

Florence Karp Kunian Schoff
Narrator

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Interviewer

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Florence Schoff **-FS**
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FS: My name is Florence Schoff. I was born Florence Karp in New York City on May 28, 1906. My parents came from Russia. My father came first. He wasn't forced to leave Russia, but he did leave because, as a student, he was engaged in anti-Czarist activity and he had a choice—either go to Siberia or leave the country—and he chose to come to the *goldene medine* in New York. My mother came from a rather wealthy family and she fled in the night, crossing borders, giving her silver away, to come to New York to join my father. As many stories, she came to Ellis Island and was detained there because at that time there was much white slavery going on. When my father, who by that time had been in the United States six or eight months, came to meet her, he was wearing a derby [hat] and American clothes, and when the officials said to her, “Do you know this man?” she said “No,” not recognizing him for the moment! And so, in order to make things smooth, they were married. They insisted that she get married right there and then, so she married my father on Ellis Island, and I came along about a year later.

I only lived in New York City for two or three months. I think it was either the American Jewish Congress or the Council of Jewish Women who were trying to get the newcomers away from this hubbub life and entice them to come to the Midwest, so my father was given land grants in South Dakota. Lou Gross's family lived in South Dakota, and also Leo Gross; they were all neighbors. And so my father became a sheep rancher, in spite of never having ever seen a sheep before! I spent probably four or five years in South Dakota, and during that time my brother was born, but then they came to Minneapolis. My sister, who's a doctor now and four years my junior, was delivered by Max Seham. We lived in South Dakota at the time they had a drought and very cold weather, a very hard winter, and the sheep froze, so my father went on to greener pastures! Then they were giving land grants in Canada so we went to Edmonton, Alberta. However, my father never settled on the land . . . he never got further than Edmonton . . . and when I was 16 years old—by that time I had another brother born in Canada—we moved back to the United States. We lived at 1234 Morgan Ave. No. for one year. My father then became the first superintendent of the Jewish Home for the Aged, now the Sholom Residence,

and my father and mother lived there until he passed away. I lived there with my family—we had our own quarters—and I attended the University of Minnesota. This was in 1922.

RL: Where was the Home located?

FS: Where it is now. [On Snelling Avenue across the street from the main entrance to the State Fair Grounds.] It was brand new; they'd just built it. I used to tell my friends, "I live in a tremendous home. It has forty or fifty rooms." We didn't have that many residents at the time, so I lived there until I graduated. And I was married in that Home!

At the University I led a very dedicated and rather sheltered life because I was a very purposeful kind of person. We certainly weren't a family of means; we all worked our way through the University. I used to work for a mail-order house called Sheroods. It was owned by Henry and Julius Fligelman and Sol Fligelman of St. Paul, who were the brothers of Fanny Brin. I worked part time every afternoon and then all during the summers. I never earned quite enough to pay for my tuition, so every third quarter—the last quarter—I would borrow the money from the University, and then I'd work in the summer and pay that off. Then I'd have enough money for the next two quarters, and then I'd repeat the process.

RL: Do you remember how much you got paid, and how much tuition was?

FS: I think I was getting \$14 a week at Sherood's, and I was a very apt employee, very fast. Otherwise the regular salary was about \$12 a week.

RL: And this was for twenty hours a week?

FS: Oh, this was just afternoons. I'd walk from the University. Sherood's was located on 4th Street... or is it 14th Street... where the Como streetcar turned to go to St. Paul. We had streetcars in those days! You'd go down, I think that's 15th, and it was a good walk. At that time, when I was living at the Jewish Home for the Aged, I used to walk across the Farm campus and take the inter-campus car to go to the University. That was only 5 cents. I rarely dated, with a schedule such as mine. I didn't have time, although I did have invitations. In those years we had the Menorah Society at the University, and no sororities, though we did have Scroll and Key. But of course I didn't consider myself one of the candidates for even Scroll and Key. I couldn't have afforded it.

RL: Why? What did it cost?

FS: Oh, I haven't any idea. I just was so busy with my school work. I was a Music major so I spent most of my time in Scott Hall. At that time it wasn't called Scott Hall but Mr. and Mrs. Scott were the active, moving factors, especially Mr. Scott. I minored in Sociology and Mr. Sorokin, who was formerly from Russia, I think, was head of the

department. And those were the years, you know, when Rarig taught English and Dr. Bird was in the Psychology department. The school was rather small and the men outnumbered the women at least five to one because, you know, co-education hadn't come in too much earlier. My school life was really dedicated mostly to my work—to my schooling and also to my part-time activities earning my schooling. At that time I met my present husband. He was a friend of my brother's and he used to come home with me. He was really my first boyfriend, but he wasn't of my faith, and at that time it just seemed an impossible thing, so we broke up just before I graduated from the University. My parents were not religious, but that didn't mean that they weren't very Jewish; their interests were channeled along Zionist activities. I think I was born a Zionist, and also a Socialist. In Canada, especially, everybody belonged to the Socialist party [laughs] so I grew up with that kind of background. I used to belong to the International Club because, having come from Canada, I was considered a "foreign student" for a while. I used to meet some of the Russians there; in 1917, after the Revolution, the Russians fled, so we had many students here from White Russia.

Just after I graduated I met the man I married, rather accidentally. He was in the "beauty business." I was a very quiet, rather unsophisticated person and I had never had a haircut or been in a beauty parlor. I was already twenty years old. That's when I graduated—cum laude, incidentally—and I wanted to do something desperate because I was in one of those "blue moods," and somebody said, "Why don't you go down and have your hair cut?" I didn't know where to go and I stopped in to see Ben Millman. He was a tailor, one of the best. He was what Koritz is today, or Juster's. He wasn't my uncle, but my father had brought him over from Europe and he considered my father a dear friend, so I called him "Uncle Ben." And I said, "Where do I go to have my hair cut?" He said, "What are you doing here?" and I said, "I made an appointment at Thomas's," which of course is now extinct. And he said, "Don't go there. I make suits for a very fine man. You go there and tell him that I sent you, that you're my niece." I said, "What will I do with this appointment?" He said, "Just call and cancel." So I did go to Paul's Beauty Craft, and being absolutely un-self-conscious, I asked to see the owner and I told him who I was, and told him who sent me. I had never been in a beauty parlor and I'd just been teaching piano, which was my major, and I had about \$10 on me. So he said, "All right, here we go." and I spent practically the whole afternoon there, which was absolutely unnecessary, but this man came in to see if I was satisfied, how I liked the service, and all that. And in true cavalier form, that weekend he came to my parents and introduced himself formally, and that was that. I was married in six months, and lived happily for thirty-eight years until Paul passed away of a cardiac condition.

I have two children who turned out to be very upright and contributing members of society, and I've got eight grandchildren. I grew up in a family that always had plenty to eat, food and shelter, but never had many of the amenities. For instance I never owned a car until after I was married. Never missed it, either. Somehow or other, growing up in a closely knit family, the values that have extended themselves more than made up for

anything that you might have suffered because of the lack of material possessions.

RL: Can we explore a little bit? You said your parents were very good Jews, but they were not observant. Can you explain that?

FS: Well, my father was a member of the intelligentsia in Russia and I imagine he wasn't good material for the people who made the Revolution. He really didn't believe in religion but nevertheless felt very strongly that every flower has a right to raise his head to the sun, Jews included. My mother came from a very religious family. Her father was even considered a *magid*, a very learned man and very observant. But when she left the family, she never saw them again. She was just a young girl. I often think about that. She must have fled Russia when she was seventeen years old, and I think of my granddaughter now, who is seventeen, and I just cannot imagine her picking up and going across the world to follow a loved one! You would think she's much too young and much too unsophisticated.

RL: Then they were good Jews in terms of being Zionists.

FS: They were good Jews in being proud of the fact that they were Jews. They never felt it was an onerous thing, or that they had to hide it. My father was always proud to be Jewish.

RL: Did they observe the dietary laws, or the Sabbath?

FS: No, no, they didn't, except that when they were at the Jewish Home for the Aged, naturally it was a very observant situation. I recall, for instance, when I.S. Joseph's father was in the Home and the Home was strictly kosher, and we had to observe that, too, while we were there. But before that and after that, after my father passed away and my mother went to New York for a while and then lived with me for many, many years, we didn't observe *kashruth* at all, although you know that I've become very, very active in Hadassah because I've always felt strongly Jewish. That was to me the first priority. I've always said that two organizations would always absorb my attention. That would be my affiliation with Hadassah, really meaning Zionism, and with the synagogue, really meaning identity, whether you attend or not. I want to be identified. So when mother came and lived with me, naturally we followed that. And you know that I've been extremely active in almost everything that has to do with Israel. The state was declared on May 14, 1948, and I'm rather pleased that I had some small part in creating a milieu in Minneapolis that made Zionism a little more popular.

RL: There was a very active Zionist movement in Minneapolis. Were your parents part of that?

FS: No, no. The Home for the Aged was in St. Paul, so they really weren't. My father's

Zionist activities were focused through me, or rather shunted through me. In Canada they were members of the Socialist party and the B'nai B'rith, naturally, and the Odd Fellows and Masons; in small towns that was very, very important, but my parents really didn't have much opportunity in Minneapolis or St. Paul because they came from Canada and they were affiliated with the Home. He was not really a public figure, but many people still remember my father. He was rather a gallant person, and he dressed well. He brought his parents over, incidentally. His mother and father—this goes back to when I was going to the U—they lived in north Minneapolis and my grandfather had a little stand where he sold probably peanut bars or chocolate bars in front of the Grand Theatre on Hennepin Avenue. A sweet little old man. So my family loyalties, the family cohesiveness, comes from way back, because my father brought his father and mother over. They originally went to Buffalo, South Dakota, where our farm was, and they had a farmstead there, too, because the United States government was encouraging that. He also brought a brother over who lived in Minneapolis and was a tailor—Sam Karp. He raised a family here and then went to Florida and since has passed away. But that was one of the reasons we came back from Edmonton. We lived there for probably ten years. My father was active in politics because he more or less could influence the Eastern vote: Ukrainians, Galicians, Russians. My father naturally spoke those languages, so he was active there, but after he came to the United States he wasn't.

RL: Then you were married in—?

FS: 1926. I graduated from the University early. In fact, in those years the College of Liberal Arts was called Science, Literature and Arts—SLA—and I wasn't even required to take final examinations, so I spent part of the last quarter in the medical library reading Havelock Ellis's "Psychology of Sex." And then at that time I also read the Bible from cover to cover. That was my only project that I had set for myself! I graduated in 1926. I think that was the first graduation that was held in the Stadium. I remember marching down Hennepin Avenue with a group of students and shouting, "Boom, Boom, Stadium Room." We were raising funds and creating public relations for the new Stadium that was being built.

RL: And then you got married, and you didn't work after you were married?

FS: I taught. I taught for quite a while.

RL: Piano?

FS: Piano. And then my first child was born two years later -- Myron -- who is going to be 48 years old next September, something hard for me to believe, because I still retain my keen interest in life. Outside of the organizational life of the community, I wouldn't say that I've made too many contributions to the community itself.

RL: But that was a great deal, though.

FS: I joined the Temple [Temple Israel] about 1928 when Rabbi Minda came to see us, and I was active in Temple for a long time. In fact, I'm still very active in what they call the Daily Worship Service. I'm co-chairman with Art Segal. That service started many years ago. Then I learned Hebrew; Ida Sanders, whom I consider a very, very dear friend, was instrumental in that. She and her husband and Paul and I would vacation together. We did that for many years. We'd either go to Florida or Hot Springs, Arkansas, or Alabama, or Mississippi, and while the fellows were playing golf Ida started me in Hebrew and taught me the basics, and then later on I went to the Talmud Torah and studied with Joe King.

RL: This was when?

FS: This was maybe twenty-five years ago. Longer ago than that, maybe. Although when I look back on it, even at the University in my history classes, some of my papers dealt with the Marranos in Spain, so I was always interested in the Jewish people, and I still am. Paul and I were not married by a rabbi—we went to a judge in Minneapolis and were married—so it's rather strange to note that now that I am remarried to a man who is not a Jew, he insisted that we be married by a rabbi! So I did finally have a religious ceremony.

RL: Why didn't you have a religious ceremony the first time?

FS: My feeling about synagogues was colored by the fact that I had lived in Edmonton and the only synagogue that I had ever known was a very, very Orthodox one that had very little decorum. And although my father attended services and we always stayed home for the Holidays, nevertheless, my recollections were of old people sneaking behind the synagogue eating apples on Yom Kippur when they were supposed to be fasting! I just unfortunately had the wrong feelings about Orthodox Jewry. So when we were married we went to a judge because we wanted it to be very simple. And then when we joined a synagogue we joined a Reform synagogue and I've been very happy. I believe in Reform Judaism but probably, in all probability, if I had attended, say, the Sephardic synagogue or the Portuguese synagogue in New York, or some such synagogue, no matter how Orthodox, I might have joined the Conservative movement. But I'm happy to listen today and see our Temple Israel become more and more traditional. Believe me, I recall the days when we were not Zionists and we even had an American Council for Judaism rabbi as assistant rabbi for a very short time. So there have been great, great changes... and in the world, too.

RL: Tell me about the Depression.

FS: Well, that was 1933. I remember very, very well those years, although we moved into this lovely home in 1934. And my recollections of rationing . . . Was that what you

wanted to hear about?

RL: Well, that would be the war. There was the stock market crash, and the . . .

FS: I know that Paul lost what he considered gold-edged Strauss bonds. They became worthless, weren't worth the paper they were written on. And everybody made do . . . but because my wants have never been great, I never really felt the Depression that much.

RL: Do you suppose, perhaps, his being in business for himself had some effect on this?

FS: We lived in a lovely home which we bought during the years of the Depression. This home used to belong to a lumber family, but I can't think of the name. Anyway, we bought the home for very little. If I told you what we paid for this home you couldn't possibly believe it! And so we lived without difficulties, living in a beautiful neighborhood. I never felt that we felt the Depression. We always had food and shelter.

Being president of Hadassah, and later on being president of the Association of Jewish Women's Organizations and then later on being the first chairman of Israel Bonds, naturally any public function that I held in my home where the organizations were involved, I would strictly adhere to the *kashruth* rules. I would never serve meat. At all my meetings I had *milchedich* (i.e. vegetarian) because after all, I respect my friends and I wouldn't violate their traditions. But I never felt personally, as many people do, that what they call these "fences," the laws of *kashruth* and all, were necessary to keep me Jewish. I've always been interested in the Jewish people and in the historic ties. I've always felt that I'm on the twentieth century end of this wonderful long history, that this people that gave so much to the world could give even more if it were allowed to have the freedom, and so for that freedom I've always given everything I've had. It's been my dedication.

RL: Let's get back to your college days for a minute. Did you belong to the Menorah Society?

FS: Just briefly.

RL: What did it do?

FS: Well, it was the early precedent for Hillel. It was the only Jewish organization on campus, and Scroll and Key was the pre-runner of the sorority. I don't know . . . What are the Jewish sororities?

RL: Sigma Delta Tau and Alpha Epsilon Phi.

FS: I think it was Alpha Epsilon Phi. I know that Lorraine Karon and Adele Lieberman—girls who were on campus at the time that I was, though they graduated a

little later—they belonged to Scroll and Key. But I never had the time nor did I have the inclination, or the social aspirations.

RL: Did they have a lot of parties?

FS: They probably did. In fact, I would have been Phi Beta Kappa, but in those years—I don't know what the rationale is today—in those years you were supposed to spend some time on campus to be Phi Beta Kappa. You were supposed to have a rounded-out campus life, and my life on campus was very one-sided because I had all my classes crammed into the morning, and I would take either twenty-one or twenty-three credits! I didn't go to school for four years, you know, probably about three and a half. And then my afternoons were for working. In fact, I didn't even take phys ed (physical education) which was required in those years. I had to learn how to swim before I graduated, so the last year on campus I had to take this physical education course. The reason I had to postpone it so long was because it was always in the afternoon, and I was working in the afternoon. So the last year at school I taught piano and earned my extra money that way, and then squeezed in my class, so I learned how to swim.

RL: The Associated Jewish Women's organization . . . when was that started?

FS: Well, that's an overall organization now. Its duties have been taken over by the Women's Division of the Minneapolis Federation for Jewish Service. I served as president . . .

RL: When was that?

FS: Well, I became president in 1946. I was president of Hadassah all during Roosevelt's term of office. And that organization used to abet the Federation. We used to provide teams for the Federation; now it's the reverse. The Federation handles it, and they more or less feel they represent the Jewish community.

RL: Were you active in politics at all during the Roosevelt administration?

FS: I was always a staunch Democrat, and I always feel that I played a small part in the advancement of Hubert Humphrey. He was mayor of Minneapolis while I was president of Hadassah, and I feel I introduced him to the Jewish community. I remember one time we had a meeting at Fanny Brin's home. She lived around the corner here. In those years, you know, you didn't have Abbey Rents. You hauled chairs from one house to the next. I remember that at this meeting, I was hauling chairs to be used at Mrs. Brin's home. There was a very sweet, demure, refined little lady who said, "May I help you bring the chairs back into the car?" And I said, "I'd love it." It turned out to be Muriel Humphrey! And of course I've always been a staunch Humphrey supporter. I shouldn't inject a political note here, but today's the day, and I've been waiting for the day when he's going to make the

decision. I've always felt he would be the best president we could have. I was always involved in Jewish National Fund . . . Israel Bonds . . . and I've always felt very close to him. I don't know how the struggle's going to turn out now, though. They've edged him out.

RL: But you weren't involved in politics in the 1930s?

FS: No, no. In fact, politics were always a mystery to me. I'm always involved either in books or in the Jewish people, although I belonged to the International Club, where I met mostly non-Jewish people. I always made it a point to say I was Jewish. I wasn't belligerently Jewish, but I was always very proud to be Jewish. I didn't want anybody to misunderstand my background. And then when the Holocaust was starting in Germany, I became intensely aware of this horrible situation, and that was almost a turning point in my life. It was then that I became very articulate and threw whatever resources I had into that particular thing.

RL: When you and Paul were dating, where did you go when you went out on a date?

FS: We went to see George Arliss in *Disraeli*. At that time, of course, the Lyceum Theatre would bring stage productions. And when I married Paul—I'd never thought of marrying anyone who didn't have a college education, or who came from an Old World background—but [laughs] he persuaded me, and the more I thought about it the more I realized he was right, that two people didn't really have to be exactly alike, that one could have the qualities the other didn't have. To use his own expression, which was very homely but very satisfactory, the two could make a composite whole. He was the one who was interested in politics and in the labor movement. Even though he was certainly considered a capitalist, nevertheless he was always interested in the labor movement because, as he said, he was a little man and had come from little people, so he was always very sympathetic to the working man. I married him six months after I met him. We would go to see plays, and at that time there was the old Metropolitan Opera House on Seventh Street across from the Radisson Hotel, so there was opera that was brought there. And that was it. We were married. And he felt strongly, even more so than I did, about the Zionist movement, because he could recall the injustices in Russia that I couldn't; I had no experience with it, though of course my parents knew about that, too. So he was very dedicated to that.

RL: So you came into the Jewish community right away after you were married—through your music?

FS: Well, I'll tell you. When I was first married I lived at what they called the Hampton Court Apartments. Lifson—was it Max Lifson?—was in the real estate business and he was in charge of rentals, and we lived in this apartment just off the corner of Franklin and Lyndale, and Gertrude Lifson asked me to join Hadassah. I was just twenty years old. I

came into Hadassah, and I didn't know what it meant! It took me two years before anybody decided to tell me what HMO meant (Hadassah Medical Organization), but whatever I did at the time, I did through my music. I would accompany somebody, or play. I used to give performances at the Jewish Home for the Aged. I'm not a brilliant pianist by any means, but I'm not too bad, either. So that's how I came in, and it took a little while before they learned that maybe I could talk, also! And I've been there ever since.

RL: When did you first go to Israel?

FS: 1953. I was invited by the national Israel Bond organization Women's Division. This was the first women's group to go to Israel. There were ten of us from throughout the United States, and I was very, very excited. I saw Israel from a vantage point that very few people have enjoyed, and met Ben Gurion. (And incidentally, Francis and I met Ben Gurion again in 1974 when he and I went to Israel.) That was a rather unusual trip. We flew El Al, and one of our women unfortunately fell in Paris, at the French Embassy, and broke a hip, and we left her there and went on. I've always felt that any facet that helps Israel is important to support. And incidentally, I feel that's what makes this community very unusual; I think if you were going to ask about one fact that makes Minneapolis stand out, outstanding would be the fact that people who are interested in one organization overlap into practically everything else. I can hardly see anyone belonging to Hadassah who isn't helping in the Federation, or working for Israel Bonds, or supporting JNF (Jewish National Fund) and Histadrut, because they are all facets of the same picture. But that's not true in other cities. Another thing, too, I'm proud of in our community is that our Federation feels that support of Israel is so vital. I think it's probably the only community in the United States where the Federation sponsors an Israel Bond affair, because they realize that each is one side of the coin, that Israel cannot get along with just investment, without giving, and can't get along on giving without investment.

RL: Those early years in Hadassah, what was your tie with Israel? What programs did you have?

FS: Well, in the early years, of course, it was Palestine. We were all busy trying to help create a publicly secured and insured homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine, as a consequence of the Balfour Declaration.

RL: How did you work toward it?

FS: Well, we were keeping up through Hadassah—keeping up the health work, supporting the Hospital—but also in public relations. There were mass meetings trying to establish a Jewish State which all came to a head in 1947, in November, through the United Nations. You remember Britain withdrew, there was all this confusion, and there was a United Nations decision—I think it was October or November—that there would

have to be two states, and the Jewish State would be outlined by the location of the kibbutzim and the Arab state would be part of the rest, and Jerusalem was going to be either an open city or a joint city, or something. Well, reluctantly, after the United Nations decision, the Jewish people and the Jewish Agency accepted that, but the Arabs didn't, and the rest of it you know. They came to war, they attacked the little embryonic state, and the Jewish people rallied, and they had the state they have today. I don't know if I'll see it in my lifetime but, hopefully, I would like to see true recognition of Israel, instead of this belligerency, this no-war, no-peace state that exists today.

As far as anti-Semitism is concerned, I feel that I was one very, very fortunate individual, because I can honestly say that I have never felt any. But I think one of the reasons is because I am so *proudly* Jewish and so secure in myself, and so it seems to me that I can be accepted everywhere. I belong to the American Association of University Women, I've spoken to them, and I have never hidden the fact that I was Jewish. I never buried the fact that I was Jewish, and I can honestly say that I have been accepted.

When my son Myron was about three years old and we were beginning to get news about the Holocaust, about what was happening in Germany, the anti-Semitism and everything, I thought it was high time that I explained to my child that we were Jewish. So I did it in what I thought was a very scientific manner. I had a big globe. My next door neighbor was Catholic—she was from Ireland originally, so she's Catholic—and my other neighbor was from Norway. I pointed to Ireland and then to Norway, and I said, “These are Norwegians, they came from Norway.” And then I said that originally, a long time ago, the Jewish people came from Palestine. I recall that we were walking down Nicollet Avenue and two women were standing looking in a window and they were speaking Yiddish, and he said, “What are they speaking?” And I said, “They're speaking Jewish.” That sound to me was grating, it wasn't euphonious, and he remembered that, too. And so when I told him we were Jewish, he wasn't very happy! He started to howl, “I don't want to be Jewish, I want to be English!” And I remember thinking at the time, “Poor little kid. If we're going to go into the world I'd like him to have as few problems as possible.” But he couldn't be English!

We felt a little anti-Semitism—when I say “we,” I mean Paul and I—when we were solicited in our office in the Loeb Arcade by the Automobile Association for membership. I remembered that I had read that they did not accept Jewish people and I made a point of saying, “Well now, certainly we would like service for our car, but do you realize that we are Jewish?” And that was the end of that! They never pushed that any further, until many years later when they changed their policy, and of course now we belong to the AAA. But that was about the only time that I think I had an experience with anti-Semitism.

RL: Did you work with your husband?

FS: Yes. I used to come down and help at times in making decision, and in our later years I helped run the real estate business. In fact, after Paul passed away I had it completely for many, many years.

RL: But then you had someone at home to take care of the children?

FS: Oh, yes. I was one of those “spoiled women.” I always had help in the house. In those years you could, although today it's a thing unknown! After Paul passed away I always had someone living here with me, usually a girl from one of the professional schools, a medical technician or a dental technician. It was company. And of course I always had a dog, too.

[End of interview]

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