

Interviewee: Zelda Schwartz  
Interviewers: Daniel Johnson and Stephanie Plotkin  
Date of Interview: November 9, 2010  
Location: Assumption College  
Transcribers: Daniel Johnson and Stephanie Plotkin



Overseen by Dr. James Lang, Assumption College

**Abstract:** Zelda Schwartz was born in 1939 and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts. She is a psychotherapist and retired Director of Family Therapy at the Jewish Family Services. Zelda is very strong-willed and has devoted her entire life to helping people. Her determined behavior led her to both pursue and achieve her career goal of being a therapist. Her father was not as accepting of her life choices because he believed that a man would not want to marry her if she continued on the path that she was on. Zelda began organizations in Worcester to assist children of broken families as an example of her overarching kindness within her profession. She is also very politically active, and is concerned with those less fortunate than her.

**Daniel Johnson:** Okay. Go.

**Stephanie Plotkin:** Okay, we're gonna start with your full maiden name and as well as your married name.

**Zelda Schwartz:** Okay, and it is Zelda Jacobson, is my maiden name, Schwartz, S-C-H-W-A-R-T-Z.

**SP:** Okay, where were you born?

**ZS:** I was born in Worcester.

**SP:** And you mentioned your husband, what's his name?

**ZS:** His name is Dr. Paul Schwartz.

**SP:** Oooo, I'm spelling that wrong.

**ZS:** S-C-H-W-A-R-T-Z.

**SP:** [Laughs]. Thank you. And you have children as well?

**ZS:** We have three adult children, daughters. Married.

**SP:** You have grandchildren as well?

**ZS:** Six grandchildren, five granddaughters and one grandson. [Pause]. Ages three-and-a-half to twelve-and-a-half [chuckles].

**SP:** And, let's see, what cultures or ethnicities do you identify you and your family with?

**ZS:** We're Jewish.

**SP:** Oh, my dad's Jewish.

**ZS:** Oh [chuckles]. We're both Jewish, but we live in a multi-cultural, global world and we have friends of all ethnicities, so we're not strictly limited to one, one particular cultural group.

**SP:** Okay, tell us about your parents.

**ZS:** My parents both were first generation. They both were the youngest in their families, my mother was the youngest of six daughters, my father was the youngest of six sons, but he had two sisters and one sister was younger than he. They were childhood sweethearts, they grew up on the east side of Worcester. Married somewhat young, and were married for—hmm—thirty-nine years. My father died unexpectedly in 1975 at the age of sixty-three, and my mother died at—she was seventy-one, nine years later, so that would be [pause] '84. My father was in the

meat business, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. [Pause]. My grandparents were immigrants, I only knew one grandmother, the rest were deceased by the time I came along, so...my oldest uncle was old enough to be my grandfather, when you do family genograms, if you know what that means, a family tree, you see the range in age when you—children of the youngest.

**SP:** Mhm. Okay, have you lived in Worcester your entire life, or...?

**ZS:** I lived in Worcester until 1957 when I went away to college. And I came back to Worcester in 1970 when my husband opened his practice and went to work at the [UMass] Medical School, he became assistant professor in medicine for the first medical school, class of 1970, and we've been here since. Forty years.

**DJ:** Which university was he—?

**ZS:** UMass Medical School. Assistant...clinical, assistant clinical.

**DJ:** And do you still live in Worcester?

**ZS:** No, we live in Holden. We lived in Worcester for twenty-two years and now we live—we moved to Holden in nineteen ninety...two.

**DJ:** From the times that you were a child to now, have you noticed any significant changes in Worcester itself in terms of, you know, who's living there, what kind of people are living there, businesses...?

**ZS:** Well, Worcester was a small town when I was a little girl, and Main Street was vibrant. My mother didn't drive a car, so we took the trolley to "come down street," to go shopping down in—you just would not believe, but all of Main Street from down where Mechanics Hall is all the way to the end where the old Denholm Building, which was vibrant and Worcester Commons, Worcester Front Street was absolutely amazing. I think the shopping and retail industry is just dead. You know Worcester Commons—hopefully the new Worcester Center will offer something, so that's been a major negative change. Culturally, I think it's exciting to live in

Worcester, I think that the colleges here have a lot of intellectual stuff going on that we take advantage of. We're subscribers to Mechanics Hall, we're members of the Art Museum, we come to the film festival at Clark [University]. I don't remember those things when I was a kid when I was here and now I'm a grown-up. I think the major change has been the retail industry and it's not what you wish it would be for a city this size. I think that there were some other things that you probably—really show the signs of changing times. I don't know if I want to say this out loud [laughs].

**DJ:** That's okay.

**ZS:** I think that this is one thing I wouldn't want to be quoted on. I guess I have to be careful on that one. I guess that's it, you know the major changes are that there are suburban areas around Worcester, I mean Holden was country and Rutland certainly was country and so now there are suburban areas around Worcester allow people to still have a city life, but still have something a bit rural.

**DJ:** What kind of work did you do while you were working?

**ZS:** I was a psychotherapist...I don't know if they want me to answer this from the women's point of view because...

**DJ:** You can answer it from any point of view

**ZS:** So, I think because you are dealing with the women's history project and you are talking about changing times for women, why I became a psychotherapist is really sort of significant. I told you earlier that I was a militant feminist when I was in high school, I was president of the youth group at our synagogue, and the rabbi had a really tough time acknowledging a woman as being president of the youth group. My father had an equally difficult time dealing with me as a good student and would say peculiar things, now seem so comical like, "Could you pretend not to be so smart, because there won't be a man out there who will have you." So when I went on to school and did well and decided I wanted to get a graduate degree, he reiterated his concerns, but he did say, "Well if you need to be so feisty, you can be a nurse, a teacher, or a social worker." So I picked social worker. I got Mass. certified in social work and advanced training much later on in family therapy so when I arrived at Jewish Family Service in 1985, it was as a psychotherapist, and shortly thereafter I went to the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy and was trained with – a particular therapist had a training program, she chose senior therapists and

we all flew into New York for Monday and we worked with her one day a week and then I flew home and went back to work Tuesday through Friday. So now I did, I do my own psychotherapy with my families that I was working with, but I developed a training program for other social workers and psychologists who wanted to do family therapy with sort of angry distressed families. I not only did that, at Jewish Family Services with a one-way mirror, but I also taught at the Worcester Youth Guidance Center and their family therapy center one day a week in terms of social work and clinical psychology had a steered place in. So the bottom line was bringing a new look at how to deal with families and help them deal with their difficulties. Emerging out of that, in 1994, I helped bring to central Massachusetts a program called Children Cope with Divorce, which by 1998 had become mandated in all the counties in Massachusetts that any families going through a divorce who had minor children had to sit through a seminar, it was a two day, two and a half hours each, five hour seminar on helping families, parents, moms, and dads who were splitting up the households, not split up their children, and help them examine the pitfalls of divorce and what the emotional impact is gonna be on kids and I did that and, you know, that expanded and happened in a lot of places in Worcester. Other agencies and other individuals were doing it, but we were particularly special at Jewish Family Services because you could come to the course with us and then you could call us the next day and we had a team of seven therapists who would see you, see your kids, see you individually, see your parents. Divorce reverberates through an entire family hurts all sorts of people. And we were there as resources to help families. That in a sense is what we did.

**SP:** That's really interesting

**ZS:** Yeah, did divorce work, did—reorganized step-family work, did individual work with younger people trying to find their way in this world and struggle through, you know, different challenges of life, saw kids...was fascinating, really was.

**DJ:** Was there any reason as to why you wanted to move into that line, was there any like experience that you had that...

**ZS:** I think that because I came from such a large family, and I always like to tell the story about when I was supervisor, I would often be behind the mirror and you would have a trainee in front of the mirror with a family. And the trainees that really had an easier time dealing with noisy, angry families were essentially kids who had come from very large families where noise didn't intimidate them. And I think that I, for two reasons, I was never intimidated by the noise and the chaos of a large family with a lot of people talking at the same time, a lot of therapists, you know, might not like to do that. And the other thing is that I—there was an intellectual challenge always to being able to deal with large families and put the pieces together to see what would be the intervention that would help them begin to think of things in a new way. In other words,

therapy is a way to help people find a new road map, so that they walk out of the office feeling a little bit differently about their issues. So I like the noise, and I like the challenge, and I love being with all sorts of different people, and I liked hearing their voices and trying to rearrange the voices so that they could hear each other. And most of the time when people come in to therapy ... not listening to each other, not knowing how to understand one another ... that becomes a challenge to find a way to make everybody's voice count.

**SP:** Oh, okay. Do you consider yourself active politically?

**ZS:** [Laughs]. I mean, I stood in line in the rain, I stood with signs for Hillary Clinton.

**SP:** Oh, okay!

**ZS:** I stood at Clark for three hours to wait and hear her speak when she was late. Where's my...

**SP:** Don't (\_\_\_\_\_???)

**ZS:** With my Martha Coakley thing.

**SP:** [Laughs].

**ZS:** I just put it around...

**SP:** Oh, wow [laughs]!

**ZS:** Yes, I'm very politically active...and opinionated.

**SP:** Alright, well that's good [laughs]. Let's see, have you been involved in volunteer or community work?

**ZS:** When I first came back to Worcester in 1970, I had two little children and I quickly became pregnant with my third, and I did a lot of volunteer work until 1979 when I went back to work. I was a stay at home mom until 1979, and that was when I went back to work. So I was a volunteer at a number of agencies, both in policy development and in program planning. I also was a Red Cross volunteer for a while in the Crisis Management after 9/11. I didn't do much, but I did go to training [chuckles]. I should add I was on the mental health team of the Red Cross because that's what it was called.

**DJ:** What role has religion played in your life?

**ZS:** Well, you—you don't—you're not a Jewish person without being pretty much aware of the horrors of our history of oppression, and I think that I have an ethical and a moral stance, and in Judaism, one of the basic tenets along with family and spiritual guidance is a notion called "tikun-olam," which means "heal the world," that "if you help one person in this world then you indeed have helped many," and I have no doubt that that influenced me in wanting to work with families, too, because I do think of families as the basis of life for all of us.

**SP:** Mhm.

**ZS:** So that notion of "tikun-olam" is pretty important to me. [Chuckles] T-I-K-U-N-O-L-A-M, that's how it's...

**SP:** L-A—

**ZS:** A-M, "tikun-olam," Jewish concept of to heal the world, the world would be a better place if you've done something special to help people.

**DJ:** Are there any health issues that have impacted your life or those in your family?

**ZS:** Hmm, how timely. Well, I'm a runner, as you can see in my costume of the day, and one of my retirement behaviors is—I just ran my seventeenth half marathon in Newport.

**SP:** Oh, nice!

**ZS:** On October 17, and just—so I’ve done that. And a year ago in a couple of weeks, I was running the Turkey—I run about seventeen races a year, I just counted them up—and I was running the Turkey Trot in Holden and I had chest pain. And I thought, “oh my goodness, I wonder what that’s about,” so I stopped and I walked a bit, and I didn’t say anything to my husband who’s a cardiologist [laughs]. Thought I’d keep that a secret for a bit. And then I ran another Turkey Trot on Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend and the same thing happened, and long story short, I had a cardiac stint in December of last year. I’m still running, I’m just running a whole lot slower than I had been.

**SP:** [Laughs].

**ZS:** So I have this seventy-one year-old body and a forty-year-old head.

**SP and DJ:** [Laugh].

**ZS:** Still see myself being a speedy lady. Now I only win if I’m the only seventy-year-old to show up, but—so that has definitely been the major health impediment, but I suppose that at seventy I have to be very, very grateful that I’m here this long and that there are medical technologies that allow me to run and take a bunch of pills and be okay, I had a cardiac eval.[evaluation] last week and I’m fine, so...

**SP:** Well, that’s great!

**DJ:** That’s good.

**ZS:** Just, well, when he asks, is there a health thing that impacted me? Yes [laughs]!

**SP:** [Laughs].

**SP:** Oh...now that we are working to tell a full story of the history of women that has been...Oh wait, what one are we on?

**DJ:** There.

**SP:** Oh, I'm sorry, okay, what are your experiences in accessing quality, affordable health care?

**ZS:** Well, I'm a lucky lady. My husband and I both made a good living, so accessing anything was within our reach, but accessing medical care when you're married to a physician is really quite nice because he stewards you through absolutely everything, but I appreciate why you're asking that question because I don't represent, you know, the norm. And I am just as concerned about it as you all are. But I live in a privileged world being a physician's wife. [Pause]. I don't need to stand in line and wait in emergency rooms [laughs] like other people do. One of the lucky things.

**SP:** Alright, now this one? Okay, now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than had been recorded in the past, what should we be sure to include?

**ZS:** Oh my goodness, you know, I just came out of the Women's Project class where the gentleman, you know, told us about his book about the Convention in 1850 and the issues that they were certainly...you know, talking about all the prescriptive notions of what women had to do and didn't have to do. And, I suspect that there have been lots of changes because women and men now—women rather than men—are more than fifty percent of students in medical school and in law schools, and women are entering the professions and the glass ceiling is at least being looked at. But...I'm still concerned always about the backlash of feelings about women in family relationships, and that educated women—right?—and educated men have now become “renaissance men” and they know how to have a relationship with their girlfriends and their wives, but we all know that there are plenty of men out there that don't treat women really well, so I'm concerned about domestic violence, I'm concerned about what it's like for children who are exposed to those unequal relationships with patriarchy and male dominance still prevail, I'm very concerned always about the impact of alcohol and drugs in family life and what that does to relationships. So even though the talk allows women, you know, it's out there, it allows women, you know, to excel and have opportunities that they didn't have education before—that the whole notion of relationships between men and women still hasn't reached, I think in the large, where it needs to reach, and I'm frightened for women who are less able to speak for themselves like you and I are.

**DJ:** We're gonna move back to Worcester as it was when you were a child.

Worcester Women's Oral History Project  
30 Elm Street – Worcester, MA 01609 – 508-767-1852 – info@wwhp.org  
www.wwhp.org

**ZS:** Okay.

**DJ:** During that time, was there anything significant that happened in Worcester that you can remember, that you remember as something that was, maybe not significant to your life, but something that you will always remember and will pass on as a story?

**ZS:** Well, I'm a witness to the tornado that happened, the Worcester tornado that happened in...I'm trying to think when it was, '53. Anyways, '52 or '53, there was a terrible tornado. Have you heard about that? The story of the Tornado?

**SP and DJ:** No.

**ZS:** Okay, a tornado swept through the Greendale section—that would be someplace...hmmm...it's near the North Theatre, but anyways, it's someplace out there, and it took the lives of many, many people, terrible destructions, and believe it or not, my husband and I were childhood sweethearts, and so—we've must have been thirteen, so it had to be nineteen...fifty-four...fifty-two—anyways, we were walking, and he would walk me home and then I would walk him halfway home, and do all these things you do when you're thirteen years old, and the sky got really, really black and he said, "You know what, I think you better go home your way, and I'm going my way." And it was about a quarter of four in the afternoon, and sometime within the next hour this tornado just blew through that section of Worcester, and we knew people who were in our religious school classes, the temple who lived in different sections of the city—we grew up in a time we went to neighborhood schools, but we knew other kids from other neighborhoods from religious school, so we knew people who had passed away, who were in the Shrewsbury area, a classmate of ours went to close her window and the roof fell in. Anyways, the next day, obviously, it was a disaster area, school was closed, and we all went neighborhood to neighborhood collecting canned goods and clothing and taking them to some distribution centers just to help the people who had been so impacted. I think as a child that is probably the biggest thing that I do remember happening here. It was really was, there was a whole book written about it by a guy named John O'Toole...who's a professor at WISE [Worcester Institute for Senior Education]..

**SP:** Oh, okay.

**ZS:** [Chuckles]

**DJ:** Continuing with the “bad thing” theme when you were in school, how were girls treated compared to boys?

**ZS:** Oh my goodness. You know, we lived—we lived in an age where there was a prescription, there were rules for absolutely everything, and so boys opened the window with the fake window stick, right? And girls were always sweet and pretty, right? And demure, and I told you already I was a good student and I also was pretty assertive, and in those days—in today’s day, I couldn’t—if a woman is assertive she felt confident, and even in those days, if a woman was assertive she was called aggressive, and that was the last thing a woman wanted to be was aggressive because that was a very negative connotation. So, I do remember in school being very engaged, and I also remember one teacher in the fifth grade, Miss Cassidy, she always wore red, and she was just beautiful, and I was ever waving my hand around to answer the question [laughs]. I was enthusiastic and I was always engaged, and I remember her saying, “Miss Jacobson, put your hand down! We know you know the answer” [everyone laughs]. So, and it went along with—you know, when you think about it, you know, when I raise my hand now, people say, “Thank you very much. That was a really nice idea you presented,” which is just so different from the way it was a long time ago. I hadn’t remembered that in a really long time.

**SP:** Now, if you don’t mind us asking this, how old were you when you were allowed to date [giggles]?

**ZS:** Well, yeah, I told you that my husband and I were childhood sweethearts, and we belonged to this gang of kids when I—we think back on it, and we think, we were really awful! There was seven girls and seven boys and we played softball by day, or tobogganed, or went roller skating, or went bowling—this whole gang of kids just every single Saturday did something physical on Saturday afternoon, and then we had parties at night in somebody’s cellar, I mean, our parents—I don’t know if we dated, we were just always this group of kids that were always together. But, I was twelve when I met him, and the family moved away when he was fifteen, so we didn’t see each other for, like, eight or nine years, and then he came back into my life when we were all grown up [chuckles]. So dating—so I went from that group experience, you know, which was very nice, except that we appreciate now that perhaps it was a bit exclusive, because if there was seven of us and seven boys, there were some other kids who weren’t...invited. So that wasn’t very nice [laughs].

**SP:** [Laughs]. Yeah.

**ZS:** And then I was—when he moved away, then I must have been fifteen, and I was dating. We couldn't go out with teenaged drivers, though, parents had to drive until I was, like, sixteen-and-a-half. So we did end up going to dances with the chaperones and I thought my parents were so...

**SP:** This one? What memories do you have of—oh—

**DJ** [whisper]: No!

**SP:** Oh, ten, I'm sorry [laughs]. When you were not at home, where did you usually spend your time?

**ZS:** With this group of kids—wait, when I was little?

**SP:** Oh, just—okay.

**ZS:** With that gang of kids, all the time. Whenever, and it was safe, remember, we walked everywhere, we walked miles, we were talking about that in the project. You know, our parents never worried about someone kidnapping us, or somebody being perverted with us, you know, it was just always—we were always with that gang...of kids...when I wasn't at home. Oh, and I had sleepovers, lots of sleepovers...with other girls.

**DJ:** How would you define success in your life?

**ZS:** Well, I've been married to my husband for forty-nine years, a loving marriage, and I have three great kids and wonderful grandchildren—I have a daughter who lives in Holden, and two other daughters who live in Arlington, Mass., and we have a close relationship with the kids and my grandchildren, and I had a job, a profession that I loved, an identity that I loved...I think I've been blessed. I've had my health for most of my life...and lots of energy, was able to do what I chose to do, nothing ever kept me down even the rules about being a woman. [Pause]. Maybe—what was the question again [chuckles]?

**DJ:** No, that's fine. Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to woman today and future generations?

**ZS:** Well, I think the bottom line is that—try as hard as you can to enjoy school.

**SP:** [Laughs].

**ZS:** Try hard to enjoy school. And read as much as you can...and be involved in group sports. I remember, you know, doing a conference a long time ago—I became known in the city for knowing how to lead seminars on women's issues. So, as I said, I think when they had the [Women] 2000 conference anniversary here, I did lead a seminar, and one of the things I remember doing is quoting, oh, a professor from UMass who said that she had done some research and discovered that women who were involved in group sports did better in the corporate world than women who didn't because they weren't afraid to get down and dirty, and they went—and they played, while women who didn't play group sports somehow didn't have that team experience and the capacity to push ahead in order to win. So all my three girls did team sports, they were all varsity athletes, and believe it or not, I became a runner—a competitive runner—when I was forty, 'cause I had been a heavy smoker prior to that, so I became, you know, a competitive runner, still a competitive runner, you know, I still like to win, although, since last year I have been going incredibly much slower than I had been before, so, I think education and reading and, definitely team sports. Definitely. Use your body and your head [chuckles].

**SP:** [Giggles]. Do you feel that you have a legacy?

**ZS:** To leave...?

**DJ:** To have left.

**SP:** Yeah, that you have left a legacy.

**ZS:** Oh my God. Well, they had a retirement party for me in 2005, that was when I gave up the directorship of Family Therapy at Jewish Family Services (I actually continued to see families

until January of this year,) but—and they said I left a legacy [laughs]. I had my name on a big plaque in the building, and I supervised a lot of young workers, a lot of students. I helped thousands of families whom I loved, and whom I hope loved me and the work we did. So I like to believe I left a legacy and that I did something meaningful. And I worked awfully hard for forty years, so it would be horrible to think I didn't, but they did say that day when they toasted me that I did [everyone laughs].

**SP:** Is there anyone else you would like to suggest that we talk to for this project, or, you know anybody that might be interested?

**ZS:** Is Harriette Chandler on your list? She's our senator.

**SP:** Oh, okay, could you spell her name?

**ZS:** Harriette Chandler, H-A-R-R-I-E-T-T-E...

**SP:** E-T-T-E, okay.

**ZS:** I-E-T-T-E Chandler, and she's the state senator. And she's just won an amazing campaign against a dreadful man who...said terrible things to try to defame her, but she's been in politics for sixteen years, she's my most honorable friend. She has a PhD in government I think from Clark, and she's just—she's also seventy-two and everything in the paper about her, the guy who was so nasty to her referred to them as the septagenarian, but she's really an incredible woman, and she's defied a lot of odds, so...and she lives on [ ] Road which is right around the corner, and I think she would probably be honored. She's great.

**SP:** Okay, is that it?

**DJ:** I think that's everything. Thank you very much for your time.

**ZS:** Thank you.

**SP:** Thank you so much for doing this.

**ZS:** Enjoy. Good luck to you.