

Interviewee: Frances Gertrude Levine
Interviewer: Judy Freedman Fask
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Worcester Women's Oral History Project

Abstract: Frances Gertrude Freedman Levine was born in Pinsk/Minsk on January 12, 1904. At the time of this interview she was 103 years old. She grew up in Worcester, MA as the oldest of ten siblings. She has four children and eleven grandchildren. In this interview she talks about her memories of growing up, her parents, and brothers and sisters. Frances worked as a secretary for many years and continued after her children were grown. Her memories include meeting President Herbert Hoover, weekly paychecks of \$12.00, and movies that cost a nickel. [Frances Levine passed away on August 29, 2009 at the age of 105.]

Judy Freedman Fask: What is your full name?

Frances Gertrude Levine: Frances Gertrude Levine.

JFF: Where do you live?

FGL: 711 West End Ave New York NY 10025.

JFF: What is your date of birth?

FGL: January 12, 1904.

JFF: Where were you born?

FGL: Pinsk/Minsk

JFF: How many children do you have?

FGL: Four children.

JFF: Do you have grandchildren?

FGL: Yes, eleven

JFF: Are you married?

FGL: Yes.

JFF: What is your mother's name?

FGL: Celia Dolanky.

JFF: Where was your mother born?

FGL: Pinsk/Minsk.

JFF: What is your dad's name?

FGL: Harris Freedman.

JFF: Where was your dad born?

FGL: Pinsk/Minsk

JFF: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

FGL: Yes, seven brothers and two sisters.

JFF: What is your background?

FGL: Jewish, Hebrew

JFF: What is your connection to Worcester?

Interpreter: Not born here but grew up here. Yes.

JFF: Do you remember the years that you were in Worcester?

Eli Freedman: 1917, the year I was born.

JFF: That is my dad, Eli Freedman, making those comments.

JFF: Do you remember what neighborhood you lived in when you first were in Worcester?

FGL: In a Jewish neighborhood.

JFF: And what neighborhood was that? Down on Water Street?

FGL: Yes, in that area, Water Street, Harrison, Fox Street and all those streets.

EF: Primarily it was at the corner of Harrison and Water Street.

JFF: When did you leave Worcester, Frances?

FGL: Well I went to Worcester when I was seventeen. My father took me to a wedding in New York

JFF: And what happened?

FGL: ...and there I met my cousin who had a stenographic office and she offered me a job, and I stayed with my aunt who had four boys and I had to share a bedroom with her youngest son who was about five years old.

JFF: OK. So now we are going to start with some of the questions. Tell me your name and where you were born? Tell me about your four children?

FGL: My Barbara went to school at Russell Sage. Where she met a young man from Union College.....and he was then transferred to Boston University, and she went there for several years and then he took a job in New York.

JFF: Barbara was your oldest?

FGL: Yeah Barbara is the oldest. Shortly after that Rhoda was born in 1931..

JFF: ...and who is your next daughter? After Rhoda?

FGL: Erma, she is 70 now.

JFF: OK, and the next daughter?

FGL: Lila, she is 67.

JFF: Your first husband's name was what?

FGL: Sydney Joseph Levine.

JFF:and then were you married again?

FGL: Two years later.....after he died. Then I married.....

JFF: OK and that was your second husband, and how many years were you married?

FGL: Eight years.

JFF: Did he pass away?

FGL: No ...I ran out on him..... [giggle]...it was a bad marriage.

JFF:Now tell me about your parents? Your mom and your dad. What do you remember about your mom and your dad?

FGL:Very loving, devoted, and caring. The little that they did they did with what they had.

JFF:What kind of work did your dad do?

FGL:He worked a piece maker as a pants maker....and for a few pennies more when they offered him a job in Worcester, he accepted. But he would not open any business on his own; he would not leave his ties with the union. That meant more to him than anything else....and as much as my mother could use him at home, when Saturday came he was busy, he had to go to sick people at the hospital. What else can I remember? He was very active and very handsome.

JFF:What do you remember about Bubbie...your mother?

FGL:I remember her making.....rolling the dough and making the holly, and making the little.....she smear them with eggs and put them in the oven....and she dried the leaves to make

JFF:When you lived in Worcester, what was your house like? You had a large family, so how many bedrooms were there?

FGL:One huge bedroom that looked like a shower bath....because we had down furniture....Betty brought from Europe...so when they moved they moved from one place to another....and the boys what was their activity...jumping on the bed, and they

JFF:How many were in one bed?

FGL: All the kids were in one bed, my mother had her own. There was an upstairs and a downstairs, and I slept in the alcove of the downstairs, that was my bedroom. I had an egg box that was my bureau....The bottom part I kept a couple of pair of pants, and on the top a couple of tops and then I had two middy blouses, one I wore and one I had to wash and had to wait to dry so I could wear to school the next day.

JFF:What do you remember about the neighborhood? You said you grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Worcester on Water Street and Harrison area?

FGL:Not very much, I remember that we did.....on the holidays.

EF:There was no hot water.

FGL:In the summer time there was no hot water, but in the winter time they had a coal

burning stove so there was hot water.

JFF: Do you remember did all the kids help Bubbie with the cooking and the cleaning, did you have chores?

FGL: The boys had to go out and sell newspapers, to make a couple of pennies.

JFF: And what did the girls do?

FGL: They came along too, other times they came along....

JFF: How old were you when you started working, also?

FGL: I must have been seventeen but I worked for a couple of years for my high school clothes.

JFF: What kind of work did you do?

FGL: I worked in a store for a lady. She told my mother that she knew that I was very honest. They deliberately left things around I always put them back where they belonged. She couldn't understand that I could be so honest as a big family like that.

JFF: Do you always remember having enough food, enough clothing?

FGL: Yes food was no problem; we always had enough food, because for very little money they could fix all those variety dishes.

EF: ...and the boys always had the best pants, knickers, we used to wear knickers. The girls were the first girls to wear long pants to school. Because their daddy made them, your grandfather...

JFF: My grandfather, my Zaddie. Were the other kids jealous when they saw you had warm pants on?

FGL: I also had a hair cutter at a very early age.

JFF: You mean your hair was shorter than others?

FGL: Yeah I was an entertainer at Commerce High, because others had long hair and I had short hair, very important topic.

JFF:and what was the final decision?

FGL: I don't remember what the outcome was....

JFF: Do you think life was different for you, because you were a girl as opposed to my dad who was boy growing up in the family or in that time?

FGL: Yes I felt closer to the family. I stayed home and helped my mother polish the stove. In those days you had to put an actual polish on the stove.....

JFF: So in the birth order you are the oldest....

FGL: Yeah....

JFF: And then who was next?

FGL: Champ...

JFF: Uncle Chance, whose real name is Himey. After Uncle Chance was....

FGL: Ruby.

JFF: Uncle Ruby, OK

FGL: then there is Ben, and Archie, then Mike, and then Joe and as soon as we got to Worcester he [Eli] started incubating.

JFF: So my dad, Eli, was born in Worcester, OK

FGL:...and so were other two girls a couple of years apart.

JFF: ...and then Betty and Aunt Evelyn. OK so that's the whole group. Now when you were in Worcester did you say you attended Commerce High School, because you moved when you were older, so you were in high school age when you moved to Worcester?

FGL: No, I was in the eighth grade. I was too young to go on I had to skip a whole class, and felt terrible but they wouldn't put me ahead, they gave me only a half of a class, but I took extra courses so I got out when at 21 instead of 22.

JFF: So when you moved...you were born in Minsk, so how old were you when you moved to the United States?

FGL: I was about fourteen months.

JFF: So where did you first move to before you came to Worcester?

FGL: In Lower Manhattan, we lived in the Bronx, we lived in Harlem, we lived in East New York.

JFF: You moved around a lot? So what brought Zaddie to Worcester how did you end up actually in Worcester?

FGL: Because they came....my father worked for a contractor who was offered work in Worcester.

JFF: Sewing?

FGL: ...so we moved to Worcester.

JFF: OK so that's what brought you to Worcester. Did you have any vocation or career yourself?

FGL: My vocation was to work? I was a secretary...a legal secretary.

JFF: How many years did you work as a legal secretary?

FGL: About four of five years.

JFF: And that was in New York?

FGL: In New York. I worked for a man by the name of Buckminster Fuller. Ask Sharon she know about him.

JFF: So what was the highest education, twelfth grade, high school?

FGL: I was always taking course....I took a lot of course, and I read a great deal, extensively. We never had a sit down meal for all of us. The boys were out selling papers, and my father was working late, and I was always with my books having a great time reading.

Unknown: When did you work again for the first time?

JFF: When you first worked she (Unknown) wanted you to repeat who did you work for? The name of the man you worked for again?

FGL: I first got a job with a poppy seed company. I worked there for a year, and I was very lonesome. I went back home. Then I came back to New York and I got a job with Buckman..... (?), Find Action Housing.

Unknown: How did you get the job with him?

FGL: He didn't have a regular secretary and he sent to Lee who was in the building, and she did the legal secretary.

JFF: Who is Lee?

FGL: A cousin of mine. She was a cousin who was very wonderful to me. She was wonderful to me I think because one day her mother came to our house...and she sat down and she was crying, then my father came home and he says: "What's the matter?" She says: "My rent is due tomorrow, it's \$12.00, I haven't got the money and they are going to put me out on the streets." That's what they did in those days, if you didn't have the money to pay the rent they didn't give you a legal paper, they just shoved all your stuff out on the sidewalk and covered it up with a sheet if it rained...so my father said: "Don't cry, meet me tomorrow at the bank, I got \$12.00 I'll give it to you and pay your rent they won't put you out tomorrow. In the mean time find out what you can do...Lee became a very devoted cousin to me, she....

JFF: When you first started working do you remember what your salary was? How much you earned?

FGL: Maybe \$12.00 a week. That was it.

JFF: That was a lot. When you were working and you had a family...did you stay at home all the time....

FGL: Yes

JFF: So you didn't work and raise your family. Working came later, or earlier.

FGL: By the time I raised my children, we had lived...

JFF: Tell me about your first husband. How did you meet?

FGL: I was out with some girls, at that time I was living with some friends from Worcester who were my high school friends, and she had an apartment with an extra room, so I went to her, I stayed with her, and my friend Lillian, I graduated high school with her....

JFF: So you met your husband....

FGL: I think he used to sell hats in the daytime and go to NYU at night.

JFF: When you first were married where did the two of you live and raise your family, in New York?

FGL: We lived with his family for a while after we were married. We wanted to make a formal wedding, but we couldn't because every time we would go to get married my mother-in-law got a heart attack. Here she is with a son who is a lawyer and is going to

marry a poor girl.

JFF: But you did get married.

FGL: We did get married; we had a very simple wedding in the house. She was very nice after that she made me a surprise shower. I got a lot of silk underwear.

Unknown: Do you still have it?

JFF: Do you still have it?

FGL: I'm sorry, I outgrew it. I was only about 89 pounds, then I gained.

JFF: Going back to when you were growing up, and you were in Worcester and the oldest in such a large family, you said the boys would go out to work and the girls would stay home.

FGL: The boys would go to the boys club where they showered. They didn't have to use the tub. The bathroom was all mine.

JFF: So by the time your sisters were born you were already out of the house?

FGL: Oh sure.

JFF: You grew up with a lot of brothers.

FGL: Yeah.

JFF: How was that?

FGL: I did have too much time with them. I know I kept them busy, some of them busy, because I got a job. Son, I was selling excess merchandise from the First World War and I would get \$1.00 for one hundred envelopes. So I was addressing envelopes.

JFF: What other interests did you have? Were you involved with politics, or social groups? What did you like to do?

FGL: Read, go to the movies.

JFF: How much did a movie cost?

FGL: My mother would give me ten cents. A nickel for the movie and a nickel for andy.

JFF: What was your favorite movie?

FGL: The Perils of Pauline.

JFF: Do you have a favorite book that you...

FGL: I read so many books... (?)

JFF: So looking back over 100 years, looking back at the roles of women then and women now that you see, what differences or similarities do you see the most?

FGL: It takes two people to work to make a decent family today. There are so many other things taking up your time, your attention.

JFF: What about all the technology now compared to when you were growing up.

FGL: There is no comparison. Way, way off.

JFF: Did you like life more simple though, or at the faster pace now?

FGL: Too much fast pace. You have to embrace too many things.

JFF: Did you prefer it when it was more simple?

FGL: Not that I prefer it, I have to accept it. I'm an optimist, what ever it is, it is. What ever will be, will be.

JFF: Who are your role models? What do you think, if you think about a role model, someone who you really admired?

FGL: That was my cousin that I talked to you about. She was a good person. She was very dedicated to her family; her father couldn't work because he had asthma. Heand when she got married her husband, didn't want to live with them, so they took an apartment. Each had their own apartment in the same building so at least she could be close to them. The mother had cerebral palsy.

JFF: What else would you like to share, any other stories or advice, for any of us young ladies who are still here and look at you as a role model?

FGL: I think you can tell me what you have accomplished. I think you people are wonderful for that. You run a household, you bring up children, you see that they get their education. I also remember how toand the strangest thing that happened to me was to meet one of my companions in the house that my family was living. Her name was Herman. She was a librarian; she took lessons at Rutgers so she could get her degree. So that is the story of me.

JFF: What are some of your fondest memories growing up?

FGL: I loved the children, I loved the babies. The only one that used to reject me was Evelyn. All she had to do was hear my voice and my father's voice. Now when he went down to the street to shop especially before holidays, and she didn't hear papa's voice she would scream.

JFF: What do you remember for some of the most challenging times in all these years you've been.....the most difficult times.

FGL: I just accepted them.....I You know when we came to Worcester from South Norwalk, it was just prior to the flu epidemic.....now mama had to go to the hospital with Eli, papa and I stayed home with one of the boys, we were the survivors, and mama had to drag Eli, who was a big boy,

JFF: Do you remember any other, was your family healthy, and were you healthy? Obviously, you are 103, you are healthy.

FGL: None of the kids had any of the childhood diseasesuntil Barbara went to public school. That's when she got the measles and the chicken pox and the mumps. I didn't have anything.

JFF: So you remember growing up with a very healthy family.

FGL: Yes, yes.

JFF: Do you remember exercising, was it something.... just your work involved in....

FGL: My exercise was jumping double rope and playing hopscotch. I couldn't go swimming, we lived close to theand if I couldn't touch the ground, when my feet went down, I panicked.

JFF: You never learned how to swim?

FGL: Never learned how to swim.

JFF: I never knew that. That can be your goal for this year.

Unknown: Your mother learned how to swim?

JFF: Bubbie knew how to swim?

FGL: Ask Eli?

JFF: So because my dad is your younger brother, do you have any stories you want to tell me about my dad?

FGL: Yeah. I came to Worcester one week-end, from New York, and a couple of the boys and my father met me at the station. After all the greetings and we were ready to leave, along comes a kid, "Fran, aren't you going to say hello to me"? I looked at him, and my God, Eli. He had carrot red hair.....looked like an Irishman. I didn't recognize him. Do you remember that?

EF: I went to pick her up at the train station with my father, when I was four years old. There was a horse stationary delivering some products to a store near by and the horses used to have along leather reins with a lead weight at the bottom so if they started to off they would drag the weight and stay, so I went over and I patted the horse on the nose and he bit me on the wrist. I had two teeth marks of a horse on my wrist, because of her.

JFF: I'm not sure it was really because of you.

EF: I would not have gone to the train station that day and I would not have seen the horse.

FGL:...but you would have missed a very interesting experience.

JFF: Dad, do you have any stories in thinking of your oldest sister?

EF: Yes, her home was always open to her brothers. She was living in after they were married, my older brother, Archie, and I started our store, she had a very good friend, who was in the furnishing, clothing and linens of his own, he had a friend who owned a sporting goods store. He upon the friend to meet us which we did, and because of their friendship, we were able to get sporting goods merchandise, we could not buy directly from the factory, because of oppositions.

FGL: Mike Freedman.

EF: Yes, because of oppositions from the sporting goods store that I used to work for in Worcester. Were it not for that contact, we could not have continued our operations. So my sister Frances who basically was the reason for our success.

FGL: I put up my bank book so that you could get a mortgage.

JFF: ... and your bank book was worth how much?

FGL: It was worth about \$100,000.

JFF: Then?

EF: Well we had to make a mortgage, from a place that we were paying first.

FGL:I went to the bank before I got the aids. I went through \$100,000 in medical fees.....

JFF: You are talking about more recently.....

FGL: Yes.

EF: We had a little store that we only paid \$30 a month rent. A fire occurred, in the next store to us, that was a tailor shop, we were out of business because of the location. We were able to find a place in the middle of Main Street, Worcester, but the rent was \$1,200 a month. We needed a \$2,500 deposit. We did have that kind of money. Our sister Frances came to our rescue.

JFF: Wow, what a nice sister.

Unknown II: They always paid back what they owed.

FGL: Archie gave me interest on the money. He paid.

JFF: What are your thoughts about growing up in such a big family?

FGL: The one thing I remember, when I took the four kids to the beach, and hadin those days already the family were sending children to camp where they had help, and they would look at me, people in the next cabin would look at me, the kids were getting impatient, they said: "You have an awful lot of patience?" I said: "I don't have patience? It was my mother who had patience."

Unknown: Frances, how old were you when you stopped working?

JFF: How old were you when you stopped working?

FGL: I must have been 33.

JFF: But then you went back to work when your kids were older?

FGL: No, I never went back to work until after I moved back from....when they were out of the house.

JFF: Right, and then you started working when your kids were grown and out of the house, and then when did you stop working?

FGL: When I was 80 or 81....when I was a little old lady.

JFF: And how many years have you been your apartment in New York now?

FGL: I've been here since 1967. That's why I have such a low rent. Everybody is jealous. My rent is only \$700 a month. Some of the tenants are paying over \$2000 a month.

Unknown: Are you the longest living resident there?

FGL: No they still have a few old.....that area used to be a skating rink and tennis court.....they sold the property and they started to build, but in those days, way back then, they didn't have the knowledge how to put down scientifically deep enough to sustain the height, because it's one of the few buildings that came up after the war. There are a few older tenants, but not many.

JFF: Do you still play bridge? Are you still playing?

FGL: If I get to read the Times, I'm lucky.

JFF: Reading the Times? Anything else you want to add, that you would like to share?

FGL: I'd like to tell you a story.

JFF: OK.

FGL:.....calls his wife over and says: "Look, here is some money, I want you to go to the beauty parlor, and make yourself up, have your hair done, have your nails done." She looked at him with amazement, he was such a stickler, he wouldn't part with any money. She went and when she came back he looked at her and says: "You look very nice." So she says: "Tell me, why did you give me this money now to go, you are sick and I can't go anyplace without" "When the devil comes to take me, you will look so good he will take you instead."

EF: Did you take any trips that are interesting?

FGL: I took a lot of wonderful trips. I went to Israel, just after the '67 war. I went there in '68. I went there again in... a couple of years later when..... Holland, Norway, Denmark, Wales, and then we landed in England. I took another wonderful trip with Barbara, after.....

EF: In playing bridge, did you compete in any tournaments?

FGL: No we never.....it was always in private.....

JFF: When you were growing up, I'm switching gears here, I'm just thinking about

women growing up and being involved in politics, voting. Do you remember being active and voting, interested in politics when growing up?

FGL: No not really. Not until after Hoover.....

EF: Who was the first president you voted for?

FGL: I think it was...it may have been....he was in for a term....I think.....

EF: So you were born...active during the year the World War I was involved with the United States?

FGL:.....moved to Washington.....she was going to bring me back to Washington for a couple of days.met a man fromMississippi. He was able togoing back to Washington.....he had his daughter ...the US Treasury,.....I remember shaking hands with Hoover, I was so shocked, I was so.....

EF: The name Ethel is a sister of my/our father.

FGL: She came over with me and mama from Europe.

JFF: Your dad didn't come over at the same time?