What lasting impact do you think the Depression had on you?

Semel: I think there were two reactions to the Depression among people who grew up [during that time]. One is to assume that whatever you have, live it to the hilt because who knows, and the other is hoard it to the hilt because who knows. My father was of the former school and I'm afraid I am too. I've discussed this with my contemporaries, and those two reactions are common.

Hecht: That's interesting. Also, during this time Hitler had been voted Chancellor in '33.

Semel: I remember Aunt Esther [Roher]—my father's oldest sister—packing up packages and sending them off. She went to Europe by herself in 1927 to look up the relatives, so she was able to keep in touch with [their] father and mother's families. I wish I had known who they were because I don't know if anybody was left, what happened to them, and so on. I don't recall anybody in my mother's family doing that, but maybe they did, and I just wasn't aware of it.

Hecht: But in your own life was there talk about what was happening in Europe?

Semel: Absolutely. Also, the Spanish Civil War had a big impact on me. By that time, I was in college. I remember going to parties to support the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and being upset with Franco and what was going on in Spain. Don't forget, in 1939 I was eighteen years old and a junior in college, so I was aware of what was going on. I went to college before I was sixteen, and I spent my whole freshman year avoiding anybody asking me how old I was. When you're sixteen, and everybody else is seventeen and eighteen, it makes you self-conscious. And I was. That changes as you get older, because then you're happy to have people know your age—particularly if they're older—but at that time I wasn't.

Hecht: What were your goals for yourself or your expectations about what life held in store?

Semel: I was going to be a journalist. I was always literary. I was on the school newspaper in high school, and I joined the staff of the *Barnard Bulletin.* In fact, I became the managing editor and editor of the literary magazine. My expectation had been that I was going to graduate in June 1941, and that I was going to go home. My parents at that time had moved to San Francisco, California. I had planned to visit them and then return to New York and attend

Columbia School of Journalism, but several things intervened: the beginning of World War II, and the divorce of my parents.

Hecht: Let's talk about both of those.

Semel: All right.

Hecht: Which one would you like to begin with? What happened first?

Semel: The divorce happened first. Neither of my parents came to my college graduation, and that upset me because I couldn't see any reason why they didn't come. My aunts came. When I got home, I discovered [it was] because the marriage was breaking up. My father waited until I got home from college to announce that he and my mother were separating, and [then] he moved to Los Angeles. That was devastating to me because I adored my father. In fact, I idolized him to the point where I didn't speak to him for about four or five years. The young can be very judgmental, and I judged him harshly. My sister—who was five years older than I and lived through the whole drama of [their breakup] here in San Francisco—was much less judgmental than I was. She always maintained contact with my father. When I was married the following year, my father was not at the wedding, something I've always regretted. That was in June of 1941. Then December of '41 came the beginning of the war.

Hecht: To backtrack for a minute, how did your parents come to California?

Semel: In the middle of my sophomore year, my father, who had been suffering from asthma for a long time, was told that he had to leave New York because the climate wasn't good for him. The choices were Arizona or California, particularly Los Angeles. They decided on Los Angeles. They shipped their things and drove across the United States. They arrived in San Francisco, presumably on their way to Los Angeles. [They] looked around San Francisco and, thank god, decided they didn't want to go to Los Angeles. Instead, they moved to Redwood City. In those days, over the main street of Redwood City was this wonderful arching sign that said, "Climate best by government test," and that's where they lived.

Hecht: And your father's asthma improved?

Semel: Yes, it did.

Hecht: Then you came to San Francisco in the summers?

Semel: Yes. I finished my sophomore year in 1939.

Hecht: Your plan was to go on to school, and we were talking about what came in the way of that.

Semel: In December of '41 the war broke out, and San Francisco was a very vulnerable place. Looking back on it in hindsight, we wonder why we thought the way we did, but there were rumors of submarines being sighted off the coast of California. I remember going out and buying the blackout curtains because we all put up the blackout curtains right away. The most dreadful thing of all was that the Japanese-Americans were herded off into camps. I remember that very well. When my children were growing up and studying about it, they were unhappy with me; don't forget my kids grew up in the fifties and the sixties. One of them said to me, "You mean you didn't protest? You didn't march?" That wasn't done then. As a matter of fact—to our eternal shame—nobody did it, except the Quakers. They were the only ones who protested. Looking back, it was a dreadful thing, as they say, but hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Hecht: You were here when Pearl Harbor [was bombed].

Semel: Yes, with my mother and my sister.

Hecht: What do you remember about [that] moment?

Semel: It was a Sunday morning and we were listening to the radio. The opera was on from New York from the Metropolitan, and they interrupted the performance to say that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. I remember it clearly, and it was very frightening because the war in Europe had been going on for close to two years and that was pretty bad. We had participated in the Bundles for Britain and the other things that went on to support the British.

Hecht: You told me that you had taken an oath, the Oxford Oath.

Semel: Between '37 and '39 in England at the university in Oxford there had been the development of this Oxford Oath that young people took. [The oath said] that we wouldn't go to war anymore, and that there would be no more entangling alliances. It spread to the United States, and at Barnard—which is part of Columbia—we stood on the steps of Low Memorial Library and took the oath. Once 1939 came along, that was the end of that. Everybody realized [war] was inevitable, and Hitler had to be stopped. In 1940, many of the young men that I knew registered for the Selective Service Act and went off to do their one-year service.

In 1941, on my way home to California by train—which is the way everybody traveled—I wanted to go through Washington to visit an ex-boyfriend of mine; [he] was at Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, doing his year of service, and my father wouldn't let me. I couldn't figure out why he didn't let me, because I would have been home a day or two later. I realize now, he didn't want me to take any more time so he could make his big announcement. He was so angry with me that he sent me the tickets—which were non-refundable and non-returnable—so I had to come straight back to California. That was the year in which people went off to do a year of service.

Hecht: You came back to California in '41, Pearl Harbor was bombed, but then your life took you back to New York?

Semel: My mother was not well after this divorce; it traumatized her. She was unhappy. And I was restless and unhappy. I didn't know too many people here. My sister, who was five years older, was already embarked on her career and doing fine. So, my mother decided that she would go East to visit her oldest brother who was living in Florida, and I decided I'd go back to New York. I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do when I got there—this was in February of 1942.

Hecht: Studying at Columbia was no longer an option?

Semel: I couldn't do it. It was the middle of the school year. I guess I thought maybe I'd go back to New York, work for the six months and go to school in the fall. But things were pretty iffy, and I wasn't quite sure of what I could do and what I could afford to do. When I got to New York a friend of mine, with whom I had been in college, met me. She said she was working in the executive training program at Abraham & Straus—a big New York department store located in Brooklyn—and why didn't I apply for that. I could work in the advertising department—which would presumably prepare me, or at least help me keep my writing skills up—and then go to Columbia School of Journalism. I guess I took the path of least resistance. Now that I think about it, it was kind of a ninny thing to do. I probably could have gotten a job on a newspaper in New York, but I think I was a little scared to do that.

Hecht: And shaken up, I imagine, by what had happened.

Semel: I suppose. I went to A&S and they took me right away. I think they would have taken any warm body. All the men were leaving to go into the service. I did become a member of the executive training program and part of that was to go [to] the advertising department—you had to learn the whole store. You went from department to department, and you did various chores.

Hecht: It was at this department store then that you met Max.

Semel: Right.

Hecht: Tell me that story.

Semel: He was the fair-haired boy of the store. He was the assistant to the merchandise manager. All the women were crazy about him. He was a good-looking, personable young man. I was twenty, he was twenty-eight. He paid no attention to me, even though I used to see him around the store. But he must have noticed me, because the day he was to leave to go into the army, he invited me to have lunch with him. I found out later that was one of three or four lunches that he had that day. He left, and I thought that was the end of that. The induction into the army was postponed, he called me and we went out. He didn't go into the army for another three weeks.

Hecht: By the time he did go into the army, you [were planning to get married].

Semel: We had decided to get married.

Hecht: Three weeks later.

Semel: Three weeks later. Crazy, huh?

Hecht: Amazing. A marriage that lasted over fifty years.

Semel: That's right. He always used to say it lasted because we were both too stubborn to say we'd made a mistake.

Hecht: There was probably more to it.

Semel: I know it wasn't the same marriage fifty-one years later: it was about the sixth or seventh marriage.

Hecht: Would you summarize what happened in those years of World War II?

Semel: Max went off for basic training in Georgia, and we wrote every day. He said he was accepted to Officers' Training School at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and he was going to have a week's leave and he wanted to get married in that week. He came back to New York on a Thursday. My mother and I, and my in-laws to be—his sister and [her husband]—went to [meet] the train. We came back to the small apartment my mother and I had in Greenwich Village, and he announced that we would go to City Hall on Friday and get married. His mother was very upset. She wanted us to have a Jewish wedding. I wasn't averse to having a Jewish wedding, but we didn't quite know how we would pull it off.

Two things happened. A college classmate of my sister had just gotten married in New York, so I phoned her. She put me in touch with the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York. Emanu-El played a big role in my life even then, although it was a different congregation. I called [the rabbi] and explained the situation. My sister-in-law had volunteered to have the wedding in her home—she lived in a house on Long Island—on Saturday night. Even though it was between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Rabbi Perlman said it was okay because it was wartime and God would understand. So, on Saturday night somehow my sister-in-law put together a wedding—there were fifty people there. I sort of remember it in a daze, but I'm told it was a very nice wedding.

A week later [Max] went back to Ft. Benning, and I didn't see him for four months. He came back with shiny gold bars making him a second lieutenant in the United States Infantry. Then we traveled around until May of 1944, when he went overseas. Those were educational months because we were in Alabama, northern Florida, and Mississippi, [all] parts of the United States I had never seen. I guess in some ways I learned more in those months than in four years of

college. Think about the time and place: this was the segregated old South. While Ft. McClellan was an old established post, the other two places where he was sent were army camps thrown up all of a sudden in the middle of the nowhere—in Starke, Florida, and Centerville, Mississippi.

Hecht: You really experienced the racial separation—and tension even, perhaps—early on.

Semel: Oh, yes.

Semel: I remember [Max] had a long weekend when he was transferred from Ft. McClellan to Camp Blanding, in Florida. We hastily threw things in a bag and went up to New York for the weekend. [We] rushed to make the train and had to change trains in Memphis. I went running for the ladies' room and didn't look where I was going, and I found myself in the ladies' room marked "Colored." I don't who was more embarrassed, the women in there or me. That was an important lesson for me. Another time in Alabama—when he was away overnight—I went to the army post to go to the movies [with] another young woman who was married and whose husband was at Ft. McClellan. We drove around looking for a movie and found one that had already started. We slipped [into the theater] in the dark. When the lights went on we realized we were in the movie theater for the 92nd Division, which was all Black. We were the only two White women in the place.

Hecht: What did you think of all this segregation?

Semel: I hated it. I thought it was dreadful. The army was segregated, and southern life was segregated; there were definite rules and regulations. You overstepped at your peril.

Hecht: How about being Jewish in the army?

Semel: That's an interesting story. [On the way] to Centerville, Mississippi, I went ahead with the wives. The men in the 63rd Division were driving the trucks and the jeeps, so all the wives went together on the train. When we got to the small town, Centerville, we started to look for places to live. Someone told me that there was a room to rent in the home of the Methodist minister, so I went [to see about it.] A nice young man and his wife greeted me, showed me the room, and then invited me into the living room where I was served the ubiquitous Coke. He said to me, "Tell me, Mrs. Semel, what religion are you?" I thought, "Well, there goes the room." I said, "We're Jewish." He said, "Oh, I'm so glad. I see enough Methodists on Sunday." This was my first experience with interfaith relationships. I have a great deal to thank David Ulmer and his wife, Doris, for. They rented four rooms and none of the renters were Methodist. We had a little interfaith group going there. One couple was Catholic, we were Jewish, one couple was Presbyterian, and I think the fourth one [was] Baptist.

Hecht: So, this was the beginning or the precursor to all of your interfaith work.

Semel: This was the beginning. I tell this to some of my Christian colleague friends and they think it's a great story. I think it's a great story. [David] was a man who had lived his whole life in the south, mainly in Mississippi. The only place he'd been was Emory University in Atlanta, and he didn't have a prejudiced bone in his body. It's true he lived with the situation as it was, but he cared about everybody.

Hecht: Was Max particularly religious?

Semel: No, not particularly.

Semel: I think his family were more religious than my family was but, again, they were living in New York.

Hecht: Did you attend services, or were you affiliated with any temples during this early part of your marriage?

Semel: While we were traveling around, no. One thing that did happen [while] he was the executive officer of the infantry company, and they were making out a roster [to allow] leaves for the Jewish men for Rosh Hashanah, and he asked for the day off as well. The company commander said, "Why do you want it off?" He said, "Because we're Jewish." He said, "You may be, but Rita isn't," because I had blonde hair and blue eyes in those days. I still have the blue eyes, but I don't have the blonde hair anymore. The company commander's attitude changed, but he didn't come from the South. That was the most blatant bit of anti-Semitism we experienced. He left, and after that there was another company commander who was okay.

Hecht: In 1944 Max went off to France to fight in the war?

Semel: He brought me home to San Francisco, and he went off. He was in the D-Day invasion and was wounded not too long after that on the beach, during the breakout from [the town of] Saint-Lô. He spent the following eight or nine months in hospitals in France, and then England. I remember clearly the night that the telegram arrived. I was working on the *Chronicle* at the time, so I was able to follow what was going on through the foreign desk there. The doorbell rang, and the Western Union delivery man [was] standing there with the yellow envelope. He said to me, "It's all right, it's got two stars on it." The envelopes were coded. If it was one star, it meant the person died; two stars meant that he was wounded, and three meant that he was missing in action. He was very kind to tell me that [Max] was wounded, even before I got the envelope in my hand.

Hecht: It must have been quite a scary moment though.

Semel: It was very scary. But I also felt very fortunate.

Hecht: Max returned before the end of the war?

Semel: Just about at the end of the war.

Hecht: Tell me about what you were doing in San Francisco while he was there.

Semel: I was working at the *Chronicle*.

Hecht: How did that come about?

Semel: I had become a little more self-confident. I went down to the *Chronicle*, applied, and got a job as a copy boy. That's what they were called, "copy boys."

Hecht: You quit the job at the department store—

Semel: When I was traveling with him, sure.

Hecht: —and then decided to come back to San Francisco?

Semel: Yes. Then I went to work at the *Chronicle*.

Hecht: What did a "copy boy" do?

Semel: You have to remember that this is before the days of computers, when we had typewriters. The copy was written on what were called copy books—a pad of at least four or five pages separated by carbon paper. I don't know if you remember or know about carbon paper, but that's what it was. Then they'd tear the copy books apart—one piece went one place, another piece went another place, and so on. We made up the copy books, that was one of the jobs. We rushed copy from the reporter to the city desk, and we got coffee.

Hecht: You were all actually copy girls?

Semel: Yes, at that point. This [was] 1944 so the war had been going on for quite a while. Most of the men who were eligible to go had already gone. We signed a statement which said, "I have taken the job of a man who is in service and when he returns, I will give up that job." It would never stand up in today's world but that was the way it was. Nobody thought anything about it, and we did it. I made twenty-four dollars a week, that was my salary.

Hecht: Where did you live?

Semel: My mother and my sister had an apartment here in San Francisco, and they were able to get a small apartment for me in the same building right across the hall. I had my own little apartment on Pine and Jones. At that time, there was a cable car that ran down Jones Street. I used to take the cable car to work, except when I worked the late shift until two in the morning, and then the *Chronicle* sprang for a taxi.

Hecht: Did you give up your job when the war ended, or what happened next for you?

Semel: I had done very well at the *Chronicle*. The only regular woman reporter not hired as a wartime replacement was a woman named Carolyn Anspacher who was a very, very fine journalist. She was a formidable woman—the terror of the city room—and everybody was afraid of her. For some reason she took a liking to me and became my mentor. I didn't even know what a mentor was in those days, but that's what she was. She was quite wonderful. She also had a connection with Temple Emanu-El, her grandfather was a rabbi there many years before in the early days.

Carolyn, who was probably in her forties at that time, had never married. She took me under her wing and I was promoted to the position of reporter. Just before Max came home, she came to me and said, "You know, Rita, you might be able to stay on after the war. There's no guarantee but you might be able to. But you will be junior when all these men come back, and you'll be working nights, weekends, late nights, and so on. I had a call from a friend named Eugene Block" [who also was a member of Temple Emanu-El] "and he is starting a weekly newspaper called *The Jewish Community Bulletin,* and he's looking for an associate editor. I think you'd be great. You'd be able to work Monday through Friday."

I went to see Gene Block and he hired me. I decided that [taking that job] was probably a good thing to do, although I knew nothing about the intricacies of Jewish life, the myriad organizations, and their various agendas.

It turned out to be an exciting time because it was the period after the war when Europe was filled with displaced persons, hundreds of thousands of them Jews. They were trying to find a place to live, and there were concerns about bringing them into the United States.

Carolyn took me along with her when she covered the United Nations Charter signing at the San Francisco Opera House. That was a fabulous experience, one which I remember with great gratitude. She was so wonderful to me. Those were very exciting days.

There was a persistent argument in the American Jewish community, and particularly here in San Francisco, between the Zionists and the American Council for Judaism [about the establishment of the State of Israel]. At that time Temple Emanu-El was a stronghold of the American Council for Judaism. The rabbi was Irving Reichert, who was a pillar of the American Council, and most of the prominent members of the congregation were members of the American Council for Judaism. You could almost count the Zionists in the leadership of San Francisco on two hands, if not one hand. That was an interesting time to be at the newspaper.

Hecht: What do you remember about the position of the American Council?

Semel: They were opposed to the establishment of the State of Israel. They claimed that Judaism was a religion. We were not a race, not a people—we were a religion, just like Protestants and Catholics. That was the height of the time when there were three major religions in the United States: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Today we know differently. We know about Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims, but they weren't on the radar screen in those days at all. The founding Jewish community members here were proud of the fact that Jews had made it into the upper echelons of all kinds of activities: the symphony, the opera, the Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Supervisors, and so on.

Hecht: Without much experience of anti-Semitism probably here on the West Coast.

Semel: It was a more subtle kind of anti-Semitism, I think. A lot of people that I know who were born and brought up here—contemporaries of mine, and even older people—always claimed there wasn't any. But if you think about it, it was much more subtle.

Hecht: How do you mean?

Semel: [For example], there weren't many debs who were Jews. In many ways they were right, it wasn't the same kind of anti-Semitism that Jews experienced on the East Coast or in the Midwest. Certainly, there were no Jewish neighborhoods. Old McAllister Street, yes, for some. There were no places that Jews couldn't live, and they did live all over the city. They lived in Pacific Heights, in Sea Cliff, the Richmond, and the Sunset, and so on. I think by and large, that was true. However, there were no Jews in the Bohemian Club or the Pacific Union Club, but Jews did have the Concordia Club.

Hecht: Where did you fall on this issue of Zionism?

Semel: I didn't really know much about it. The first week that I was at the *Bulletin*, I got a call from a woman who said, "This is Mrs. M. C. [Marcus Cauffman] Sloss, and I'd like to take you to lunch." Hattie Sloss was the widow of Judge Sloss, and a pillar of Temple Emanu-El. She had a daughter and two sons, one of whom (Richard) became the president of Temple Emanu-El. We met under the clock at the St. Francis Hotel—which was where everybody met and had lunch—and she spent the entire lunch telling me why there shouldn't be a Jewish state. It sounded quite logical until I realized that there was no place else for these [displaced] Jews to go [after the war]. Our country wasn't taking them in, nor was anybody else, but that was the prevailing attitude.

Hecht: But your thinking had already started to shift, given your exposure to the displaced persons in Europe and the issues they faced.

Semel: Yes.

Interview 2: December 23, 1998

Rita Semel: Soon after the end of World War II, Committees of Inquiry formed to address what should happen in Palestine. It became clear that there was eventually going to be a vote [concerning the formation of the State of Israel].

The small band of Zionists in San Francisco became quite active. The American Council for Judaism folks felt more beleaguered than they previously had, but it was clear it [Israel's statehood] was going to happen. After the vote in favor of a Jewish state was taken in November 1947, a number of the prominent Jewish families in San Francisco who had formerly been part of the Council for Judaism—the Koshlands, the Haases, and people like that—immediately withdrew their membership from the American Council for Judaism. In effect they said, "If there's to be a State of Israel, we've got to support it. We've got to make sure that it succeeds."

There was a change in the leadership of Emanu-El: Rabbi Reichert left—and Rabbi Alvin Fine was tapped for the job. Rabbi Fine had been a chaplain in the army in China, and at the time was assistant to the president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

He made it clear from the outset that not only was he a Zionist, but he was a Labor Zionist. He was handsome and dynamic—a very exciting rabbi, and he breathed a whole new sense of life and purpose into the congregation. In fact, at one time I teased him when he complained to me that people were not involved in the social justice issues to the extent that he thought they ought to be. I said to him—and I still think there was more than a grain of truth to it—"People don't feel that they have to [be involved] because you're such a good representative—you're doing it all, so they don't have to. They can just bask in your reflected glory."

In that post-war period, Max and I were looking for a synagogue to join because we had children. Elisabeth was born in 1950 and Jane in 1952, and we wanted them to have some roots. In San Francisco, unlike New York, you don't get to be Jewish just by breathing the air. We looked around, and we decided that Temple Emanu-El was the place we wanted to be, so we joined in … about 1954.

Anita Hecht: Tell me a more about making that decision.

Semel: I did not have much to compare it to, and Max only had Orthodox synagogues to compare it to. By this time, we both knew enough about Reform Judaism and its commitment to social justice, which is such an integral part of Reform Judaism. We knew it was going to be a Reform Jewish synagogue [that we would join], although we admired and liked the rabbi at Congregation Beth

Shalom [a Conservative synagogue] very much. I didn't know Hebrew, and still don't, except for a few odd words like "shalom." Max could read Hebrew, but he hadn't read Hebrew in a long time, so we knew our choice would be a Reform synagogue.

Hecht: What was your understanding of Reform Judaism?

Semel: The social justice aspect was terribly important, and we felt that Reform Judaism had maintained the essential elements of Judaism, but not some of the more arcane practices of Judaism, which didn't particularly appeal to us, or mean anything to us. It turned out to be a choice between Sherith Israel and Emanu-El. At that time the rabbi at Sherith Israel was Rabbi Israel Goldstein and we didn't care for his style of preaching. We found Rabbi Fine's much more challenging and interesting, so we joined Emanu-El. I joined the sisterhood and Max joined the men's club. I ended up being a real mother to the girls when they were in religious school and did all those motherly things. The rest, as we say, is history.

Hecht: We'll talk much more about that history. I did briefly want to ask you about your job at the *Jewish Bulletin*, and how long you stayed there and what being a career woman in those days was like.

Semel: I stayed there until 1949.When I was about to have Elisabeth, I thought that the thing for me to do was to stay home and be a mother, as everybody else I knew was doing. But I really wasn't happy about it. I liked working, I liked what I was doing, and I liked the challenge. Almost by happenstance, I got some calls from [connections I had made] to do freelance public relations work. I thought it was a pretty good compromise for those early years because [they] were one-shot jobs, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. At that time, the third bedroom in our house was unoccupied, so I made myself a little office. I was fortunate to have pretty good help, and I did freelance public relations for several years. I did a lot of work in the Jewish community, but I also did things in the general community. That was very good.

Interestingly, I felt guilty because none of my friends were working, even though I used to break my neck to be home when the girls got home from school. I drove the ballet carpool, the Girl Scout carpool—or whatever carpool it was—and [hosted or attended] the obligatory Saturday night dinner parties. I did <u>all</u> that. Those were the days of Super Mom.

The time I stopped feeling guilty was when Lis was in about the sixth grade, and I was doing a special project with the State of Israel bonds. Of course, the school always knew where I was, and one day I got a telephone call from the school nurse saying that she had Lis in her office and Lis had an earache and could I please come and take her to the doctor. I phoned the pediatrician who said, "Bring her right in," and I started to leave downtown.

Because it was going to take me about twenty minutes, I thought I'd call a couple of my friends who lived in our neighborhood and see if they could go over and sit with Lis until I got there. I called two or three friends, and nobody was home. We didn't have answering machines then—they hadn't been invented. As I was driving to pick up Lis, I thought to myself, "Why am I feeling guilty? It could have been one of their kids, and [the school] wouldn't have been able to find them." I didn't know where they were—out playing tennis, marketing, shopping, whatever it was. Nobody could have found them. After that I didn't feel quite so guilty, because at least they always knew where I was.

I was fortunate in another way—and I feel I must say this—Max was supportive, always. He never stopped me from doing anything. I suspect in his heart of hearts—given his kind of traditional upbringing—he probably would have been much happier if I had been the wife who stayed home and cooked and cleaned and baked and sewed and all that stuff. But he never made me feel that way—I think he was proud of what I did and was certainly supportive. I was lucky. He knew about women's lib before Betty Friedan did.

Hecht: Tell me more about your first impressions of the Temple. You mentioned the divisions within the community between the Zionists and the anti-Zionists. Was that still palpable when you joined, or had that settled out?

Semel: I never was a member in the Reichert days—I suspect it was much more obvious then. In the Alvin Fine days, which is when we joined, Rabbi Fine went a long way toward healing [the schism] for several reasons. In the first place, because of his own talents, and also because he married a member of the congregation who had been widowed. Her late husband's family was an integral part of Temple Emanu-El, although she herself came from Virginia, I think. So, Rabbi Fine was immediately accepted into that part of the congregation—they may not have liked it particularly, but nobody ever said anything.

He did become such a figure in San Francisco—as well as in the synagogue—that nobody was willing to argue with success. He was a member of the first Human Rights Commission. He did all kinds of wonderful things. He, along with a priest and an Episcopal minister, had the first television program.

The only place in which he was stymied was when he tried to set up a Social Justice Committee. That was when I told him that people didn't feel they had to do it, because he was doing it, and it didn't really get off the ground. What did get off the ground was an adult education program which he started, and [he] asked me to be on the very first committee. I stayed on that committee—oh god, it must have been twenty years—through all kinds of rabbis. It was wonderful. In the early days, and today still—although I'm not on the committee—we have a fine adult education program which attracts not only members of the synagogue, but people from other parts of the city.

Hecht: You were on the adult education committee, the sisterhood—[and you] served on the sisterhood's board.

Semel: Briefly, yes.

Hecht: On the religious school committee.

Semel: No, my husband served on the religious school committee. He served on one of the rabbi selection committees. We were reasonably faithful attendees. We didn't go to services every week, by a long shot, except after Jane died, when Max went every week for more than a year, but that was later, in 1970.

Hecht: What in these early years of your membership stands out to you if you think back, either events, or sermons, or issues of the day?

Semel: Rabbi Fine preached on all the issues of the day and always managed to relate it to the portions of the Torah—always brought in the relationship of today's issues to those in the five books of Moses in a very wonderful way. His sermons were really and truly inspiring and, of course, the music was wonderful. Cantor Rinder no longer had much of a voice, but there was always the magnificent choir. Then Cantor Rinder retired, and Cantor Portnoy came—and that was a revelation. Now we have Roz Barak. There was a lot of consternation about a woman cantor, but I think she's won everybody over with a perfectly magnificent voice and a marvelous presence. It was always a treat to go for that reason. We made many friends [at Emanu-El] that I still have and am close to.

Hecht: Of your work there, and your participation and contribution—is there anything in particular you'd like to mention that you're proud of?

Semel: I did a variety of things for Temple Emanu-El. For a number of years, I helped edit the *Temple Chronicle*. I also wrote the speeches for some of the presidents to give at the annual meetings—and I designed some of the invitations and programs for various projects and events. We didn't have the kind of professional staff that we have now. I was happy to work in that capacity, and they were satisfying things to do—my freelance efforts.

Hecht: Wonderful. You also got involved with many other issues of the day in the Jewish community and in the larger San Francisco community.

Semel: In 1963, in Chicago, the three religions got together for the first time at a meeting sponsored by the National Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches, and the Synagogue Council of America, which at that time represented the three branches of Judaism. The subject of the meeting was a conference on religion and race. As you think back to 1963, the big issue was integration/segregation. The theme of that meeting was: "Eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the United States."

Follow-up conferences were planned in different places, including San Francisco. Alvin Fine asked me to be on the committee to help plan our conference, which was scheduled for fall of '64 at the University of San

Francisco. Alvin was one of the three co-chairs and it was a successful meeting—so successful that more than five hundred people attended. We discussed many issues—jobs and education, and … And, unfortunately, these are some of same issues that still plague us today. We don't seem to learn very quickly, do we?

The conferences continued for twenty-five years. I became the coordinator, and that was a marvelously satisfying experience. The sponsorship continued to be the Board of Rabbis, the Archdiocese, and the San Francisco Council of Churches. It sort of fell apart after twenty-five years for several reasons: one was that San Francisco Council of Churches disbanded and a lot of the personnel changed in town. I was by that time the associate director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, and in a sense, I was mainly the one who was keeping an eye on it, but the extent of my involvement depended on how much else was on my plate.

In 1988 and '89 two things happened which forced many of us to decide that we needed to revive some kind of interfaith organization, and if not the conference itself then something else. Those two things were in December of '88, Mayor Art Agnos called the clergy of the city into his office on a Thursday—all these things seem to have happened on Thursdays—and said, "You've got to help me out with the homeless. You've got to open your doors. It's December and it's cold."

The second thing was that Rabbi Malcolm Sparer, who was president of the Board of Rabbis at the time, called me and said, "Rita, we've got to set up a committee—we've got to do something." So we set up a committee. I don't seem to be able to let go of things very easily, and we've been at it ever since. We had an ad hoc Committee on the Homeless.

In October of '89 we had the Loma Prieta earthquake, and someone wanted to give money to a religious entity to help earthquake victims, but they would only give it to an interfaith group. We had to form the Ad Hoc Committee on Earthquake Relief. It was as if we were sitting on a revolving stage because the same people kept turning up at all of these things. At that point a few of us said, "Sorry, we can't keep having ad hoc committees." So, [finally] we set up the San Francisco Interfaith Council, which was established in October of 1990. It took us between October '89 and October '90 to set up bylaws and who was going to be on the board and where we were going to get the money from and all that stuff.

We're still doing the shelter—we're in the middle of it right now as we speak. We have six different sites that begin operating the week of Thanksgiving and continue to the end of March. About forty congregations provide the food.

Hecht: Is Temple Emanu-El involved in this effort?

Semel: Temple Emanu-El just completed a week in December of providing food for the shelter at Trinity Episcopal Church.

Homelessness has become almost an obsession with me—I find it hard to believe that we can't [solve it]. I suffer from that American syndrome of if you've got a problem, you've got to solve it. I don't like to believe that some problems are insoluble. This problem may not be completely solvable, but I think we can do better than we're doing.

Hecht: Sure, we can do better. But next, Rita, tell me about your philosophy on interfaith work and why that's important to you.

Semel: It's enriched my life enormously. I've met some wonderful people and I've learned a great deal, not the least of which is that a lot of the values that we hold so dear and think are so Jewish, we've been fortunate enough to give to the world. [Some of these values] have been adopted by Protestants and Catholics and there is a growing feeling on the part of some Protestants and Catholics that [Judaism] is where their roots are. Some appreciate their Jewish roots more than ever, at least as far as I know.

One of my friends, Sister Chandra with the Brahma Kumaris, an offshoot of Hinduism, pointed out last year that December is the darkest month of the year—it's the winter solstice. Every major religion in the world has some kind of holiday in which light plays a part, and that's not by happenstance; rather, it's to light the darkness and prepare for the spring that's going to come. Ithink that's a wonderful thing. If you think about Hanukah, and Christmas, and Kwanzaa—I don't know what the Buddhist one is called—but they all involve candles, and they all involve light. So that's what I've learned.

The [second] thing is that this is an opportunity for us to make ourselves, as Jews, better known to the rest of the world. One of the proudest moments of my life came when a Catholic priest friend of mine said publicly that he was a better Catholic for having known me and other Jews. So, I think that's a very important thing to do. We give, and we get.

Hecht: It's almost the same thing. Let's return to the chronology of your life now. We were in the 1960s … your daughters were growing up. There was also a lot of history being played out there.

Semel: Oh, yes, my daughters were growing up! My older daughter, Elisabeth, was and is a very bright young woman, but at that time she was still just a young a girl. Whatever was going on, she wanted to be part of it. It was the Summer of Love and all of the hippies were in the Haight-Ashbury. There were the Vietnam teach-ins at the University of California and the Free Speech Movement and all of that. Lis wanted to be part of it. She was very precocious. She was ahead of herself in high school. She skipped a couple of grades, and in her junior year

she decided to transfer from Lowell to Polytechnic High School, which no longer exists. It was not an academic high school, and the student body was about fifty percent minorities.

My husband and I were not happy about that, but she hoisted us on our own petard by saying, "You've been working to integrate the schools, and here I want to go to a school where I can help boost those [stats on integration]." So, she went to Poly for her senior year, and I can't say it hurt her at all, because I'm convinced that the most important part of education takes place in the home anyway and our home didn't change: the reading and the trips and the exposure to other things continued. Besides, she was already a junior and a good student.

However, when she graduated in June of 1967, she decided she wasn't going to go to college because it was "irrelevant." Do you remember that term? You're too young. That was a term in the sixties—whatever was "relevant." She said college was irrelevant. Fortunately for her, she had a wise father who said to her, "All right, you don't want to go to college? No college—no money. Get a job!"

So she did, and as she later put it, she got one dead-end job after another because no matter how smart she was, she was still only fifteen-and-a-half, not quite sixteen, and with only a high school education. She was out of school that whole year. In December she was selling stockings behind the counter in Joseph Magnin's, and she came home and announced that it was the worst year of her life and that she was going to college in the fall, which she did.

Hecht: Tell me about how this entire era affected Temple life. Do you think it did?

Semel: Well, I think it did. There was a lot more questioning about religious school and what was being taught there. Don't forget, 1967 was the year of the Six-Day War in Israel, and Israel was very affected. Most people who were still questioning the necessity—the validity—or the need of Israel to survive forgot about that.

Someone wrote an article in one of the national Jewish publications at the time saying, "Everybody's a Zionist now." I'm not quite sure that I'd go that far, but certainly if there was any opposition … the American Council for Judaism, which had opposed Israel's statehood, sort of withered away. A rally for Israel was held at Temple Emanu-El in that period, in 1967. I led a delegation of people from here to Washington in the middle of the Six-Day War to urge Congress to support Israel and to send planes and money, because up until then the policy of the American government, while not unfriendly, was certainly not warm and fuzzy. In terms of American foreign policy in Israel, I think that was the beginning of the shift, and Temple Emanu-El changed along with the rest of the American Jewish community.

Hecht: You said that Emanu-El's Religious School felt the sixties too.

Semel: I think there were a lot of changes going on in the curriculum. There was much more emphasis on Hebrew when my kids were there. They were taught Hebrew using something called *Rocket to Mars,* or some kind of picture book, but it wasn't really serious Hebrew. The bar mitzvah ceremonies were fairly perfunctory, certainly not what they are today. There wasn't as much Hebrew used in the services as there is now. There was much less being sure of the roots than in some of the old traditions. I'm not saying that Temple Emanu-El will ever be like an Orthodox synagogue, but I think there's more taking [up again] of some of the things that were discarded in classical Reform Judaism.

Hecht: It sounds like the sixties were destabilizing in a way.

Semel: It was a very destabilizing period: all the old values were being questioned in every area of American life, including religion.

Hecht: One of your daughters chose to be confirmed, and the other one …

Semel: Lis was in the confirmation class and there was a discussion of God, and in her usual style, she announced that she didn't believe in God. The teacher, who I thought didn't really know how to handle a fifteen-year-old, threw her out of the class. Max went and talked to the Religious School people and Lis was moved to the high school class and was never confirmed.

The late sixties and the early seventies were traumatic for me. I was still freelancing but working more and more. Lis was off at Bard College and Jane had started at San Francisco State—she didn't want to go away to school, she wanted to stay home. We made her spend her first year at San Francisco State in the dormitories because we felt it was important for her to have that experience. At the end of her freshman year, Jane said, "I've done that—can I come home now?"

Jane was living at home when she died in December 1970. That was a very traumatic and devastating experience, which I guess it's fair to say none of us ever got over. We all handled it in the best way we could. I've heard that one of two things happen to a marriage when a child is lost—the marriage either falls apart, or it becomes stronger. Fortunately for me, ours became stronger—and our relationship to Lis became stronger. She wanted to transfer to a California school and not finish her last year at Bard. Both Max and I felt it was very important that she live as normal a life as possible—and that she not come back and try to be two children instead of one. She did [finish at Bard], but then returned to California and decided to go to law school. She went to UC Davis School of Law, which was close, but not too close. That was wonderful.

[When Jane died] the Temple was a great source of solace. Rabbi Asher was in our house within thirty minutes after it happened. Liz Fine came and Faye Asher and Cantor Portnoy, and the associate rabbi. It was quite wonderful the support that we received [from Temple] and also the support I received from

some of the Christian clergy with whom I had become friendly. That helped—it didn't make up for it, but it helped.

Hecht: Jane was quite young when this happened?

Semel: This happened in December. She would have been nineteen in March. She was a marvelously talented, wonderfully sweet, lovely young woman. But one has to make the best of it. What is it? You have to play the cards you're dealt.

Hecht: Her death was a complete surprise?

Semel: Oh, yes, it was an accident.

Max went to synagogue every Friday night for at least a year, and maybe more. I couldn't do that—and I didn't do that. I went many times, but I couldn't [go as regularly as Max]. It's such a cliché to say he was religious about it—but he was, and it was helpful to him. I solved my problems by working harder than I ever did. I became a member of the staff of the Jewish Community Relations Council. At that time, I was assistant director. In 1974, I became the associate director, and in 1987, I became director.

Hecht: Tell me about JCRC—the Jewish Community Relations Council.

Semel: The Jewish Community Relations Council is one of one hundred and twenty-five or so organizations around the country committed to representing the Jewish community to the larger community. The issues we dealt with were the Middle East and Israel, and also the plight of Soviet Jewry, which was a hot issue at the time. We worked on church and state separation, public education, and all the issues involving quality of life in the community that could have an impact on the Jewish community.

It was a perfect fit for me and all the things I cared about. It involved me again with other people of other groups caring about the same things that I did. It was marvelous. The director was a man named Earl Raab, who was a wonderful colleague. We got along extremely well. We didn't always see eye-to-eye, but there was a wonderful and healthy give and take, and a meeting of the minds on how we were going to handle things. There was a wonderful group of lay people. All the Jewish organizations and the synagogues were members of JCRC.

I was at JCRC until 1987, when I hit my sixty-fifth birthday and decided it was time to hang up my track shoes. I'm glad that I did. In the years since, I've been fortunate enough to continue to do a lot of the things I care about, and I spend more time on those things and less time on running an organization. I don't have to worry about budgets anymore and personnel problems, but I am able to do many things I care about.

Hecht: In your giving to these organizations—both the JCRC and the Temple and all the other things that you've done—do you also feel like they've supported you through some of your loss and grief?

Semel: Absolutely.

Hecht: Tell me about that.

Semel: I've been very fortunate. I don't have much family out here—my sister and brother-in-law, and their three kids, live down the Peninsula. My sister died about five or six years ago. My mother died about seven or eight years ago. My brother-in-law is still alive. I have one nephew who lives in Los Altos with his family—they're very close to me. I've been very fortunate in that. And I've been very fortunate to have some wonderful friends—some of whom I've known since almost the time we came out here, some I've met through the Temple, or the Jewish Community Relations Council, or other activities that I've been involved in. That's a help. Not being alone is a great help. Although, in the end everybody's always alone—I know that.

Hecht: Has the Temple been that kind of an avenue for you as well?

Semel: Not in the sense of envisioning a man sitting on fluffy white cloud, but in a sense of being rooted and grounded in moral values and in ethical principles and in a way to live one's life and give back and make the world better by doing the best you can to the best of your ability. Yes, it has.

It's very important for me to go to Temple to commemorate the anniversaries of Max's death and my daughter's, my mother's and sister's … the list gets longer, I'm afraid, all the time. But it's life, isn't it?

Hecht: Part of what helps you through it is community.

Semel: Yes, and now we're getting ready to celebrate the Congregation Emanu-El's 150th anniversary. I'm sitting on a couple of those anniversary committees, and we're going to have some exciting times. We'll have a wonderful lecture series next year. I've been involved in helping to organize an interfaith 150th concert in November of 1999. In addition to Emanu-El, there are six other congregations who are going to be celebrating—Congregation Sherith Israel, the Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Church, and the Episcopal Diocese. They're all my friends, and they're all excited about it. It's going to be wonderful.

Hecht: We've been talking about the current state of affairs—the 150th—is there anything about the seventies, eighties, and nineties at the Temple that stand out to you? Were you involved with inside affairs at that point, or did the change of rabbis—

Semel: Of course, I've known them all. I admire Rabbi Kirschner. I guess that's who you're talking about. I was upset and unhappy when he decided to resign, and for the reason that he decided to resign. I was enormously impressed with the way Rhoda Goldman, who was then the president of the board, and Paul Matzger, who was then vice-president of the board, handled the Kirschner situation for the congregation. They turned what could have been a very divisive and destructive situation into a coming together and constructive situation.

There were congregation meetings and you could to go to them and talk it out and say what you thought. Everybody was willing to listen. We made arrangements with the Jewish Family and Children's Services for anybody who felt they needed counseling. They handled it extremely well. This is the Pollyanna in me coming out and I'm sorry about that, but I can't help it. I think the Temple is stronger for it. One of the things that's happening now is that the whole congregation is being run on a professional basis. Rabbi Pearce is perfectly happy to do what he does best, which is to be the pastor, to be the mentor, to be the teacher, and to have others do what they need to do. We've got a fine executive director and a wonderful cantor and a gifted rabbi educator who has completely re-energized the religious school. I'm sorry I don't have grandchildren who go to it. Rabbi [Helen] Cohn is making her outreach into the community. I think the 151st year and on will be good ones because they all seem to know what they're doing.

Hecht: That's great. What do you think is unique about this place?

Semel: Temple Emanu-El?

Hecht: Yes.

Semel: Well, I think what's unique about it is that it was started by a group of German Jews who were making their fortunes in both traditional and untraditional ways. While it's true that some of them came to mine gold, others realized that there was an opportunity for commerce. Levi Strauss is just one example of all the businesses that were started by Jews [in San Francisco] a hundred and fifty years ago. In addition to [being business owners], they were always part of the community. That tradition of giving back—which I got in another way in a different part of the country, [since] my ancestors had not come to San Francisco in the 1840s, is part of the ethos of Congregation Emanu-El. There's a Community Service Committee now which does a lot of reaching out to people less fortunate and finding projects to support. Having meals at the homeless shelters is [just] one aspect of all the things that are being done.

The breadth of speakers who came for the 150th… Just a few weeks ago we had Thomas Cahill—who wrote the wonderful book, *The Gifts of the Jews*—speaking at Temple Emanu-El in partnership with the Judaic Studies program at the University of San Francisco. There are all kinds of collaborations and connections constantly being forged—I think there's no question that the future will be bright.

Hecht: What do you think is important for doing community service work? You're a veteran.

Semel: I think it's important to bring a little bit of humility to it—to know that you don't know everything, to be open to learning and listening. Listening is almost a lost art in society. I don't mean hearing—I mean listening. I think there's a subtle distinction between the two. You've got to listen to what the other person is saying—that's important. We can be quick to take umbrage if we think someone isn't giving us respect, but I'm not sure we're always so quick to hear what the other person's problem is. I'll probably get in trouble for saying this, but that's okay. I think it's true. We've had such a bad history, a tragic and suffering history. I don't want to see us turn into professional martyrs. We don't need to be in this country, at this time. We're the most successful Jewish community in the history of the world. That isn't a reason to gloat—but it's a reason to celebrate, and it's a reason to give back, and it's a reason to listen. I think we still have plenty to learn.

When someone wants to say or write, "Praise" that or talks about "witnessing" this, that, or the other thing—I feel perfectly comfortable in saying, I don't think we should use the word "witness" because that isn't a word which resonates with Jews, or Muslims, or Buddhists, or Hindus. It's a Christian word. Let's find something we can all agree on. By saying that I don't mean that we should water down—or dumb down, which I think is the current phrase—everything to the least-common denominator, but I think sensitivity is called for.

On the other hand—if it is a time for us to say, "This is the way we do it," then we use the words we're comfortable with. I'm perfectly happy for Christians to use "witness" or talk about "our Lord, Jesus,"—or whatever it is that makes them comfortable. There's always that delicate balance between finding ways in which we can all be comfortable in a situation, without losing our own identity. That's the challenge, I think. We're working at it. It's all fairly new, although I understand some interfaith groups have been around for a hundred years. (I haven't been around quite that long yet.)

Hecht: It sounds like it's important to you to have Judaism and its particularity of belief or ethical—

Semel: To be at the table?

Hecht: Yes.

Semel: I think the problems of the world are so big and overwhelming that it's going to take everybody working together in the best way we can to solve them—from the homeless problem locally, to the problems of war and peace internationally. I'm involved with an organization called the United Religions Initiative—which is not an organization that's going to make one religion out of everybody's, but [instead] unites them to work for peace.

If you look at the conflicts around the world, nine-tenths of them have some kind of religious dissension at the bottom. If the religions of the world can't talk together, how can we expect anybody else [to do so]? That's an important avenue for us to pursue.

Hecht: What a beautiful message to pass on as a legacy to future congregants [of Temple Emanu-El—and [to] the world community as well.

Semel: Thank you. That's very nice of you to say.

Hecht: Is there anything else that you'd like to speak of that we haven't touched upon—either about Temple Emanu-El, or the importance of passing on history like this?

Semel: I would just like to see the Temple and its members—I think the Torah phrase is "Go from strength to strength,"—and they do. If we continue to play a major role in the lives of the people in San Francisco, that would be a wonderful legacy to pass on.

Hecht: You've certainly done a lot to create that, and to add your own special touch to this community.

Semel: Thank you. The Temple's been good to me.

Interview 3: February 3, 2020

Basya Petnick: Today we've agreed to talk about interfaith—interfaith community, interfaith council. Why don't you start by telling us about how you became involved in interfaith work?

Rita Semel: I became involved in interfaith—not work but in an interest in it—many years ago when my husband was in the army and we lived in the South. I didn't realize what I was getting involved in.

[Repetition deleted]

Petnick: Was "interfaith" a concept or a word that—

Semel: No, it wasn't. We didn't think of ourselves as an "interfaith" community. All of our husbands were officers at the camp.

We had an interesting experience. One of the women and I decided—our husbands were out in the field and they weren't coming home that night, so we decided to go to the camp to go to a movie. We got in a cab and we drove to the camp and we drove around until we saw a movie that we wanted to see, and we went in. As officers' wives we were sitting in the back of the movie house. After it was over, the lights went on and we realized we were the only two White people in the room. One of the other divisions at the camp was a Black division, and we had no idea. Everybody was embarrassed. They were embarrassed that we were there, and we were embarrassed that we were there. It wasn't bad. Nobody was unhappy. We were just embarrassed because we felt we weren't supposed to be there. The army at that time (1944) was very segregated.

Petnick: The South was still highly segregated?

Semel: Oh, my god. For someone who had lived in New York and San Francisco, it was an education, a college education, going down there.

Petnick: It was shocking?

Semel: It was a shock. When I first saw the signs over the water fountains, Colored and White, I couldn't believe my eyes. I had heard about it, but to see it in real life was a whole different experience.

Petnick: Yes, I can understand.

Semel: I remember before that when he had been at Fort McClellan in Alabama, he had the weekend off and we were going up to New York to visit his family and we got on the train.

Petnick: You're talking about Max's family.

Semel: Yes, his family lived in New York. We took a train and before we got on the train, I said, "I have to go to the bathroom." I rushed into a bathroom and realized after I got in that I was in the wrong bathroom. I don't know who was more embarrassed, the two African-American women who were standing there or me, when I realized it was the wrong place. That whole experience was a shocking experience, a learning experience, and it made me aware of what needed to be fixed in this country, which we're still fixing. We're still fixing. All these years later we haven't really fixed it.

Petnick: It's a long way off.

Semel: Yes, particularly with this administration.

Petnick: When did "interfaith" come into your life, that concept, and the idea of religions of various faiths working together, when did that come about?

Semel: I was at the Jewish Community Relations Council and it was—

Petnick: You were working there or—

Semel: I was working there.

Petnick: You had a paid position?

Semel: I was the associate director or maybe it was the director by then, December 1988. It was cold and it was rainy, and it was the beginning of the homeless problem. Mayor Art Agnos called the clergy into his office and said, "We don't have enough shelters; you've got to open your doors and help." I was not there because I was not a clergy. The President of the Board of Rabbis, Rabbi Malcolm Sparer came into my—

Petnick: What's his name?

Semel: Malcolm Sparer (S-p-a-r-e-r) came into my office from the meeting and told me about it. He said, "Rita, we've got to be part of this; you've got to come to the next meeting with me," which I did. We got four congregations to open their doors and then we started calling on other congregations to provide meals. This was in December and we were supposed to go until the end of February when the rain stopped, which it did, and we felt we were done and that was that.

Petnick: What was the extent of homelessness at that time? Approximately how many homeless did we have here at that time?

Semel I don't remember the figures, but it was certainly less than we have now. Four congregations opened their doors and that was enough to take care of it. At the end of February, we felt we were done and that was that. We had a good experience; everybody had been very responsive.

Then the following fall came the Loma Prieta earthquake. Calvary Presbyterian Church's minister, Father James Emerson, got a call from Church World Service which offered him ten thousand dollars to help San Franciscans deal with the effects of the earthquake.

Petnick: What was the name of the service?

Semel: Church World Service, which is a Protestant organization. They said, "Butyou can't just give it to Protestants, you've got to give to everybody." He said, "Fine." He was a wonderful man. He called together the committee that had organized the shelter thing and he said, "This is the situation—will you help?" So we did. We provided help to people of all different faiths with that money. After we had spent the money, we discussed our work—what we had done right and what we should have done and what we could have done more—and concluded that every time something happens we can't just have a committee, we had to have an organization. That's how the Interfaith Council was born.

Petnick: Which religions were participating? Which churches [religious institutions] were participating? Was it only Christian and Jewish?

Semel: It was mainly Christian and Jewish, but we did have a Muslim member. Iktakar Hai was the first Muslim to become involved.

Petnick: Were there any Buddhist organizations involved?

Semel: No, not then. It was mainly Christian and Jewish. We started the Interfaith Council and it was strictly all volunteers.

Petnick: That was 1989?

Semel: That was '89. I had just retired as executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), so it fell to me. They said, "You're not working, so you can do this," so I did. We didn't have a permanent office. Whoever was the chairperson, the mail came to his congregation and I would go pick it up. I worked from my home. We did this for about five years. Every winter we did the homeless shelter. We kept doing it and we began to be asked as we became a little better known in the community this, that, and the other thing. I was so-called retired, and I was doing this as a volunteer. After about the fifth year I said to the then chair, "There are too many things to take care of and I don't want to work full time. We've got to bite the bullet and raise the money to hire somebody," which we did. That was when we really got organized because we had a staff person. I continue to be involved. I'm still involved to this day.

Petnick: Is that when Michael Pappas was hired?

Semel: That's when Michael was hired.

Petnick: What was the mission of the organization? When it formed itself as an actual organization, what was its mission?

Semel: Let me get a copy of the mission statement and then you'll know. We thought long and hard. [Struggling to get up] Don't get old.

Petnick: It's too late. Your advice comes too late. It's already happened.

Semel: It's a pain in the neck.

Petnick: Yes, it is. I understand.

[Pause while Rita looks for a copy of the Interfaith Council mission statement.]

Petnick: This is part two of today's interview.

Semel: [Reading] "Celebrating our diverse faith and spiritual traditions, the San Francisco Interfaith Council brings people together to build understanding and serve our community."

Petnick: How nice.

Semel: That's the mission statement.

Petnick: That's good. One idea I read about was that historically conflict of different religions had created a lot of strife and problems, so interfaith work was the effort to harmonize various religions and keep everybody focused on their ministries to be able to do the good in the world that they were supposed to be doing. Is that—

Semel: That's a good definition. As we work together, we find that we have many more things that bring us together than divide us. To quote my friend, Bishop Marc Andrus, the Episcopal bishop, said to me once, "I thought about all the various religions and what we think we want to do and what we say we want to do, and it all comes down to the same thing." He said this to me. "In Jewish tradition it's called *tikkun olam*, to repair the world." He said, "The basis of every religion is the feeling that we have to repair the world," which I found very interesting. *Tikkun olam* has been the guiding principle for me that God's help is to repair the world.

Petnick: I'll stop you for a moment because I've invited Rabbi Pearce to come to one of the interviews with me and for the two of you to talk together about *tikkun olam.* Ordinarily I would be asking you some questions about it at this point, but I want to save these questions until Rabbi's here and then the two of you will talk together, okay?

Semel: I suspect we both feel the same way about it.

Petnick: Yes. Can you describe the evolution of the organization and how more religions came to be part of it? When it started out it was Christian and Jewish and then one Muslim joined. How did it grow and change over the years?

Semel: It grew and changed because we deliberately wanted it to grow and change. There are very few people who originally were members of the board, or honorary members of the board, who are still around except, for me and one other member of the original board, Mary Culp.

Petnick: Mary Culp?

Semel: Culp. I'll tell you about her.

Petnick: Tell me how you spell her last name.

Semel: C-u-l-p. I'll tell you about her in a few minutes. She was involved at the very beginning with me. At that time there was only one Interfaith Council in the area and that was in Marin. When we decided we wanted to start the Interfaith Council [in San Francisco], Mary and I went over and talked to the Marin director: what are you doing, how do you do it, who's involved, how do you get people involved, all those questions about things that you need to know. The director, whose name I unfortunately don't remember—she no longer lives in the area—was very helpful.

Petnick: There were a lot of Indians and Tibetans—

Semel: We invited everybody. Who knew who? We tried to reach out as carefully as we could, and we still do. We try to have the board as representative of the breadth of the religious community and the faith community as we can. Michael Pappas likes to say there are eight hundred congregations in San Francisco. You know what, there are. I used to tease him about having made up that figure, but there are. We had a Coro Fellow assigned to us—you know what Coro is.

Petnick: I don't.

Semel: Coro is a program that trains future leaders. Dianne Feinstein was a Coro Fellow. C-o-r-o. Do look it up. We were lucky enough to have a Coro Fellow a few months ago. Michael had her look on the nonprofit roster of the city and, yes, we do have eight hundred congregations in this city which is supposed to be so secular and so anti-religious. Some of them are small. Some are large like St. Mary's Cathedral and Temple Emanu-El and Grace Cathedral. Some of them are tiny little things, but there they are.

Petnick: The Council grew because you had representation of more and more—

Semel: Yes. We try to make our board as diverse as possible. Our chair is a Hindu. We've got Buddhist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Jewish. I am trying to see around the table in my mind's eye.

Petnick: Episcopal?

Semel: Episcopal. Presbyterian. Interesting that you ask. The Episcopal is Ellen Clark-King who is the Vice-Dean of Grace Cathedral. You have to meet her. She is so special. She is just wonderful.

Petnick: I have a different kind of question for you. What's been the impact of the Interfaith Council on you? How has coming into contact with people of different religions changed your heart and mind and your outlook on life?

Semel: It's changed my life enormously. I feel very blessed. I feel very superior—that sounds like chutzpah, but I don't mean it that way. When I meet people who live in a silo, I think "What are they missing?" I've grown so much. I've learned so much. I think it began when I traveled with my husband in the army because we were exposed to all different places and all different kinds of people. I've always had a curiosity. I grew up without … we didn't belong to a synagogue … because my father was in rebellion against his Orthodox family. I never went to a synagogue. Emanu-El was the first synagogue I ever belonged to. That happened with a lot of first-generation kids. We never belonged to a synagogue when we were growing up. When I was in high school, some of my friends were being confirmed and I came home and I said, "I want to be confirmed." My father looked at me aghast. Finally, he said, "Okay, if you want to do it, go ahead." I went with my friend—I forget the synagogue we went to, but it was kind of meaningless because my parents were not at all involved.

Petnick: Jewish life is so tied to family life that if it's not connected to your family …

Semel: I went through it, but it didn't mean anything really because I just sort of did it.

Petnick: Have you studied other religions? Do you read books about Hinduism or Buddhism or other religions?

Semel: I haven't read books, but I've learned from people who follow those faiths.

[Repetition deleted]

Petnick: I like Hinduism. I've read the Council's work these days focuses on civil rights, homelessness, housing affordability, and disaster preparedness. Could we go through some of these and catch up on what's going on? What's the Council's current work on civil rights?

Semel: We're very, very involved. I was talking to Michael this morning. There was an incident at St. Mary's Cathedral over the weekend, some of their windows were smashed.

Petnick: I did not know this.

Semel: I didn't know it either because it wasn't in the *Chronicle*. Don't ask me why it wasn't in the *Chronicle,* but I had an e-mail from Michael this morning."What are we going to do about that?" He was going over to the cathedral after he talked to me to see exactly what happened, what the status was, and what we could do. We've been very quick. We try not to issue too many statements because if you issue too many statements, nobody reads them. We try to call out when it makes sense and show our support in however it's needed. St. Mary's has been very generous to let us use some of their conference rooms for things that we've had. We know Diane, the manager for their conference rooms, Luperini very well. Michael was going over there to see what we could do. We've called out incidents against synagogues, against mosques. We're an equal opportunity caller out-er. We're all in this together. If one group is vandalized or something has gone wrong, it might be us the next day. You never know.

Petnick: I can see how having an organized Interfaith Council, a central organization of religions, if big events happen, or the government wants to communicate something to a lot of people, it serves as a chain of command.

Semel: We have about three thousand people on our e-mail list.

Petnick: There, that's what I mean. Are those religious leaders or also congregants that are—

Semel: Congregants. Anybody who wants to be on our e-mail list, we put them on our e-mail list.

Petnick: How does disaster preparedness, which is one of your missions—

Semel: The disaster preparedness came out of the fall of the shelter. Then there was Loma Prieta and we had to deal with that.

Petnick: Chronologically it came out of that.

Semel: It's more than just homelessness. It's whatever happens, whatever needs to be done.

Petnick: Since homelessness is such a huge problem in San Francisco, I'd like for you to talk with us about your view of homelessness and what's going on and what should be going on. Just say all you want to say.

Semel: One of the things I've started to do—and it hasn't moved as quickly as I personally would like to see it move, but then I feel my age and I feel impatient. I tell Michael, "We got to get a shovel in the ground before I die." We have set up what we call an Essential Housing Taskforce. It was Bishop Marc Andrus who gave us the use of the term "essential." By "essential" we mean police, fire, teachers, people who are essential to the running of a city and are frequently—more frequently than we'd like—priced out of San Francisco. What we've done is we are trying to find out which congregations have property—a parking lot,

a football field, whatever, on which low-cost housing can be built. It's going slowly, much too slowly for my taste, but these things unfortunately take time. The Episcopal Diocese has identified four congregations and Christian Science is working on one. That's what we're currently trying to do.

Petnick: This would be to have places where you could build low-cost housing.

Semel: Affordable housing.

Petnick: Right, then be able to move some people into housing in those areas. Given the restricted size of our city.

Semel: Of our city.

Petnick: Right, it really is because we're a peninsula and we're bordered.

Semel: The San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean, we've got water on three sides.

Petnick: Property, given the reality of those natural limitations, is so expensive here, so it must be hard to find anything.

Semel: That's where we are with that.

Petnick: Does it have to stay in the City and County of San Francisco, or if you were offered property on the Peninsula or so forth …?

Semel: We'd have to go to the interfaith group. There's one in Marin, there's one in Contra Costa, there's one in Alameda. There's not an Interfaith Council, as such, down on the Peninsula. There is a group that works together, but we're concentrating on what we can do within the city limits.

Petnick: Interesting. There's the interfaith work with all the different faiths and then the different interfaith organizations and they, too, network together.

Semel: The Interfaith Center at the Presidio here in San Francisco, on a regular basis brings the directors of the various Interfaith Councils together to see what they can do as a group to learn from each other.

Petnick: Tell us more about homelessness. Are the people who are homeless in San Francisco people who were born and raised here, or are they people who came from other areas? Tell us about homelessness here.

Semel: I forget the statistics, but there are statistics about how much it's grown in the last number of years. A lot of people come because of our climate and because we have a community that's sympathetic and wants to help. We've got a homeless department in city government. Jeff Kosinski is the director, and we work closely with him.

Petnick: What's it called?

Semel: The Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. The shelter that we offer from November to February is great, but it's not a solution—it's a Band-Aid. I'm under no illusion about that. The winter shelter is necessary, but we've got to figure out how to solve the [larger] problem.

Petnick: What's the best idea you've heard about how to work on homelessness and how to solve homelessness?

Semel: Look what just happened in the legislature. [California State Senator] Scott Wiener's bill, SB50, got dumped for the second or third year in a row. That was a start. He's not going to give up.

Petnick: For the sake of this interview, tell us more about that bill. What was the content?

Semel: The bill, as I remember it, authorized the building of low-cost housing near transit centers. I still cannot fathom why it had so much opposition in the State Senate. We were at the mercy of the communities. Everybody's senator had to vote for it and in some communities, they didn't want it. Knowing Scott Wiener, he's going to come up with another version, I'm sure.

Petnick: Why did communities reject it? What were some of the reasons?

Semel: They rejected it for all kinds of reasons. "Let's do something, but not in my neighborhood." That's essentially what it came down to. "It's a great idea, but not in my neighborhood." People are so selfish. They don't realize that it helps their neighborhood if we can provide homes for people who don't have them. Everybody is so self-centered.

Petnick: Do you think the world has grown more self-centered in your lifetime?

Semel: Oh, yes.

Petnick: You've been here [on earth] almost a hundred years. You've seen a lot of change. Talk about that, would you please, how the culture, how the sense of things has changed.

Semel: You're opening a door to my concern about the President, whom I can't stand. Because of who he is and what he is and what he's done and what he has said, he has enabled a lot of people to say things and do things they never would have done before. He's made it all right to be prejudiced. He's made it all right to be self-centered. He's made it all right to not give a damn about your neighbor.

Petnick: Sad, but true. There's a saying that a country gets the president it deserves. In what way would you say that we deserve to have such a president?

Semel: I don't think we deserved to have such a president.

Petnick: Long before Trump, you could observe that the general attitude of the country had changed over the many decades.

Semel: People have become much more self-centered.

Petnick: How do you see that?

Semel: Living where I do in San Francisco, it's hard for me to appreciate what people in Knoxville, Tennessee care about. I realize we live in a bubble here. Yet even in this city there are people who say, "Yes, do it, but not in my neighborhood." Look at the fight that London Breed had when she tried and finally succeeded in setting up a navigation center on the Embarcadero. I remember the fight she had to do that, even in San Francisco. People only see what they want to see and only care about their own interest.

Petnick: A member of our congregation, Marc Benioff, is a billionaire and he became concerned about helping with homelessness. He created a tax on the wealthy San Franciscans to help with homelessness. What do you think about Mr. Benioff's efforts?

Semel: He's a very interesting man. I think he's a terrific person. I have great admiration for him. I forget the millions of dollars he gave to UC to do a study. I don't think I would have given it to do a study, but maybe something good will come of that. I hope so. He's an incredible human being. He's done a lot.

Petnick: I heard him speak at a luncheon for philanthropists last year and I was so impressed that he talked about … almost a Buddhist idea … that we're all connected. You can't make yourself happy. It's foolish to try to make yourself happy, improving your own conditions without improving the conditions of others around you because we are all connected. That's something new for a lot of people to hear, but it's something in your interfaith work that you've known well for a long time.

Semel: I remember seven or eight years ago the Federation had a Philanthropy Day, which they do frequently. The two speakers at lunch were Marc Benioff and Warren Hellman, who has since died, to talk about their ideas of philanthropy. Maybe it was as long as eight years ago. I remember Marc Benioff talking about the philosophy at Salesforce. One percent of all the profits go for philanthropy. Every employee gets one day off a month to do something in the community. Did you know that?

Petnick: No, I didn't.

Semel: And is encouraged to give one percent of their salaries to philanthropy. He put his money where his mouth is.

Petnick: He's given millions, hundreds of millions.

Semel: He believes this, and he acts it and it's not just talk. His whole attitude and his speeches about what corporations need to do sets an example. Unfortunately, not too many of them are following him. I have nothing but admiration for him. His whole position on Prop 8 last year, remember that?

Petnick: I don't.

Semel: Proposition 8 was taxing corporations.

Petnick: Yes, and that won, right?

Semel: It won. It's still in the courts because they haven't figured out whether they needed two-thirds, or they can go with a simple majority.

Petnick: For this record, let's say what that was. This was to—

Semel: This was to tax corporations for money for homelessness.

Semel: Benioff was one of the first. Maybe the man from Twitter joined him, but he was practically the only corporation exec who was supporting it, I think. There were no more than two or three, if that many. If we had more like him, we'd be better off.

Petnick: I'm glad you feel that way. Marc Benioff is one of my favorite people too.

Semel: Do you know him?

Petnick: No, just through reading about him and then seeing him that one time. I was awestruck when I heard him speak at that philanthropy luncheon about how people and all things are connected. Thinking about the people, the millionaires and billionaires, who were in that room and what he was saying to them was very important. As you said, it's not just talk. He does it himself. His speech has power not just because he's rich but because he—

Semel: He puts his money where his mouth is, exactly. To coin a phrase.

Petnick: According to the mission statement, another aspect of the Interfaith Council's work is "convening and advocacy." They're bringing people together. Can you talk about convening and advocacy?

Semel: We've worked on various issues. The most recent one is bringing congregations together to talk about security. Unfortunately in the world we live in today, security's necessary. We had three hundred congregations come together to meet with the FBI and city officials and security people to find out what they need to do to make their places safe for people to come and feel safe when they come in.

Petnick: Speaking of that, let's talk about Temple Emanu-El over the years. I remember when the sidewalk was clear and you could approach from the south and you could approach on Lake Street, or you could approach from Arguello. There were no barricades. You've been a member since the fifties, right?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Tell us what you remember of the physical changes that relate to security.

Semel: When I first joined, as you were saying, you could just walk in. Now they put the barricades up on the street and now they've got a security station. You can only go in one way. You have to put your bag down and you have to open it. When there are special events, we have more security. The same thing has happened with other congregations, not only Jewish congregations, but others. When we offered a symposium on security, we had three hundred congregations come because everybody's concerned about it. Look at Grace Cathedral with the big plaza. Anybody can walk in there.

Petnick: They have a lot of exposure.

Semel: That's the world we live in.

Petnick: You're on the board of directors of Temple Emanu-El?

Semel: And I'm on the board of Grace Cathedral.

Petnick: That's interesting. What do you have to say about that?

Semel: It's interesting. I feel honored that I am on both boards. One of the things that I've learned is if Grace Cathedral goes before the Board of Supervisors for whatever, they have a certain amount of influence. If Temple Emanu-El goes, they have a certain amount of influence. If Calvary Presbyterian goes, they have a certain amount of influence. But if the three of them go together, it's much more impactful, and that's the whole ideal of interfaith, of working together. If we can go someplace and say, "We represent eight hundred congregations …"

Whatever you are doing becomes that much more meaningful because you're doing it with people who care about the same things and want the same results, who think that certain issues need to be addressed.

Petnick: Tell us about clergy from Grace Cathedral and from Emanu-El who have sat on the Interfaith Council. Who has represented those two august institutions?

Semel: I represent Emanu-El because I'm on the board of Emanu-El. Ellen Clark-King, who is the Vice-Dean of Grace Cathedral, represents Grace Cathedral. We've had other people from Emanu-El on the board at different times.

Petnick: How about participating?

Semel: Absolutely.

Petnick: Do most of the rabbis participate at one time or another? Rabbi Mintz, Rabbi Cohn, when she was here?

Semel: Yes, Rabbi Jonathan Jaffe, he was on the board.

Petnick: Our current rabbis, Beth and Jonathan Singer?

Semel: They are supportive, but they've never been on the board. I guess they feel that since I'm there, they don't need anybody else. But someday I'm not going to be there, and they are going to have somebody else.

Petnick: We're counting on you to live forever.

Semel: Oh, god.

Petnick: No? (Laughs) That's a subject I'd like to talk about. You're ninety-eight now. You were ninety-eight on your last birthday, November 15. How does it feel to be this age? What's it like to be ninety-eight? Tell the truth. Tell us.

Semel: Some days I feel like I'm ninety-eight, and some days I don't. People ask me, "What's the secret? Why do you do it?" I go back to what my friend Pam David said when she left the Walter & Elise Haas Fund. She said, "I'm not retiring, I'm rewiring." I hold that close to my heart. As long as I can keep going, it's fine. Who knows why I'm able to do all I do, but I think it's because I've not decided to retire. Instead, I've decided to rewire.

Petnick: Keeps you charged up?

Semel: Yes. I get bored easily if I don't have enough to do.

Petnick: Your daughter was teasing you and she said something about on your tombstone it's going to say—

Semel: "She's not here. She's gone to a meeting."

(Laughter)

Petnick: Rewiring—that's clever. At your age, your energy levels probably fluctuate a lot. Is that why you mean some days you feel ninety-eight, other times you—

Semel: If I'm at a meeting, I don't think about my age.

Petnick: How about your outlook on life? Do you have a different worldview or view as you age? Do you look at human life or your own life differently now?

Semel: I guess I'm not happy with the state of the United States right now. I'm not happy about the state of the world. I think the current administration has given permission for all the bad things that people feel to come to the fore. I try not to listen to Donald Trump because it makes me so angry, unhappy, frustrated, miserable, whatever. But to hear him talk and the things he says about other people, people feel free to express themselves that way, in ways that they didn't previously. We've had bad presidents before, but I think this one is the worst, the absolute worst. I couldn't stop myself last week from watching some of the stuff that went on in the Senate and it was just appalling.

Petnick: This was the impeachment trial, the trial in the Senate.

Semel: Yes. I thought Adam Schiff was incredibly wonderful. I thought Alan Dershowitz was just dreadful. I was embarrassed that he was Jewish.

Petnick: I felt the same way. I used to admire Mr. Dershowitz many, many years ago.

Semel: I did too.

Petnick: He's been the disappointment of a lifetime.

Semel: I thought he was just awful. No money in the world could make me say the things he said at that hearing.

Petnick: What's something hopeful or bright that you see going on today? Let's end on a more positive note.

Semel: I'm hopeful that there'll be lots of people who are saying, "I'll vote for any Democrat," as we see the ongoing struggle as to who's going to be the Democratic candidate. I feel that way. I'll vote for any Democrat. I hope it's the right one. Don't ask me who I think is the right one because I haven't made up my mind. Anyone would be better than Trump. I hope that a lot of people share that view.

Petnick: Okay. I'm going to end on that note, unless there's something else you wanted to add to our discussion today.

Semel: No.

Interview 4: February 5, 2020

Basya Petnick: Today we're going to be talking mainly about your husband, Max Semel. But before we begin talking about Max and his influence on you, Rita, let's talk about where we are right now, about this great moment in US history. We've just had the President's State of the Union Address torn up by Nancy Pelosi on camera and so forth. Let's start there. What's going on in today's world?

Rita Semel: What's going on is beyond words. I can't believe I'm living in the same country that I grew up in and that I loved all these years. All I can say is that the Democrats better get their act together or we'll be lost forever. Donald Trump is making up history as he goes along. Not a word comes out of his mouth that's true. If it wasn't for Nancy Pelosi and Adam Schiff and a few other stalwarts like that in Congress, I would say we'd have no hope at all. I'm just hoping that the truth will come out and the election in November will prove that democracy can work. But the Democrats have to get together and figure out who can beat Donald Trump and put their own egos aside, which, when I say this, everybody says to me, "But being a politician, you have an ego and you don't put it aside," so maybe that won't happen. But if they care about the country, that's what needs to happen.

Petnick: They need to focus on what's important.

Semel: Absolutely. And who can beat Trump.

Petnick: Let's talk a moment about what happened last night. The President gave his address and then an unusual thing happened which was that the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, tore up her copy of the address. Why did she do that? Do you know?

Semel: I wasn't watching, I just read about it in the paper this morning. Knowing Nancy as I do—I've known her for forty years or so—it doesn't surprise me. She is one of the few people along with Adam Schiff and Zoe Lofgren and a few others who are standing up to this man and calling him out for the liar and the dishonest human being that he is. The fact that she tore up his speech to me was a symbol of how she felt, and [also] how she felt the rest of us ought to feel.

Petnick: You've known Nancy Pelosi for forty years?

Semel: I think that's about right.

Petnick: Tell us about that.

Semel: [When I first met her] she and Paul lived in Presidio Terrace.

Petnick: Paul Pelosi, her husband?

Semel: Her husband. I had a friend, Naomi Lauter, who, unfortunately, is no longer living. She lived next-door to them. I came to Presidio Terrace one day to visit Naomi and there was this woman pushing a baby buggy. Naomi introduced me to her. She said, "This is my neighbor, Nancy Pelosi." That's how we met.

I had no idea who she was, of course. After she walked by and I went into Naomi's house, she told me a little bit about her: the fact that she came from a Democratic political family in Baltimore; that her father and her brother had been mayors of Baltimore; and that Nancy at that time was heavily involved in the Democratic Party, which she had been all of her life. Her role was to raise money for candidates. I saw her casually over the years and I got to know her a little bit. I knew Sala Burton who was then a member of Congress, the widow of Phil Burton who had taken Phil's place when he died. Then I found out that when Sala was on her deathbed, she said to Nancy, "You have to take my place." I must admit I was startled when I heard this because I thought, "She's a good fundraiser, but is she going to be a good member of Congress?"

That shows you how little I knew.

Petnick: There was a question.

Semel: There was a question. Then she took Sala's place and the rest is history. She's become, thank God for us all, one of the most important people in the United States, number three. My dream is that Trump will be thrown out and then Mike Pence will be thrown out and, guess what, who's number three? That's Nancy.

Petnick: Right. I would love to see her in the White House.

Semel: Wouldn't that be something?

Petnick: It really would. Are there particular political acts in her role as Speaker of the House that are memorable to you? Is there legislation that you particularly appreciate that she was instrumental in passing? Or, on the other hand, defeating?

Semel: I can't think at the moment of any specific thing, but I'll try to. She has generally stood for all the things that were right. I don't mean right politically, but right as the thing to do. She's been a tremendous leader. She's never forgotten her roots. For example, the San Francisco Interfaith Council has a breakfast every Thanksgiving and she always comes.

Petnick: Really?

Semel: Yes, she always comes, and she always has something important to say about what's going on at that particular time. When you think about it, here's a woman who is number three in the United States government, takes time to make sure the people in her own community are not neglected and she comes and makes her views known. That says a lot about her character.

Petnick: Yes, it does. You know her, and she knows you personally, is that right?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: You mentioned to me that you were at her New Year's party this year.

Semel: Yes, I was at her New Year's party— she had the San Francisco Girls' Chorus. What she told me at that time, which was just a couple of weeks ago, was that she was going to be going to Auschwitz to be part of the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation. Then she was going on to Yad Vashem in Israel. She is a staunch supporter of liberty and justice for all, as it says in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Petnick: Wonderful.

Semel: What do they sing? "America the Beautiful," all the verses.

Petnick: Poetically, that song is beautiful.

Semel: Yes. Just beautiful.

Petnick: Where was her New Year's party held?

Semel: At the Golden Gate Club at the Presidio. Speaking of the Presidio, which is a wonderful place [and] has wonderful opportunities for all San Franciscans, we wouldn't have it if it wasn't for Nancy. When the military decided to close it, it was up for grabs and it was because of her legislation that it became a national park rather than being cut up in twenty-four-foot lots. That's symbolic. You asked me what she's done for the city? That is something she has done for the city.

Petnick: A wonderful thing to do. Thank you very much, Nancy Pelosi. I'm sorry I didn't know that about you, but now I do, and I won't forget it. Rita, when I asked you what you would really like to talk about today, you said you would like to talk about your husband, Max Semel. Tell us what you'd like us to know about Max. Tell the whole story, take your time, and tell everything you want to tell.

Semel: I was very lucky. After I graduated from college and my parents divorced, which we'll talk about some other time, I was here in San Francisco. I had just graduated from a college in New York, and I had never really lived in San Francisco. For the first few months after that, I was kind of lost. I didn't quite know what I was going to do with my life. My family life was disrupted by the divorce. My mother was unhappy, and my sister was at Berkeley in graduate school. My mother decided to visit her brother in Florida, and I decided to go back to New York. A friend of mine from Barnard met me at the train—there were trains in those days—this is early 1942, just after Pearl Harbor. She met me at the train, and she said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'll have to

look for a job." I had always wanted to go to Columbia School of Journalism, but I couldn't do that because of the divorce.

Petnick: For economic reasons?

Semel: It was too late to register. My friend's name was Joan. She told me that she was working at Abraham & Straus, a department store in Brooklyn, just across the river from Manhattan. She was working in their executive training program. I said, "I'm interested in writing." She said, "Do the training and then you can work in the Advertising Department."

I took the path of least resistance, I must admit, and I went, and I was accepted to be part of the executive training program. I soon learned about Max Semel's existence because he was one of the few single men working there. He was the assistant general manager, way out of my league. He was single and quite good-looking. All the single women working there had their eye on him. I was just this lowly trainee. He was to be inducted into the Army and out of the blue he invited me for lunch the last day he was there. I found out later he had had three lunches that day. Anyway, we had lunch and it was very pleasant. I said, "Goodbye and good luck," and that was that. A couple of days later I got a phone call from him saying that his induction had been postponed for a couple of weeks, and he invited me out to dinner.

We went out to dinner and he was not inducted for three weeks. At the end of three weeks we had decided to get married, which was pretty unusual in those days, except that it became usual because of the war and all that meant. My mother by this time had come to New York, and she and I were sharing an apartment. My sister was still in California. I called my sister, and she, who was five years older than I was and much more sophisticated, was horrified. "You're going to marry this man you've known for three weeks?" "Yes." Her answer shocked me. She said, "Sleep with him if you have to but don't marry him." This is 1942 and I was shocked out of my … I never heard of such a thing.

Max and I corresponded. He was doing his basic training at Camp McClellan in Virginia. He wrote that he was accepted to Officers Training School and that he would have a week's leave and he would come up to New York and we would get married, which we did. He came up to New York, and my mother and his parents and his sister and brother-in-law and I met him at the train. It was a Thursday, September 24. We came back to my mother's and my apartment and he said, "Tomorrow we'll go to City Hall and get a marriage license and we'll get married." My sister-in-law-to-be said, "No, you'll get married on Saturday at my home." My future mother-in-law said, "We have to find a rabbi." I did not belong to anything and I didn't have a clue as to how to find a rabbi. But I remembered that one of my sister's college roommates had just gotten married a couple of weeks before, so I called her. I told her what was going on and I said, "I need a rabbi. Who married you?" She said, "The rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in New York," and she gave me his telephone number. I called him and I explained the situation. It was September 24, which that year was between

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when you're not supposed to get married. I told him the story and that we had this short period of time [while Max was on leave.] There was silence on the phone for a few minutes and I thought he was going to say no. Then he said, "Okay, I think God will understand," which I thought was very, very nice. And he married us.

I don't know how my sister-in-law arranged it all between Thursday night and Saturday night, but there were about forty people at the wedding. It was lovely, it was very nice.

Petnick: That's great. You had a complete wedding. Let me ask a question. How did you know that Max was the right person for you? Somewhere inside yourself did you know or feel that? You made a very important decision. How did you make that decision? What did you feel?

Semel: It's interesting you ask me because in thinking back it was completely irrational, it was only emotional. I had no idea. It must have been something that told me. I knew he was a good person. I knew he was a caring person. I knew he was smart. I was not quite twenty-one years old—what did I know? I just went with my instinct.

Petnick: Tell me about Max himself. Your daughter has told me a little about him, how he loved to read—

Semel: There are a number of things you need to know about Max. He was the fourth in a family of five children. His parents had been immigrants who came from Germany, I think. I'm not sure about that, but I think so. Semel is a German name meaning biscuit or something like that. He was number four of five, and he was the only one of his siblings who went to college. He went to college at night because they all had to work.

Petnick: He was first-generation American, and his parents were born in the Old Country.

Semel: Yes, he was first-generation American. He went to college at night and worked during the day. When I met Max, he was seven years older than I was and he had already graduated, but he never stopped learning. He loved to learn. If he had had his desire, he would have been a teacher.

Petnick: He went to City College?

Semel: No, he went to Johns Hopkins in New York at night and worked during the day. He did well at Abraham & Straus. As I said, he was the assistant general manager when he went into the army.

Petnick: It's never easy to work all day and go to school at night.

Semel: That's what he did. He loved school, loved learning.

Petnick: Your daughter said Max loved literature, he loved history. He liked to read the dictionary. Tell us about that.

Semel: If Max came across a word he didn't know, he immediately went to the dictionary. He loved language. He was a good writer. His letters when he was overseas were really good. Unfortunately, after he died and I moved from the house to the apartment, somehow his letters got lost in the shuffle. I don't have them, and it breaks my heart that I don't.

After our wedding, Max left and went [off to the army], to officers' school. When he graduated, he was assigned to Fort McClellan [in] Alabama. I decided to give up my job and go be with him in Anniston, Alabama. [This] was the beginning of my second college education, going to the South.

Petnick: Yes, we talked about that. Tell me some things that you liked about Max and some things that he liked about you. I'd like to know more about how you related.

Semel: He and I were very different. He was much more thoughtful than I. I have a tendency to make up [my] mind in twenty minutes, and he had to think more about it. He was much quieter than I. He didn't make friends as easily as I do.

Petnick: Did he get his master's degree? He had an undergraduate degree in English, but he never got his graduate degree.

Semel: He was never able to finish, no.

Petnick: Why was that?

Semel: Because of the war.

Petnick: He was quieter, more thoughtful than you. You were a more outgoing person, quick to make decisions, quick to meet people, get engaged and involved.

Semel: Right.

Petnick: An important thing to you was that Max was very supportive rather than critical of who you were.

Semel: Yes. He was way ahead of his time.

Petnick: How do you mean?

Semel: When the war was over and he came back, I was working. It was assumed by most that I would immediately give up my job, which I didn't. He certainly was very supportive. I only gave up my job when I became pregnant with my

daughter Elisabeth. At the time I thought that's what women did. I thought I was supposed to do that.

Petnick: Which job was that?

Semel: I was the associate editor of the *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*.

Petnick: How many years were you in that job at the *Bulletin*? Five years?

Semel: Yes, about five years.

Petnick: You left because you were pregnant with Elisabeth.

Semel: Yes. I thought I was supposed to. I found out a few months after she was born that I loved her dearly, but I didn't really like staying at home the whole time, so I did freelance PR for a number of years.

(Telephone ringing)

Semel: Jane was born eighteen months later, and I was doing freelance PR. Max was very supportive of my doing that. We were fortunate to find a housekeeper named Bertha Robinson, a lovely African-American woman who helped me and helped take care of the kids when I wasn't there. I did that for a number of years, and he was always very supportive of my feeling that I needed to do something outside of the house, which was most unusual for his generation and for his time.

Petnick: What was his thinking on it? You're right, it wasn't the thing to do.

Semel: We had a group of friends that we met, veterans he had met at World War II's version of the American Legion, called the American Veterans Committee. Max met a number of people there and we became friends [with them and] their wives, and also [with a group of people] from the nursery school. The girls went to what was then called a co-op nursery school in which the parents had to work one day a week. The custom was that people would be invited for Saturday night dinner and we would move from house to house. At one dinner, one of our friends said to Max, "I wouldn't let my wife work." Max said, "What do you mean 'let her work'? She is a grownup. She can decide what she wants to do." There was shocked silence, because I was the only one of this group ofwomen who did anything outside of the home.

Petnick: That's such an important incident. The man who said that was reflecting the idea of women as the property of men, owned and controlled by men. It was very brave of Max and he was very advanced in his thinking that he did not take on that view of women.

Semel: That was typical of him. He respected me as a fellow human being who was his equal not his inferior. He was supportive of everything I did all of the rest of the time we had together.

Petnick: That's fantastic. How lucky.

Semel: I was very lucky.

Petnick: Tell me about things that you liked to talk about together, maybe some things you argued about. Bring us into your memories.

Semel: We argued about politics. We were both liberal. Lis likes to remember the incident when Adlai Stevenson was running for president and Henry Wallace was running on the Socialist Party. Max persuaded my sister to vote for Henry Wallace and then he voted for Adlai Stevenson. That's the story that Lis loves to tell. My sister was furious when she found out.

(Laughter)

Petnick: Why did he do that?

Semel: I think it was an intellectual exercise for him.

Petnick: To see if he could persuade her?

Semel: That he could persuade her to do that.

It was because of Max's friendship with my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, that my sister's and my relationship, which had never been very good—because she was five years older and she was the perfect child who never did anything wrong—got better because Max and my brother-in-law were good friends.

Petnick: What was your brother-in-law's name?

Semel: My brother-in-law's name was Sidney Resnick. Max and he met at one of the meetings of the American Veterans Committee. He was a CPA and he had just moved here and gotten a job with a firm here in town. Max met him at one of those meetings and invited him for dinner. My sister, who was working at that time as Governor Earl Warren's speechwriter, was down from Sacramento and she was there for dinner and that's how they met.

Petnick: Your sister is Miriam Resnick.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: She was [the] speechwriter for Earl Warren.

Semel: At that time for Governor Warren, and then she met Sid. We were responsible for that wedding.

Petnick: Interesting. You had a lot of political ties and interests going on in your—

Semel: We always did, yes.

Petnick You did PR work because of your pregnancy, but what was your first social action job?

Semel: I got a call from a man named Si [Isaiah L.] Kenen who had just started an organization called the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC. I forget how he heard about me. The Republicans were having their national convention in San Francisco—it was the year they nominated Eisenhower. Si said he would like to hire me. The thing he wanted me to do was get him the opportunity to speak before the platform committee of the Republican Convention because he wanted their support for something. I was able to do that.

One of my clients was AIPAC, for a number of years we worked to establish a group—a chapter—here in San Francisco [that] supported AIPAC. I did that. I met Naomi Lauter, she became involved and that leads to the meeting with Nancy.

Petnick: I want to go back to Max because he's our main subject of discussion today. I want to know more about the way you related. What were your enjoyments? Did you go dancing? Did you travel together? How did you relax—

Semel: We didn't do much traveling in those days. The girls were little, and he was working for the Sixth Army as a civilian doing human resources work. The Sixth Army was located at the Presidio. We didn't have terribly much money, so we didn't do much traveling. We had the two little kids.

Petnick: Where did you live then?

Semel: We bought our first house just before Lis was born at 198 Vasquez Avenue, which is in Forest Hills extension.

Petnick: That is south of here, this being the northern end of San Francisco.

Semel: 198 Vasquez was a two-bedroom house. When Jane was born, there was a tiny little room behind our bedroom, so we made that into a nursery, but we realized we needed to have a bigger house. The second house we bought was at 93 Rockaway Avenue in the same area, just a few blocks away abutting St. Brendan's Church. What I didn't realize when I bought the house on Rockaway Avenue was that everybody on the block was Catholic and all their kids went to St. Brendan's. My kids were not going to go to St. Brendan's, they were going to go to West Portal School. All the Catholic kids went to West Portal School

for kindergarten, but when it came time for first grade, they all went to St. Brendan's and my kids stayed at West Portal. They were the only ones who did. It was a good school. They had a good education. San Francisco public schools at that time were very good. It breaks my heart to see what's happened to the schools since then. When the whole business came in to integrate the schools, we all thought we were being so smart to support busing but busing literally destroyed the San Francisco schools.

Petnick: It was a mistake?

Semel: When Kamala Harris was running for president and she talked about how great busing was, I couldn't believe my ears. The kids would be brought in, they'd stay for school, and then they would go out. A lot of White parents in San Francisco, as in other communities, either put their kids in private schools or they moved out of the city, so what did we accomplish? Nothing. As long as you had a neighborhood school, it was the segregated neighborhood that was the problem, not the segregated school.

Petnick: You want to keep that connection between school and neighborhood. That's the way the kids get to know one another, that's the way the parents get to know one another in the neighborhood. It strengthens—

Semel: You have to integrate the neighborhood, not the schools.

Petnick: Exactly. How much were houses in those days—these houses that you were buying?

Semel: The first house was $23,000. We had a loan from the Veterans Administration, and we thought we were spending a lot of money. I forget how much the second house was, but it probably wasn't too much more than that. We lived on Rockaway Avenue. It was a dead-end street and our house abutted a cliff. In 1966-67, we had a torrential rain and half the cliff fell down into our kitchen.

Petnick: Into your kitchen! No!

Semel: Yes, because the house abutted the cliff. Nobody was hurt but it was a big mess, as you can imagine. We said, "Enough of this." At that time I was working at the Jewish Community Relations Council. Earl Raab was the director and I was the associate director. He said to me, "You have to get out of this neighborhood. Move to the Mission. The weather's better." That's when we moved to Castro Street.

Petnick: Castro Street. What were the cross-streets? Where did you live exactly?

Semel: We lived at 928 Castro Street between 22nd and Alvarado.

Petnick: You lived there for a long time?

Semel: We lived there until Max died in 1994.We bought this 1902 Victorian on Castro. It was one of five. We had seventeen steps to the front door, seventeen steps to the bedrooms. We had three bedrooms and two bathrooms.

Petnick: Jane was living then?

Semel: Jane died in 1970. We lived on Castro Street when she died. Lis was in college at Bard in the East. Jane was here at San Francisco State.

Petnick: Max was close with the girls.

Semel: He was the best father.

Petnick: Tell us about each of your daughters themselves, and then their relationship with their father.

Semel: There were two girls born eighteen months apart. They couldn't have been more different. Lis was very smart from the beginning, and at eleven months she began to talk. She took longer to walk, but she started talking really early. She was outstanding in school. Jane took much longer to do everything, but she was extremely artistic. She made that dulcimer. She had a beautiful voice. She inherited my father's voice. She was very artistic. I have some coasters that she made.

Semel: She sang. She had trouble learning to read. We had to get a tutor to help her to read. She [had] the sunniest, most wonderful disposition. She was beautiful. She was a lovely young woman.

Petnick: How did she die?

Semel: She was visiting a friend and the friend's family had what-do-you-call-it in the basement? Oh, my god, Rita.

Petnick: Give me a clue, what are we going for here? Like a recreation room?

Semel: I'm having a senior moment.

Petnick: It's quite all right. Your memory, considering that you're ninety-eight years old, is phenomenal. I know people my age, who are in their seventies, who can't remember as much as you do. Please, take your time. She was visiting a friend.

Semel: They have them in gyms and health places.

Petnick: A piece of exercise equipment?

Semel: No, it wasn't exercise equipment. I guess I don't want to remember.

Petnick: There was something in the basement that had to do with sports.

Semel: Yes, and the thing didn't work, and they were both—it was like a sauna, I guess, and it didn't work, and she and her friend were both killed.

Petnick: They were taking a sauna in the basement and something happened with the sauna.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: And it killed both of them … like fumes or something, or some sort of exhaust? How extraordinary and how shocking.

Semel: It's awful. Awful. It's the worst thing that can ever happen is to lose a child.

Petnick: It must have been so hard for you, I'm sorry …

Semel: You never get over it, never get over it. Lis was in college. She came home and she said she [was] not going to go back to college, she was going to stay home to be with us. Max said, "No. If we want to honor Jane, we each have to go on with our lives and do what we were doing so that she can be proud of us." That's what we did. Needless to say, it impacted all of our lives. Lis went back to college, I went back to doing what I was doing, he went back to doing what he was doing. He went to services every Friday night for a year. I couldn't go.

Petnick: You were already members of Emanu-El.

Semel: Yes, we joined Emanu-El when Lis was born. Every time I go there now, I think of what he said. "If we want to honor her memory, we have to go on with what we're doing."

Petnick: That was wise of him to say that. He was close with both the girls, right? When they were little girls, he—

Semel: He was the best father. When they were little, Saturday was Daddy's Day. He would take them out and I was never invited. They would go to the zoo or they'd go to Golden Gate Park or they'd go downtown, or they'd go to a museum, whatever, every Saturday.

In a way it was pleasant for me because I had a couple of hours for myself, but that was it. I was never invited to go with them, which in thinking back was really wonderful. It was an opportunity. They loved him. I forget which one of them came home from school one day and was telling me something terrible that happened at school—I don't even remember what it was—and then she said to me, "But don't tell Daddy. I don't want him to worry." It's all right to worry Mom, but don't tell Daddy.

(Laughter)

Petnick: Was Max healthy most of his life? What happened with Max?

Semel: He was working in human resources for the Sixth Army. He did very well, but that really wasn't what he wanted to do. He never stopped learning. He took classes at San Francisco State every year at night. One night a week he would go off to San Francisco State to take a class. He loved learning. Even after he retired. There's the Fromm Institute now at USF, it wasn't then, but there was a senior program at UC Extension. He and one of our friends went every week to that. He never stopped learning. The other thing about him that Lis reminded me that I have to tell you is that he loved Christmas carols. At the beginning of December when they would start to play them on the radio, we had Christmas carols every night and all day if he was home. He loved Christmas carols.

Petnick: And he loved you. It sounds like you had a happy marriage.

Semel: We had a great marriage.

Petnick: It was a quick decision but the right decision.

Semel: We didn't make a mistake. It lasted fifty-one years.

Petnick: I understand that your focus was community organizing and various issues and he had his intellectual interests, but what were some of the interests you shared?

Semel: We both loved the ballet. We went to the ballet every year, went to the symphony every year, opera not so much. We both loved the theatre. We went to A.C.T. every year.

Petnick: To dress up, go out to those events, and appreciate and enjoy them together. That sounds great.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: He was always supportive of you, encouraging you.

Semel: He was, indeed.

Petnick: Did you tell him a lot about your work?

Semel: Yes, we would discuss it.

Petnick: You would discuss it and he would give you advice sometimes.

Semel: He was not a great one for big dinners, so we had an arrangement. If he had something connected with his job to do at night, I didn't have to go unless it would be embarrassing for him for me not to show up. I did the same thing. When I was at JCRC, I loved community events, and I didn't make him go to all of them.

Petnick: Is there anything else you'd like to share today about Max himself?

Semel: I was really lucky. I had a husband who was very, very supportive of what I wanted to do and what I did do. Maybe deep in his heart he would have preferred to have someone like his mother who stayed home and cooked but, if so, he never let me know.

Petnick: How did you deal with cooking? Did you cook—

Semel: I cooked.

Petnick: You cooked every day.

Semel: I was fortunate enough to find this woman, Bertha Robinson, who came to work for us when Jane was about a year or a year and a half and stayed until Jane went to high school. She came—I can't remember how many days a week she came, but certainly when I was doing freelancing she was there.

Petnick: Do you want some water?

Semel: I'm fine. I seem to not be able to lose this cold. Anyway, she was with us for a dozen years or so. The kids loved her. She was African-American and she used to take them to her church. They loved her church; they loved the music.

Petnick: That's great. You've had a very lucky life. You went to a great college. You married a handsome, intelligent, kind and good man, who was a good husband to you and a good father to your children. You had household help that you could trust and who supported you. That's a big thing for a woman to have someone like that. For her to be able to go out and to know that the children and the house are being properly taken care of. It's a big relief isn't it? Otherwise your attention is always distracted and divided.

Semel: I was very lucky.

Petnick: Is that it for today? Is there anything else you want to share? Anything else come up as a memory?

Semel: There's one more thing about Max. He was diagnosed with diabetes. It shows the kind of character he had. He was told that he had certain things that had to happen in his diet. I changed my whole method of cooking to comply with the dietary regulations. He had to do exercise and he had to take certain medications. He was completely—not devoted, that's the wrong word, but he did those things and he survived for twenty-five years, which was incredible.

Petnick: Because he took care of himself. Otherwise he wouldn't have lived that long.

Semel: It's a very, very destructive disease. It destroyed him in the end, but it took twenty-five years. He was very disciplined, and I tried to do what I had to do. To this day I don't have anything with salt. When the waiter comes around with the salt and I say, "No," people look at me and I say, "I learned not to use salt because salt is not a good thing." I changed the way I cooked, how I cooked, what I cooked, to go with the diet that the doctor gave. He survived for twenty-five years.

Petnick: He couldn't have salt and sugar? He had to probably limit his sugar.

Semel: Sugar, salt, that kind of thing.

Petnick: Food on the one hand is nutrition—it sustains your life; on the other hand, it can become a poison and can take your life.

Semel: Chicken and pasta and very little red meat.

Petnick: So you cooked.

Semel: I changed my whole way of cooking.

Petnick: No more pot roasts. (Laughs) How old was Max when he died?

Semel: Eighty.

Petnick: He lived to be eighty. He was a little older—

Semel: I was seventy-two.

Petnick: I'm glad you had all the happy years that you did have. You had a lot of happy years.

Semel: Fifty-one.

Petnick: So you had your 50th anniversary, your Golden Anniversary.

Semel: We did. You want to hear about that?

Petnick: I do. Tell me, Golden Anniversary.

Semel: The 50th anniversary … Lis was by that time a lawyer and living in San Diego. She called a friend of ours and she said, "My parents are going to have their 50th wedding anniversary and I'd like to come up and give them a party." Her name happened to be Jane. "Jane, would you be able to help?" Jane knew us well and knew my husband was not a great one for parties, and she said, "Lis, have you spoken to your parents about this?" Lis said, "No." She said, "Why don't you see whether your father wants a party and if he does, of course, I'll help you."

So, she called and I was on one phone and he was on the other. She said, "I'm going to come up and Jane Winthrop and I are going to plan a party for you." But Max didn't want a party; he wanted to go to Paris, his favorite city.

He wasn't particularly fond of traveling, but if I could persuade him to travel, it had to include Paris. Fine. We went to Paris. I said, "I want to go to Bruges." We compromised: we'd go to Paris and then we'd drive to Bruges. She and the then gentleman friend, whom she did not marry, came up from San Diego and went with us. She had been a French major in college, so she spoke fluent French. I don't know if you know about the French.

Petnick: I do.

Semel: My fractured French—I studied French in college, but I was not good. She was completely fluent. What a difference it makes when you go with someone who knows how to speak French. Their whole attitude changes. We went to Paris; we had a great time. Then we rented a car and we were driving to Bruges. On the way we stopped at Giverny and then we went on to the coast and we spent the night at Honfleur. When we got to Honfleur, the inn at which we were staying [had] a sign which said, "To the D-Day beaches." Max had never talked about landing on Omaha Beach, which he did on day three.

He was wounded and he spent six months in the hospital. He never talked about it. Lis said, "Daddy, I want to see where you landed." If I had said, "I want to see where you landed," he would have said, "Forget it." But Lis said it. He could never say no to her for anything. The next morning we went to Omaha Beach and it was the first time that he ever talked about that experience, the very first time in all those years. I think it was good for him. I think it was something he kept bottled up all that time.

Petnick: Many men coming home from the war were like that—they could not, did not speak of it—and still, to this day, men coming back from war …

Semel: That's interesting you said that, because I feel the same way. Anybody who talks about their wartime experiences was not in action. Anybody who saw action never talks about it. Of course, we didn't know about PTSD during World War II, but I'm sure he suffered from it. He had to, having gone through that experience. He talked about lying in a foxhole while the German planes were flying over until they could break out from the beach to go to Saint-Lô, the famous breakout. He never talked about it until that time.

Petnick: Okay. It would take a lifetime to talk about Max completely, don't you think?

Semel: Yes.

Interview 5: February 11, 2020

Basya Petnick: Today we're looking through a folder of clippings and other materials about the Interfaith Council and making some notes about the things we find. The first thing in the folder is this newspaper article. Rita, could you tell us more about it?

Rita Semel: This is an article from *Catholic San Francisco* about a meeting that some of us had with the interim acting police chief. This is before Bill Scott was appointed police chief.

Petnick: What year is the article dated?

Semel: It's dated August 2016. The idea was that we would provide a list of faith leaders in each district for the police to have to call on. The idea came from G. L. Hodge, who was at that time the chair of the Interfaith Council. He and I with Michael Pappas, the executive director, met with Toney Chaplin, who was then the acting police chief, to talk about it. Toney Chaplin thought it was a great idea. We did provide names of people in various districts—rabbis, ministers, priests—that the police could call on.

Petnick: Did they use it, do you know?

Semel: It's one of those things that nobody really followed up on. I should mention it to Michael. Maybe it's time to follow up and see if the idea still has merit, or if we should update it because some of the clergy have changed. We ought to talk to Bill Scott, the current chief, and see if it's something he might be wanting us to do.

Petnick: What were some of the circumstances that were envisioned in which the police or fire people would call the clergy? Give us an example.

Semel: I'm trying to think of one. If there was an act of violence not necessarily against a church or a synagogue but in the community, it might be helpful to the police if that person belonged to a congregation of some sort and if the police could call on the clergy person to be helpful. That might be one way to do it. It's said that San Francisco is an irreligious community, but we have eight hundred congregations in this city.

Petnick: I'm fascinated to know that. I never would have guessed. It also makes a very good point that the things that we read and hear about are not necessarily so.

Semel: That's right.

Petnick: I can envision that if someone were in an accident, or somebody died, or … that the police or fire department could take a member of the clergy of that person's faith to the home—

Semel: It could be helpful, yes.

Petnick: It would work.

Semel: I can see if I were in trouble and one of the rabbis came from Emanu-El, that would be helpful.

Petnick: (Laughing) You better stay out of trouble. You know they'll *all* be here.

Semel: I'll try to stay out of trouble.

Petnick: Let's see what we have next. This is about an anniversary celebrating twenty-five years of the Interfaith Council. We'll look at it and see if there's something we wish to record.

Semel: It was a concert that was held at the Unitarian Church. It was our twenty-fifth anniversary. Vance George, who used to be the director of the symphony chorus, put it together for us. Musicians from a number of congregations performed.

Petnick: It makes me think of another aspect of your work with the Interfaith Council. It's brought a lot of beauty into your life, colorful people and so forth.

Semel: Yes, this is what I said. We have an annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast every year.

Petnick: Tell us all about that.

Semel: On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. What we do at that breakfast is we celebrate what we've done in the past year and look toward what we need to do the following year. We didn't do it for the first few years. This is the program from the 2017 one. We celebrated twenty-five years. The theme of it was, "Together We Can Do More." I think that really is the reason for the Interfaith Council, or for any collaboration.

For example, if something comes up before the Board of Supervisors that affects the faith community and if a group from the Jewish community went, they would have a certain amount of influence; if a group from the Protestant community went, they'd have a certain amount of influence, etc. But if the Catholics and the Protestants and the Jews and the Muslims all go together, their influence is multiplied many times. That's what we mean when we say, "Together We Can Do More." That's the whole reason for the Interfaith Council—by collaborating, by joining together, by finding the things that we have in common, the things we care about that are the same, we can have

more of an impact.

Petnick: I would imagine that your Prayer Breakfast is a highly attended event every year.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: How many people attend?

Semel: We have it at the Kabuki Hotel. The capacity is about two hundred and fifty, and it's a sellout every year. People have said, "Why don't you go to a larger place?" The problem is we would have to go downtown and going downtown into a hotel would cost much more, and it would be harder for people to get to. We've decided to stay where we are. People will just have to sign up more quickly, so they get a place.

Petnick: Makes sense. Downtown's a different atmosphere. You have more intimacy in a hotel like Kabuki. When things get very large then it becomes more of a corporate kind of event.

Semel: Exactly. Yes. We do this every year.

Petnick: Who gets invited to be a speaker at this event?

Semel: It depends what the problems are or what the issues are at the time. With this one, let's see the program … one of the speakers that year was Ed Lee, Mayor of San Francisco.

Petnick: This is the 2014 Thanksgiving Prayer Breakfast?

Semel: The mayor, Nancy Pelosi, and Michael Pappas, the executive director, spoke. The keynote speaker was George Marcus who has been a supporter of the Interfaith Council for many years. He is a very charitable and giving person. He's been a supporter of University of San Francisco. He's been a member of the Board of Regents, and he talked about his faith and what it means to him to be part of something like this.

Petnick: Do you remember anything in particular he said about that? Was there something that stayed with you?

Semel: It was interesting because here's a man who is a real estate billionaire and he cares about this because it means something to him; it means something to him aside from maintaining his business. It was six years ago, and he gave a very good speech. He's a good person.

Petnick: I'm glad to hear that. Here's something interesting. What's this?

Semel: This is a letter from Senator Feinstein on my 90th birthday from the *Northern California Jewish Bulletin* in 1992.

Petnick: What's the article about?

Semel: "Homelessness and Bigotry Targeted by the Interfaith Council."

Petnick: I read this morning that there was a time when there was a big ship that had been taken out of use, and the idea arose to make room for homeless to live on the ship. What was that about? Did that happen?

Semel: No, it didn't happen.

Petnick: Was that a good idea? What went on?

Semel: It was an idea floated by former Mayor Art Agnos, but it never went anyplace.

Petnick: Were you disappointed that it didn't go anyplace? Did you want it to happen?

Semel: We never did enough research to know whether it could work or not. If I think about it, it probably could work, but it would require an enormous amount of cooperation among various institutions. It's hard enough getting the people to say they'll do the meals in the church or synagogue around the corner, but to go schlepping down to—

Petnick: To schlepp to a big ship that is docked in a remote place …

Semel: Who knows what kind of … what's the word I'm looking for … bureaucracy we would have to go through to get permission to do it.

Petnick: Yesterday I called Tova Green, a Zen priest and member of the Interfaith Council, to ask her what she thought was important about the organization. First of all, she said to please give you her best.

What Tova found interesting was that people of different faiths are invited to lead the prayer for each meeting and everybody says that prayer regardless of [their religion]. So this means that people say prayer words that are sometimes contrary to their established beliefs. Could you tell us about that?

Semel: Early on we decided—I'm not sure we talked about it—but it was assumed this was an opportunity to learn. To have different faith leaders lead their prayer in their traditional way. I should mention this: before every meeting we read a statement that says, "This is an interfaith meeting. Whenever you say something, you are free to say it according to the faith that you believe in." I wish I had a copy of it. I'll have to get you a copy of that statement that we read at every meeting. It gives people [freedom] to be who they are. I don't have to apologize if I'm going to mention something that comes out the Hebrew Bible or the Jewish service, or the priest doesn't have to apologize, or the Catholic

doesn't have to apologize if they're going to say something that comes out of their faith.

Petnick: I see, you don't have to water it down.

Semel: You don't have to water it down. You are who you are, you believe what you believe, and everybody respects it. We read that statement at every meeting that people are free to do that.

Petnick: Tova said that if someone brings a prayer from their religion, whether you believe in the ideas in it or not, you read that prayer and experience it.

Semel: It's an education moment. You learn something.

Petnick: Can you give an example of something you might have learned from reading the prayers of a religion other than your own Jewish religion?

Semel: I'm quoting Bishop Marc Andrus who said to me that when you boil every religion down to the bottom, they're all doing the same thing: they all want to make the world a better place. They do it in different ways. That's at the bottom— according to him—of every religious faith, to make the world a better place. Jews call it *"tikkun olam,"* repair the world. Others may call it something else, but that's what we're all trying to do.

Petnick: I get that. Any other thoughts that you have today about the Interfaith Council? Have there been any agencies or any persons who are the community allies of the organization? Let's look at who the allies are and if there's any opposition.

Semel: We haven't had any opposition. People respect what we're trying to do. We're now how many years old?

Petnick: It was founded in 1989.

Semel: '89, so it's thirty years?

Petnick: It would be thirty-some years.

Semel: It's more than thirty years old and I think that we're respected. People … whether they belong, or they don't belong … we're not a threat to anybody. The idea is that we are trying to make the world a better place by bringing people together, as our mission statement says, to do good for the city.

Petnick: When a religious group is attacked, like if a synagogue is defaced or Muslims are threatened in some way, does the Council as a body respond to it?

Semel: We do. We do it with respect to what that organization wants us to do. For example, last week St. Mary's Cathedral suffered destruction of the windows. Michael immediately went to Archbishop Cordileone and they didn't want to

make a big deal about it, but they were very grateful [for] the fact that we cared and came and said, "What can we do? Do you want us to make a statement?" They didn't want to make a big deal out of it. That's their decision and we respected it. Things have happened at other places that people do want to make a big deal out of it, and we do that. We're there to do what each congregation wants us to do. We respect their right to say, "This is terrible. We want the world to know it." And, "This is terrible and we don't want to make a fuss over it."

Petnick: Last week when I was here someone called you. I think she might have called you to say that she lost somebody in her family, or she delivered some sad news to you on the phone. I heard you say, "Oh, I'm so sorry. What can I do?" That was your response. I thought this is typical of you and also typical of the Council. Not only do you feel empathy or sympathy for what's going on, but then also, "What can I *do*?" What did you do? Did you meet with that person? Did you get together with that caller?

Semel: I don't remember who it was.

Petnick: I don't remember the name of the person. I was just very moved by your immediate question, "What can I do?" I want to remember that—to teach myself to respond that way.

Semel: I think if we're not for other people, why are we here? We're here to do—I'm not even sure I believe in God, but we're here to do God's work—or whoever. That's what we have to do. We have to make the world a better place.

Petnick: I'll ask a foolish question: In what ways is the world not a good place?

Semel: Ah. [*chuckle*] Just read the morning paper and you can be depressed for a week.

Petnick: You said it.

Semel: Oh, God.

(Pause)

Petnick: We're back on, and we're talking about someone who was mentioned previously in Rita's interviews. The woman's name is Mary Culp. Would you tell us about Mary?

Semel: I met Mary Culp through a mutual friend. She was an interesting woman. I say "was" because she died a couple of weeks ago. We became friends. She had been the Director of Volunteers at Mt. Zion Hospital, so she knew a number of people that I knew. She was a Presbyterian and I was Jewish. The idea had come up about starting an interfaith council as a result of the—I think I told this story as a result of doing the shelter every year, and we felt we needed an organization to do it rather than just a committee.

At that time there was just one Interfaith Council in the Bay Area, in Marin. Mary and I went over and talked to the director of the Marin Interfaith Council to find out what we needed to do to start an interfaith council in San Francisco. We had many questions: how does one fund it, where does the money come from, how do you attract members, what do you need to do?

Mary was involved in the beginning of the Interfaith Council in that way. Another person who was involved in it was Lois Peacock who was a member of Zion Lutheran Church. Right then and there you had the three of us representing three different congregations and two different faiths.

You [recently] mentioned Iftekhar Hai. Iftekhar Hai was a Muslim who had decided by himself sometime that he was interested in joining with other religions. He went to Emanu-El and introduced himself and that's how I met him.

Petnick: Did he speak to the congregation?

Semel: He has spoken at Emanu-El, yes. There we were. I knew Father Eugene Boyle from previous activities with the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race, which we started in the sixties. We had a cluster of people that all knew each other and that was the beginning. Richard Schaper was then the pastor at St. Mark's Lutheran Church and we gathered there. We decided it was time since we were doing this work—a shelter every year—we decided it was time to have an organization. When we realized what it takes, writing by-laws and how do you raise the money and how do you get a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. It ain't easy, but we did it.

Petnick: They make it hard for you. You have to set up a board of directors and plan it all out.

Semel: Set up a board of directors. A daughter of a friend of mine was a lawyer and we persuaded her to do the paperwork and the legal work for free to get us our 501(c)(3). We didn't have any money. Everybody was a volunteer.

(Laughter)

Semel: I had retired from JCRC, so I became the unpaid director. We didn't have an office. We had the office of the current board chair and we used his/her congregation as our headquarters. When I think about those days and how far we've come in these last thirty years, it's kind of incredible.

Petnick: Where is the Interfaith Council located now?

Semel: We have an office in the Main Post Chapel in the Presidio.

Petnick: Is it an office space that's donated to you?

Semel: We pay rent.

Petnick: Now you have to bring in enough money to pay an executive director. You have a staff, right?

Semel: We have a staff of two—the executive director, and Cynthia. Michael Pappas is the executive director, and Cynthia Zamboukos is—she has a fancy title that means she is the person who does all—she is just incredible.

Semel: Over the years, we've had a couple of Coro Fellows work for us, which has been incredible, wonderful.

Petnick: Let's talk about the Coro Fellowship. What is that?

Semel: Coro is an organization that trains people for doing good work. Dianne Feinstein was a Coro Fellow, for example.

Petnick: Do they get a stipend or—

Semel: I'm not sure. I don't know. People who are interested in doing—I won't say, "charitable work," because it's more than that, some of the Coro Fellows like Dianne do political work. It's people who want to do work.

Petnick: Community work?

Semel: Community work.

Semel: We were able to get a Coro Fellow twice to do various special projects.

Petnick: I'm sure that helps a lot.

Semel: It's been most helpful, yes. One of the Coro Fellows [The Coro Fellowship in Public Affairs] researched [the number of congregations in San Francisco]. We had been talking about eight hundred congregations, but we weren't sure. A Coro Fellow did the research and, yes, there are eight hundred.

Petnick: How [is] the Council funded? What are the main income sources?

Semel: We are supported by the Archdiocese. We are supported by the Episcopal Diocese. We are supported by Temple Emanu-El, Congregation Sherith Israel, many other congregations. Whatever a congregation feels they are able to give—there's no set fee. We have loyal supporters who contribute generously annually. Each board member is asked to contribute according to his or her ability. We've done pretty well with foundations for special projects. A number of foundations have been generous, would be the way to put it.

Interview 6: February 18, 2020

Basya Petnick: This is Basya Petnick today with Rita Semel and Rabbi Stephen Pearce.

Stephen Pearce: Hello.

[Repeated portions of family history deleted.]

Petnick: Rita, you said that your parents always helped other people, were generous to other people, even though they didn't have a lot themselves. What were some of the specific things that they did for people?

Semel: My mother was a great cook—something I did not inherit. My father would tease her. She loved to make blintzes, and he said she was carrying on a "blintzkrieg."

(Laughter)

Pearce: A great line. Sounds like he had a good sense of humor.

Semel: My father had a great sense of humor.

Pearce: What were some of the things of that nature that your parents did?

Semel: They provided food for people who needed it. I was fairly young. I don't know where they found the people or who the people were, but I remember my mother always cooking things and delivering things to people who didn't have enough food in the house.

Pearce: You know the Talmudic principle that even somebody who is the recipient of charity has to give charity himself. That's where the half-shekel comes in, less than a penny was important to be sure that even people that receive gave. It sounds like that was their hallmark. No matter what they had or didn't have, they gave anyway.

Semel: Yes, that's true. They did.

Pearce: Did that [giving spirit] affect you as well?

Semel: I grew up knowing it was the right thing to do. We did not, Rabbi, belong to a synagogue. My father wanted no part of organized religion as a result of the fact that his father had been a Talmudic scholar who never made a living and only studied.

I remember when my sister graduated from high school—she was five years older than I was and the perfect child. I was not the perfect child.

Pearce: You were always a hell-maker.

Semel: She never tore her dress. She never fell down—

Pearce: In a puddle of mud.

Petnick: Are these things that happened to you? Did you tear your dress and fall down?

Semel: Yes, I was always in trouble.

Petnick: We want to hear about that.

Pearce: What was the worst thing you ever did?

Petnick: (Laughing) Yes, come on, 'fess up!

Semel: What was the worst thing I ever did?

Pearce: Or the most memorable.

Semel: I would guess the worst thing I ever did was to not get all A's on my report card.

Petnick: You got a B?

Semel: That was not good in my family.

Pearce: Because they wanted you to succeed and make it to the top.

Semel: Yes. My sister always got A's. "Why can't you be like her?"

Pearce: Did you wind up resenting her as a result?

Semel: Oh, yes. She was five years older and we never were good friends. It was only because our husbands liked each other that we had a relationship. As I think about it, I regret it, because the sibling relationship is the closest.

Pearce: Yes, but it was influenced by your parents who made it difficult.

Semel: I remember when Jane was born, my second daughter. I remember saying to my husband, "We will never compare these children. Never."

Pearce: Good for you. And you didn't?

Semel: We didn't, no.

Pearce: Getting back to your grandmother and your parents. What would you say was the funniest, sweetest story about them that you can remember?

Semel: About my parents?

Pearce: Yes.

Semel: Their determination that my sister and I would go to college. I remember my father saying, "I hope when you go off [on your own] you'll find someone to love and you'll get married, but I want you to be able to support yourself if you ever have to. You must go to college." So we both did.

Pearce: It was unusual for girls in those days to go to college.

Petnick: Where did your sister Miriam go to college?

Semel: Barnard.

Petnick: She went to Barnard, and then you followed.

Semel: Yes, then I followed her. When I arrived at Barnard, "Oh, are you Miriam's sister? Are you as smart as she is?"

Pearce: Living in her shadow.

Pearce: Barnard was not an inexpensive place to go to college?

Semel: No. It's interesting because girls in my circumstances went to Hunter.

Pearce: Which was free.

Semel: I was not about to go to Hunter. I applied to two colleges, Vassar and Barnard, and I got into both. The problem was if I went to Vassar, I had to live there. Although I was offered a scholarship, it was not nearly enough for tuition, room and board, and travel, so I didn't go to Vassar.

Pearce: You went to Barnard so you could commute and live at home?

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: Where was home at that time?

Semel: In Washington Heights.

Pearce: So it wasn't that far away?

Semel: No, no. In those days you took the subway and it was no big deal.

Pearce: In addition to the emphasis on education and being independent, how would you characterize your relationship and your sister's relationship with both your mother and your father?

Semel: I'll talk about my relationship. I loved my mother and my father, I really did. I think I recognized the fact that my parents wanted the world for us; they didn't have it and we had to have it. When we talked about college, I remember my father saying, "I'd love for you to marry and have children and all that, but I also want you to be able to support yourself, if you have to." I started college in 1937. I was sixteen years old, which is too young to go to college.

Pearce: It sounds like he was your biggest booster.

Semel: Oh, he was. He was. He really loved his kids.

Pearce: Was he affectionate?

Semel: Oh, yes.

Pearce: How?

Semel: Because of the things he did for us, taking us to the theatre, taking us to see every place that he thought we should know about.

Petnick: Was he jolly? Was he fun to be with?

Semel: Oh, yes.

Pearce: Given his theatrical career, did he love telling jokes or funny stories or just his repartee?

Semel: He had a good voice, which neither my sister nor I inherited. I think that was the biggest disappointment of his life that neither of us could sing at all. I remember in kindergarten the teacher saying to me, "Just move your lips, Rita."

(Laughter)

Pearce: I had a similar experience in junior high school where the art teacher said to me, "You bring a book." She was very cruel.

Semel: When I tell people they say, "That was terrible." It wasn't so terrible. I knew I couldn't carry a tune.

Pearce: How about your mother—her affection for you?

Semel: My mother was a typical Jewish mother of that era. She was the best cook in the world, the best baker in the world. My father always used to tease her and say, "You'd be much happier if you married someone who worked for the post office."

(Laughter)

Semel: Because he was always trying things: he was going to make a fortune any time with all this stuff.

Pearce: Were you a daddy's girl?

Semel: Oh, yes. I thought my father was wonderful.

Petnick: What was your emotional relationship with your mother? Were you able to confide in your mother? Were you emotionally close?

Semel: No. I think she was the only virgin that had two children.

Pearce: Who taught you about sex then?

Semel: My father.

Pearce: He was very direct?

Semel: I don't think my mother … she couldn't bring herself to do that.

Pearce: But your father was very open.

Semel: My father was very open. He loved his daughters.

Pearce: Do you remember those conversations?

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: Really?

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: What was your initial reaction to your father saying, "Oh, by the way, there's this thing called the birds and the bees"?

Semel: I think at the time I assumed that was the way it was. Thinking about it years later, I realized that was not the way it was for most girls. Their mothers …

Pearce: Your mother sounds was a little cool, a little distant.

Semel: She wasn't, but she didn't like to talk about these things.

Pearce: It was an awkward time.

Semel: Yes, it was very awkward.

Petnick: What I've been trying to understand about your life is what were some of the character qualities or virtues—what were the values of your family that became instilled in you that you then carried into your own adult life. What did you bring forward from your family nest?

Semel: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Pearce: For example, seeing your parents who would give even when they didn't have much to give somehow became part of your raison d'être.

Semel: I guess I assumed that was the norm.

Pearce: I understand that, but whether it was or not, that was a gift. What were some of the other gifts that you got?

Semel: Love of the theatre. Going to the Drake Hotel to eat oysters.

(Laughter)

Semel: The idea of travel. Although we didn't have any money to travel, I thought about it because my father loved to travel. My parents couldn't go anyplace because they didn't have the money. He had seen the country when he was traveling with Gus Edwards.

Pearce: He could take you to the Cloisters though.

Semel: Yes, we definitely went to the Cloisters. I forgot about that. I wonder how many New Yorkers have ever been to the Cloisters. Not too many, I don't think.

Pearce: I was an adult by the time I got to go.

Semel: Really?

Pearce: It's stunning.

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: So love of travel, giving even when you don't have.

Semel: Love of the theatre, love of opera.

Pearce: What was the model for you to become a wife and a mother?

Semel: I didn't have a good—

Pearce: Female model.

Semel: No, I didn't. My parents were divorced.

Pearce: I didn't know that.

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: How old were you?

Semel: I had just graduated from college, and it was a very painful thing. My sister who was at Berkeley knew there was trouble, but nobody ever told me. I was completely devastated. The day after I got home, he left and went to Los Angeles. I didn't talk to him for five years.

Pearce: Oh, my god. You were hurt for your mother.

Semel: I was so hurt. It turned out there was somebody else in Los Angeles.

Petnick: You were hurt for yourself too, right? Did you feel abandoned?

Semel: It was just crushing.

Pearce: As you reflect back on it years and years later—

Semel: It was a marriage that never should have happened. They were two completely different people.

Pearce: He was kind of a free spirit.

Semel: Oh, he was. He was. I had planned to go to the Columbia School ofJournalism and Pearl Harbor happened.

Petnick: Could I ask you—in thinking that you were going to go to the Columbia School of Journalism, what did you have in mind for yourself, what kind of career?

Semel: I always wanted to be a reporter on a newspaper.

Pearce: Intrepid young reporter.

Petnick: Were there women who were reporters for the *Times* and other major papers?

Semel: No, not really. I had been the editor of the magazine at Barnard and the associate editor of the newspaper.

Barnard was then and still is a place where women were encouraged to have a career of their own. My plan was to be a reporter.

By the way, I realized years later that there was a Jewish quota at Barnard, there was a Jewish quota at Princeton, and at all those schools in those days.

Pearce: So you were one of the token Jews?

Semel: Yes. My sister was before me. I would say that maybe one percent were Jews.

Pearce: It was bad.

Semel: All the Ivy League schools had quotas. It's something that was there, and we knew it was there.

Pearce: You fast-forward to today where a number of major universities like Yale [and] University of Pennsylvania all have had or now have Jewish presidents.

Semel: There was one from San Francisco.

Pearce: Yes, of course. Levin.

Semel: Phillip Levin. I knew his mother. I remember her telling the story that when he was appointed, they belonged to Sherith Israel. I guess the rabbi was …

Pearce: Martin Weiner, still.

Semel: She told him, and he said, "I don't believe it.

(Laughter)

Semel: I guess there was more anti-Semitism then. We took it for granted. That was just the way it was.

Pearce: I'm interested to getting back to the anti-Semitism, but I still want to finish the story of your father. Here you are, you refused to talk to him, you were very hurt, you probably cried a lot. Did that ever resolve itself?

Semel: Yes, it resolved itself five years later, after the war, when my sister was getting married. She wanted my father to come to the wedding. My mother was very gracious about it. I was furious. I was married by then, and my husband said to me, "It's enough. Forget it. He's the only father you have and there's no point in carrying it on." So we came to the wedding.

Pearce: That's real wisdom.

Semel: He was very smart. I don't know if you remember Max.

Pearce: He was already gone by the time I came to town.

Semel: That's right. I was very lucky. I married a smart and caring man.

Petnick: You were smart too—to recognize the wisdom of what he was saying to you.

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: You resumed your relationship with your father?

Semel: Yes. It was all right. My sister was much closer to him in the last years. He lived in Los Angeles and he continued his career of starting things. He started the first clinic on the south side of Los Angeles, which was very heavily African-American. He would come up and we'd go to the opera or we'd go to the symphony. He came up one time and he said, "I'm opening a clinic on the south side of Los Angeles." Why? Because it was mainly African-American and they didn't have any place to get healthcare. He started this clinic in which they paid a certain amount for a year's worth of care, and it was successful.

Pearce: He was way ahead of his time.

Petnick: Would you say in that way that you're like your father in that you see a need and you find a way to—

Semel: I never started a clinic.

Petnick: You've started other things.

Semel: I never—

Pearce: You were on the forefront of many things.

Petnick: Homelessness. Homeless people?

Semel: I guess so. I never thought of it that way.

Petnick: You have a remarkable quality not to think much about what your contributions have been. Sorry, but on the occasion of your oral history, I have to keep asking you about *you.*

Semel: (Laughter) Do most people just talk about themselves?

Pearce: That's the object.

Petnick: What is the self? The self also includes everyone else. It includes everything.

Pearce: Let's go all the way back to the beginning. What's your earliest memory? Then I'll tell you why I want to know.

Semel: My earliest memory. I guess it was going to the theatre. I was five years old.

Pearce: You mentioned that before. The reason that I ask people that question is because I often find that the first memory really is reflective of the way somebody went

through life. If it's a joyous, wonderful occasion like that, you have a bright, cheery outlook. If it's something dour and sad, that also somehow—

Semel: Really? That's interesting.

Pearce: You did have a life—in spite of the twists and turns and tragedies—that was always with a sense of purpose and forward thinking. How would you reflect on that? What was the magic?

Semel: I think I was lucky, because up until the time they divorced, I had a father whose joy in life, in spite of all the things that went wrong, never went away.

Pearce: Never looked back.

Semel: He never looked back. Even during the Depression, it was either feast or famine, but it was always something. I don't remember ever feeling sorry for myself. I don't remember ever feeling that something's wrong or that we shouldn't enjoy ourselves.

Pearce: Or depressed.

Semel: No.

Pearce: And you've had things that have happened that could have made you that way.

Semel: I guess.

Pearce: But you would always brush yourself off, stand up, and get back to what had to be done.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: A lot of resilience.

Pearce: Yes, that's the right word.

Semel: My grandmother lived with us for a while. Her husband died when I was three or four. She had my mother and four brothers, and everybody lived in New York. My grandmother lived with each of the children. When she lived with us my father was wonderful about having her there. He got along better with her than my mother did. I remember taking her to the movies and helping her read the titles.

Pearce: How sweet!

Semel: She was so proud that she could read the titles. Her being a citizen meant so much for her, which made me aware of what it meant to be a citizen, to vote. I

remember going with my parents. I used to go with them to vote. My father would let me pull down the lever.

Petnick: You're thinking about it because what you're pointing to now is the booklet for the primary coming up?

Semel: Yes, I have to figure out what to do about all of this.

Pearce: You've always stayed so vitally interested in the political world and the nonprofit world and the world of charity, of helping those who have lost their way or don't have what they need to have. It's been your hallmark.

Semel: Isn't that what people are supposed to do?

Pearce: You make it sound like, "Well, everybody knows that."

Semel: Don't they?

Pearce: No.

Petnick: Some people, if they knew, they forgot.

Pearce: Rita, you sound so modest. When you're a hundred and twenty-three, what will you want the rabbi to say about you?

Semel: When I'm a hundred and twenty-three?

Pearce: Do you know why a hundred and twenty-three instead of a hundred and twenty? So no one should say you died young. (Laughter) A hundred and twenty, please, God. What would be in your eulogy?

Semel: She made a lot of trouble.

Pearce: That's the title of the book, *She Made a Lot of Trouble*. (Laughs)

Semel: I find it very difficult to talk about myself.

Pearce: I know. That's why I'm asking you what somebody else would say, not what you would say. What would Lis say?

Petnick: That's a good question.

Semel: "She's not here. She's gone to a meeting."

(Laughter)

Semel: That's what my younger daughter, Jane, said. We were talking one night at dinner about eulogies. Jane must have been about eight years old at the time.

She piped up and she said, "What would be on your tombstone?" I think she was eight or nine at the time, and she piped up and said, "She's not here. She's gone to a meeting."

Pearce: It must have been a great joy for you to be a mother, especially given the model of your mother. Sometimes we look back and we say, "I'm never going to be like her."

Semel: After the divorce my mother really came into her own. She had never worked; it wasn't done. She decided she would get a job. She didn't have a résumé. There was an advertisement for a receptionist at the Southern Pacific Hospital, so she went and applied, and they said, "But you've never worked." She said, "I had two daughters who went to Barnard College, and I think I can do this job." And she got the job.

Pearce: What a great story. You were proud of her.

Semel: Oh, my god, yes. It was wonderful. She really came into her own. She decided to travel. She had a good friend and they traveled: they went to Europe, and they went all over the United States.

Pearce: So she put her life back together, and maybe the divorce wasn't as terrible as it might have been or as it [was] when you first learned [of it]."

Semel: She really put her life in order.

Petnick: What did your mother say about you in your hearing? Sometimes the way that parents convey their feelings about a child is they'll say things like, "She's the one I always count on," or "She's the one that..." Was there something that your mom frequently said about you?

Semel: She was very proud of both of us.

Pearce: Did your family use Yiddishisms, like you were a *sheyne meydele,* a sweet girl?

Semel: Not really.

Pearce: They spoke Yiddish, did they not?

Semel: Yes, they did because of my grandmother.

Pearce: Was it the secret language in your house if they didn't want you to hear something?

Semel: No.

Pearce: They spoke English most of the time except to your grandmother.

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: Did you learn any Yiddish as an adult?

Semel: I learned about five words. (Laughs)

Pearce: That's the immigrant experience. The first generation is steeped in the tradition, and the further away you get—except you made a U-turn and brought your children into the wonderful world of Shalom Aleichem and life as Jews.

Semel: Emanu-El was the first synagogue we ever belonged to.

Pearce: Was it really? What made … you wanted your children—

Semel: Because my husband came from an Orthodox background. When Lis was born, we felt we needed to provide a background for them. We were going to be here, so we toured the synagogues. Alvin Fine had just become the rabbi of Emanu-El and we joined the Temple.

Pearce: What were your initial impressions of him?

Semel: He was wonderful. He was just great. You know the history of Emanu-El before that. You know it too, Basya. Rabbi Reichert … was … I don't think we could have belonged with him.

My father's younger sister was an early supporter of a Jewish state. She lived in New York. I heard about it as a kid, but it didn't mean much to me. But when Max went overseas, I came here, and I got a job at the *Chronicle*.

[Repetition deleted]

Pearce: Who were some of your role models—professors or - ?

Semel: There was a professor at Barnard, Jane Clark. She was a professor of political science, which was my major.

Pearce: Something new in those days.

Semel: It was my major. She was wonderful. Even though I always knew I wanted to be working on a newspaper, I was advised by my advisor at Barnard to major in political science because that would give me a background that would be more helpful than [being an English major and studying literature]. Barnard at that time—and I think still—has a system [*of*]… you can't declare a major until your junior year. You have to spend the first two years taking courses in every kind of subject. I took courses that I never would have taken if I didn't have to: anthropology, eugenics, anything but math.

Petnick: There's another chapter title: "Anything but Math."

Semel: I was terrible at math. I still can't balance my checkbook.

Pearce: Could we talk theology a little bit?

Semel: Theology? Yes.

Pearce: You belong to a synagogue; you raised your children there. You are a regular worshipper. You've had blessings and tragedies in your life. What's up there?

Semel: I don't know. I don't know.

Pearce: Do you pray?

Semel: No, not particularly.

Pearce: Did you ever pray?

Semel: No.

Pearce: I don't want to put words in your mouth. Is God just the creator who's up there and set everything in motion and said, "It's all yours now, take over."

Semel: Do you remember a trip that you and I and Maureen Sullivan took to the GTU [Graduate Theological Union] board meeting? She asked you if you believed in an afterlife, and you said a "rotty" thing. You said, "I'll tell you what I think, but, first, let's ask Rita what she thinks."

Pearce: (Laughter)

Semel: Do you remember that?

Pearce: Yes, and you've never forgiven me for that.

Semel: I've forgiven you. And I said that I don't believe in an afterlife. It would be wonderful if I did. I would see my husband and my daughter. You said you did believe in an afterlife and that was a great comfort to her.

Pearce: How nice.

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: I still believe that. I think that there's more.

Semel: If it's true, that would be wonderful.

Pearce: I think I was good in another life to have a friend like you.

Semel: (Laughs)

Pearce: Because it just doesn't happen by accident.

Pearce: You're talking to Basya who is a deeply spiritual person. We've never talked about what you believe, but I have a feeling that we're pretty close. It's never too late to start, Rita—we can work on this.

Semel: Okay.

Petnick: You've told me before that you didn't really believe in God.

Pearce: Or in an active God. It's not that you don't believe in God; is that correct?

Semel: I believe more in *tikkun olam.*

Pearce: Fixing the world.

Petnick: What I want to understand is that you attended a lot of services at Emanu-El over the years, and what is your experience in a worship service? How is the service for you? What are you doing in that service?

Semel: I think what I'm doing is I'm enjoying the music, I'm enjoying the sermons—some of which I agree with, some of which I don't. It gives me a great sense of belonging, which I never thought I'd have.

Petnick: So community with the congregation.

Semel: Community, yes. When they asked me to be on the board, I was surprised. All those years I had never been asked to be on the board. I think someone found out that I was on the board of Grace Cathedral and they thought, "Well—"

Semel: So I said yes. It's fascinating the similarities and the differences between the Grace Cathedral board and the Emanu-El board.

Pearce: Could you elaborate on that?

Semel: At Grace Cathedral, people are much more polite. Nobody ever interrupts anybody at the Grace board meetings. At the Emanu-El board meetings people have very definite opinions and have no objection to saying what those opinions are. At the Grace board they have opinions, but they're much politer about them.

Pearce: I will interject a humorous story. I was invited to speak at one of their galas once, and it was risky. I told the following joke. A man is being given a tour of Hell and he comes to one room and the man who was showing him around said, "These are the Jews who ate pork." He comes to another room and it's Catholics. What did they do that was wrong? They ate meat on Friday. Comes to another

room and it's Episcopalians. He said, "What did they do that was wrong?" He said, "They ate their salad with a dessert fork."

(Laughter)

Pearce: They roared. There were people that told me that joke for years.

Semel: They must have loved it.

Pearce: Yes, they did, but that's what you're talking about. You're prim and proper.

Semel: Interestingly enough, Marc Andrus, a terrific, wonderful man, said to me—we're good friends, and I was having lunch with him—"When you boil every religion down to the essence, it's what you call *tikkun olam*, repair the world." Every religion if you go down to the basics, it's *tikkun olam,* repair the world.

Pearce: When you finally realized there was a title for what you were doing, was that liberating, motivating? When you were a young woman, no one knew from this thing "*tikkun olam.*"

Semel: I hadn't quite thought about it that way, but I think that was what I was trying to do all these years—repair the world. Anybody that I tell about that, "Why do you do it?" Everybody reacts to it. I think people—if they have any feeling at all—have to say that's what our job is, to repair the world.

Pearce: Yes, and that's been your job.

Semel: I've done a pretty bad job of it.

Pearce: I don't know how much worse it would be if you hadn't.

Petnick: That's right.

Semel: The state of the world—oh, god.

Petnick: You're saying that people resonate with the term you use "repair the world." Many people of many different faiths, or no faith, recognize that the world is broken in various ways and that a task of an awake human being is to fix it?

Semel: It's our job to fix it. That's our job. So far we're doing a pretty lousy job of it.

Pearce: Again, you just don't know what it would be like. I think of—talking about jokes—of the woman who goes to the vet because she's going to be traveling by train with her cat and she wants a sedative to calm her down and he accidentally prescribes an amphetamine. The cat goes berserk in the train and runs all over and bites people. She comes back to the doctor and she says, "Thank god that you gave the cat those pills. Think of how much worse he would have been if you hadn't."

Think of how much worse the world would be if you hadn't done the things that you did. You're shrugging your shoulders like this is normal. It's abnormal. You're an abnormal person.

Semel: Really? (Laughs)

Pearce: Yes.

Petnick: You worked for JCRC for many years and other paid work [that was beneficial to building a more just society]. Then when you retired from JCRC—Rita told me, Rabbi, she didn't retire, she rewired, and she kept—

Pearce: That's a good term.

Semel: I can't claim it. Pam David who used to be at the Walter & Elise Haas Fund [said it].

Pearce: Yes.

Semel: When she gave up the job, we were invited to her rewiring. I love it. I say that to people, "You rewire, you don't retire." Isn't that wonderful?

Pearce: It's extraordinary. I'm going to use that, so thank you. That's my gift—

Semel: I'm using it, so why not?

Pearce: It's nice of you to share it. When people say, "What's it like being retired?" I simply say, "I'm just as busy, but now I get to choose the things I want to be." But I like this even better.

Petnick: Lots of times when people finish their paid work, they don't rewire—they do retire. They keep traveling. They go on all those vacations.

Semel: They go to Fromm. They play bridge.

Pearce: Fromm I can understand. The bridge—

(Telephone ringing.)

Semel: I got to know Paul Ash when he started the food bank and I was able to do a mitzvah, which is something I'm really quite proud of. What happened was that they were unable to get permission to buy the stuff at the—not the farmer's market, but the wholesalers. They had stuff that if it wasn't perfect, they couldn't sell it. Paul wanted to have the opportunity that he'd have them donated to the food bank or pay something.

Pearce: Pennies on the dollar.

Semel: Yes. He got no place. I was able to introduce him to Kenneth Colvin who was in the food business. They met and Kenneth was able to arrange for them to have permission to buy that.

Pearce: This is such a big part of the Food Bank's mandate now. In fact, we need to expand the warehouse by an additional forty thousand square feet because we're turning away food from producers, from wholesale markets, from the government because we can't warehouse it in our room. Your good work is continuing.

Semel: It wasn't mine—it was Kenneth Colvin's.

Pearce: It sounds like there's no organization that you didn't leave your imprint on.

Semel: (Laughs) I'm known as a busybody.

Pearce: Yes, but they must have been competing for you. "I'll take Rita." "No, no, I'll take." "No, let me have this little piece of Rita." "I want Rita."

Petnick: Michael Pappas, a person who knows thousands of people, said about you today, "She's my favorite woman on the planet."

Pearce: I would go a little further, my favorite woman in the universe. Please, forgive me. Your imprint, wherever you step people say, "Oh, Rita Semel, she—" "Rita Semel, oh, she—" "Rita Semel."

Semel: She's a busybody.

Petnick: You're poking your nose into a lot of things. Homelessness. Let's recount all of the things that you did poke around in.

Pearce: Homelessness, food insufficiency, interfaith activities.

Petnick: Didn't you do something way back for battered women too?

Semel: A little bit, but it wasn't my main.

Petnick: Another thing you told me about that I loved that you were involved in was taking non-Jews to Israel.

Semel: That's one of the things I'm proudest of, my time with the JCRC, starting those trips.

Pearce: And it still continues to this day.

Semel: We're doing it. I still run into people saying, "Oh, you took me to Israel."

Petnick: It was your idea.

Semel: No, it was not my idea. I went to the annual meeting of the JCRC directors and the director in Baltimore said that he had done this. I thought, "That's a great idea." I came back and I went to the JCRC board and I told them about it, and I said, "I'd like for us to do it." We got an original grant from the Koret Foundation, and we decided that people who were invited had to pay something because what you get for nothing, it is worth nothing. I think it still works that way. People pay five hundred dollars, which is nothing compared to what it's worth. The first trip was Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, a Buddhist priest, and me. (Laughs)

Pearce: You were like Moses leading the *goyim* into the Promised Land.

Petnick: How did it go? How was the trip?

Semel: It was wonderful. What happened when we got to the church—

Pearce: The Holy Sepulcher?

Semel: No, the one overlooking the water at the Sea of Galilee, Domus Galilaeae. One of the priests said to me, "Would you mind if I read the Sermon on the Mount?" I said, "No, please do." It was so moving to everybody to be right there that we did it every time. On a subsequent trip I took the president of USF, not Paul Fitzgerald, the one before him.

Pearce: Steve Privett.

Semel: No, one before Steve Privett. I forget his name. He went to someplace in the Middle West. Before we left, I said, "When we get to the Church of the Domus, we always read the Sermon on the Mount. Would you be willing to do that?" He looked at me as if to say, "Oh, my." He said, "All right." So when we go on the bus I said, "Do you have the Sermon on the Mount?" He said, "You really mean it, don't you?" I said, "Yes." So we get there, and this was not a trip with a lot of clergy, it was a mixed group of people.

Pearce: You also took politicians and—

Semel: Yes. He read it and, of course, there was not a sound. We go back on the bus and he said to me, "You were right." I felt so good about that because I think he thought, "That's so usual."

Pearce: Trite?

Semel: Trite, yes.

Petnick: It was just the right thing.

Pearce: Was this life-changing for some of the people that you—

Semel: Oh, yes.

Pearce: Can you think of an instance?

Petnick: In what way?

Semel: Because I had never gone to Sunday School, and I never was confirmed or anything. Seeing it through their eyes.

San Francisco was opposed to a Jewish state for many years. When I started to work for the JCRC, it was just before Israel became a state. I didn't know anything about it, but I could see the unhappiness of some of the families in this city who didn't want a Jewish state. I remember Mrs. M. C. [Marcus Cauffman] Sloss. Do you remember that name Hattie Hecht Sloss?

Pearce: Do I ever.

Semel: I was working at the *Jewish Bulletin* at the time and she took me to lunch. She finally came to the point of why she was taking me to lunch. She said, "We don't need a state—we're a religion."

Pearce: She represented the old-line families of Emanu-El—

Semel: Yes.

Pearce: —that all felt that way.

Semel: They all felt that way. But I will say that once the state was established, they changed. Walter Haas, Dan Koshland, Hellman—all those families—said, "We didn't want it, but now that we have it, we have to make sure it succeeds."

Pearce: Rhoda Haas Goldman (may she rest in peace), commenting on Rabbi [Irving] Reichert said to me, "We were misled." (That was not the word she used.) "He was such a great orator and so convincing that we jumped on the bandwagon. I don't know why it was, but once Alvin Fine came, we made a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn."

Semel: That's right.

Pearce: You consider yourself as somebody who came into Judaism through a side door, you were never confirmed, whatever, but you had a bat mitzvah.

Semel: Yes, I did. Thank, you, Stephen. You heard the story of the bat mitzvah?

Petnick: I knew you had it, but I haven't heard the story. What's the story?

Semel: This gentleman and George Marcus—

Pearce: Were determined.

Semel: —were determined. They drove me crazy.

Pearce: Unrelenting. What was that experience like?

Semel: It was moving. I fought it tooth and nail, as you know. In a way I felt it was kind of cheating because I didn't have to go through three years of study. I remember standing up there on the *bima* with Lis and she was holding the Torah. She said the blessing because I didn't know the Hebrew and she did. It was really very touching.

Pearce: There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Petnick: Why did you and George want her to have the—

Pearce: Because she would always say, "I have no Jewish background. I was never confirmed, but I belong to the Temple." I kept saying, "Rita, we can fix that," and she would laugh every time.

Semel: (Laughs)

Pearce: Just like that.

Once I told George about it, it became his raison d'être. He said, "She is going to have a bat mitzvah." If you think I was unrelenting, every time I saw him, he would say, "When is Rita's bat mitzvah?"

(Laughter)

Pearce: Finally, Rita wanted something from him for the Interfaith Council, and he said, "Okay, there's only one thing that I want."

Semel: You have to have a bat mitzvah.

Petnick: Great story!

Semel: I was in high school and there were a number of girls who were going to be confirmed. I came home and I said to my parents, "I'd like to be confirmed."

Pearce: They said, "Con … what?"

Semel: Be confirmed. My father said, "Well, if you want to, go ahead and do it." So I went with my friend to her synagogue. But it felt funny because my parents weren't at all involved, so I never went through with it.

Petnick: You didn't go through with the ceremony.

Semel: Because they didn't exactly say, "No, you can't do it," but they were not involved in it.

Pearce: You never wanted to be a phony. What you see is what you get.

Semel: It seemed like a phony.

Pearce: But you have no guile, no malice, no left-handed way of doing things, no end-runs around people. It's your purity, your pureness in the way you deal with people. Straightforward. You're shaking your head "yes."

Semel: I guess so. I never thought of it.

Pearce: You could disagree with me.

Semel: I never thought of it.

Pearce: It's good that we're having this interview so that I can tell you some of the wonderful things that you deserve to hear. She shakes her head back and forth, she laughs.

Petnick: With her, praise goes in one ear and out the other.

Pearce: She remembers everything. She has a mind like a steel trap. (Laughs)

Pearce: Toward the end of your parents' lives—how are we doing on time? I know you have a schedule.

Semel: I'm having lunch with the woman who owns this building, Arlene Krieger.

Pearce: Maybe you should take me with you. I'll put the arm on her. No, no, did I say that? She's a lovely woman.

Semel: She belongs to Sherith Israel.

Pearce: I know that. We still talk to her.

Semel: I have to meet them at five of twelve.

Pearce: So it's about time. Anything else?

Petnick: Maybe you have a closing question.

Pearce: What is the meaning of life?

Semel: That's quite a question. The meaning of life is to live it, to find something to make it better, to enjoy it when you can, to try not to be too mad at Donald Trump.

Pearce: I knew you'd find a way to slip that in.

Semel: And, hopefully, we'll find someone to vote for.

Pearce: Rita, you say it all. I'm so grateful for this opportunity. Thank you, Basya, as well, for allowing me to be part of this.

Semel: I'm so glad to see you.

Pearce: We have to do this more often.

Semel: Yes.

Interview 7: February 24, 2020

Basya Petnick: We're going to be talking today about your work at JCRC, the Jewish Community Relations Council. You worked there for many years starting in … 1972, is that correct?

Rita Semel: I was on the board before that.

Petnick: '72 is when you became associate director?

Semel: Right.

Petnick: When did you first connect with JCRC—in the fifties?

Semel: After the war was over, I left the *Chronicle* and became the associate editor of the *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*. Part of our job at the *Bulletin* was to be the PR staff for the Jewish Federation, so I got to know a lot of people in the community I didn't know before.

Petnick: The Jewish Federation is the major sponsor of JCRC?

Semel: Yes. That's how JCRC got practically all of its funding, from the Federation. I became involved and I was appointed to be on the board of JCRC. One of the PR jobs I had was with AIPAC.

Petnick: What does AIPAC stand for?

Semel: American Israel Public Affairs Committee. This is before Israel became a state. The Republican convention was being held in San Francisco and Si Kenen, who was the founder of AIPAC, wanted to present the case for a Jewish state to the platform committee of the convention and wanted to be included in the platform. I arranged for him to speak. I worked in public relations with AIPAC for a while and got to know the people at JCRC.

Petnick: Who was the director back then?

Semel: Eugene Block was the director and Earl Raab was the associate director. The [Jewish Federation] did not have anybody on the staff who was concerned about Israel. The San Francisco Jewish community in those days was opposed to Israel becoming a state. They created a Middle East Committee and I became the consultant to that committee as a freelancer.

Petnick: Before first talking with you, I did not know that the leadership of the Jewish community [in San Francisco] was opposed to the formation of the State of Israel. That's something I've learned from you, and something that people will learn in your oral history. I think it's important.

Semel: There were three major cities in the country who were opposed to Israel becoming a state: Pittsburg, New Orleans, and San Francisco. As I've said, all the major Jewish families initially were part of that opposition, but they fell into line.

Petnick: Tell me again why they didn't want it.

Semel: I grew up in New York in a whole different kind of Jewish community [one that had developed over hundreds of years], but in San Francisco, the leading families of the Jewish community were those who had come here in the Gold Rush. The key to becoming a part of San Francisco [society] was if your family came during the Gold Rush. That was what made one eligible for being accepted. That was the calling card, and that was not true in any other city in the country. In New York, even though there were lots of wealthy Jews, they weren't on the Chamber of Commerce, they weren't on the Symphony Board, they weren't on the Opera Board, but here those early pioneer families were.

Petnick: That's a good point. The pioneer Jewish families had already become part of the San Francisco social and civic elite.

Semel: The key to your acceptance here was, "When did your family come?" Not what your religion was, which was quite different than in New York and Chicago or anyplace else. I didn't know anything about any of that because I didn't grow up here. But I found out. It was interesting. It was a whole different perspective on the acceptance of Jews in the community.

Petnick: That's probably why Emanu-El was the leading synagogue.

Semel: They all belonged to it.

Petnick: It's almost like an Episcopalian version of Judaism. There was and is today a high degree of assimilation.

Semel: Absolutely. When my husband and I first joined Emanu-El, there was one Hebrew phrase in the whole service and that was the Sh'ma.

Petnick: That tells you a lot, doesn't it?

Semel: That was the only Hebrew.

Petnick: Was that in the days of the quick half-hour service in Rinder Chapel and then everybody rushed out to dinner? I've heard about that.

Semel: Yes. A whole different community. I go to Friday night service and I sometimes chuckle to myself about what a different service it used to be

What happened was I was the associate editor at the *Jewish Bulletin*. The Federation funded us, and part of the deal was that we were to serve as the PR

staff for the Federation in return for the money that they gave us. In addition to being the associate editor on the *Bulletin*, since there were only a staff of two —the editor and me—when Golda Meir came I had to set up her schedule and take her places: I set up a press conference, set up a leadership luncheon for her, took her to the radio station to be interviewed, and so forth.

I spent three days with Golda Meir and I was absolutely overwhelmed. I think I was about twenty-two at the time, there I was (me!) with this woman who was the prime minister of a state. Did I tell you the story about her?

Petnick: You did but I'm not sure if you told it at a recorded session, so please tell it again.

Semel: I took her to the radio station—there was no television then. I organized a public meeting for her at Emanu-El, interestingly enough. Then I had to take her to the airport. I was absolutely so impressed. We get to the airport, which was an entirely different place than it is now, parked the car, started walking over to the gate. She said, "I need to go to the bathroom." We find the ladies room, and she disappears inside a stall. And then she comes out, stuffing her corset into her bag, and says to me, "I feel much better now."

Petnick: (Laughter)

Semel: That night when I came home, I told my husband. Max said, "See, she's just like everybody else." Because every night I would say to him, "Oh, my god, she's so incredible, she's so wonderful!" (How could anybody live up to that?) So now he said, "See, she's just like everybody else."

Petnick: That's a wonderful story. Are there other things that you recall from that time you traveled around with her?

Semel: Golda Meir was interested in everything. She had an inquiring mind. I had to explain the setup of this Jewish community. She had been born in Milwaukee, so she knew American Jewry, but the [level of] acceptance of Jews in this community [San Francisco] was new to her, as it was to me when I first learned of it. She was interested in that as well. She was very smart—of course, she had to be so smart when you think about what she accomplished in her life.

Petnick: She was truly great.

Semel: Yes, she was. I'm not sure that I really appreciated how important she was. Oh, yes, I knew her title, but I was young, and what did I know? In later years, I realized what a pivotal role she played [in Israel's history].

Thinking back I was extraordinarily fortunate to have these experiences when I was so young. I'm not sure I really appreciate them. Looking back on it, I was really very lucky.

Petnick: You were in the center of the action in the Jewish world of San Francisco. You were right there.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: How did you get over to JCRC?

Semel: There were several organizations interested in public affairs. One was the American Jewish Committee, the other was the American Jewish Congress. The American Jewish Congress was the more liberal one and I was active in that. They were entitled to a seat on the board of the JCRC and I was asked to do that, which I did. That's how I became involved with the JCRC as a member. JCRC tried hard to get members of different organizations. It was sort of a Jewish Interfaith Council. (Laughs) The Congress was the more liberal committee and the Congress didn't survive. It went out of business, I would say.

[Repetition deleted]

Petnick: What year did you take a paid position at JCRC? Here [in this commemorative booklet published by JCRC] it says you became the associate director in 1972.

Semel: That's right.

Petnick: So that's when you were formally hired and paid as associate director.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: In 1972. This booklet [JCRC Yearbook in Review] is organized according to year, starting in 1943, and presents a timeline of relevant events. I saw some interesting things that happened in the world right after you were hired, and I want us to talk on the record today about those things. The first thing listed under 1972 is "Hired Rita Semel as Associate Director."

Another important event at that time concerned working with the problem of the Soviet Union. Apparently that they were charging Jews five to twenty thousand dollars each in order to be allowed to emigrate from the Soviet Union to Israel or to America or to other countries. That was interesting to me—

Semel: I wonder who wrote this booklet? I never saw this before.

Petnick: There were two copies of it in the file folder that Elisabeth put together for us. I want to leave one today here with you because it's very good, very helpful to us. It a JCRC timeline packed with lots of information about issues addressed by JCRC each year. Under 1974, do you see that, please?

Semel: Yes. I don't know who wrote it. [Rita's attention is focused on the booklet.]

Petnick: I'm going to pause this.

Petnick: [Recording resumes] In 1974 JCRC worked with the San Francisco Board of Education because the Board of Education wanted to outlaw people coming to public meetings in San Francisco in Nazi uniforms. JCRC brilliantly said, "No, we have to let people do what they need to do; otherwise, we're going to be fascists ourselves." Do you remember this issue?

Semel: I do remember it.

And I remember another issue in which the Ku Klux Klan marched in Skokie, Illinois, and Skokie didn't want them to do that. The Klan went to the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and got permission. It came up as a discussion point at a JCRC meeting and many members of the JCRC governing board felt we should boycott the ACLU. Earl Raab and I had this discussion and decided that if we could stop *them*, somebody else could stop *us;* therefore, we supported the idea of free speech. We asserted that there were other ways to deal with the Nazis or the KKK, and we did not want to deprive them of the very right that we wanted for ourselves. It was not a popular decision. It took a lot of explaining, a lot of arguing, and a lot of discussion.

Petnick: What were some of the arguments?

Semel: They were beyond the pale. They argued that it didn't apply to them. But we took the position that it applied to everybody and if they could be stopped, then we could be stopped if we wanted to do something. I think we were right. A lot of people only want to defend their own rights—they're not willing to give the same permission to other people. We see it over and over again, and it's still an issue.

Petnick: That's why I chose this to talk about this today, because that very issue is at issue today.

Semel: Absolutely. There are things that Trump does that I think are absolutely awful, but we shouldn't be fighting by stopping him—we should be fighting him by beating him.

Petnick: In the election?

Semel: In the election.

Petnick: Not by limiting his right and the right of his followers to speak.

Semel: We have to have a government of which we can be proud. The way to do it is to not re-elect him.

Petnick: Yes.

Semel: I still believe that. It's hard. It's not easy to do. There are plenty of people who are willing to say, "Let's lock 'em up." That's an easy thing to do. But to fight it on the basis of the truth and what's good for the country is much more difficult.

Petnick: When I was young, I went to hear Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross speak and a couple of times she said, "Then the Hitler in me …" meaning herself, and I was so shocked when I heard these words. How could there be a Hitler in dear Elizabeth Kübler-Ross? In time I came to see when something happens that we don't like, a fascist part—a part that is in everyone—arises that wants to control the situation. It wants to annihilate the opposing person, silencing them, deadening them. This fascist impulse can arise in everyone, no matter how nice you are. I guess the thing is not to give into it—to open, just when you want to close. As you say, it's not always easy.

Semel: It's so easy to say, "I don't like what you're going to do, so you can't do it." That's the easy way out. The important way out, the difficult way out is to say, "You have a right to say it, but I'm going to fight with you for two things. One, my right to oppose you, and, two, my right to educate you about why you're wrong." It's both things, and it's not just opposing but it's *proving* that the other person is on the wrong side.

Petnick: "The right to educate about why the opponent is wrong." Hmmm. Can you give me a good example of work that you did at JCRC in which you both opposed and educated?

Semel: There was a KKK march in Georgia and Coretta Scott King called Cecil Williams and said, "We're having a march next week over the same route that they took [before]. You have to send some clergy of every faith from San Francisco to march." I was at the JCRC and Cecil called me and told me about this march and said, "We need a rabbi." I said, "Fine, I'll get you a rabbi. When is it?" He said, "Saturday." I said, "Cecil, I can't get a rabbi to go to Georgia on a Saturday." He said, "I know, but that's when it is, and you've got to get us a rabbi. It's important."

I called Rabbi Robert Kirschner [at Temple Emanu-El] and told him the story, and he said, "Of course, I'll go. When is it?" I said, "Saturday." Dead silence on the phone. He said, "Rita, I can't go on Saturday." I said, "But it's important. You know as well as I do why it's important. It's important to have priests and ministers and you and other rabbis there." Dead silence on the phone. Finally, he said, "Okay, I think God will understand." I said, "He better. If he's God, he better understand."

Rabbi Kirschner went, and I don't know about the congregation, but the board backed him one hundred percent because they all realized you have to put your money where your mouth is.

Rabbi Kirschner found himself walking on a road in Georgia next to Amos Brown from Third Baptist in San Francisco. They had never met here in San Francisco and then they met three thousand miles away on a dusty road in Georgia. They talked about San Francisco and how crazy it was that they had to come three thousand miles to meet each other, and they agreed to have lunch when they got home, which they did. They liked each other and discussed what the two congregations could do together. They agreed that education was the most important thing—that every child deserves a good education. They formed a joint committee in which everything was equal, the same number of people from Third Baptist as from Emanu-El, and the same amount of money to get the thing started. What they were going to do is train a group of volunteers to serve as tutors for kids who were having trouble in school. It's called Back on Track.

Petnick: I love that program.

Semel: That was thirty-three years ago, and it's still going strong. On the weekend of Martin Luther King's birthday, on the Friday night, Amos preaches at Emanu-El at the Shabbat evening service, and on Sunday one of the rabbis preaches at Third Baptist. Back on Track has been going ever since they first met. I don't have a clue about the number of kids that have been tutored.

Petnick: Thousands probably.

Semel: Thousands. And it's equal. That was the premise on which it was organized, that if there were six Baptists, there were going to be six Jews, but they take any kid. So, it's possible to do these things—you just have to have the will and the desire and the understanding of why you're doing it.

Petnick: What would you say is the "why" in that?

Semel: The "why" is education, which is important because people do things out of ignorance. They don't necessarily understand what they're doing. I'm not suggesting that there aren't some evil people who do it because it's evil, but many times people just don't understand the ramifications of what they're doing. So much is done out of ignorance: "I never met him. I don't know who he is, and, therefore, I hate him."

Petnick: Then there's also fairness. In our society White people have a lot more educational opportunities, and therefore they have more job opportunities. In the Black community if we can increase education—

Semel: That's right.

Petnick: —then you're putting people on a path to a much better life.

Semel: It's easy to hate someone you don't know. You have an idea of who they are, not necessarily bearing any resemblance to the real truth.

Petnick: Give me an example of a person or a group of people that you might have had some idea about them, but when you go to know them, they turned out to be something quite different.

Semel: That's a tough one.

Petnick: It must have happened.

Semel: It probably did. I guess the closest I can come to it is when I was traveling with my husband during the war in the South. I encountered segregation, which I had never experienced. I grew up in New York and San Francisco. What did I know about segregation?

Petnick: You didn't know about "White Only," "Colored Only."

Semel: Exactly. The first time I saw those signs in Anniston, Alabama, "White" and "Colored" over the water fountains—I couldn't believe my eyes. I knew it from the history books, but I had never seen it. When you see it, it's a whole different story.

Petnick: We talked about this in previous interviews, so I'm going to ask a different kind of question. When did you start to first have Black friends that you spent personal time with? Did you have Black friends when you were a kid?

Semel: I had Black friends in high school, but when I went to Barnard there was one African American girl.

Petnick: In your whole class!

Semel: In the whole college. She was the daughter of a federal judge. That's not true today.

Petnick: Of course, not. But that's really interesting, Rita.

Semel: When I went to Barnard, not only did they not think of taking an African American young woman, but there was also a Jewish quota. All of these so-called fancy schools in the East, they all had a Jewish quota. Princeton had a Jewish quota. Dartmouth, the whole … I have to say that I didn't fight it, I was so glad to be accepted.

Petnick: Did you start to make friends outside the Jewish community and form personal relationships with people who were not Jewish?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Tell us about that.

Semel: It mainly happened in college, but it also happened a little bit in high school but not as much because New York City high schools were neighborhood schools. We lived in Washington Heights, which was mainly a Jewish neighborhood. The same thing happened later on after I was married here in San Francisco. The schools were segregated because the neighborhoods were segregated, and they were neighborhood schools.

Petnick: You didn't even have a chance to know somebody who was different than yourself. Talk about being in a bubble! Everyone was in a bubble then.

Semel: I was very much involved in the desegregation efforts in the San Francisco schools. We thought busing was the answer. We couldn't think of anything else to do because the schools were neighborhood schools and all the neighborhoods segregated. Even in San Francisco African Americans couldn't buy in Forest Hill, they couldn't buy in St. Francis Wood, so as long as the neighborhoods were segregated, the schools were going to be segregated. The only way to bring kids in—we reluctantly thought—was to bus them in, but it was a disaster because they'd bus them in, they'd spend four hours or five hours at school and then they would go home. We had to integrate the neighborhoods before the schools were going to be integrated.

Petnick: It takes both for people to bond and form relationships. It takes both neighborhood and school integration to change race relations. Otherwise, in many places, they arrived in their group, stayed in their group and left in their group. It was all superficial.

Semel: It didn't integrate *anything*. The result was parents took their kids out and put them in private schools or they moved out of San Francisco. When my kids went to school here in the city, we had a good school system. The busing ruined it.

Petnick: What's in your background that allows you to have these very liberal attitudes?

Semel: I got it from my parents.

Petnick: Say more about that. How?

Semel: Particularly my father. My father was a very interesting person.

Petnick: We talked a lot about your father, yes, including that he performed with Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor.

Semel: That experience of traveling with a vaudeville troupe introduced him to a whole other different world than the world that his family came from.

Petnick: That's a good point.

Semel: I forget who was asking me this the other day—maybe it was you—about why parents did the things they did because they were first generation Americans—their parents were the ones who immigrated here. Still, it was not easy.

I grew up with the idea that you had to help other people, that you had to do something for somebody else.

Petnick: That was Rabbi Pearce asking you about that when he was here last week. We were talking about *tikkun olam* and what that meant. Where did you get the idea to "repair the world" and make it a better place?

Semel: [Going back to childhood] the idea was that however bad things were for you, there was always somebody who had it worse.

Petnick: I understand. And now back to JCRC.

This was on the website of JCRC, explaining what their core values are. The very first value listed is "*Tikkun Olam*," which is a core value for you. Since you've talked about it a lot, I thought maybe we could review the other values JCRC promotes. The next one is "*Darchei Shalom*, Paths of Peace."

Semel: In making the world a better place, these two follow.

Petnick: They all have to do with making the world a better place. Making the world a better place is the key value, it's number one.

Semel: I told you what Bishop Andrus said to me. If you could only live up to that, all of us, to make the world a better place, imagine what kind of a world it would be.

Petnick: The next core value expresses the idea that all of the House of Israel are responsible for one another. Simply put, Jews are responsible for each other. As a Jewish person, I certainly understand and have a good feeling about that, but this is a different part of the question. I want to know if you think that sometimes we as Jews are more focused on helping one another, and not doing enough for people who are not Jewish? What do you think of that?

Semel: I don't think it's an either/or, I think it's a both/and.

Petnick: Say more.

Semel: I think that's the whole point, now that I think about it, of why I think interfaith work is so important. When you get to know somebody then you realize that you have more in common than that which divides you. Every family wants to do well by their children. Every family wants to make enough money to buy a house, to raise their children in good schools. There are some basic things that every family wants. You don't have to have it at the expense of somebody else. There's enough in this world for all of us.

Petnick: So it's not a zero-sum game?

Semel: No.

Petnick: It's not a zero-sum game. Amongst our Jewish people there definitely tends to be an attitude of "Is it good for the Jews? What are we going to get out of it?" Sometimes the politics of the situation or the assessment of the situation can become almost blindingly Jewish, if you know what I mean. Do you know what I'm talking about? I'm playing the Devil's Advocate today.

Semel: Yes, but I wonder. I'm thinking about my daughter and the kids of my friends—that generation doesn't feel that way.

Petnick: I think it belongs more to our parents' generation when they were struggling so hard to make it here.

Semel: Even my parents didn't believe that. No matter how bad things were during the Depression, we would always think of somebody who had more difficulty.

Petnick: When your parents helped people, did they help them whether they were Jewish or not? It wasn't that they just helped Jewish people, they helped whoever they knew about who was in need?

(Long Pause)

Ok, here is another interesting core value of JCRC "Do not stand idly by." This expresses a commitment to activism.

Semel: No, you can't stand idly by. You've got to get involved. Even if you think you're doing it just for you or your family, if something's wrong you have an obligation to try to fix it—at least I think you do. We've got to make the world a better place. If we think we're doing it just for our own and our children that's too bad, because while we're doing it for our children, we're helping other children whether we realize it or not.

Petnick: That's a good point. What we're doing for our children helps other children whether we realize it or not. That's really beautiful. Our mutual friend, Norma Satten, was very big on "making the world a better place" and *tikkun olam,* repairing a broken world. These were the guiding principles of her life, too. Did you work on any projects with Norma Satten and Libby Denebeim?

Semel: I'm trying to remember.

Petnick: Norma was involved with Coming Home Hospice, the Commission on the Status of Women, Community Living Campaign, and various Jewish organizations. She was in the Emanu-El Sisterhood. Your paths must have crossed in a number of places.

Semel: I don't know that we worked on any one particular thing together, but we were probably on similar paths. We had similar ideas and similar commitments. We were good, close personal friends.

Petnick: But you each had your own work with different organizations.

Semel: But the essential idea was the same: *tikkun olam.* It sounds boring, but we keep coming back to that.

Petnick: It's the same thing in Norma's oral biography. She keeps coming back to *tikkun olam, tikkun olam.* I should look at my computer and see how many times it was said. That was the guiding principle of her life too. You could put a *tikkun olam* sign over her house. Making the world a better place.

I am thinking of the famous quote from Hillel. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me; if I am for myself alone, what am I; and if not now, when?" What does that mean to you?

Semel: I think it's absolutely true. Anybody who thinks they can better their life without caring for somebody else's is doing it for the wrong reason because everybody is dependent on somebody at some point.

Petnick: That's what's gotten lost. To me that's one of the main reasons why we're having such great difficulty in the world now. We have so many wealthy people who have forgotten they wouldn't have anything at all if it were not for the grace and help of everything and everyone.

Semel: Right. If you help somebody else, you don't take anything away from you. Your life can be much more meaningful.

Petnick: In this first part, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" You have to be for yourself as well. What do you think about that?

Semel: I think that's true. Once I was on the Social Justice Committee at Grace Cathedral, as well as Temple Emanu-El, and sometimes when we'd talk about what we should be doing and how we should be doing it … I turned into a bore about this … If we are for something, or we want something done before the Board of Supervisors, if people go in it from Emanu-El, that will have a certain amount of influence. If Grace goes in, that will have a certain amount of influence, and if Calgary goes in … a certain amount of influence. But if the three go in together, they have more than triple the amount of influence. You get more done. It's a selfish thing. You get more done if you do it with others because people are much more impressed when it's not just this one or this one, when they're all together.

Petnick: That was one of the principles—an important principle, maybe a key principle behind the Interfaith Council.

Semel: We never spelled it out, now that I think about it, because we were so busy doing the shelter and making sure the homeless had a place to go during the cold, wet winter.

Petnick: I'm looking at this—the last of the core values that are listed from the JCRC information booklet. It says just what you were talking about, "Building consensus and speaking with a collective and civil voice." That's a good way of putting it. Is there anything else? This is especially important, "when vital interests are at stake." Can you think of times when either JCRC, which represented a lot of people, or the Interfaith Council went before the SF Board of Supervisors or another decision-making body and pleaded for something representing a lot of people: can you give some examples of the effectiveness of this principle?

Semel: Here's an example of the Interfaith Council. The MTA [Municipal Transit Authority] wanted to have metered parking in front of churches on Sunday. So we got involved in the issue. For example, there's Mission Dolores. There's the Lutheran church, and so many more. We went to bat for all of them. The Interfaith Council got them all together to go as a group and oppose Sunday metered parking, and we won. There was an example of people coming together. It didn't matter whether you were affected or not affected, the principle of the thing was what was important.

Petnick: That was a good victory. I think we should stop now, unless you have something else that you want to say right now about JCRC.

Semel: They were wonderful years of my life. I really enjoyed it. I first came on when Gene Block was the director and Earl Raab was the associate director. Then when Gene retired and Earl took over, he made me associate director. I'll tell you something else—I'm not sure I want to include it, but it's a funny thing that happened. We realized we needed somebody, and we wanted to hire Doug Kahn. He had just finished his term at Hillel and his wife, Ellen, had just graduated from law school and would be working at Sideman and Bancroft. Earl and I were talking about what we should pay him, and Earl said, "I think we should pay him what you're earning."

I said, "Really, why? The only work he ever got paid for previously was at Hillel."

Earl said, "Well, he needs to support a family."

I said, "Earl, Ellen's going to work for one of the biggest law firms in the city, and no matter what we pay him, she's always going to make more money."

"But you're married." Earl said. I said, "What has that got to do with it?"

Even Earl thought that the man should make more money than the woman, but I won. He didn't start at the same salary that I was making. It was so typical of the time and the thinking of men: men should always make more money than women.

Petnick: When did Doug come in?

Semel: You really are testing my memory.

Interview 8: March 11, 2020

Basya Petnick: We are going to continue our interview about JCRC today. We'll begin with the topic you raised, Rita, about the change in attitude after Israel became a state. Tell us your thoughts about that.

Rita Semel: We talked about this a little bit previously. Most of the Jewish community leaders were not pro-state: they didn't want a state. I think their concern was to be seen as having "dual loyalty." That was the big issue. When the United Nations voted to make Israel a state, then they really changed their tune. The attitude was, as I have said previously, "We didn't want it. We didn't ask for it. But now that we have it—we have to support it and make sure it succeeds." This is very important because at the time, in the early days, there was a great deal of need from the American Jewish community [for financial support]. This was before Congress voted to give Israel a lot of money, which they still do. It's very important.

Petnick: But it wasn't always so.

Semel: No, it wasn't always so. I remember in the early days going on a trip to Washington, which the JCRC spearheaded, with a number of leaders in the Jewish community to make sure that we secured foreign aid for Israel, and we succeeded. There were a few congressmen who were very helpful.

Petnick: Raising money here in the US?

Semel: There's a huge amount of money—I don't know the exact sum—that Congress allocates to Israel.

Petnick: Billions. Every budget period they are allocated a large sum.

Semel: That started way back when. I remember going to Washington with a group of our leaders from the Federation and from the JCRC to make sure Israel was included in the foreign aid that they gave to countries.

Petnick: There's a tremendous pro-Israel lobby.

Semel: Yes, that became one of the major issues that AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] took on. For a while when they had their meeting in Washington once a year, every member of Congress—regardless of party—would come. AIPAC counted on that support and Congress counted on the support that they were getting from the Jewish community.

Petnick: So it's mutual.

Semel: It was a two-way street.

Petnick: The members of Congress get financial support and vote support.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: It's a powerful constituency.

Semel: Because reliably … Jews vote. They do.

Petnick: Yes, we do.

Semel: There are certain decisions.

Petnick: Do you think the attitude of the general population in the US and non-Jews throughout the world became less sympathetic to Israel after it became a state?

Semel: I don't know. There was a certain constituency which was concerned about Palestinians and that they had no say in what was going on in Israel. There was a lot of concern.

Petnick: Were they called "Palestinians" then? When did the name "Palestinians" come into being? Arabs in what is now called "Israel" were not always called "Palestinians," were they?

Semel: They were because the country was Palestine. It was always Palestine. When Israel became a state and the lines were drawn for the boundaries of Israel then those parts of the country which were not included in "Israel" became Palestinian. It remained Palestinian. That was the issue.

Where were the boundaries going to be: what was going to be Israel and what was going to be a Palestinian state? The idea presumably was there was going to be a Jewish state and a Palestinian state. This was called the "two-state solution," which I still think is the only thing that's going to save it. Because the longer it goes on [as it is now], and the more Israel annexes territory, the more trouble.

Petnick: They no sooner established Israel than warfare broke out. The Arab population was not happy with the distribution.

Semel: No, they weren't.

Petnick: They attacked Israel and then Israel fought back aggressively and took more land.

Semel: Yes. There were certain factions in Israel who felt that it was all supposed to be Israel.

Petnick: Yes, you can imagine there would be a faction like that.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: What do you think were some of the best periods of Israel's history?

Semel: After the Six-Day War.

Petnick: 1967?

Semel: '67. It was such an outstanding victory for Israel. Hindsight is 20-20 vision, so it's easy to say, "If only they had done this, that, or the other thing." It was the perfect opportunity—Israel won so clearly, and if Israel had been magnanimous and proposed a two-state solution … On the Israeli side a two-state solution was theoretical—everybody talked about it, but nobody really wanted to do it. Because there were those people who felt, "Well, we've gone this far—we can go to the other step. To hell with the Palestinians." That was too bad.

Petnick: You're right, it was the perfect time to be magnanimous and generous.

Semel: Yes. But you can look over history and see all the times we've flubbed it, not only Israel and Palestine but all over the world.

Petnick: What other high points in Israeli history come to mind for you? It doesn't all have to be politics and warfare, it could be also cultural things. Whatever you wish to recall.

Semel: The building up of Hebrew University, building up of the university in the south. Education was always a very important issue in Israel. I don't know this for sure, but I would suspect that the number of college students compared to the population would out—

Petnick: It would be a higher ratio in Israel of students to the general population than most other places?

Semel: Anyplace in the world. Education was always very much valued. I read the other day that the Israelis are close to finding a vaccine for—

Petnick: [the Corona Virus] I've read about that in the Jerusalem Post. I think it would redeem Israel in the eyes of the world. If Israel developed the vaccine, it would be heroic … fantastic!

Semel: I read that they've come up with something, but it has to be tested. Can you imagine what it would do for Israel if they actually come up with something?

Petnick: I have my paws crossed—I'm hoping.

Semel: What I read in *The New York Times* is they've got it, but they have to test it.

Petnick: I haven't seen it in the *Times*. I'll go back and look. I only saw one small article and I thought, "Why isn't the world talking about this—it is so important." It's in the *Times*? I'll find it.

Semel: What a boost that would give to Israel.

Petnick: It would be great.

Semel: And its legitimacy.

Petnick: A lot of great medical discoveries have come to the world from Israel and, of course, from medical work and research at Hadassah Hospital. The son of one of the leadership families of Emanu-El suggested that one of the things that we could do to improve Israeli-Palestinian relations would be to do more medically for and with the Palestinian population. He said when you go to Hadassah Hospital you see Palestinian nurses and doctors and Israelis nurses and doctors working side-by-side, harmoniously together. It's not like what you see on the evening news, which features only hostilities. I know Yael Dayan and others work helpfully and harmoniously with Palestinian women, but it is not on the news.

Is there anything else that you'd like to call attention to?

Semel: I think you're absolutely right. I've never been in an Israeli hospital, have you?

Petnick: No.

Semel: I don't know.

Petnick: I just know that Hadassah Hospital has a great reputation. They have some highly advanced treatments and procedures.

Semel: And it's supposed to be a place where they work side-by-side. If there could be more of that—but I read the other day Netanyahu still hasn't been able to put together a government. I read that [Benjamin (Benny)] Gantz was working with a group of Palestinian members of the Knesset. If they could put a government together, that might be the start of something good. And it would be a message that it is possible for them to work together.

Petnick: That would be great. Is Gantz considered moderate?

Semel: He's moderate.

(Simultaneous comments)

Petnick: To have a centrist or moderate person heading Israel would really be a benefit.

Semel: The thing I find so hard to understand is … Netanyahu is under indictment. We have a pretty crummy president, but at least he's not been indicted.

Petnick: He will be as soon as he leaves office.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: If he ever leaves. Let's take another minute and just think about Israel for a minute and see if there are any other thoughts that you wish to share.

Semel: About Israel?

Petnick: About Israel. We haven't talked in a more detailed way about the trips to Israel, and especially your experiences in taking non-Jews to Israel. Do you want to reminisce about that a little and share some details?

[Repetition deleted]

Semel: I think that was one of my best achievements as director of the JCRC.

(Telephone ringing)

Semel: I thought it was a fabulous idea. I went to the board and I told them about this. I said, "I think we should do this." "How are you going to fund it?" I went to the Koret Foundation—

Petnick: You have to say what "this" is. You think we should do what?

Semel: We should take some of our people from various parts of the San Francisco community—people in government, people in business.

Petnick: Community leaders—

(Telephone ringing)

Petnick: We're back on. This is part two of today's interview with Rita Semel.

Semel: I went to the Koret Foundation. When I presented it to the board of JCRC we had a thorough discussion about the pros and the cons, and we decided it was worth trying. We also felt—and I think this is an important issue—that people have to have some financial stake in it. What you get for nothing is worth nothing. We would invite people. It would be paid up to a certain point, but they would have to put in some money of their own. I went to the Koret Foundation and the director then was—I'll think of his name in a minute. He liked the idea and he put it to the board, and they gave us—I don't remember the exact amount of money. We put together this trip, this itinerary. I checked with the American-Israel organization in Washington that took members of Congress. I checked

with the director there about how they designed their trip and what were some of the places and people they felt were important for non-Jews to visit.

We designed the itinerary and they recommended a person to be our guide. His name was Menachaim—Israel has a school for guides. They really know the country and this Menachaim was one of their top people. We designed the program. The idea was that we would show Israel warts and pimples and all—the good things and bad things. It would be an itinerary which would include the things that worked and the things that were problems.

I'm glad that we did that because it wasn't Israel *uber alles*. It wasn't everything is just wonderful. We included what the issues were and what the problems were. That made an impression on people, that we weren't trying to cover up what the issues were and what the problems were.

Petnick: What were some of the issues and problems at that time? What decade are we talking about? Was this the seventies? Where are we in time?

Semel: It was after the Six-Day War. It was probably the early seventies. The issues were the call for a two-state solution, the problems that the Palestinian villagers didn't have the same things the Israeli villagers had. There were Palestinians who didn't get the education, the same training, the same—

Petnick: They didn't have the same amenities and facilities and have the same well-functioning institutions.

Semel: There were Palestinian villages that didn't have running water or electricity. We tried to be as honest as we possibly could.

Petnick: Were there any Israeli villages like that or no?

Semel: No. I would suspect that there are still Palestinian villages that don't have—

Petnick: I know that there are.

Semel: I'm sure there are. I think the fact that we were willing to show the good with the bad and the good with what was needed, made the trip reasonable and honest. We weren't making it seem as though everything was just hunky dory and fine. We took them to the Knesset, and they got to meet people in the Knesset, members of the Knesset that were both Israeli and Palestinian. There was no covering up of what was wrong or what needed to be changed. Most people will tell you that it's been the most important trip of their lives. Still, even after all these years, someone will say to me, "Oh, you took me to Israel." They never forget.

Petnick: How long are these trips to Israel?

Semel: Ten days.

Petnick: At JCRC, of the many things that you did?

Semel: That was one of the best and they're still doing it.

Petnick: Ok. Tell me something else that is a powerful memory for you, something that you accomplished at JCRC. When I say, "you," I mean you and others working together.

Semel: We were involved in the Soviet Jewry movement.

Petnick: Let's talk about that.

Semel: There was a lot of activity. I can't tell you the number of times I stood in front of the Soviet consulate yelling and screaming and waving banners. And we were involved in the exodus from Ethiopia to Israel. We were very involved in pushing for that.

Petnick: How old were you when you were doing this? What decade of life were you in?

Semel: I was in my late forties, early fifties.

Petnick: Your presence must have been powerful. When an older person participates in those kinds of demonstrations, it gives a gravitas to it.

Semel: I didn't think of myself as old. (Laughter)

Petnick: I said, "slightly older," not old.

Semel: It was a long time ago now that I think about it. You don't think about yourself as old.

Petnick: Never. Probably never. Do you ever think about yourself as old?

Semel: No, I don't until somebody asks me how old I am, and I say, "Oh, my god."

Petnick: (Laughter) In the former interview you talked about when Jews were trying to leave the Soviet Union and there was a tax or a fee that was put on them and they needed to pay thousands of dollars to be able to leave. When Jews were trying to leave the Soviet Union, did they had to pay money to get out?

Semel: I don't remember it.

Petnick: I have it on record, but we won't talk about it. We'll go on to something else.

Semel: I'm sure it was true, but that wasn't the issue.

Petnick: Let's talk about when Soviet Jews or Russian Jews came to San Francisco in the seventies. You have Jews from Eastern Europe coming to fairly sophisticated, fairly cosmopolitan San Francisco. What happened here? How did that go?

Semel: Jewish Family and Children's Services was the main organization that did the bringing in. The JCRC role was to find ways to get them out. The resettlement here had to be done by a social service agency and JCRC is not a social service agency. HIAS played an enormously important role nationally and JFCS locally did the resettlement.

Petnick: You worked with Anita Friedman.

Semel: No, we're not social workers.

Petnick: You just let them do their job.

Petnick: You got them out and they came to San Francisco and Jewish Family and Children's Services was here to embrace them and take them on.

Semel: Yes. Have you talked to Anita Friedman?

Petnick: I talked with her about working with Norma Satten but not about this.

Sometimes there were cultural clashes as Soviet Jews tried to integrate into the Jewish community in San Francisco. It doesn't always go so smoothly. Is there something you want to say about that, about the integration?

Semel: Again, that was not our job. Our job was to get them out of the Soviet Union. JCRC is not a social service agency. Jewish Family and Children's Services were the ones that did that and had to do that.

Petnick: You have clarified that, so please tell us more about getting Soviet Jews out of the Soviet Union, since that's what you were focused on.

Semel: We worked on members of Congress. We worked on whatever had to be done. Dianne Feinstein at the time was the mayor of San Francisco and we had to persuade her. She was going to be in the Soviet Union meeting with the mayor of … what's the name of it … one of the mayors. Before she went, we went and talked to her and I asked her to try to persuade the mayor of—what was the name of the city?

Petnick: Moscow? Leningrad? Kiev?

Semel: I think it was Leningrad. It was important for her to tell the mayor that it was important to let people out.

Petnick: For the record here, why was it important? You and I know. This is oral history: let's tell future generations.

Semel: Because it was a democracy and in a democracy people have the right to go where they need to go.

Petnick: But the Soviet Union was not a democracy.

Semel: No, but we—

Petnick: Tried to bring that democratic idea to them.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Right. You partly succeeded. You got a lot of people out, right?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Anything else today to add about JCRC and Soviet Jews?

Semel: No, I don't think so.

Petnick: I'll move on to the next subject today about your work at JCRC. We were going to talk more about schools and segregation and integration. We touched on a that in the earlier interview, but if you want to expand out from there, that would be good.

Semel: We were very involved in trying to integrate the schools. Despite what Kamala Harris said about busing, it was not a good idea in San Francisco. I won't talk about the East Bay because I don't know what went on there.

Petnick: We talked about this in the previous interview. We talked about that they didn't really integrate, that they came—

Semel: What happened is that the bus would fill up at Hunters Point, they would bring them in for the school day. They would attend and then they would take them back to Hunters Point or Bayview or wherever.

Petnick: They probably just stayed in their own social group.

Semel: Yes. There wasn't integration in the truest sense of the word because they didn't play with each other; they didn't have an opportunity to make friends and walk home from school together. They made friends in the classroom, but it has to be more than just the classroom. It has to be after school or before school as well.

Petnick: So it was a superficial—

Semel: The real issue was the neighborhood. The neighborhoods were segregated because everybody went to a neighborhood school except for the kids that they

brought in from Hunters Point. To say that we were integrating the schools was a misnomer. We weren't integrating the schools.

Petnick: You were just busing kids around.

Semel: The result was that a lot of parents were concerned about—this wasn't only the Jewish community; it was the whole city—they were concerned about what was happening with kids coming in who were not as well educated as the ones who were already there. Some White parents took their kids, who had made the San Francisco schools good schools, out of the city's public schools and put them into private schools. Many families moved down the Peninsula so their kids could go to school in Burlingame or San Mateo or Palo Alto. These changes destroyed the San Francisco School District.

Not that I'm suggesting that we shouldn't have worked to desegregate the schools, but what we failed to realize is that because they were neighborhood schools we had to make the neighborhoods—

Petnick: Integrate the neighborhoods to successfully integrate the schools.

Semel: Exactly. At that point in San Francisco neighborhoods like Forest Hill or St. Francis Wood, no Blacks could buy a house there. There were [restrictive] covenants in all of the so-called fancy neighborhoods. Certainly this neighborhood, Pacific Heights, no Blacks could buy a house here. As long as Blacks couldn't become property owners and neighbors, we were just busing kids in to stay for five hours and then busing them out, and that wasn't going to integrate the schools.

Petnick: Are there any non-Whites who currently own property here in Pacific Heights?

Semel: Probably not.

Petnick: Interesting. I hadn't thought about that until right now.

Semel: At that time we had the Redevelopment Agency, which destroyed the Fillmore.

Petnick: It was a terrible thing.

Semel: If you talk to the director of redevelopment at the time, what they were doing, according to him, was not making people move out but having them move out so we could fix up the neighborhood and then they would move back. Of course, they never moved back.

Petnick: It didn't work out that way.

Semel: It didn't work out that way.

Petnick: Who did move into those—

Semel: There are still people in the African-American community who still are resentful, as they should be, of what happened to destroy their homes, their neighborhoods.

Petnick: Yes, I understand. I've met some of them in other oral history projects.

Semel: It was a terrible thing.

Petnick: This will be the last topic for today: Israeli-Palestinian relations. What do you want to talk about? About a two-state solution and why we need that, how that might come about. However, you want to approach talking about Israeli-Palestinian relations would be ok.

Semel: The two-state solution is the only answer. Israelis should be wanting it because that's the only way they're going to end up being safe. The problem is who's going to draw the lines, how are they going to divide the territory? As long as there's a government in Israel which insists on moving people into places where they shouldn't be, which—

Petnick: You mean the settlements in Gaza and so on.

Semel: Yes. And wanting to annex territory, there's not going to be a two-state solution and we're going to have this constant war. If we went back to what the United Nations did, the idea was to have both Israel and a Palestinian state. Israel came into being, but the Palestinian state never came into being. We've got to stop playing games. People are entitled to have the state.

Petnick: We're the occupier.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: It's oppressive.

Semel: Very depressing.

Petnick: Do you have any observations you wish to share about the evolution of JCRC itself? Are you happy with the development of JCRC over the years?

Semel: Yes. I think my successor was extremely competent, did a fabulous job.

Petnick: That was—

Semel: [Rabbi] Doug Kahn. When he became the director, he hired Abby Porth as his associate director, and she was very good.

When Doug retired, she became the director. She was excellent. Her decision to leave had nothing to do with the organization but had to do with her personal

life, family life. I've talked to her about this and her reasoning was that her children were fairly small when she became the director and as they were growing up, she found the demand of the job was such that she felt that her kids were growing up without her being present. She wasn't looking to retire, but she was looking for a job that would not mean [being] out of her house three or four nights a week. That's what happened. They have just gone through a selection process. They just announced a new director. There was supposed to be a program this week—what's today, the 11th? Tonight there was supposed to be a program.

Petnick: To meet the new director.

Semel: It was canceled.

Petnick: Is this Hallie Baron? Is that the new director?

Semel: No, Hallie was the interim director. The new director is a man named Todd Gregory who comes from an organization called A Wider Bridge. A Wider Bridge is an organization of LGBT Jews. I've not met him, but everybody tells me he's a terrific young man.

Petnick: This is maybe a good time to ask you what do you think are some good qualities of a leader of an important nonprofit organization? What succeeds in that role?

Semel: You have to be open to acceptance of the Jewish community as it is, with people on the far right, people on the far left, people in the middle, and people who think that the only reason for a JCRC is to be supportive of Israel. And you have to be open to those who believe that we have to worry about our relationship with the mayor and the members of the board of supervisors and what's going on all over the community. I suppose you could say JCRC has to be all things to all people, and that's not an easy thing to do. Our concerns are education—making sure that the schools do the kind of job that we want them to do for every kid, not only for Jewish kids but for every kid; that housing is equitable; that people are hired because they can do the job, not because they're Black, White, Christian, Jewish. In other words, the interests of JCRC are to make certain that there's fairness not only for the Jewish community but for every community, to make sure that we are doing all we can to make this a wonderful place to live. You could spend all week talking about the issues. When I think about it, there's no issue that doesn't affect the relationship of the Jewish community to the rest of the community.

Petnick: It's always all interrelated.

Semel: Employment, education, making sure that it's possible for Jews and others in the city—more than the city, the territory that the JCRC encompasses, which is San Mateo and Palo Alto and San Francisco. The East Bay is also part of the JCRC. We're concerned about ethics, we're concerned about education, we're concerned about housing, we're concerned about employment, and we're

concerned that Jews have a shot at it all. It brings you into all kinds of issues, but you make good friends. You really do.

Interview 9: April 9, 2020 (Telephone)

Basya Petnick: Today the focus of our interview is going to be what are called the *elu devarim* and the mitzvot. These are things that we're supposed to do in life that are so good that you can't do enough of them. The *elu devarim* are the things that are considered "beyond measure." Today we're going to talk about "welcoming strangers." What can you tell us about that?

Rita Semel: Did you see the article about me and the *J?* That told a lot about the sort of things that I've been doing all my life. Was that at all helpful in this?

Petnick: I've read material like that before, but for this oral history we need for you to repeat some of it and also tell us new things and their impact on you. Let's start with your personal experience. Did your parents ever bring strangers into the home to feed them or to give them shelter overnight?

Semel: No, they didn't bring people into the house or keep them overnight, but they were involved in providing food. Don't forget, I grew up in New York during the Depression. We had a tough time during the Depression; life wasn't easy. My father had difficulty keeping jobs. But whatever we had my mother was sure to share with other people. That was a given all during my growing up years.

(Sirens, fire engines)

Petnick: It doesn't always have to be that literal, sometimes it's a friendliness to strangers to bring them into a group or into a conversation. How about when you were in college, did you have an eye out for who might be being left out and who needed to be brought in.

Semel: Yes, I did. I went to a college which at that time had a Jewish quota, so I was always a minority. At the time when I went to college, all the so-called Yales and the Harvards and the Radcliffes and the Barnards all had Jewish quotas. So I was always aware of being a minority, I always knew I had to be twice as good as anybody else in order to get what I wanted. That was nothing new in my growing up and in my college years.

Petnick: Were any of your friends Jewish?

Semel: I had a variety of friends. I was very involved both with the college newspaper and the magazine and different kinds of friends worked with me on those two things.

Petnick: Were they Jewish or not Jewish?

Semel: Both.

Petnick: That was pretty early in those days to have relationships or friendships with a mixture of people rather than just in your own Jewish world.

Semel: Absolutely.

Petnick: If you had attended a college which did not have a quota for Jews, there probably would have been more interest in your own group?

Semel: I don't know about that. I never made friends because they were Jewish or not Jewish. I made friends because I liked them, because they were interesting, and because I felt at home with them. I can't say whether the fact that someone was Jewish or not influenced my [feelings of] friendship.

Petnick: We talked about when you first traveled with your husband and about meeting the minister. You thought maybe he wasn't going rent you and Max a room in his home because you were Jewish, but then he was so happy that you were Jewish because he was tired of his renters all being Methodists and wanted something different. How about when you were newly married, a young wife, what about welcoming people into your home or making outreach to people who might be for whatever reasons left out?

Semel: When my husband first came home, he became involved in an organization called the American Veterans Committee, which was the World War II answer to the American Legion. They were all young men and some women who had served in the armed forces. Most of our friends for the rest of our lives came from that group. They were all different kinds of people, some Jewish, some not. Our kids went to what was then called a cooperative nursery school, which is today's preschool. Cooperative meant that the parents had to be involved, had to serve one morning a week with the kids. We met a lot of people through that and they became good friends, and they were both Jewish and not Jewish.

Petnick: What's the first time that you had an important experience through your work with the Muslim community or African-American community, a community that was markedly different than your home community?

Semel: I can't think when I haven't.

Petnick: You're saying that your life has always been filled with a mixture of people from many different communities.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: How about not just work, but also in terms of personal friendships, people who come to your house and have dinner with you or you go out to lunch with them or share a meal? Who are those people?

Semel: Today or when?

Petnick: Let's talk about years ago when you were first going into the working world. I'm trying to find out if you formed real friendships with people of different types.

Semel: Yes, I did. Working at the *Chronicle* I certainly met all kinds of different people. It became more Jewish when I was working for *The Jewish Bulletin* and for the Federation and then for the Jewish community. When I worked for the Jewish Community Relations Council, I met all kinds of people and became friends with all kinds of people. That's what the JCRC does.

Petnick: Let's stop there and say what "all kinds of people" means. What kinds of people were they? Who are we talking about?

Semel: We're talking about people in the school department. We're talking about people on the Board of Supervisors. In 1963 I became involved with the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race—which followed a National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago—[that] was called together because of discrimination and segregation. There was a Catholic priest from San Francisco who was in Chicago and he came back to San Francisco and brought together a group of people, all different kinds of people, to form a San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race, which coalesced in 1965. We had five hundred people at the University of San Francisco at that conference. Thatwas a discussion on segregation all through the schools and in residences. Ibecame involved in serving as the unpaid administrator for about twenty-five years. I certainly met a wide variety of people—Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Christians, all kinds of different people.

Petnick: How about the Asian communities? Have you worked much or formed relationships with various Asian communities—Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and so forth?

Semel: Yes, we did have some of that. Not Korean, but certainly Japanese and Chinese.

Petnick: What would you like to tell us about your experience in working with or being close with people who come from cultures that are entirely different than your own? How was that for you?

Semel: It was wonderful. I learned a lot. It was great.

Petnick: Tell us some examples, Rita, please.

Semel: It's been so much a part of my life it's hard to sort it out.

Petnick: It's like a fish trying to know water and water's all around the fish?

Semel: I became friends with a Muslim named Iftekhar Hai, maybe twenty-five years ago. I've met his wife and I've met his children and I've been to his daughter's

wedding. Amos Brown is a good friend of mine. They are so much a part of my life it's hard to sort it out.

Petnick: What do you think makes people afraid of meeting or becoming close with people from other cultures?

Semel: You're asking me why people are afraid? I have no idea. It's so alien to me. Maybe because they're afraid of something different. I don't know. Maybe they don't feel secure in their own selves. That could be. If you feel secure in who you are then you have no reason to fear anybody else.

Petnick: Good point. I think some people when they encounter difference think, "Oh, different, interesting, good." Then other people go, "Different. Oh, no." They back away.

Semel: I think it relates to your own comfort level in who you are.

Petnick: What are some outcomes of the work that you did in bringing groups together in different conferences? What were some actual real-world changes or results from that work?

Semel: One of the major ones was the work we did on homelessness following the call from Mayor Art Agnos, opening the congregations to shelter people which resulted in the Interfaith Council, which is not thirty years old. Just this morning I was on a Zoom meeting with members of the Interfaith Council and the City Controller and the Director of the Office of Economic Development. [We were] talking about the problems that we're encountering with what's going on in San Francisco right now with shelter-in-place and the nonprofits that are struggling to keep their doors open and continue their work. It keeps going on.

Petnick: We're in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic that has swept the world. Already more than half a million in the United States have this virus and thousands of people have died. We've been asked by Mayor London Breed and the Governor Newsom to shelter in place, to stay home, to stay in the house. What are homeless people doing during this time?

Semel: They're struggling. They're having a terrible time. Some of the discussion this morning was what the city is doing about that. For those of us who are stuck in our houses, it's very difficult to do anything.

Petnick: Because you can't get out to go to meetings or to get resources together?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: What would be your response [be] if you could go out today and do things about what's happening. What would you do?

Semel: I would gather people who were like-minded who would find out what the issues were and see what we could do to help them. Nobody does anything alone. Everybody does things in a community.

Petnick: You can't do much alone. You really can't accomplish—

Semel: No, you have to get like people and they have to work together. That's the only way you are going to do anything.

Petnick: I agree. I don't go out much because we're supposed to shelter in place and stay home, but I've been out a few times in the area I live in, Hayes Valley, and I've been out a couple times to the stores. Often there are people camped in tents along the way, on the side streets. Most recently when I went out they were not there. Something has changed.

Semel: I don't know where they are. I haven't been out for days. I'm about to lose my mind.

Petnick: It's hard to stay home every day—it really is.

Semel: Oh, my god, it's terrible. I watch too much television. I've seen too much of Donald Trump. Not good for my mental health.

Petnick: Right. Got that. You were on the board of both Grace Cathedral and Temple Emanu-El. Let's start with Grace Cathedral. What are some of the protocols that Grace Cathedral has in place to welcome strangers, to welcome people into its fold?

Semel: They pride themselves on being a welcoming community. We haven't had a meeting in a couple weeks so I don't know what they're doing right this minute, but they pride themselves on the fact that the cathedral was always open. I doubt that it's open now, but I don't know for sure. Most congregations are closed.

Petnick: Emanu-El, I think, is closed.

Semel: Emanu-El's closed. Sherith Israel is closed. I suspect Grace Cathedral is closed. That's a problem we have to face. Services are being done online in all these congregations.

Petnick: Have you attended any online services either for Grace or Emanu-El?

Semel: Yes, I have.

Petnick: How was that?

Semel: Very different. Last Friday night on the [computer] screen Rabbi Jonathan Singer was on half of it and the cantor was on the other half. They weren't even

in the same place, and the service was short. They did the best they could, but it's hardly the same thing as having services together in the temple.

Petnick: Were you watching it on your computer in your study? Is that where you were?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Were you alone or was someone with you?

Semel: A friend of mine was over.

Petnick: What are some of the activities that Grace Cathedral supports to welcome strangers during normal times?

Semel: It's a very welcoming congregation. They have people greeting you and so on.

Petnick: So if you come for service or you stop by just to look at the cathedral they have people to receive you?

Semel: I don't think now.

Petnick: No. I mean during normal times. I'm not talking about during the pandemic.

Semel: At normal times it's a very welcoming place.

Petnick: How about Emanu-El. Is Emanu-El welcoming also?

Semel: I don't know. Since it's my congregation I've never been in that position, so I don't know what they do.

Petnick: I know Emanu-El has greeters for every service.

Semel: During services, yes.

Petnick: Just during the day if you wanted to stop by there, I don't know if there's somebody who can show you around. I don't know how they handle that.

Semel: I don't either.

Petnick: With the security measures that went into place after 9/11 everything is so much more guarded and locked. You can't just walk in anymore.

Semel: I know they're very involved with security, as are most synagogues and many congregations.

Petnick: Describe the security at Emanu-El. What do you mean by that, by "security"?

Semel: When you go in you have to show your purse and sometimes if they don't know you, they—what's that wand they use over you?

Petnick: Like a metal-detector wand to see—yes. They have a security booth. They have security officers that are on duty all the time there.

Semel: Yes. A lot of congregations do. It's a shame, but that's the way it is.

Petnick: It really is. It creates a whole different feeling.

Semel: When the Interfaith Council had a convening on security, three hundred congregations showed up.

Petnick: That was a big turnout. It was an important issue to everybody.

Semel: Yes, absolutely.

Petnick: When people come into services at Emanu-El, if they're not members of the congregation, if they're just visiting, is there anything in place to welcome those people or to do outreach to them? Do you know anything about that?

Semel: I haven't been in a while because there haven't been any services. On an ordinary Friday night people would be welcomed from the pulpit. They have a signup sheet and you're asked to put on a name tag and say hello to people you don't know.

Petnick: So it's pretty friendly. They're invited to the *oneg*, where there's an opportunity to meet people and talk with people.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: To share some challah, cookies, and wine together.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Let's talk about welcoming strangers in a larger social and political sense. Let's talk about the border, and the issue about the US border with Mexico.

Semel: Several of the rabbis of Emanu-El have gone down to the border. Rabbi Mintz has gone several times. I think Rabbi Rodich has gone as well. I know that people have gone from Sherith Israel.

Petnick: Would you describe for the historical record what the issue is about the border and what the conditions are at the border so that people in the future know what's going on today.

Semel: I don't know. I haven't heard anything lately.

Petnick: Thinking about the topic of welcoming strangers is there anything else that comes up?

Semel: I think it's more important than ever. Of course, the opportunities are much fewer since we're all stuck in our homes. It's a little hard to welcome strangers when you've got to shelter at home. You can't even welcome your neighbors.

Petnick: You can hardly welcome yourself. You see yourself in the mirror with a mask on, and you don't even know who it is!

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: I think we have done as much as we want to do on welcoming strangers so maybe we should end there.

Semel: A little difficult to do right now. Okay, dear. Thanks so much.

Petnick: Thank you so much. Nice to talk with you today. Nice to hear your voice. Bye-bye.

Semel: Okay, take care of yourself. Bye.

Interview 10: August 7, 2020 (Telephone)

Basya Petnick: Before I turned on the recorder today, we were talking about your daughter, Elisabeth Semel. I asked you what values she might have inherited or learned from you. Would you please repeat on the record what you were just saying to me?

Rita Semel: I'd love to take a little credit, but I think her father deserves more credit than I do. Elisabeth inherited a sense of social justice, a sense of caring for the underdog, a sense of wanting to make the world a better place. I think my husband and I shared those values, and I think we perhaps handed them on to her. When she was at Bard College she went to Washington to protest the Vietnam War. She did some work with what's the lawyer—oh, dear, my senior moment.

Petnick: I have them too. Tell me what you're going for and maybe I can help you.

Semel: Public defender. She did some work for the public defender on the East Coast and that made her interested in criminal defense work. When she decided she wanted to go to law school, there was no turning back: she knew that's what she wanted to do. When she graduated from college, she applied to law schools, and was accepted to UC Davis Law School, which was only about five years old at the time. It was a school that was open to all kinds of new ideas, and it was really the perfect place for her. She did some work for the public defender in—what's the county, is it Sacramento County that UC Davis is in?

Petnick: Yolo County.

Semel: Almost from the very beginning when she started law school it was clear that she was going to be a defense lawyer. When law students were doing volunteer work, whether it was with a corporation, with whatever … Elisabeth went to the [Yolo County] public defender's office and did her volunteer work.

Semel: After she graduated and passed the bar [California Bar Examination], she got a job with the public defender's office here in San Francisco briefly. Then she was invited to come to San Diego and work. They didn't have a public defender in San Diego, but they had a law firm that did the job, and she was invited to join that firm. She moved to San Diego where she worked for a number of years before being invited by the American Bar Association to run their team for the abolition of the death penalty. She moved to Washington and worked on that issue for a while.

And then Boalt Hall [at University of California, Berkeley] established a clinic on the death penalty. She was invited to become the director, and that's when she came back to California and has been at Boalt [name changed to Berkeley School of Law] ever since.

Petnick: When we first started your oral history project, we, [Lynne Newhouse Segal] and I, went over to Boalt Hall and met with her at her office and got a sense of what she was doing there.

What I would like to ask you about is conversations—your conversations together. Take us into your living room when other people aren't there and you and Lis are talking together. You talk about the world … you talk about social justice or racial inequality? Can you share with us something from the kinds of conversations that you two might have together when you are sitting together or having dinner and you begin to talk about racial inequality, social justice, things that you each care about. What are those dialogues like, the dialogues between the two of you?

Semel: I guess we do share a number of concerns about making the world a better place. We do talk about it. I talked to her this morning and she was getting ready to talk to a committee of the state legislature on a bill that she's pursuing which has something to do with social justice. I'm not sure exactly what the bill is. I'm sure it has to do with her concerns of criminal justice.

Petnick: I've read that she was doing a lot of work recently about the inequality of jury selections.

Semel: Yes. She's been concerned about that. [The concern is] that Black potential jurors are denied service on the jury more often than White. She was on—what's his name …? Lester Holt's program about that. She testified before the state legislature about that issue.

Petnick: That's important work. It's mostly Black people who receive the death penalty, so if Black people are excluded from being on the juries, for one thing it means Blacks are not being tried by a jury of their peers.

Semel: Oh, terrible. She's done a whole study about that. What else? Surprisingly to me, while she enjoys being in a courtroom, it also turns out that she enjoys teaching. That is something she got from her father, who was a teacher and a student all of his life. She loves teaching students.

Petnick: When we met with her she seemed happy about her interns. She has a whole crew of young people who work with her on death penalty cases.

Semel: Yes, before the current situation with the coronavirus, she would take the students to work on—part of the whole business about the clinic is that the students actually get to work on cases. At one time she had a case in Alabama, and another case [in] Texas, and [one in] San Diego. She would go work … in various places, and take students with her to do the actual work. It was wonderful for students to be able to see what they were doing in real time.

Petnick: What is the actual work at that point? What would they be doing?

Semel: They would be interviewing witnesses and they'd be checking into various aspects of the law as it relates to the case. Actually, they would be doing what lawyers do when they're preparing a case.

Petnick: So these are defendants who have been sentenced to the death penalty, but what her students are doing is looking to see what maybe hasn't already been brought out in the trial—other evidence or other witnesses. Is that what it is?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: You said Max was a lifelong learner but I didn't know that he also admired teaching or was a teacher. Tell us more about Max and teaching.

Semel: I remember when the kids were little that he would go to San Francisco State and take a class at night. UC Berkeley started a program for seniors like the Fromm Institute and he went to that for many years. He would go at least one night a week to some class or other. He just loved learning. I think she inherited [it] because I certainly didn't have it.

Petnick: It's a powerful value in Jewish life. We believe that education is the key to opportunity.

Semel: I believe in education; there's no question about that but I'm not one for taking classes. People used to say, "Why aren't you going to Fromm [The Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning]?" I could no more go to Fromm than I could go dance on Market Street. I had friends who spent lives going to Fromm but that was not for me.

Petnick: Why is that?

Semel: I'd rather be *doing* something than sitting in a classroom.

Petnick: You're the doer. But you seem to read a lot: your house is filled with books. Do you spend much time reading?

Semel: A fair amount.

Petnick: Ok, it's mostly doing. Mostly you are in meetings or you're working with people getting things done?

Semel: I hope so. Given the state of the world, I wonder how good a job I'm doing.

Petnick: (Laughing) In the home in which Elisabeth grew up there was the value of education. Her parents both cared about the underdog and about social justice and about creating a more equitable society. It feels like she absorbed these values from you and Max.

Semel: I think so. Where else would she have gotten them?

Petnick: I don't know. There's also the time that she grew up in—the Vietnam War and the opposition to that war, and Civil Rights.

Semel: During the Vietnam War she was in college in the East and she joined a number of demonstrations going to Washington to protest the war. Our protests against injustice go way back to when she was in grammar school. One day when, I think, she was in the fourth or fifth grade, she came home and said to me, "Did you know that during World War II this country arrested Japanese-Americans and put them in a camp?" I said, "Yes, I knew." She said, "Did you protest? Did you march?" I said, "No." She said, "Why?" I said, "Because we were told …"

Communication was very different during that period. We didn't have the kind of communication then that we have now. I said, "When war broke out we were told that there were Japanese submarines in the Bay. I remember going with my mother to buy blackout curtains for our windows. It seemed logical at that time to do something [to] Japanese-Americans." She said, "But they were citizens." I said, "Yes, we were wrong, but you have to look at things in context of when they happened. We didn't know any better."

That didn't satisfy her.

Petnick: I can understand it from both sides.

Semel: It makes me unhappy that we didn't do anything, but it was what we were told. Where were you when the war broke out? Were you here?

Petnick: I wasn't born yet. I was born in '46. I'm an early Boomer. I missed all that, but I have studied a lot about the war. I have uncles who fought in the war and my mother talked about it all the time. It's hard to imagine in today's world how patriotic people were during WWII. Most people in this country participated in the war effort and wanted to do everything they could possibly do to win the war and bring our troops home.

Semel: Absolutely. I'm agreeing with you. I was in San Francisco when Pearl Harbor happened. As I said to Lis when she was complaining to me about arresting Japanese-Americans, we were told that there were Japanese submarines in the Bay. We didn't have television. We didn't have available [the volume of] information that we have now. We had to believe what we were told. It's hard for young people these days to imagine a world in which you didn't have access to all kinds of information immediately.

Petnick: Immediate contact with people all over the globe. [Back then] you would have been lucky to get a flyer to somebody on your block.

Semel: My mother had a Japanese housekeeper and one day she didn't show up. My mother tried in vain to find out what happened to her. We never were able to find it out. I'm sure she was interned like the others, but we never were able to find her.

Petnick: I have read that you and Lis were in a program together at Grace Cathedral. What do you recall about that? What was that about?

Semel: Grace Cathedral has a program before Sunday services called The Forum. They invited people to talk about various issues. On Mother's Day, three or four years ago, we were invited to talk about the mothers and daughters relationship and what each of us do. It was fun. I was very proud of Lis.

Petnick: Did anything come out in that dialogue that you didn't know? Did you have any surprises?

Semel: No, not really.

Petnick: You say you're proud of her. Tell us clearly how and why you are proud of her.

Semel: Because I think she's doing important work, and because I think she brings to that work honesty and devotion and clarity and all of the good things that people need to have to do what's necessary to right a wrong. And I agree with her that the death penalty has to be abolished. I don't want to be a part of anybody else's death.

Petnick: I feel the same way.

Semel: I'm sure you do. When you think about it, Basya, I think life without the possibility of parole is a much more devastating sentence. Once you're dead, you're dead. This way you have to live the rest of your life with this and that's much more your punishment.

Petnick: I've been corresponding for thirty-some years with a man who committed a murder when he was a young man, when he was seventeen years old, and was sentenced as an adult. I've been corresponding with him regularly. We had a commitment for the first twenty years that we would write to each other every six weeks. I have followed his life carefully. I have a sense of what it's like for someone to spend so much time in jail. It isn't easy. No, it's not easy.

Semel: What jail is he in?

Petnick: This is not California. When I first started corresponding with him he was in Joliet, in Illinois. He's been in various prisons in Illinois. But he's a well-behaved prisoner, so how he's in a medium-security institution. He was in high security for many, many years, and that was a very hard life. Now he's in a medium security, and he can be outside a little more. He's earning a college degree, he's able to go running on the prisons grounds out of door and has a lot more privileges than he used to have. He had to earn them. It took a long, long time.

Semel: Oh, my god. What a world we live in!

Petnick: Indeed, I appreciate all the beautiful things you said about your daughter and from what little I know of her, I could easily agree. She's definitely a wonderful person. I only know her a little bit, but I admire her, too.

Semel: Thank you.

Petnick: Did you ever have any disagreements? You're laughing so you must have had some disagreements. What did you disagree about?

Semel: She was not an easy child to raise. She was born with a mind of her own.

Petnick: That's part of the package. I suppose that was a good thing.

Semel: Like all mothers, you want to protect your child. You don't want them to frequent dangerous places. She went away to college two thousand miles away and I couldn't keep track of what she was doing. I found out after the fact.

Petnick: This is great. I think you took your comedy pill today. You're very funny. Any political or social issues that you and Elisabeth specifically do not agree on?

Semel: I can't think of any offhand, no. I sometimes would disagree with her only because of concern for her safety, not on issues. I think we agree on most things.

Petnick: Is there anything else that you would like to say about her?

Semel: She's a wonderful daughter and now it's as if she's my mother. She calls me every day to make sure I'm not doing anything that I shouldn't be doing because of this coronavirus. For example, my friend Gerry [Gerard] O'Rourke died. I don't know if you read about him.

He was a wonderful man and we were very good friends. There was a service for him yesterday, outdoors, and she absolutely had a fit when I said I was going to go. I ended up not going because she made such a fuss about it—I shouldn't put myself in danger by being with too many people, even though it was outdoors. It would be limited because all these things are limited to twelve people. She made such a fuss I ended up not going.

Petnick: You weren't allowed out yesterday. She loves you and she protects you.

Semel: She does, indeed, and she's sure she knows better than I do about everything. Probably does.

Petnick: That's really sweet.

Semel: I appreciate this. This is a great interview.

Interview 11: September 9, 2020 (Telephone)

Basya Petnick: We're going to interview today about challenges—challenges you have met mostly in your work, Rita, but also in other areas of your life. What comes up for you? What's something that you first think about when we talk about challenges?

Rita Semel: I think in my generation the challenge was trying to make your way as a woman in the business and professional world. Those challenges have not completely disappeared, but they're nothing today to what women in my generation experienced. When I go back to my first job as a copy boy at the *Chronicle* during the war, we were called "copy boys." Previously they never had a woman in that position doing that job. [The men were overseas] they had no choice but to hire us. Believe me, if they had a choice they never would have hired us. The point I'm trying to make is we were called "copy *boys.*" We had to sign a statement that said in effect, "I have taken the job of a man who's in service and when he comes back, I'll give up my job." That was the situation then. You can't imagine it today, but that's what it was in 1944. The city editor, particularly at the time at the *Chronicle,* was very anti-woman. It was funny because his wife was a reporter at the *Chronicle*. I don't know how she put up with him anyway.

Petnick: Who owned the *Chronicle* then?

Semel: I know the city editor was Johnny Bruce. He was not bad. Actually, he was kind of good because his wife was a reporter on the entertainment side. She did a review for movies, and what little theatre there was at the time.

Petnick: Women did get a few jobs on newspapers, usually writing about entertainment, or about style or household—what were deemed women's interests.

Semel: Carolyn Anspacher, whom we've talked about before, was the only woman reporter on the *Chronicle* before the war who was on the city side. You're right, the other women were doing food and music and that kind of thing. She was an enormous influence on my life. She made me realize what women could do in spite of the disadvantages that they had and the obstacles they had to overcome. She never married. She was a great inspiration to me. I was very fortunate. She took me under her wing, and she said to the city editor when she was going on an assignment, "I need help. I'm taking Rita with me." I got to do a lot of things that I never would have done if I was just another "copy boy."

What's so interesting to me is that in those days women were taught to be competitive with one another, so she was way ahead of her time to act as a mentor toward you and to help you in your career in all kinds of ways. I hope I showed the appreciation that I should have shown.

Petnick: Let me ask you about this on a personal level because I want to talk about things on an organizational level, like we're doing right now, but then I want to also bring in the personal. What was it within you that gave you the confidence to step out into the world and to work for a newspaper? Where did that come from?

Semel: I think I got it from my father who was way ahead of his time in thinking of what women could do or should do. I think I mentioned to you before that he said to my sister and me about how important it was for us to go to college. Of course, he wanted us to marry and have a family life and all of that, but he also wanted us to be able to take care of ourselves. This was from a man who was from an immigrant family, who only had a high school education, and who was way ahead of his time. Now that I think about it, the men in my life—my father and my husband—were both advocates of women doing what they should do or what they could do. Not too many women of my generation were lucky enough to have [those] kind of men in their lives.

Petnick: Quite to the contrary. There were many women who were married to men who repressed them and held them down.

Semel: Maybe my husband would have preferred to have a traditional wife, but he never let me know it. He supported everything I wanted to do all my life. I never thought about it.

Petnick: I find it interesting. Your father envisioned what became "Super Mom," a woman who did everything: she had a good job but she was also a great wife and mother and homemaker. It's difficult to do all that but it sounds like that's what your father envisioned for you, that you would do all those things.

Semel: Yes, I guess so.

Petnick: And you did it.

Semel: I guess I did.

Petnick: Tell me about another challenge that you met in your career.

Semel: When I started to work at the JCRC [Jewish Community Relations Council], I became the associate director. We had a meeting of the executive committee in the conference room. The executive committee at that time consisted of all the past chairs of the JCRC. I walked into the room, and a fairly prominent male attorney at the time, said to me, "Where's the coffee?" I wasn't going to let him get away with that!

Petnick: Was he serious?

Semel: He was serious. I decided I was not going to let him get away with it. Without discussing it with the executive director, I said, "I'll check and see." I didn't say, "I'll go and get it," or anything like that. I thought I'm not going to give into this … whatever you want to call it.

Petnick: What year was that?

Semel: Let me see if I can figure it out. When did I go to work at the JCRC? I would say it was probably in the early fifties.

Petnick: Maybe it was 1954 when you went to JCRC. I'm not sure myself.

Semel: Something like that, yes.

Petnick: What about other challenges? You were at JCRC for a long time.

Semel: I retired in 1963.

Petnick: Let me share with you for a moment what my theory is about career—the difference between a job and a career. A career is something that we engage in with our whole being in order to do it. It gives us an opportunity to use our strengths, but it also sometimes shows us some of our weaknesses and places where we need to become stronger. Thinking about your work in that way, what comes up for you? Were there places that you felt like you needed to become stronger in order to accomplish certain things in your career at JCRC?

Semel: Absolutely. I didn't have any background—whatever that was in those days. Who knew about background? We were making it up as we went along. It was fairly soon after the war and the Jewish community was just in a way coming into its own. The JCRC, as a concept, right after World War II was when it started all across the country.

At that time we were almost completely funded by the [Jewish] Federation. Although we were an independent agency, we got our money from the Federation with no strings attached, which was rare. In many places across the country, JCRCs were committees of the Federation, and the Federation had a lot to do with the agenda, but not here. We were very lucky.

Petnick: Did you personally ever have to ask people or organizations for donations for funding?

Semel: No.

Petnick: No, you never did.

Semel: I never did that. In those days we were almost completely funded by the Federation. We had very little reason to do fundraising and we didn't know much about it.

Petnick: So even for special projects the Federation took care of it for you guys. It all came through the Federation.

Semel: There was one glaring exception and that was for taking non-Jews to Israel, which was first funded by the Koret Foundation, as I told you.

Petnick: Give me an example of when you were wrong. Surely there was some time when you asserted something that turned out to be wrong. I know that you're extremely successful and most of the time you've been right, but there had to be a time when you were wrong. When were you wrong?

Semel: Hmmm.

Petnick: If ever. Maybe not?

Semel: I'm sure there were plenty of times that I was wrong, but I'll have to think on that.

Petnick: If there was ever a person that you hired that it was the wrong hire or you were on the wrong side of an issue, something.

Semel: I'll tell you something. It wasn't my doing completely but I was complicit in it. At one point, it was a year of economic challenge. I was the associate director at the time. In a discussion with the JCRC we came to the conclusion that what this community needed was a vocational service where we could help people find jobs. We checked to see what other communities were doing and how we should do it here. We started the Jewish Vocational Service. I was the assistant director and the associate director took over as director of the JVS and that's when I became associate director. Unfortunately, the situation became problematic.

Petnick: How did you deal with it? That's an interesting thing, to know how you solved a personnel problem.

Semel: I don't remember all the details, but we managed it. One good thing he did was to hire Abby Michaelson Porth. She was right out of graduate school when she started to work there. That was the best thing that ever happened to JVS: Abby Porth. She literally does it from the ground up. She did a fabulous job and it became a model agency around the country, not only in the Jewish community but any community.

Petnick: That's great. I never knew that. Is it still in existence, JVS? Is it still a service?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: It lasted all this time.

Semel: Yes. It's still around. Abby's not there anymore, she finally retired. I don't know who's running it now, but Abby did a fabulous job, just fabulous. They would have an annual event and people came from all over the world, all over the community to their annual event.

Petnick: That's great. And it was launched by you guys at JCRC. It was your idea.

Semel: We came up with the idea that it was needed. Now that we're talking about it, I wonder how it's doing because God knows it's needed today. She [Abby] built it up into something that was nationally known. I was proud to be part of that. So where are we?

Petnick: Our basic topic is challenges—challenges you've met in your work and how you met them. What else? I'm looking for what was hard for you, and what character qualities you had to draw on or cultivate in order to get through it.

Semel: I don't know. I'll have to think about that. Nothing comes to my mind right this minute. I'm sure there were plenty of them.

[*interruption*]

Petnick: This is part two of today's interview on September 9, 2020. We're now talking about the United Religious Initiative. All that being said—

Semel: This is my niece from Canada calling now.

Petnick: Why don't you take that call. It's important to you. I'll call you back later, bye.

Interview 12: September 22, 2020 (Telephone)

Basya Petnick: W'll talk about the United Religions Initiative (URI) today, ok?

Rita Semel: That's fine.

Petnick: My understanding is that it was started from an inspiration of Bishop William Swing. Can you tell us about how it started?

Semel: That's Bishop Swing's version.

Petnick: You tell me your version—it's your interview.

Semel: There was an anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, the signing at the Opera House. Bishop Swing volunteered to have Grace Cathedral have an interfaith service commemorating the signing. He called together a committee of various religions to plan that interfaith service, and I was one of the original members of that planning committee. At first it was very … limited in its reach to other religions. There was a Catholic priest, there was me, there was Marty Weiner, the rabbi, there was one imam from Oakland who attended the first meeting, but who never came back again, and Cecil Williams. There were about five or six of us. During the meeting I said to Bill [Swing], "If we're going to do this, we need to have representation from the whole Protestant community. We don't have it. We just have Cecil."

Toward the end, [Rabbi Martin] Weiner said, "Bill, what about what Rita suggested about getting other members of the Protestant community?" He agreed, so we broadened the community. We brought in Amos Brown and we brought in a number of other Protestants.

Semel: This came out of that interfaith service that we held following the anniversary of the United Nations. It was so successful that we decided we needed to continue with it. Bill and Mary were going on a sabbatical trip around the world and he said, "Wherever I go why don't I try meeting the religious people of the country, whatever country that is, and see if we can get some interest in the United Religions. Now we have the United Nations so how about United Religions," which was a good idea.

To his great credit, he and Mary did try. Every place they went—they met with people in Rome, they met with the archbishop in London, they went to Israel and met with some of the rabbis there, and they all thought it was a great idea but nobody wanted to do anything about it.

He came back and we called together the group who had worked on the program here and we said, "If the high mucky-mucks don't want to do it, we'll do it with the people." That's how the idea came that we would have just ordinary people

organized in various communities in what we were calling Cooperation Circles, [with] a minimum of seven people representing at least three religions. The idea [was] that each Cooperation Circle would do what was necessary in their own community. It was planned deliberately to be locally based, which it still is. I don't know the exact number of Cooperation Circles we have today, but we've got thousands around the world. That was the idea, a minimum of seven people could get together representing at least three different religions, decide what is needed in their own community and become a Cooperation Circle.

Petnick: What were some of the things people saw as being needed. I'd like to understand some of the practical work that was done and is being done.

Semel: The San Francisco Interfaith Council is a Cooperation Circle.

Petnick: Now I understand how it links up.

Semel: That's one idea. We've got Cooperation Circles doing all kinds of things—cleaning the streets, cleaning the water [*unclear*][7:07] the community, working on the schools. Just about anything you can imagine, we've got a Cooperation Circle doing it.

Petnick: When I looked through the literature, work centers, etc., I see some of the elite or society members of San Francisco. I also would like to know more about other people who were not in that elite echelon of people who are active in URI. If we look at a program from an award luncheon or dinner you see San Francisco elite. Looking back some years you see the Goldmans and you see Doug Kahn and Dede [Diane B.] Wilsey. Who are some of the non-elites of San Francisco who are strong community activists and who are involved in URI?

Semel: We've got people from all over the world.

Petnick: Locally who supports it?

Semel: Locally we've probably got a half a dozen Cooperation Circles.

Petnick: So people who belong to those circles, both the leadership and—

Semel: It depends on what the Cooperation Circle is striving to do. The leadership comes from the local community.

Petnick: In addition to the Interfaith Council, what's another community group in San Francisco that belongs to URI?

Semel: I don't know. I'll have to find out.

Petnick: What was your role in the organization in the beginning?

Semel: I was the first chair. We were organized like a global council and I was the first chair of the global council that brings together people from all over the world.

Petnick: What year was that? Do you know offhand? If you don't happen to know it, I can look it up.

Semel: I don't remember the year. I do remember we met in Rio de Janeiro.

Petnick: Had you ever been there before?

Semel: No.

Petnick: Was it a good trip?

Semel: It was fascinating.

Petnick: Tell us a little about that? That's an interesting side.

Semel: This was the first global council meeting being held outside the United States. I forget why we chose Rio de Janeiro but there must have been a good reason at the time. It was fascinating. Have you ever been to Rio?

Petnick: I have not. That's why I wanted to hear about it. I'd thought I'd learn something completely new today.

Semel: It's a lovely city. It was fascinating to be in that city. I'll tell you a story. Father Gerry O'Rourke was one of the delegates. We were taking a walk one day and there's a big hill maybe like if we were down on Market Street and we looked up at Nob Hill, but it wouldn't be that far away. I said to Gerry, "Let's walk up there." He said, "I'm not walking up there." I said, "But it's the statue ofJesus." He said, "I don't care. I'm not walking up there."

Petnick: That's the famous landmark photo that you see—

Semel: Yes. It overlooks the city. It is everywhere.

Petnick: When you were chair what were some of the issues that you worked on? What was the stated mission? You must have clarified the mission in your role as chair. What was the mission and what did you work on?

Semel: The mission was to organize Cooperation Circles in as many countries and cities and towns as we could. That remains a primary mission. The idea was to bring people of faith together to work on local issues. In order to start a Cooperation Circle, you set a minimum of seven people, a minimum of three different religions and you work on whatever issue that's important in your community. We've got people who are working on climate change. We've got people who are working on housing. We've got people working on employment, and on whatever that particular community deems needed. I can find out for you how many Cooperation Circles we have.

Petnick: I'd like to have that figure in this report. That would be good. How many years did you serve as chair … approximately?

Semel: Two or three.

Petnick: Who succeeded you? Who was next? Do you remember?

Semel: No.

Petnick: There are a lot of women who have become involved in this work. I looked at some material today that had some interesting quotes from women all over the world about the role of women. This was in recognition of International Women's Day. I'm looking at something that says, "Women of URI. In recognition of International Women's Day we asked a few URI women leaders to talk about what it means to be a leader, a woman, and a peacemaker." Does that sound familiar? You're in it.

Semel: I am?

Petnick: You said something very interesting. You said that what women bring is compassion and "juggling." What you mean by that? I think you meant juggling all different roles, wife, and mother.

Semel: Because women do juggle. Why do you think widowers marry twice as often as widows? Because they can't be alone, because they don't know how to do anything. Women can be very self-sufficient because we're used to juggling, we're used to taking charge, even though the men think they're taking charge. It's the women who are taking charge.

Petnick: I agree but tell me how you see that.

Semel: I see it from my own experience and the experience of friends and people that I know. I've seen that when men get widowed, they get married again very quickly.

Petnick: They don't know how to take care of themselves.

Semel: They don't know how to deal with the issues of everyday life that women cope with every day: running a house, bringing up children, going to the market, making dinner—whatever it is, we manage to do it.

Semel: My husband retired before I did and he said, "I should do the cooking now that I'm retired and you're still working." I thought that was a great idea until he tried his hand at cooking.

Petnick: It was better in theory than practice.

Semel: I didn't have the heart to tell him how awful it was. He was so proud of everything he did I couldn't say, "Oh, good god, let me go back to cooking."

Petnick: That's cute. I love that. He never knew.

Semel: He was a great guy. I loved him dearly. I didn't want to offend him.

Petnick: That comes through in your oral history how much you loved and respected Max.

Semel: I do, but cooking was not his thing.

Petnick: Something else that you said that's quoted here in this pamphlet is, "I have yet to meet a mother who wants her children to go to war." Let's talk about that. Let's talk about women's intention for peace versus the male intention for war. War and peace.

Semel: I said that?

Petnick: Yes, you said that.

Semel: I think that's probably true for the most part. There's a famous quote of Golda Meir when she met with what's-his-name from Egypt and she said something about, "I wish you had never made us go to war and put our sons in danger," something like that. Here she was the prime minister of a country that was struggling for existence and had to go to war. She did send Israel to war because she knew she had to win to survive, but she always resented having to do that. I think you find that most women feel that way, that war was the last thing they want to do.

Petnick: Why is that?

Semel: Because our nature is loving and giving and protecting.

Petnick: By "our nature," you mean our feminine nature, women's nature or did you mean human nature?

Semel: It's probably human nature to an extent, but it's women's nature at the forefront. Even the women who were in power in various countries … when you think about it, somebody like Angela Merkel. I'm sure she would agree the last thing she would want is war. That was true of the woman in India whose name I can't remember at the moment.

Petnick: Indira Gandhi?

Semel: Yes, Indira Gandhi. I'm sure if you spoke to Elizabeth Warren or Kamala Harris or Amy Klobuchar, even Dianne Feinstein, what would be the last thing that they would want? I think it's the nature of women. Which is not to say that all men are warriors, but I think men are more willing to accept war and think it was inevitable and necessary.

Petnick: Yes. Women are much stronger sustainers and protectors of life, and men are more challenging and more willing to risk it to get something else that they want.

Semel: I think that's absolutely true.

Petnick: Anything more about URI? What are some things that have delighted you about the organization, that you've really enjoyed the way that it grew or things that it did? What was there to like?

Semel: I'm still involved marginally with URI. I had a meeting this morning. The idea that religion can be used to bring people together even though we believe different things, I think is a real wonderful idea.

[Interruption]

Semel: The idea behind United Religions is that religions have more in common than they originally thought. An Episcopal bishop told me that he thinks that if you get all religions down to the essence of what they're saying, they're all saying what Jews call *tikkun olam.* The message is to repair the world. If we could bring religions together to repair the world, that's a good thing. We can solve some of the world's problems by working together rather than fighting each other. [*unclear*][24:01] That's the whole idea of URI, that everybody has their beliefs and their beliefs have validity and that the beliefs are not something which should tear us apart but should bring us together.

Petnick: When you think about a broken world, what do you think are the key things that are broken? Speak to me about that.

Semel: You mean two?

Petnick: No, a few. There are millions but what stands out for you? What are some key things. When you say, "repair the world," what are some of the first things that you think of that are in need of great repair?

Semel: One of the things in need of repair is the idea that the only way to get what you want is to go to war. That's the wrong way to go about it. The whole idea—and that really underscores what you are all about—is that you don't have to go to war. You have to learn what the other person believes or thinks and you'll find that there are more similarities than you thought there were. In the end, what most people want—and I say, "most people," because there are some who want to control everything. But the ordinary citizen doesn't want war. The ordinary citizen wants a good life for their family, for their children, and their grandchildren. They don't want to control the world. You're not going to find Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump joining URI.

Petnick: (Laughing) They're not in it. Ivanka Trump is not the head of a Cooperation Circle.

Semel: No, I can't see that.

Petnick: Wars are mainly initiated by power, by greed, by wanting power, by wanting property, and by wanting to make profit on the sale of arms. Would you agree

or not that wars then come about through greed, through people wanting more property or more power or more profit from the sale of arms.

Semel: Absolutely.

Petnick: What else would you say causes war?

Semel: Wars come about because the people who are leading the country want something that the country doesn't have and some other country has, and they've got to go after it instead of figuring out how we could make peace with the other country and share whatever it is. It's like a cooperative dinner. You bring the salad and I'll bring the main course and somebody else will bring the dessert.

(Telephone rings) Can I ask you to hold on for just a minute?

Petnick: We should close soon. What else would you like to say about URI?

Semel: I think it's a wonderful idea and it has already brought a lot of people together who never would have come together. In individual ways it made a difference.

Semel: Currently, I'm just on one committee, the Finance Committee, which if my husband knew, he would be laughing. I was never good at finance. I never knew what a budget was.

Petnick: Thank you very much. Good talking to you.

Semel: Thank you. Talk to you soon. Bye.

Interview 13: October 7, 2020 (Telephone)

Basya Petnick: Let's talk today about your work with Catholic Charities. Tell us about how you became connected with that organization.

Rita Semel: I've been trying to think of how it happened., and I'm not quite sure I remember. As far as I can recall, someone I knew asked me if I would be on a committee. No, that's not right. From what I can remember it was at least twenty years ago. I've been involved with them for years and years and years. Why did I get involved with them in the first place and how did it happen? I don't know.

Petnick: Forget about my question. You say whatever you want about Catholic Charities, whatever comes up for you to talk about.

Semel: Somebody was telling me about Catholic Charities and the good work that they do and asked if I would want to be on the board. I thought, "What the heck, I'll be on the board." So I joined. It has been a really good experience. I guess I was the first Jew to ever be on the board of Catholic Charities and they didn't quite know what to make of me. I knew several of the people on the board from other activities so it wasn't so much of a struggle to get to know them. It's a really wonderful organization. It's similar to Jewish Family and Children's Service and to Episcopal Community Services. They all do the same kind of wonderful work. It's an eye-opener to go onto a board that's different from the one you are used to because you tend to think you're the only people doing this stuff and then you realize that's not quite true. There are other people doing that. It's a good lesson.

Petnick: How long were you affiliated with Catholic Charities?

Semel: I was on the board for about twenty-nine years.

Petnick: That's a very long term of board service.

Semel: First I was on the committee and then I was on another committee. Then I finally decided it was time to go and they asked me to find a replacement. Who would I suggest from the Jewish community who might be interested in joining? I recommended Jerilyn Gelt. Do you know Jerilyn?

Petnick: No, sorry.

Semel: Do you know her by name?

Petnick: No.

Semel: She's a terrific person. She's been on the board ever since.

Petnick: So it was a good pick?

Semel: Yes. That's the story.

Petnick: I'm looking at their website and I see that they work with older people, they have support for aging—

Semel: They do a lot of work with older people. The idea is to keep people in their homes. They do a great job of doing that. They also do counseling. They have a very strong immigration department.

Petnick: Tell us more about that.

Semel: They work loosely with getting people to become citizens, do what they have to do to become citizens and then to vote. They're strong on that, which I happen to think is terribly important. They have a daycare center for seniors. They do all of those things that a family service agency would do.

Petnick: They have homelessness and housing services, children and youth services, they have a camp. They have a lot going on.

(Telephone ringing)

(Interruption)

Petnick: We're back online. We were talking about the services they provide.

Semel: They provide all the services that a classic social service agency provides. They probably all do pretty much the same things.

Petnick: Why did you join them? Why not Jewish Family and Children's Services?

Semel: I was on the board of the Jewish Family and Children's Services many years before. I was on that board. I thought it would be an interesting experience and it was.

Petnick: What about it makes it Catholic? What was the Catholic character of it? JFCS serves lots of people but they have an essential kind of Jewish flavor to their organization.

Semel: It's a Catholic organization but they serve everybody. I'm sure JFCS will tell you they serve everybody too. People tend to go to the agency which is their religious agency. Ninety-nine-and-a-half percent of JFCS people are Jews, and ninety-nine-and-a-half percent of Catholic Charities people are Catholics, and the same with Episcopal Community Services. If you go to them and you're not Catholic or you're not Episcopal or you're not Jewish, they'll take you.

Petnick: They'll help you.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: Having served these different organizations, what are some of the things that you've learned about community organization? What is it that they get right and what do they tend to get wrong? Stand back for a minute and give us an overview.

Semel: I'm not sure what you're asking.

Petnick: What I'm saying is you've had a lot of organizational experience. I'm sure you've seen a lot of things go right but certainly certain projects go wrong. I'm asking for an overview of what you think organizations tend to get right and what do they tend to get wrong. Where do they get bogged down? Where do they do well?

Semel: So much of it depends on the executive director because boards come and boards go. The key person in any organization is the executive director. Catholic Charities went through a very bad time with an executive director before the current one. He wanted to do everything himself. He didn't want the board to do anything and he made it difficult for the board to do things. There is a delicate balance in the relationship between the executive director and the board. The board sets policy and the executive director carries it out. That's easy to say but hard to do. The previous director had a bad time. Finally he left and they went on a search and they hired a new director. She has done a fabulous job fixing the relationship and putting together a board. I'm no longer on the board, as you know; from what Jerilyn tells me, it works very well.

Petnick: The relationship between the board and the executive director is a delicate balance, sometimes it works really well, and other times—

Semel: It takes doing on both sides. The board has to realize what its role is, which is to set the policy. The executive director has to realize what his or her job is, and that's to run the show based on the policy that's set by the board. It's delicate and everybody's got to walk very carefully or else it doesn't work.

[Deletion]

Petnick: When you were on the board before Jerilyn, because she replaced you, who were some of the personalities, who were some of the important people that you worked with in your time at the Catholic Charities who were some of the leading actors in that organization?

Semel: Bob McGrath, Cecelia Herbert. She was the chair of the board for several years when I was on the board. You know who she is?

Petnick: I don't.

Semel: Cecelia and Jim Herbert are the couple that started First Republic Bank. She is one bright, wonderful human being.

Petnick: Is she still living?

Semel: Oh, yes. She was the chair of the board for a number of years when I was on the board. She ran a good board.

Petnick: Say something about that. When you say, "she ran a very good board," what makes for a good board chair?

Semel: A good board chair has to be able to have a good relationship with the executive director. Each of them has to know what his or her role is. She helped the board to set policy that the executive director would then carry out. During her time the executive director, who had a mind of his own, didn't get along very well, and she left and then they hired the current executive director who does a very good job … and also knows how to get along with the board, which the previous executive director did not know.

At least this is what I'm told because I'm no longer on the board.

Petnick: Thinking about the different services that Catholic Charities provides—help for aging, youth, homeless, and so forth, which one of those services do you personally feel the most interested in? I know you appreciate the need for all of them, but are there one or two that you're particularly drawn to that you have an ongoing interest in?

Semel: I think the work they do on immigration is particularly important because considering the President of the United States that we have and how bad he is on immigration, it's very important to have social service agencies that look out for the rights of immigrants. The immigration department of Catholic Charities is a particularly strong one.

Petnick: They do a lot of work to get undocumented people documented.

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: As you say, when they're documented, they're able to vote so they become a voice.

Semel: Getting people in the process of becoming citizens is important.

Petnick: Is there something more about Catholic Charities that you'd like to say that I haven't asked you about?

Semel: I think I've said everything. I think it's a very good organization.

Petnick: What was the time of your service? When did you start with them and when did you end approximately?

Semel: I was on the board for twenty-nine years. I ended about three or four years ago, maybe a little bit longer. Then I was asked to find my replacement.

Petnick: You must have gone there sometime in the early 90s— does that sound right?

Semel: Yes.

Petnick: All right. Thank you. Unless you have something else, this will be fine.

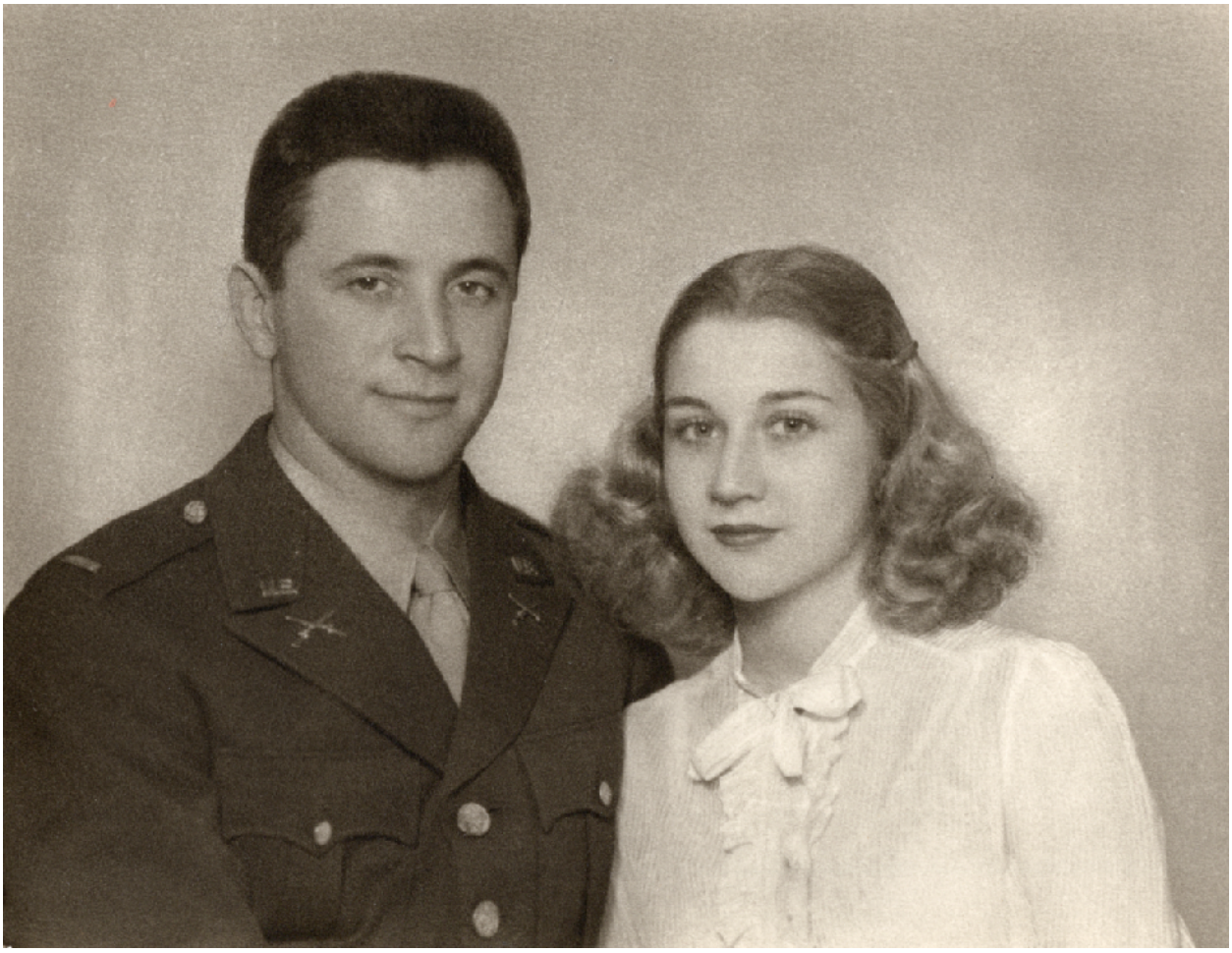
Semel: Is that it for today?

Petnick: Yes, we're letting you off easy these days, these strange pandemic, shelter in place days.

Semel: Thank you, dear. Good to talk.

[End of Interview]

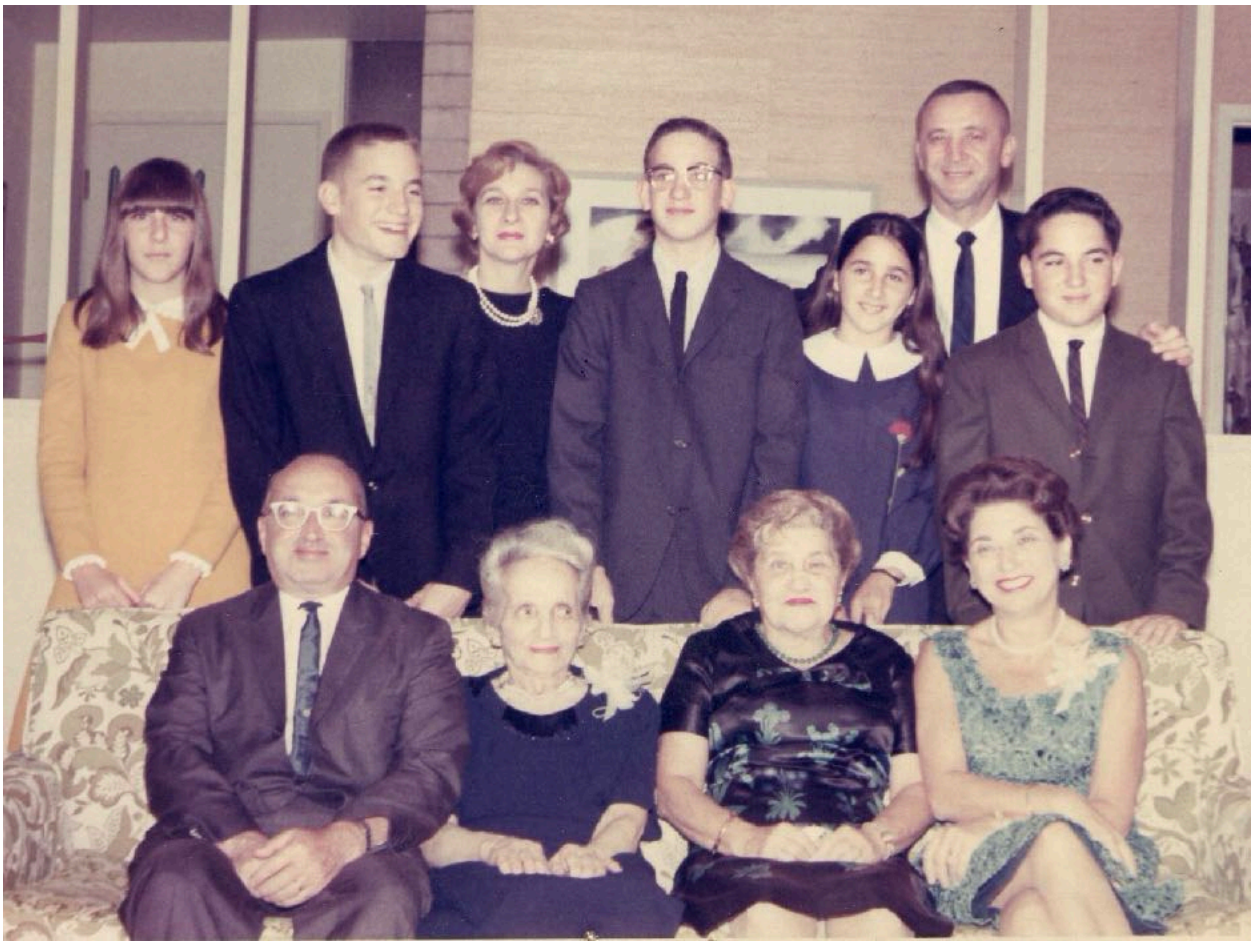
Appendix: Photographs



Marriage of Rita Roher to Max Semel
New York, 1942

Rita Roher Semel
Amsterdam, 1979

Max Semel
Israel, 1979



Top L-R: Elisabeth Semel, Daniel Resnick, Rita Roher Semel, Andrew Resnick, Jane Semel, Max Semel, Paul Resnick. Seated L-R: Sydney Resnick, Elizabeth Resnick, Henrietta Roher, Miriam Roher Resnick, circa 1974

JCRC Retirement Party, 1986

President William Jefferson Clinton visits with San Francisco clergy to discuss homelessness: Rita Roher Semel, Amos Brown, Father Jerry O'Rourke, et al., circa 1996

Thanksgiving Breakfast, Rita Roher Semel, US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and Michael Pappas, circa 2015

Rita Roher Semel and San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee, circa 2016