

Interviewee: Ellen Arlene Smith
Interviewee: Manuel Zax
Date of Interview: October 26, 2006
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Manuel Zax



Abstract: Ellen A. Smith was born in Worcester and has lived here almost all 92 years of her life. She attended the public schools and Salter's, where she learned more about shorthand and typing, leading to work as a secretary for Temple Emmanuel and Worcester State College. She married Henry Smith, who joined the army two months after they married. Ellen followed Henry to Fort Devens, where she had a secretarial job, and later visited him where he was stationed in Alexandria, Virginia. Shortly after the birth of their son, Henry was sent overseas and returned two years later, after which they had a second child, a daughter. She has two grandchildren. Ellen considers herself a fashionable woman and seeks clothing stores carrying stylish clothes, which she finds currently lacking in Worcester. She recounts that she has always been treated with respect and never harassed or discriminated against because of her gender. Ellen has been a docent at the Worcester Art Museum and is on the board of the Music Guild, attending many of the concerts at Mechanics Hall. Her hobbies have included modern dancing, enameling on copper, painting, swimming, and horseback riding. A recent leg bone fracture from a fall resulted in her stopping driving, but she looks forward to resuming driving in the very near future.

MZ: The first thing I want to ask you is, are you giving permission for this interview to be recorded?

ES: Yes, I am.

MZ: Good. Thank you very much. Now we are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women, aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences, based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focusing on the area of women's education, health, work, and politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on all of these experiences that you've had. So we thank you for your help with this important project. What is your full maiden name?

ES: Ellen Arlene Brodsky.

MZ: And your married name?

ES: Ellen Arlene Smith.

MZ: And when were you born?

ES: ... 1914.

MZ: Do you have children?

ES: Yes, I do.

MZ: Do you have grandchildren, also?

ES: I have two grandchildren.

MZ: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with?

ES: Jewish religion, faith.

MZ: What countries would be involved in your family background?

ES: My parents were both born in Russia.

MZ: In which cities?

ES: Kiev, in Russia.

MZ: Who was born there?

ES: Both my parents.

MZ: And to whom were you married?

ES: I was married to Henry Smith.

MZ: Tell me more about your parents. Let's start with your father. When did he come to this country?

ES: I'm 92, so he came two years before that, in 1911 or 1912. My mother came in the following year. They did not come together.

MZ: Did they know each other in Kiev?

ES: They were married in Kiev. And they came into the Boston port, not New York.

MZ: So did my parents. Where did they live at that time?

ES: When they first came here, they lived with a brother of my father on Waverly Street. They had a big apartment, and both my parents lived with them.

MZ: That was in Worcester?

ES: Yes. Waverly Street, near Ledge Street.

MZ: Why did they come, landing in Boston, and going directly to Worcester?

ES: Because my father's brother was there.

MZ: And what did your father do for an occupation?

ES: He was a tailor and furrier. He did that all his life here. A short life. He died very young. He was 63 when he died. He died of heart condition. He had high blood pressure, and they didn't know how to deal with it. No drugs. They put you on a rice diet. And he was probably eating the wrong diet. They didn't know. He was not fat. And my mother died a few years later, from a broken heart, really. She couldn't live without him.

MZ: What kind of man was he? How would you describe him?

ES: My father was known by everyone. His business was at the foot of Saint Vincent Hospital, on Vernon Street, and everybody loved my father. Sam Brodsky was known in that entire neighborhood. I've met people at different functions who remember him when they were children, and everybody adored him. He was sweet. Ambitious, just very charming. Very good looking (laughs).

MZ: How about your mother?

ES: She was also very pretty. Wonderful housekeeper and cook, and a marvelous seamstress. She had a wonderful talent. She used to make my clothes and hers when I was young. She embroidered beautifully, made gorgeous dresses with beading bags that ladies would kill for today. But that was my mother.

MZ: She never worked outside of the home?

ES: No. Not here. Never.

MZ: You grew up in Worcester? You described the neighborhood was near Providence Street, but can you fill us in a little bit more?

ES: Yes. When I was born, maybe shortly before, my father and mother rented an apartment of a brand new house on Clarkson Street. The Providence Street area. The lawyer Talamo used to live on that street. There was a mixed neighborhood of Irish people and we were all very good friends—the Talamos and the Callahans—and Clarkson was a new street. We lived there for quite a while. Then we moved.

MZ: While you were living in that area, did you go to Water Street? Was that your shopping area?

ES: Yes. We always had wonderful food. My father always liked to shop, and we had the best food. That's where we shopped.

MZ: How old were you when you moved from there?

ES: I was 10 years old when we moved to upper Providence Street, near Vernon Hill Park—the field which is past Worcester Academy, with a skating pond. I think it's still there. It was an academic field and they developed it. There was the Providence Street School, which was built. It's right near there. The American Steel and Wire was there at the foot of the hill, which is gone. It was a great operation then.

MZ: Then you made another move.

ES: After that, I was married when the war broke out—the Second World War, 1941. And my husband was drafted right away. He left two months after we were married. And I believe I took various jobs to keep busy. At one point he was stationed at Fort Devens, later. I was still living on Providence Street with my parents. And at Fort Devens there was a secretarial job open, and I applied for it and got it. I was secretary to the only other Jewish man in the whole firm. And the people who worked there were from Maynard, Mass. I was secretary to this Mr. Shapiro. I remember him.

MZ: How did you get from Worcester to Fort Devens?

ES: I used to drive.

MZ: You had your own car?

ES: Yes. I had our car. My husband's and mine. And then for a while he was stationed in Devens, so we rented a little cottage on Lake Ayer, I think it was. The cottage was very plain. It was on stilts. We had a water pump to get our water in the sink. Many men from the base would come to visit us. They felt they had a home to come to. And I was very active in the USO. There were many other young people there. While my husband was at the base, I worked there, and afterwards we always went there. We were together. Then he had to leave, and I kept working at the job.

MZ: When you said he had to leave...

ES: He had to leave for the South, as an Army person. He was sent to Officers Training School. He became an officer there, and meanwhile I worked at Fort Devens and did drive every day. And when it became too icy and slippery to drive to Ayer, Mass., I gave that up. And he graduated from Officers Training in Virginia, and I went down. I remember going down by train. That time you couldn't take a plane, because all the planes were only for soldiers. On the train I remember vividly that there were young soldiers being recruited, and one young man sat with me, cried all the way down, because he had left his farm, and he told me about all the meat they used to dry by hand, and he was only about 19 years old, and was terribly upset. So I got to Alexandria, Virginia. They had a graduation, and we had a very good friend, a Worcester man, there. Jack Jacobson, who was an officer. He arranged for me to stay with a Colonel's wife, or somebody, so I didn't have to stay at a hotel. They had a maid, and I caught the mumps

from her. (laugh) That was when I went home. But I went to the graduation when Henry graduated, and then he was sent off to New Orleans, and later I was able to go there and see him before he was shipped overseas.

MZ: Where was your husband sent?

ES: He was sent to China, Burma, India. He was in Burma, and while he was there, I think I was expecting. So Bruce was born two years after we were married. But before Henry was sent overseas, he got leave to come home for the birth—just made it. Then he went back, and we never saw him again for two years. When he returned, Bruce was two years old—didn't like him, a stranger who came into our house. So it took a while for him to adjust. That was very strange. That happened a lot. In the meantime, it was difficult, but I was not the only bride, but it was a very hard time. I don't think I worked then at all. I don't remember. No, I didn't. We were still with my parents. It was very hard to get an apartment then. With the influence of car dealers, we got an apartment at Salisbury Gardens, next to Institute Park. We lived there for five years. Then Leslie was born—my daughter. Then we knew we had to leave because there wasn't enough room, only two bedrooms. We came here... Henry went into the shoe business on Winter Street—wholesale shoes. Work shoes. Then later he went into sneakers. And all that time, I was just raising the children. I was a mother at home. Henry died at 59. He was a great smoker. On Sunday, all the merchants used to come into his store, and everybody was smoking like crazy. He was breathing that for years, and even with air conditioning, it didn't help. So he did get ill.

MZ: Did they diagnose it as lung cancer?

ES: Yes, and heart trouble, but we were never sure. Mostly the heart, and eventually it took him. But before he died, I did go into his office, and he taught me a little about the business. And when he died, I took over completely; a cousin of mine who was an accountant gave me a little advice. I managed to close the store and some of the dealers, big manufacturers, took a lot of merchandise back, and they were very helpful. We had been contemplating maybe selling the business and going to Florida because Henry thought it would be better for his health, but he was really slipping. So it never materialized. He never gave up smoking. They weren't aware how bad it was then.

MZ: How about you? Did you smoke?

ES: Never. No one in my family...my son smokes. My parents never smoked. None of us ever smoked. Henry smoked a great deal. My daughter doesn't smoke.

MZ: What made Bruce start?

ES: I don't know. Well, Bruce went to Europe and started his own businesses. So he finished high school, went to college for two years in Colorado—was not someone who could be in classes. He had to be on his own. What he learned in Colorado was how to become a better skier. He was marvelous. When he went to camp, he had to have lone

sports; team sports weren't for him. Later he did play tennis, but he took to horseback riding, and he was a marvelous archer. He had to do individual things. So he went to Europe and started this business, which turned out to be a fantastic business. It was in computers. In the states, before he left, he invented a couple of tools that worked with computers and wires and things—fine little things. When he went to Europe he had an idea of how to take care of these machines, and he started a plant with 17 men in England, and English bankers funded him. Because there was so much unemployment, they figured that this was a chance for some of the people to get work. I went to the building. It was a very nice city building. A beautiful rose garden in Bristol, England. From that he expanded. And later he went to Holland, Spain, Germany. He became enormous. He retired two years ago. He's now 62. He had a chance to sell it, so he sold the whole thing. He lived in Spain and Holland. That's where one of his plants was, in Holland. And I was at all these places. I went every year for 12 or 13 years. One year my children went with me to Spain and Holland—two years they came with me. Now he lives in Belgium. He built a beautiful house. I think he's going to change now. The house and the gardens are getting to be too much.

MZ: Do you want to talk about your daughter?

ES: She graduated from Clark, and then earned a Master's Degree at Assumption. She married an attorney 26 years ago—a very successful attorney—but they weren't compatible. Things were just happening. So now she's divorced and is working on her own, working hard. She's in real estate. She's a very charming young woman, and her two children are grown and they both graduated from college—from BU in Boston. And both live in Boston and have excellent positions. She does come here and give me a hand once in a while, when I was having my little accidents—which is often.

MZ: What about these accidents? What kind of accidents?

ES: I fell about 10 weeks ago and broke a femur bone in my leg—just a fracture. That took time to heal, and I haven't been walking the same since. But, anyway, little things like that. While I was working at Worcester State College, I was taking courses during my lunch hour sometimes, or after work. One of the professors was very nice. He would drive me home at night—at nine o'clock at night so that I wouldn't be walking home in the dark. I think I did about half my credits, but I didn't finish for the Bachelor's Degree. I guess I got tired. It was just a lot for me, somehow. Music was my minor, and English was my major. Working all day and studying at night was a little hard for me. I regret that I didn't finish. I have kept in touch with cultural events, going to concerts and lectures. And I still do.

MZ: When did you start to drive?

ES: I was 18. I still drive. Since this last thing with the leg, I wasn't driving, and now the doctor says I could drive—that it's healed—if I felt up to it. My daughter will not allow me. She doesn't trust me yet. Maybe I'm a little afraid, myself. My whole body feels different. I still have the automobile, although my daughter Leslie has it now. But I hope

I'll be driving again. I only stopped three months ago, but I've been driving all this time, going where I have to go, doing my own marketing. I don't do that now. Leslie does that. She lives in Holden, and she works in the city, off Grove Street. She does the shopping for me, but last week I said, "Les, I want to go with you." I enjoy shopping. It's kind of fun. I went once. I'll try again. I hope to redeem my car within a few weeks.

MZ: Let's talk a little about Worcester. What kind of changes have you seen in Worcester?

ES: I've always found Worcester to be a little unclean. Clutter around. It seems like they're doing a better job with that. At least they seem to be more aware of it. They've got the DCU, and buildings. Certainly, they're making an effort to make it a larger city, and more important. It is home to me, and I don't think I'd like to live elsewhere, but I've always seen many faults in it. There is a little less progress and duller than some cities. Somehow, we never stay with good restaurants and things, but I can't complain. I think it's as good a place for anybody to live. As safe as anywhere, when you hear about other cities. It's not like Boston or New York, but I'm just a homebody at this age. But if I could afford it, I would move from Worcester. I would rather live in Boston than here, I think. It's more alive. Another thing about Worcester—there is no place for a woman to shop for clothes. All the good dress shops have left. J.C. Penney or Macy's do not satisfy my taste. I would like a little better quality. I thought Macy's would improve, but it's the same as Filene's. But I don't care as much now that I'm older, but it was important to me before. Mechanics Hall is a gem. I think we're very fortunate that we can get there and attend these wonderful concerts. It's impossible to get to Boston. Even if you lived in Boston. It's much harder to get to Symphony Hall than to Mechanics Hall. That's one of the things I wouldn't want to leave, ever.

MZ: Anything else in Worcester that's an attraction to you?

ES: I think our art museum is also wonderful. As a matter of fact, I was a docent. I did that for about 10 years. I went to the classes and became a docent, and I was taking people around. I was already retired. Now I'm emeritus, because it gets a little tiring to walk around the museum with people or children. But I find that art is the other interest I have. When I've gone to Europe, I didn't go shopping. I went to museums, because that's something I love. In Worcester I think we're lucky to have that wonderful museum.

MZ: Is there any particular city that comes to mind that you've visited?

ES: Well, I liked London. I liked the countryside—just unbelievable. Scotland, too, was just fabulous. Spain had its...it's hard to pick one. I did like England. I loved the living in Bristol and Clifton when my son was there. It's just charming. And Spain was intriguing. I met some wonderful people there. We didn't speak the language, but some of them were artists and were very interesting. I've only been to Paris twice, but I've never been to the real countryside of France. I did stay at a hotel there. The food was wonderful, and walking every place. I met people who knew English, and it was interesting. I liked it all. I wish I could still do it.

MZ: How was school for you? You mentioned you graduated from Commerce High.

ES: School was wonderful. I always had high grades. I think I made a mistake going to Commerce and not Classical. The difference between these two schools was that Classical had kids who were snobs. My father felt that if I went to Commerce I would pick up some work things like shorthand, which I did. When I graduated from Commerce, I went to Salter's, and I did perfect my shorthand. And at that time jobs were very difficult to get. But I had no problem because I had that skill, including typing. And that always came in handy when I went to Worcester State. I was secretary for the faculty.

MZ: Your typing would come in handy if you ever learned the computer.

ES: I know. At the art museum they told me how to use a word processor. But I never did do the computer. I now feel I wouldn't want to start with a computer. It's too bad, but it was a skill I could have had, but it's too late now. I guess I don't want to invest in the equipment. I could have gone to college. That was a mistake. The only thing was that when I got through with high school, it was Depression, and men were selling apples on the street. So my father...if I had family incentive, I could have gone to Worcester State, but they didn't know how to do it. But my brother went to Classical. He went to BU. But he traveled there every day by train—he commuted. My father wanted to do that for us. That's why I went to Salter's, so that I would have something behind me.

MZ: Were there other siblings?

ES: No. Just the two of us.

MZ: What is your brother doing now?

ES: My brother moved to Florida when he was married. I don't remember the year. First he was in the car business in Boston, right near Fenway Park. When he left there, the firm closed. He and his wife and two daughters went to Florida, and they always lived there. Then his wife died, and he remarried, and he worked for Lehigh Real Estate. He's two years younger than I, and he's retired now and takes life easy.

MZ: What other jobs did you have?

ES: I did get a job as a bookkeeper for a while, but I didn't like that kind of work. I worked until I married.

MZ: When did you meet Henry?

ES: I knew Henry when we were very young. I used to skate on the pond across the street at Vernon Hill at 10 or 11 years old, and he used to skate there, too. So we always knew

each other. Later on I dated him for a while, then didn't date him. Then...I didn't marry until I was 26. I had been dating in all the years.

MZ: What about your housework? Can you remember details about doing housework?

ES: Yes. I did it. When my father died at 63, and my mother died a year and a half later, I was very depressed. I used to go to a bible class at Temple Emanuel with Rabbi Klein. One day he asked if anyone could do secretarial work. I thought, I'm just at home doing everything myself, but I need to get out. So I applied and I got that job. I became his secretary for 10 years. And in the interim I had this woman from Nova Scotia, Gladys, who was marvelous. She would do housework for me during the day, and then when I came home at night, the children were home from school. And with her help I was able to run things. She would come once or twice a week and keep the house going. My children liked good food, so I did a lot of cooking. And I worked.

MZ: Looking back on your life, can you make any generalizations about how women were treated?

ES: Well, in my family I never found women were not treated well. My mother was respected and loved. My father—neither one of them ever raised their voices, and I never knew any women who were abused. Not the way women are today, as a matter of fact.

MZ: And in the workplace?

ES: Well, there were always a few women at the Temple who were disagreeable, but there were quite a few disagreeable women at Worcester State.

MZ: How were you treated...you had men for bosses?

ES: Temple was wonderful, and so was Worcester State. Men always treated us very well. It was the women who were in trouble.

MZ: Do you consider yourself active politically?

ES: No, I'm not, really. In my lifetime I have maybe made a few calls for someone running for a political office, like Sonny Marcus. How many years ago that was. And I've always voted. That's always been very important to me. But I've always read the papers and kept in touch. I read the paper, Time Magazine, New Yorker. I watch the news faithfully at night, even if I have to take my dinner in now that I'm alone—I do that a lot.

MZ: Who do you watch on the news?

ES: I used to like Dan Rather, of course, and he's gone. And Schiefer—I liked him very much. Now Katie Couric is there and I like her. And I sometimes watch channel five, and switch around. And I do watch Charlie Rose at night, sometimes at six o'clock. And otherwise, I stay up until 11. I watch him then.

MZ: Have you joined any other groups or organizations?

ES: Yes. I was a member of the Art Museum. And I'm a member of the Music Guild, and I'm a member of the board and have been for five or six or seven years. That's an important organization as far as I'm concerned. We raise money for children's programs and scholarships. I'm a member of the congregation of Temple Emanuel and National Hadassah and the Council of Jewish Women. I used to be more active, but now I mostly attend donors' functions. They have book reviews which I go to. I was a member of the Jewish Community Center. All I did there was participate in the fitness classes and swimming, but I don't do that anymore. I still belong, to get information on what's going on every month.

MZ: Now let's talk a little about your health. Other than your broken femur, how has your health been?

ES: Well, it was always wonderful. Well, I am 92, so in the last year or so, I've developed high blood pressure. And the drugs seem to affect me, such as Toprol. It does swell your feet. I called the pharmacy today, and that's what they said, and it does. It's been impossible. However...I have trouble walking now—the last couple of weeks. I mentioned it to the doctor the other day, but he doesn't know. Well, isn't that kind of silly.

MZ: Earlier in your life, did you have any health concerns?

ES: I never had blood pressure problems until I was about 85 or 86. Well, I've had appendicitis and tonsillitis, and normal things. And a broken bone here and there. I did have the mumps and all the other children's diseases. I've been in very good health, knock wood.

MZ: Do you have any problems regarding access to health services?

ES: No. I have an excellent insurance policy from Worcester State. And whenever anything has happened, the city has been wonderful in sending help.

MZ: Is there something that comes to mind about women's history, as you have lived your own history? Can you think of anything we might have left off? Would you consider that you were a fashionable young woman?

ES: Well, I would consider myself fairly fashionable. Not ultra, but, yes. And it's important to me. Always important to me to look fairly well dressed.

MZ: And you do. I'm impressed with your looks and dress.

ES: Thank you. Maybe it's vain, but I think it's important. I always felt that when my husband died, it was more important for me to look good, not to let Henry down.

MZ: Getting back to your parents, what education did they have, starting with your father?

ES: My father was left an orphan when he was very young in Europe, and he was taken in by a man—an apprentice, sort of, to tailoring and furring. He learned that in Russia. And he was also very bright. He spoke and read and used to write Russian to his relatives in Russia. Taught me some Russian songs, some of which I forget. He was self-educated. Maybe he did go to school in Europe because he knew Russian so well, and here he learned English. And became a citizen, as did my mother.

MZ: And what education did your mother have?

ES: I don't think she had any formal education. I remember she said her sister had learned to sew and do that kind of thing. And they were skilled. When she came here, she did go to night school a little bit. My son has inherited some of her craft skill, because he paints beautifully, and he's a marvelous sculptor. He does wonderful woodwork. You should see the cabinets he's built.

MZ: Did your parents speak and write English?

ES: Yes. My mother didn't write as well as my father. They spoke Russian at home, and I learned some Russian from them. I learned some songs, and one song I used to sing to my first grade class. It was not a bad song, but it was about a drunken father. Also, I used to hear a lot of Yiddish from my parents, who spoke Yiddish at home a lot. There would be bridge parties for some of the new immigrants. So I heard a lot of Yiddish. When I was about 10, I never heard as much. And over the years, very little. And suddenly, it all comes back. I wish I could remember the French and German I learned in school the way I did the Yiddish.

MZ: Did you have any hobbies?

ES: I've done enamel on copper with Lilyan Bachrach, and I've got some of those things here. And I painted with Bernie Epstein. He taught it at the Jewish Community Center. Then he went on to New York and became pretty well known. I still have a copy of a Cezanne that I did. And I'm going to have it reframed. What else...tennis. I went horseback riding all the time. I was in high school Sunday mornings. I met with men, older than me, and I would go horseback riding with them. They were all so nice. No one ever abused me. We used to go to Sterling. In those days you could rent horses easily. I was a good swimmer—went to the Y sometimes. And dancing for exercise—modern dancing.

MZ: Do you have any regrets about any choices you've made in your life?

ES: Who doesn't? I must, of course, but nothing pops out. I made some bad choices all my life. I think I still do. Does anybody not? I've been a widow for 33 years. That's a

long time to be on your own. I've had to have other interests. Either that or I'd stay home and become a vegetable.

MZ: There's a last question, which is difficult to answer. Do you feel that you have a legacy? That is, something for which you want to be known after you've gone?

ES: Well, it's funny you ask that. I often think that, and say, "Just what kind of a life do I have?" I have nothing important left. But on the other hand, I've been sort of an interesting woman. I haven't been a dullard. I haven't done any great things—made a great mark. On the other hand, I never did anything bad either.

MZ: I want to thank you for participating in the Worcester Women's Oral History Project. I will make a transcript of this interview, and get a copy of the transcript to you. Thank you very much.