

ABA Commission on Women in the Profession

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

SHIRLEY ADELSON SIEGEL

Interviewer: Joan F. Krey

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ORAL HISTORY OF SHIRLEY A. SIEGEL

FIRST INTERVIEW

March 23, 2006

This is the first interview of the oral history of Shirley A. Siegel which is being taken on behalf of Women Trailblazers in the Law, a Project of the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession. It is being conducted by Joan F. Krey on March 23, 2006.

SIDE A

Ms. Krey: Interviewing Shirley Adelson Siegel for the ABA Women Pioneer's project. We are going to start with [inaudible] and I'd like you to speak of course as slowly as you can, but we are going to have a conversation. You will be able to look at the transcripts, correct anything you would like, add anything, delete anything, and we're just trying to really explore all of your memories. So, what are the things that you remember first about where you were born and some of the early times of your life?

Ms. Siegel: I remember the stories that have been told in my family over the years about my early years more than I remember them myself. I was born in the Bronx. I don't remember the Bronx at all. When I was a year old, the family moved to Trenton, New Jersey. We were there until I was five years old. I don't remember Trenton at all. I remember only the stories about Trenton, and, of course, there are family snapshots, so I can see what the house looked like and what I looked like on the porch. A very central fact of my life took place at the age of five. Which I know

by so much telling about it and that is, when I was having my fifth birthday it was the day that the family moved from Trenton back to New York City.

Ms. Krey: Now what year was that in?

Ms. Siegel: I was born July 3, 1918. This was exactly five years later. And I sat next to a stranger on the Pennsylvania railroad on that two hour trip. When I got back to the city with the family, what they talked about the rest of that day was that I had spoken to this stranger for the whole two hours, and they said, she is such a chatterbox she should be a lawyer. Well, I then entered kindergarten and the teacher asked us what we wanted to be. This was in public school, which I attended through high school. I said that day in kindergarten that I wanted to be a lawyer, without knowing any lawyers and having absolutely no idea what this was all about. That response created a little sensation in the class. I may have been known throughout elementary school as the girl who wanted to be a lawyer. So this was a very odd way to choose a career.

Ms. Krey: Tell me, tell us something about your parents, what they did, your grandparents and your siblings.

Ms. Siegel: I came of an immigrant family. My parents were both born in Europe. They were born in Czarist Russia, in the part that is now known as Lithuania. My father came over when he was nine years old, in or about 1883, and my mother came over later in 1905, when she was 22 years old. They married in 1909 in the United States. My parents came from the same vicinity. My mother knew my father's family in Europe, and they knew her family. They were leaving Europe, of course, for opportunities in this country. As Jews, they didn't have a lot of

opportunity in Czarist Russia. My mother's brothers had preceded her to America.

She was brought up in a rural area. Her father had an occupation which was common at that time for Jews. He was the overseer for a large feudal estate belonging to Polish nobility consisting of farmland, mill, forest, lakes, peasants' homes and so on. He and his family lived comfortably on this estate, in a very beautiful area. My mother and her sister were tutored at home. I heard stories about reading Russian literature while they were sitting by the lake, not being made to be really good for anything much.

Ms. Krey: But they were, they sound as though they were educated.

Ms. Siegel: They were educated at home. My mother then wanted to go to the university, but that would mean living in Vilna, and her father wouldn't hear of it. Her mother had died when she was thirteen. Now she had a stepmother, a nice woman, but she never got used to having lost her mother. She was sort of in charge of the younger siblings. She had a younger brother (who later preceded her to America) and a younger sister, and then finally the stepmother had a daughter. My mother from age thirteen was taking some mature responsibilities at home, but it was an idle life, and she was restless. So, when her brothers sent her money for a dowry so that she could marry well, she took the money and bought tickets to come to America. She took along her younger sister.

Ms. Krey: She sounds very brave.

Ms. Siegel: She was a very brave woman. She was also a very intelligent woman. I think that it was the smartest thing for her to do.

Ms. Krey: So what year would that have been, when she came?

Ms. Siegel: 1905, during the Russo-Japanese war.

Ms. Krey: And her brothers were living in New York City?

Ms. Siegel: Her brothers were living in New York City. They then got together and took an apartment for the three brothers and two sisters. My mother and her sister were at first received at the home of David Zagor, an uncle, a brother of her father, who was established in New York City. He himself had several children and he just took in these two waifs, who came with their goose down mattresses and their second-class passage, when they turned up. He put them up for some weeks until the siblings got together and established their apartment.

Ms. Krey: How old were they?

Ms. Siegel: My mother was 22 and I guess that Sarah was 20.

Ms. Krey: And was this -- where in New York City?

Ms. Siegel: The lower east side, Hester Street, which my mother thought was dreadful.

Ms. Krey: Yes, because she came from a farm, I mean a beautiful estate.

Ms. Siegel: Yes, yes and traveling to America, she went through Warsaw, she saw great cities. And Vilna was a fine city, too. It's now known as Vilnius.

Ms. Krey: Yes. Where did she debark from?

Ms. Siegel: I think they went through Germany.

Ms. Krey: So this is 1905.

Ms. Siegel: She married in 1909.

Ms. Krey: And explain again how she met your father.

Ms. Siegel: Well my father's family came from the same vicinity. In fact, the village that he came from, this hamlet had a name, VsokiDvor. His family had lived there for many many years. They had gone to Moscow and got an incorporation for this little Jewish hamlet in the 17th century. Finally, by World War I, everything more or less collapsed. And my mother told me that from her hills in Talkeva (now known as Tolkiszkes), she could see the red roofs of VsokiDvor. V-s-o-k-i-D-v-o-r. It's now known in Lithuanian as Aukstadvaris. It exists, it's now a completely different place, not a Jewish hamlet.

Ms. Krey: And that's where your father was.

Ms. Siegel: That's where his family was from and that's where my mother's family went on Jewish holidays, because there was a little synagogue there. My father's family was the dominant family in VsokiDvor. My mother said it didn't have more than four streets, at most, but it was a pretty village.

Ms. Krey: What was your mother's name.

Ms. Siegel: Her name was Rose Zagor, Z-a-g-o-r. My father's name in Europe was Abramowicz but in New York they changed it to Adelson; that's my middle name, you know.

Ms. Krey: So, that was your beginning, but what is so interesting, we are back in 1905, your mother is there and now she is here and where does she meet your father's family--?

Ms. Siegel: Well, they are also in the lower east side of Manhattan, and my grandfather, my father's father, had known my mother's mother. See, my father's father was a rabbi, and my mother's mother was the daughter of a rabbi. In fact, that's how

my mother's father had met her, because she was the daughter of the man who was his teacher. And since the families were acquainted, of course, having been going to VsokiDvor my mother certainly knew the Abramowicz family.

My grandfather was here a few years ahead of the family. He came first and then the others came.

Ms. Krey: And what was he doing?

Ms. Siegel: The story is that my grandfather graduated at sixteen, which was remarkable, from a special rabbinical seminary near Vilna, and that also has a name, Volozhin, V-o-l-o-z-h-i-n. It's very well known.

Ms. Krey: Is this your mother's father or your father

Ms. Siegel: No, this is my father's father. My mother's grandfather, her mother's father, was a rabbi in another vicinity in Lithuania, then part of Czarist Russia. He was a Chasanavitch, descended from a chief rabbi in Seipzig in about the 15th century; the victim of a ritual murder. My father's father when he came here, really just wanted to study, he wanted to read the Talmud all the time. But he had to support a family, so his cousin, Louis Adelson, helped him out: Louis had married a woman by the name of Adelson, changed his name from Abramowicz to Adelson and told my grandfather he'd better Americanize himself and take that name too, which he did. His cousin then helped him get a little business, doing insurance, but he never did much. The family was extremely poor. My father suffered from rickets because of malnutrition when he was growing up. And my grandmother was just overwhelmed by the poverty. If they had stayed in Europe and things hadn't changed, it might have worked out. Her merchant family would have

supported this young rabbi, who was the son of a rabbi; that tradition would have gone on. But their world was changing. My father as the eldest son was destined to be a rabbi and was educated only in Hebrew schools in Europe and also when he came to New York; he never went to a secular school. When he was in his teens, there was an opportunity for him to apprentice at a synagogue in New Orleans. That's the story that I've heard. None of this is documented history.

Ms. Krey: That's great.

Ms. Siegel: And he rebelled. He was in America, and he just wanted to go out there and make money, so he embarked on being a businessman and broke with his father. He never was a consistently successful businessman, but he always tried, he had entrepreneurial instincts. When my mother married him, he was doing well in some branch of the garment industry. They were engaged for a long time. They met in 1905 and married in 1909. They went to Niagara Falls... By that time, she was twenty-six.

Ms. Krey: Twenty-six. _____ in those days I am sure a little bit older.

Ms. Siegel: It was a little older. Well, she had been picky in Europe. A lot of the good men had gone to America. And she had wanted to work in Vilna and attend the University where she had friends, but her father vetoed that idea. She was just supposed to get herself a husband in Europe, and she didn't find one so she came to America and found this one.

Ms. Krey: Your father had been in America since when about?

Ms. Siegel: 1883.

Ms. Krey: Oh, so he had really spent most of his childhood here.

Ms. Siegel: But he didn't go through the American public schools. He studied in what they called a Cheder. He was studying on the lower east side, where there was a large orthodox Jewish community. He was raised in an orthodox home where he was to grow up to be a proper orthodox rabbi. And he was considered a very good student in this, his father was proud of him. My father was very well read, self-taught, in history both ancient and modern, which he read in English. If only he had received proper guidance, had a mentor.

Ms. Krey: Okay. Would you just tell us now were you the first born.

Ms. Siegel: No, they were two ahead of me. There were two girls. I was the third girl, and that's the whole family. Three girls. The first one was eight years older than I, and the next one five and half years older.

Ms. Krey: Where were they being schooled?

Ms. Siegel: Well, once we were in Trenton, they were in the Trenton public schools.

Ms. Krey: And when did you move to Trenton?

Ms. Siegel: When I was one year old.

Ms. Krey: Did you have a house there or apartment?

Ms. Siegel: A house. As I said, I don't remember the house, but I know it from the pictures. The house with the porch. Not too far from the Delaware river, where, as my sister told me only a few months ago, just before she died, she used to go fishing with my father when she was a little girl. I didn't recall that my father ever went fishing -- she told me, at the age of ninety-three, "Father went fishing with me."

Ms. Krey: With you?

Ms. Siegel: No, with her.

Ms. Krey: And she is the middle one?

Ms. Siegel: She was the middle one. We children had a very happy childhood in Trenton. All three of us did, with our disparate ages.

Ms. Krey: Why did your father move there?

Ms. Siegel: I think because he was having problems with the union in New York and he figured if he'd go down to Trenton, it would be non-union and everything would be great. So he went down; at first things were great, but then that fell apart. He had to come back and try again in New York. They had lived in one place in Trenton for four years, just four years.

Ms. Krey: Did he have friends there? Did he have any relatives in Trenton, do you know?

Ms. Siegel: There were relatives of my mother there, in fact, her father's sister and her family and her own sister Sarah and her family. One of the Trenton cousins was attending Princeton.

Ms. Krey: So, could you explain again about the train trip, in context?

Ms. Siegel: The family returned to New York on the Pennsylvania railroad, a two-hour trip, and somehow I sat next to a stranger, since my two sisters, I guess sat together.

Ms. Krey: And you were moving now back to New York? Was this your first time on the train, that you know of?

Ms. Siegel: I had probably been taken by train down to Trenton, because my father never drove a car. We never had a car. So, the story is, that I spoke to this stranger all the way and when the family arrived in New York, it was the talk of the family.

Ms. Krey: Do you think it was because you hadn't talked a lot before.

Ms. Siegel: I don't know what it was. I think possibly the idea that they had left me with a stranger and I was not fazed by this. I don't know what it was, because although my father had been disappointed that I wasn't a boy, as soon as he got to know me he spoiled me and I am sure I probably talked a lot. The story is that my father always was saying, don't bother the baby.

Ms. Krey: And how did you know he was hoping for a boy.

Ms. Siegel: Oh, that's family lore. In fact, he was so disappointed when I was born that his uncle, his mother's brother, who was well off, and my father at that time was not doing so well, the uncle said he would adopt me. He had only sons, no daughter. Well, my father then said if this child was good enough for Jake Alberts, she was good enough for him. So here I am, five years old on the train and. The important thing is, the family's reaction made such an impression on me that when I went to kindergarten I announced I was going to be a lawyer. Of course, the reaction of the kindergarten also impressed me, so as I was impressing them they were impressing me. The other little girls wanted to be nurses and teachers.

Ms. Krey: So we're in 1923, approximately.

Ms. Siegel: I went through public school in the Inwood section in Upper Manhattan.

Ms. Krey: That was a nice section.

Ms. Siegel: It was hardly built up. When I go back now, which I rarely do, I see that it is solid with apartment houses, but at that time there still were areas where they hadn't even broken down the rock to build foundations.

Ms. Krey: So that was a little more trees and rural.

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes, very much so.

Ms. Krey: Did your mother like that?

Ms. Siegel: I think my mother was a city person, and Trenton as a small town did not appeal to her. Inwood was the city. And we stayed there until I was in my last year of high school, at which time my father had a business failure which gave him a heart attack and we were about to be evicted, so we moved down to an apartment near Columbia University, West 115th Street.

Ms. Krey: Let's go back a little bit. Tell me about your two sisters. Just the early part when you went to kindergarten, what did they want to be, that kind of thing. What do you think that their reactions were.

Ms. Siegel: I don't think anybody in the family, except me, was so dopy as to have a career staked out at that early age.

Ms. Krey: Did your sisters make fun of you?

Ms. Siegel: No, not at all.

Ms. Krey: Did your mother?

Ms. Siegel: Not one bit, no, nobody did. My mother was used to the idea of women in professional careers. Where she had lived in Europe, it was close by the grand house of the Polish nobility, and the daughter in that family was a biologist who had studied at the university and so on, so my mother was very restless. She saw that women studied and had professional careers.

Ms. Krey: She saw a role model.

Ms. Siegel: Oh sure. And then there was something else very important in inculcating the idea that perhaps I should be a lawyer. My father's sister Frances had a best friend who was a lawyer at one time she was a domestic relations court judge in

New York City. Now, so far as I can tell, she was not a friend of my parents. I don't know whether they ever met her, maybe they met her at my aunt's home, but they knew about her. Her name was Jeanette Brill, and as I recently learned, at one point she was an Assistant State Attorney General. It is through this connection -- it is too complicated to explain -- that it finally dawned on me how my parents happened to say I should be a lawyer. Whom did they know who was a lawyer? Obviously my aunt's best friend. My mother certainly thought that women belong in the professions. She always regretted that she did not have any training for anything. When she came to New York, it was a land of opportunity, but there were no opportunities for her because she thought she couldn't do anything. She had learned how to sew and so, when she and her siblings were setting up housekeeping, she got a little job sewing in a factory. But that was a horrible experience and she did not continue with it. She was a very fine seamstress and made the clothes of her older daughters and that kind of thing, but she didn't know how to make a decent living out of it or didn't want to.

She was living with three brothers until one by one they married. I think she was the last of the group to marry. I know she was intent on getting her younger sister married well; she felt responsible for her. They gave her a fine wedding, as well as they could. But the brothers were really supporting the household.

Ms. Krey: Did she keep house for the brothers then in other words until she married?

Ms. Siegel: Her sister had a facility for cooking. My mother had never cooked. They had had a maid and cook at home in Europe, so I think that she kept house with her, but the cooking was done by her sister.

Ms. Krey: So now your mother is married, has children, and she's supportive of your sisters. I am curious about what she wanted them to be or how that all worked out.

Ms. Siegel: My oldest sister was considered a prodigy, a brilliant girl with many talents. When she studied the piano, the piano teacher thought she should be a concert pianist. Anything she touched she did well. She spoke so beautifully that the Trenton education department had her go from class to class to say a few words, so that the kids could hear a young person speaking in decent English with good syntax. I have a loving cup of hers, a silver loving cup, that she won doing an article at age 10 on why I love America or a similar subject for the American Legion. I mean, she was a hit in Trenton.

Ms. Krey: And what was her first name.

Ms. Siegel: Dorothy. When she came to New York she went to Hunter High School, and did brilliantly. Academically, she was at the top. Then she came to Barnard College and decided, as the family was financially insecure, that she ought to major in the classics, because then she would be able to get a job teaching Latin or Greek. And so she majored in the classics and she walked off with all of the classics prizes at Columbia University. But she couldn't get a job in that field, because they weren't available. So, while working part-time for her masters degree, she took a job as an English teacher in the New York City public school system. She found that high school teaching wasn't suited to her, and so she then began taking

jobs as a writer. Meanwhile, she started to work on a PhD. on the philosophy of aesthetics. And the family never affected what she did in any way; she chose her own path. She always worked hard for the family. When I went to law school, although I had a loan from the law school to cover my tuition, I needed living expenses out of town, and my sister helped me without any question. She was already doing this for other relatives, out of the money that she made during the few years that she was a high school teacher.

Ms. Krey: So she went to Barnard and she must have gotten along there also.

Ms. Siegel: Of course she did, she may have got scholarships. In fact I had scholarships, at first, at Barnard, and then, I think, in the last year, they changed it to a loan.

Ms. Krey: That must have been a big achievement for someone from this family to go to Barnard, for her to go to college.

Ms. Siegel: Well, you know, it's funny, it didn't seem like an achievement. They thought of themselves, while poor, as being people of worth. It's the rabbinical background and all that. So the fact that they had not succeeded in America, weren't rich, didn't affect their own sense of identity. It was really like impoverished gentility.

Ms. Krey: Right. So they took it, as a matter of course, that a girl would go to Barnard, that their daughter would go to Barnard.

Ms. Siegel: Right, I think so. And after all, my father's two nephews went to Columbia, so they were all creeping out.

Ms. Krey: And were they predecessor to her, so she was following in their footsteps by going to Barnard?

Ms. Siegel: I think the oldest grandchild was already at Columbia. That's true, she was number two.

Ms. Krey: So, obviously you knew about that and saw that as a model too

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes.

Ms. Krey: What about your middle sister, what's her name?

Ms. Siegel: Bernice.

Ms. Krey: And so what did Bernice do in her younger days?

Ms. Siegel: Bernice. I'd like to say what Bernice did in her whole life because she ended up with a very good life. Being in the shadow of Dorothy, that was really very hard. She was around Dorothy a lot ... both of them read early and well, and Dorothy's taste influenced her ... but she always felt that Dorothy was the special one, and so she wouldn't even consider applying to Barnard. She felt that it wasn't for her, so she went to Hunter.

Ms. Krey: And had she gone to Hunter High School, also?

Ms. Siegel: No, she hadn't. She went to George Washington High School, a public high school, which is where I went. She was always a very good student, but suffered from a sense that she was not in Dorothy's class. Partly for the fact that Dorothy was such a good reader Bernice then became such a reader, she became a good writer also, and Bernice finally ended up on the editorial board of Life Magazine. And she worked for a masters and never completed it, just as Dorothy never completed her PhD. In fact, one of the publishing houses offered Dorothy an advance to do a book on Marcel Proust, but then World War II broke out and she

couldn't get overseas to do the interviewing that she wanted to do, and so she just did other things.

Ms. Krey: So did they ever marry.

Ms. Siegel: Bernice married well to a distinguished academic. Dorothy married, but it wasn't a successful marriage and she divorced. There was a lot of pressure on women to marry, self-imposed pressure.

Ms. Krey: Were your sisters, and, of course, obviously you were achieving a lot, but in that time period, were you different from the other girls that you played with, that were on the block? Was it not unusual for girls to achieve so much? To go to Barnard? For example, and to go to Hunter, cause this 1920s and early 30s, yes. Were you unusual. They'd say "oh, look at those Adelson girls" or was it....

Ms. Siegel: I think the Adelson girls were considered unusual. Well, just think of the locale, of Inwood, in New York, at that time, northern Manhattan. It was lower or working class neighborhood. We had nice friends.

Ms. Krey: Were they mostly Jewish?

Ms. Siegel: No, they weren't. They were all kinds of things, they were Armenian, Irish, Greek, and so on, I am thinking of the people that we knew well, like the girl who walked with me to school.

Ms. Krey: Did your parents move there on purpose to not be in a Jewish community or did they just didn't know?

Ms. Siegel: No, they were looking for a place where the rent was low, and where the children would have a nice open air place. And, at that time, there were certainly a lot of trees.

Ms. Krey: So they were focused on that and not the culture or religious issues.

Ms. Siegel: No. And they were able to take a bus across to the Bronx where my father's parents still lived. Every Sunday morning he would get on that bus and visit them and sometimes I went with him. My grandmother was a very good cook, and she made sweets. Inwood did have at least one synagogue although it was not a particularly Jewish neighborhood.

Ms. Krey: But, did you have Jewish children in your class.

Ms. Siegel: I don't recall many Jewish children in my classes.

Ms. Krey: The teachers sound like they were supportive of your story that you tell about being a lawyer, they weren't going who does she think she is.

Ms. Siegel: Oh no, no. In fact, I did very well in school. When I came home with good marks the first year, my father said, oh, just because your name is Adelson and begins with A like Abu Ben Adam, you're at the head of the list. He teased me, but I did very well in my studies. I then went on to junior high school, where I was the valedictorian and I was valedictorian also at George Washington High School. I did very well, academically.

Ms. Krey: And it sounds like your parents were proud of you.

Ms. Siegel: I am sure they were.

Ms. Krey: Because sometimes parents of girls will say, perhaps, what does she need an education for, or, you know, she's just going to get married. It sounds like there wasn't any of that. Was there any of that attitude?

Ms. Siegel: No, I think that my father might have had some of that in him. You know, it's time for them to go to work.

Ms. Krey: Oh, it's time to go to work. That's different.

Ms. Siegel: But my mother would not support that. She wanted us to be educated and also marry.

Ms. Krey: What kind of activities did you do in school? Did you do athletics? Clubs? Any particular thing? Now we are talking through high school.

Ms. Siegel: Oh, I did clubs. I did not do athletics, beyond the required gym, and swimming, which was always humiliating, because our family had little money for resorts in the summer time, we didn't much go to the beach and I had not learned to swim. They had a pool at George Washington High School, and you had to take swimming. I was a bit laggard, because I had no real opportunities for sports and the family were not athletic. Well we didn't go away in the summer.

Ms. Krey: What did you do?

Ms. Siegel: I just stayed home. My sisters called me a street kid, since I played in the street so much of the time -- hop scotch, jumped rope. My oldest sister Dorothy, as soon as she was, I guess, sixteen, got some sort of a summer job. My sisters both had summer jobs. I think my sister Dorothy got a job selling tickets at the motion picture theatre down in Chinatown one summer, through a connection of an uncle of ours. Bernice worked in Macy's on Saturdays.

Ms. Krey: Was work something that you looked forward to doing? Did you like school better?

Ms. Siegel: I loved school, but I never thought I would not work.

Ms. Krey: What made you feel that work was good for a woman? Your mother wasn't working, was she?

Ms. Siegel: No, she didn't work. She did housework. I don't think I ever had a question that I would not work. And I think that my sisters felt they were going to work. It was just work at what.

Ms. Krey: Was it the economics of the time that, you're in an immigrant environment, that everybody worked.

Ms. Siegel: That may be it. I don't know. The possibility of not working, the fact that my mother didn't work. Well, after all, she was an immigrant woman who had never gone to a school.

Ms. Krey: Do you feel sorry for her.

Ms. Siegel: I was very very attached to her, and thought she was wonderful. In fact people who met her thought she was smart. I think they were surprised that a woman who hadn't been formally schooled could have that poise and that natural elegance.

Ms. Krey: Did she talk to you about her hopes for you or that she would like you to work.

Ms. Siegel: No. I don't recall our discussing it.

Ms. Krey: Your sisters?

Ms. Siegel: No, we didn't discuss it. We just were busy getting through our schooling.

Ms. Krey: So they obviously thought school was most important.

Ms. Siegel: Oh of course, and then graduate school, too; both of my sisters were embarked on graduate school.

Ms. Krey: Now, your girlfriends, the friends that you were friendly with in elementary school and high school, which can be a very influential time, were they also very studious and interested in studies.

Ms. Siegel: High school friends, not my friends in elementary school.

SIDE B

Ms. Siegel: I was active in club activities, but I didn't really know these girls outside of school. At high school, I did know several girls who then went on to Barnard College with me.

Ms. Krey: Okay. And what about the influence of boys?

Ms. Siegel: Well, I never went to a party with boys or went out with boys, until I was in college.

Ms. Krey: And the boys in the class were they neutral, discouraging, encouraging?

Ms. Siegel: I had good relations with boys in high school, good students who were in a sense competing with me. So, when I came out first as valedictorian, there was a salutatorian who was male; he competed with me, but we were friends. There was no social activity, but, in school, I had many friends, boys as well as girls. I was active in the Foreign Policy Association club, that kind of thing. I was in the Arista, the honor society for George Washington High School, which had 5,000 students all together; in the honor society I don't know how many there were. So I did have friends in high school.

Ms. Krey: Were the teachers supportive of your achievements in high school or did they favor the boys in any way?

Ms. Siegel: I didn't see that boys were being favored at all. I had a history teacher, I think maybe favored me unduly.

Ms. Krey: A woman or a man?

Ms. Siegel: A woman. And I remember, this fellow who was the second highest when we graduated was also in my Latin class. I think the Latin teacher liked me.

Ms. Krey: Man or woman?

Ms. Siegel: Man. So you see gender wasn't an issue. Not for me. No, it didn't hurt me at all.

Ms. Krey: What about anybody else in your family, encouragement or discouragement of your goals to go to college and work and even become a lawyer. You know, looking now to your parents, siblings or cousins or whoever?

Ms. Siegel: I think they were proud of me. The cousins were all on the same track. They were also going to go to college. On both sides of the family. My mother's nieces and nephews and my father's niece and nephews were all heading for college.

Ms. Krey: Were there any all girls organizations that you were part of at all?

Ms. Siegel: I was a Girl Scout.

Ms. Krey: Did you enjoy that?

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes, I did enjoy that.

Ms. Krey: Was that something that was sponsored at school or did you have to seek it out?

Ms. Siegel: I think they held their meetings at the synagogue.

Ms. Krey: Did you go camping with them?

Ms. Siegel: No. I never did anything really outdoorsy or athletic.

Ms. Krey: Did your Girl Scout troop itself go camping and then you did not?

Ms. Siegel: I don't recall that my troop went camping. I think that our world was so poor, in those days. I couldn't even afford a uniform. I didn't have a Girl Scout uniform.

Ms. Krey: Did the other girls?

Ms. Siegel: There were some girls that had a uniform, but I was not unusual in not having one. And obviously it was because it would have meant an outlay of money. For what? For a Girl Scout uniform? When you're trying to feed the family.

Ms. Krey: Was there any sexual harassment at all? I mean we didn't call it that then, but was there any kind of sex discrimination or disparate treatment that you can think of? Up to college we're talking about.

Ms. Siegel: Never.

Ms. Krey: Never. All right. So, if you were thinking back, who were your role models before college?

Ms. Siegel: My sister Dorothy. Dorothy was brilliant, lovely, and she excelled at Barnard and had excelled at Hunter and everywhere. When she was sent to Temple Emanuel, she walked off with all the prizes. This was the affluent Jewish community, so we have, at home, a beautiful edition of Shakespeare that was a present from the women's organization. We also have a set of Graetz' multivolume History of the Jews with a frontispiece stating, in recognition of Dorothy Adelson, etc. I mean whether it was Hunter or it was the Temple Emanuel religious school This is the kind of sister I had, she was truly a role model.

Ms. Krey: Was there anybody else, that mentored you or anything like that?

Ms. Siegel: No.

Ms. Krey: And, the lawyer issue which is . . .

Ms. Siegel: Pardon me I also did babysitting. I did babysitting. I liked that.

Ms. Krey: You liked that. The lawyer issue continued in the family, that you were going to be a lawyer, and at this point before going to college had you met any lawyers?

Ms. Siegel: No.

Ms. Krey: No. But you remember your father's sister's friend was a lawyer?

Ms. Siegel: I never met her, and I don't recall that I knew about her at that time. That my parents' saying she should be a lawyer may be traced to that friendship is something that dawned on me many decades later, only very recently. Because I really kind of wondered for years, "how come?" And when it dawned on me recently, I was very excited, because I thought I'd finally unlocked a mystery.

Ms. Krey: You also said that when you were at school you would repeat this to people, but you did not know what lawyer actually was.

Ms. Siegel: Right. I didn't know any lawyers. I'd never been in a courthouse. I studied government and vaguely connected that with being a lawyer. My cousin, the first born of all the Adelson grandchildren, went to law school, but I had really never discussed anything with him about law or being a lawyer; I don't know, maybe I wasn't quite as stupid as I say. I really don't remember.

Ms. Krey: What about advantages or benefits of being female or disadvantages?

Ms. Siegel: Is this a comment on life in general or how I felt?

Ms. Krey: In childhood. How you felt in childhood.

Ms. Siegel: I was very happy, and I enjoyed having sisters and didn't feel that I missed any brothers. So being female was all right with me. It never occurred to me that being female might be a problem in my plan for a career in law.

Ms. Krey: Yes. What year then did you -- you were valedictorian -- and what year did you graduate?

Ms. Siegel: 1933. From high school.

Ms Krey: Had the depression made any effect yet on your family?

Ms. Siegel: My father was beginning to pull out it, somehow. When things were going so well in the '20s, he was having a very hard time. And when others were jumping out of windows and the economy was going to pot, he began to pull it together. So, during the depression, things were, if anything, more tolerable, even though we still were living on a shoestring. Everybody else was also suffering now. It seemed, in fact, not as bad for us. The threat of eviction came when I was about thirteen years old, I was in high school, at that time, and my father really couldn't meet the rent. It was as simple as that.

Ms. Krey: And then what happened?

Ms. Siegel: You know how it is, you can't meet the rent, you go and move somewhere else. We just took another apartment somewhere else.

Ms. Krey: But you were able to continue at the same school?

Ms. Siegel: Yes. Well, it was a high school.

Ms. Krey: But from the same area?

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes, it was still the West Side, Manhattan. I had just one more year. Well, I graduated at fourteen. I wasn't quite fifteen. I was fifteen in July. I graduated in June when I was still fourteen.

Ms. Krey: How does that happen?

Ms. Siegel: In the New York public schools if you were a bright student they would push you through.

Ms. Krey: You would just skip a grade?

Ms. Siegel: You'd skip, but I did all the skipping in elementary school. When I came to the high school, I did it in four years. In effect, I did eight years of elementary school in five years, from a combination of skipping and junior high school.

Ms. Krey: So when did you start George Washington high school?

Ms. Siegel: I entered George Washington High School for the sophomore year, the second year. At that time, if you went to junior high school, you did three years in two. So, it included the first year of high school.

Ms. Krey: I see. So say you were eleven or twelve when you started high school. Is that possible?

Ms. Siegel: I must have been, because I have told you exactly what my age was when I finished, and after junior high school, I went to high school for three years, and that was it. So, when I came to Barnard, I was young, too. Barnard at just fifteen.

Ms. Krey: Were there a lot of others of that age . . .

Ms. Siegel: It was not unheard of.

Ms. Krey: Mostly girls? Or boys and girls, that would be so young?

Ms. Siegel: It could happen to both.

Ms. Krey: Had your sisters also skipped?

Ms. Siegel: Dorothy didn't skip, because, first after all, she was in Trenton schools, where they didn't do this.

Ms. Krey; Was skipping something that made your nervous or proud or it just was normal?

Ms. Siegel: It was normal. Because it wasn't unique. But there weren't many.

Ms. Krey: Made you feel special at that point _____ .

Ms. Siegel: I don't recall that feeling.

Ms. Krey: Was it a strain that so many of the other kids were so much older?

Ms. Siegel: It should have been. I was insensitive to that. The fact is that I wasn't more mature than my years. So when I tell you that I had no social life in high school, I wasn't dating, I was not anywhere.

Ms. Krey: It sounds age appropriate. And your sister, your older sister was seventeen or eighteen when she graduated?

Ms. Siegel: I don't really know but she hadn't done all that skipping, because she had Trenton and then she had Hunter High School. It was different.

Ms. Krey: And Bernice?

Ms. Siegel: Bernice did some skipping. I think I may have been a year on her.

Ms. Krey: You mentioned about the summers that you didn't go away. And it sounded like you wished you had gone away.

Ms. Siegel: I don't believe that I complained about it. It was after all understood it was a matter of not being able to afford it.

Ms. Krey: Were there any public culture influences on you like movies or women politicians or . . .

Ms. Siegel: I'm not aware of that. We went to the movies sometimes.

Ms. Krey: What did you read when you were young?

Ms. Siegel: I don't know whether I remember this from just having told it or whether I really remember it. But Dorothy took me to the library when I was about a first grader. Wanted me to get a library card and wanted me to get out books. And she thought I should get out books about fairies. And I wanted to get out books about little animals having a life. It wasn't her kind of literature. She was disappointed.

Ms. Krey: About fairies. What kind of books were they?

Ms. Siegel: I don't know. She was showing me books, that I wasn't -- I wanted to have Brer Rabbit and that kind of thing. Brer Rabbit and Brer Wolf.

Ms. Krey: How about when you were in high school?

Ms. Siegel: By the time I was in high school, I read Thomas Mann, Dickars. I was a fairly serious student. I was also taking piano lessons during my high school years.

Ms. Krey: What courses were you taking?

Ms. Siegel: I don't know how much option there was in the courses I took, but most important to me was the history course. That's where I had a very good rapport with the teacher Mrs. Gottesman. The woman teacher I told you about earlier. And then, as I've said, I went to meetings of the Foreign Policy Association. And I was serious about all that.

Ms. Krey: Those were high school meetings, foreign policy or?

Ms. Siegel: Yes. They had a student unit. I found that very interesting, and I just lapped it up.

Ms. Krey: Now, going on to Barnard.

Ms. Krey: Did you have to take exams or how did you pick Barnard?

Ms. Siegel: Dorothy and my mother must have decided that I should go to Barnard. They had wanted Bernice to apply to Barnard and she had kicked. Wouldn't even try. And I didn't kick. To me it was perfectly normal to go to Barnard. In the first place, it was right down the street. We were then living, well, we had moved from 115th Street which was practically on the campus and we were now at 110th near Broadway, also near the campus. And Barnard was a college I knew about from Dorothy, I didn't apply anywhere else.

Ms. Krey: She could live at home and go to classes during the day I take it?

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes. She never lived in a dormitory, and I didn't either.

Ms. Krey: Were most of the girls in dormitories in those days?

Ms. Siegel: No, those were depression years and besides Barnard didn't have enough dormitory space if all the girls were going to live in. Later in the era when girls wanted to live in dormitories, Barnard had to build them. In my day, I think the dorm was really for the out of town girls. And Barnard did want to recruit out of New York City very much. Barnard was very anxious to be a national school, so if you came from Oklahoma, it was believed you didn't have to be quite as academically gifted in order to be admitted. And of course that helped fill the dorm, too.

Ms. Krey: Was there any restrictions on being Jewish?

Ms. Siegel: A quota. I think our quota was 15%.

Ms. Krey: And you were aware of it at the time?

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes. I was aware of it.

Ms. Krey: Did George Washington High School say to you, well there's a quota for our school, or did it work that way, they would recommend a few Jewish girls and that would be part of the quota?

Ms. Siegel: I don't know whether the high school did any recommending. I don't recall that there was a placement person at the high school. I think you were on your own. After all, what percent of that high school population was going to go to college.

Ms. Krey: What percent would.

Ms. Siegel: Nothing like today. I don't know.

Ms. Krey: Okay. But small, I take it you're saying.

Ms. Siegel: I think so.

Ms. Krey: And when Bernice went to Hunter, that was all girls and she commuted, I guess ,
by subway.

Ms. Siegel: Of course. Where did we live at that time? It may be that she had a commute
from Inwood.

Ms. Krey: But Barnard was considered better.

Ms. Siegel: Oh yes. Hunter wasn't bad. She had some excellent faculty and made some good
friends at Hunter.