

Interview with Professor Jonathan Sarna
Music 194rs: Leonard Bernstein's Boston
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Professors Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Carol Oja
Class Interviewers: Sheryl Kaskowitz and Stephanie Samuels
Minor editing by Elizabeth T. Craft

0:00 (Interview starts at approximately 1:50)

Sheryl Kaskowitz:

So I just wanted to take the time to introduce Professor Sarna. Professor Jonathan Sarna is one of America's foremost commentators on American Jewish history, religion, and life. He was born in Philadelphia, raised in New York and Boston, and attended Brandeis, the Boston Hebrew College, *Merkaz HaRav Kook* in Jerusalem, and Yale, where he obtained his doctorate in 1979. From '79 to '90, Dr. Sarna taught at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, where he rose to become Professor of American Jewish History and director of the Center for the Study of American Jewish experience. He has also taught at Yale, the University of Cincinnati, and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Dr. Sarna returned to Brandeis in 1990 and now assumes the new Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun professorship in American Jewish history in the department of Near Eastern and Judaic studies. He served two terms as chair of that department and now chairs the academic advisory and editorial board of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish archives. He also serves as chief historian of the National Museum of American Jewish History and of the 350th commemoration of Jewish life in America (1654-2004). The *Forward* newspaper has dubbed him one of the 50 most influential American Jews. Dr. Sarna has written, edited, or co-edited more than twenty books, and his most recent work, *American Judaism: A History*, has been praised as being "the single best description of American Judaism during its 350 years on American soil." It won numerous awards, including the 2004 Everett Family Foundation Jewish Book of the Year award from the Jewish Book Council. So we are very pleased to welcome Professor Jonathan Sarna.

[Applause]

Professor Jonathan Sarna:

Well thank you, it's really a pleasure to be here, and I'm grateful for the invitation and to learn that I had a neighbor in Professor Oja. I didn't know that, so there are all sorts of, of benefits. What I want to do is to give a certain amount of background into Boston, and I'll try and weave Bernstein into the Boston Jewish community. Bernstein is born in 1918, and by then already Boston is a community of about 80,000 Jews. But it's worth knowing that Boston is what I would call a late Jewish community. Now that will surprise some of you because the local aficionados say, "The first Jew came to Boston in 1649 even before you had a community here," but the truth is he kind of wandered, blundered into town as a stranger, and they warned him out of town, gave him three months to leave. He wisely took the hint. That's not the beginning of the community. What's truly important is Boston is really the only important colonial port city without a Jewish community, and such cities as Cincinnati, Cleveland, Louisville, St. Louis, all of them had synagogues, organized Jewish communities before Boston did.

5:00

You only begin—and you'll see why in some ways this is relevant—you only begin to have an organized Jewish community in Boston in 1843, and the first synagogue is Ohavei Shalom. It still exists; of course it didn't start off where it is now on Beacon Street. As a rule, when a congregation has a name "Lovers of Peace," which is what Ohavei Shalom is, sure sign that there was all sorts of disagreement among the members, and "Lovers of Peace" is a sign of what they hope will happen. It had numerous divisions, but Ohavei Shalom was the third synagogue in New England after Newport and New Haven. Now there is kind of a rule of Jewish communities. I don't actually know many exceptions, and that is that where Jews achieve pioneer status in a community, meaning when they're there at the very beginning—Indianapolis, Cincinnati, San Francisco, to some extent New York—Jews fare better. They have the legitimacy that comes with being a pioneer. But when they're seen as latecomers and interlopers, generally it's very different, and they fare worse, and the reason that it's important that Boston is a late community is to understand that Boston is that second category. Jews were late to Boston, for a long time they are something of an alien presence in the city. They're not among the city's founders. They're not all that welcome. For much of the

19th century, Boston has a small Jewish community. As late as 1880, there are only – which is 38 years before Bernstein is born, there are only four to five thousand Jews in Boston. Compare that to 75,000 Jews in 1880 in New York. Indeed, Boston is smaller than Baltimore, than Cincinnati, than St. Louis. A lot of the Jews in Boston, and this distinguishes it from the Midwest communities, they're central European Jews—those Jews in 1880—but actually if you look carefully, they are more Polish than German. You have a small German community, but it does not dominate the community, unlike New York or Cincinnati, where the German Jews dominate. Ohavei Shalom is Polish. Temple Israel is the small German community. Now, one of those German Jews, by the way, who is here in the late 19th century, is Louis Brandeis. I have to mention him once in every talk, it's in my contract. He doesn't play any role in this story, except to remember that he's an outsider in Boston, and that's what's interesting. The Frankels, who give a job to Sam Bernstein, to Leonard Bernstein's father, they are German Jews. And this firm Frankel and Smith, which brings him to Boston, is German. They see themselves as the absolute elite of the Jewish community. They worship at Temple Israel, if they worship at all. They have a sense that they will make it, but it's a small community. The coming of East European Jews beginning—we usually date it to 1881 because of the assassination of Alexander II and the pogroms in Russia leading to a significant emigration in 1881—the coming of Eastern European Jews transforms Boston, and it is.... because the community that Bernstein is coming to is a community that has just undergone an astonishing transformation from the point of view of the Jewish community. Keep in mind, I said there were 4,000 Jews in 1880; in 1920 there are 80,000 Jews. So you get a sense of forty years, total transformation. Almost all of those are Jews from Eastern Europe. Now, the significant East European Jewish community in Boston—those who considered themselves the, the elite of the East European community and who dominated Boston Jewish community, gave it sort of its character—are actually Lithuanian Jews.

10:00

This is technical, they considered themselves *Litvaks*, that's not identical borders to present-day Lithuania or even 18th century Lithuania, but they followed the Lithuanian traditions of East European Jewry. They had, as you'll see there in *The Jews of Boston*,

they had a substantial impact on Jewish education. Some of the great rabbis were Lithuanian—say Louis Epstein, one of the leading modernizing rabbis. That's the tradition. Sam Bernstein [note: pronounced "Bern-STEEN"] is not part of that tradition. He is from Ukraine, not Lithuania, and whereas the Lithuanian Jews tended to have a tradition of learning and followers of Elijah of Vilna, known to Jews as the Vilna *Gaon*, the great learned rabbi of Vilna, Sam Bernstein [note: "steen"] came from a Hasidic tradition. This Hasidism is a Jewish pietistic movement with its origins in the 18th century, not so very different from some of the Christian pietistic movements that arise at the same time, and Bernstein [note: pronounced "bern-stine"] comes from a little place—you won't find it on most maps—*Berestiv* in the Ukraine, and his background is in Hasidism. That's—He's heir to Hasidic music. We were talking about trying to find out really what kind of Hasidic musical tradition might he have come from. What did he know? We have these accounts that Leonard would hear his father singing these Hasidic tunes. Could we find out anything about them? I don't know the answer to that. It would require finding out exactly which branch of Hasidism Sam Bernstein came from, and anyway it is important to know that whereas the Lithuanian Jews emphasized learning, and Sam Bernstein's, the many accounts of him and Talmud I think are suggestive to me that he has brought in to the Lithuanian tradition of Talmud. I'm not so sure that that's what Hasidim were known for, but that's how you made it in Boston. Anyway, he certainly had a Hasidic musical tradition, and the family remained interested in the Hasidic world. You'll see in Burt Bernstein's book he talks about how Sam was close to the Lubavitch yeshiva, and indeed there's a wonderful picture there of all the family gathered at some big gala for the Lubavitch yeshiva. Lubavitch of course is a branch of Hasidism, and I would doubt very much because the geography doesn't work that Sam Bernstein was Lubavitch in Europe, but in America he found those Lubavitch Hasidim closer to the world and the mode of prayer that he really liked. Now, a lot of the Jews who come from Eastern Europe are refugees, but I would not classify Sam Bernstein as a refugee. He really comes to escape the drudgery of a small farm village, no possibility of rising, and he's very much fired as so many immigrants are by the promise of American life. He has an uncle who helps to bring him; this is typical chain migration. He goes first to Hartford, but then a sign that he's fired by opportunity,

opportunity knocks in Boston and he runs to answer it, starts off as a stock boy—this is a typical Horatio Alger story of moving from, moving up, from rags eventually to riches. The family moves to Boston; he really lives in the heart of Jewish Boston initially. Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan—this is the heart of Jewish Boston from, in the years when they come. Earlier you've had Jews in the South end, in the North end, in the West end. But by these years the heart of Jewish Boston has moved to the streetcar suburbs of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan. You'll see that they move around a great deal. That's characteristic of immigrants. They were renters.

15:00

Once a year the rental contract was up, and you thought maybe you'd get a better deal somewhere else, or get better neighbors, or get better heat, and in that respect the early years were very typical of immigrants. What stands out, what's different here, is that he really succeeds, much more than the average East European Jewish immigrant does. Many East European Jewish immigrants took two generations to rise up. Sam Bernstein, because he breaks into the beauty business early and has some very good luck, he joins a very exclusive group of East European Jews in Boston who achieve wealth in one generation, and that puts him into a whole new category. He's no longer just one of these multitudes who come: he's made it. And I'm going to say more about that, but now I want to take a minute—maybe a little more—to point out that when he makes it he joins Congregation Mishkan Tefila, and you can't underestimate the importance of that for the Bernstein story. Mishkan Tefila, at that time in Roxbury, it's a congregation that broke away originally, it goes back to 1858 when you had a breakaway of Polish Jews from Ohavei Shalom, they were more traditional, they found Mishkan Israel. It then merges with another congregation, Sha'arey Tefila in 1895, and they took the Mishkan from one synagogue, the Tefila from the other synagogue, and poof, they now merged into Mishkan Tefila. But what's important is that by 1920, which is the year they joined—Leonard is two years old, time to join a synagogue—when they joined Mishkan Tefila it has already become a pioneer in what is going to come to be known as Conservative Judaism, a modern form of traditional Judaism. It's not reform, it is taking traditional East European Judaism, and giving it a modern form. It is a Judaism designed to keep these East European, rising East European Jews within the synagogue, within the Jewish

world, and the congregation really focused on upwardly mobile East European Jews. They called them “the risen generation.” It’s interesting to me it’s in the past tense; if you hadn’t already risen, you probably couldn’t pay the dues. So, the risen, not the rising generation of East European immigrants and their children. And Mishkan Tefila for really decades was the Conservative congregation. It called itself, it even considered itself the greatest synagogue in Boston. That would have been disputed by its reform counterparts. We call it in *Jews of Boston*, it referred to itself as the *Shtadt Shul*—the city synagogue. That certainly was true of the East European congregations. Its rabbi was a very interesting man named Herman Rubenovitz: R-U-B-E-N-O-V-I-T-Z. And Rubenovitz had spent time in western Europe and deeply believed that the way to preserve Judaism for these upwardly mobile Jews was to stress beauty and decorum and dignity. He had seen congregations in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. He experienced the music of those congregations, often with a choir, sometimes with an organ. He decided to bring that to Boston, and he does, and introduces, which was unknown and quite controversial, he introduces into a traditional synagogue—you might have had it in a reform congregation but not in an East European traditional congregation—a mixed choir, meaning men’s and women’s voices, and, as distinct from a boys’ choir, which a traditional congregation might otherwise have had, and an organ. So you already have had in 1914 organ and mixed choir. Soon after the Bernsteins join they engage a very distinguished Russian cantor named Iz- – I don’t know how to pronounce it – Izso Glickstein: I-Z-S-O Glickstein.

20:00

And then in 1928, and this is very important, in 1928 he is joined at Mishkan Tefila by a leading European Jewish conductor—I’d love to know more about this man, he is very significant in the early Bernstein story—his name is Professor, he always called himself Professor which must mean he served as a professor, Professor Solomon G. Braslavsky. Braslavsky, I suppose means he had some roots in Braslav, which is a place name, but Braslavsky. And he is the music director, he is the organist, and he is also a composer. He is all three, and he brings to the congregation—listen to this quote because at some level you could have heard Leonard Bernstein say this—he brings all kinds of musics, old and new, conservative and modern. “The main thing,” Braslavsky insists, “is that the

music must be good and traditionally Jewish in character.” And this is the music that Bernstein hears when he attends those services which he apparently did often. Professor Oja sent me this document, which I hope some of you have seen or maybe we can look at at some point. Bernstein, late in his life, is interested in creating a Russian Hebrew-Yiddish cantata, as he calls it.

Professor Kay Kaufman Shelemay:

Should we put it up now?

Sarna:

Sure, put it up, we'll talk about it now. I don't know how to do it. If I hit the button, it'll explode. That's what it is, it's not easy to read, but – cantata on Hebrew and Yiddish. I was actually on my computer able to blow it up but you can't do it here, but I wanted you to see a few things there. First of all, oh there it is [note: screen zooms into document]. “First real music I heard.” What does it say in parenthesis? “Braslavsky!” So it's not just me who's made this up. Bernstein is conscious: the first music I heard is Braslavsky, and in order to understand that you have to know that Braslavsky is the music director at Mishkan Tefila, and he is hearing it. Now what is, it's inter-, he has all sorts of interesting questions. Why do I want to do it? “Nostalgia for youth?” “Guilt toward my father?” Is it “my first real cultural exposure?” Am I lacking a “larger identity with a race, with a creed”? With a “supernatural force”? “But the latter wouldn't account for so many Yiddish performances” [Note: the document actually says “Yiddish responses”]. What he's alluding to there is the fact that many of the folks who stressed Yiddish called themselves secular Jews. They were looking for a Judaism that was cultural, but that had no supernatural element. They argued that you would maintain Jewish identity through culture, through language, but without G-d. But that's not so much what interests, and then he goes on—lacking in, uh, “seeking any identity,” this is for the psychohistory. But then he goes on, there's another piece, if you keep on going down. Ah—I was interested in this list of music. The idea is that the speaker will speak in English, but the singing will have the Hebrew and the Yiddish. But what struck me here is that the first two items on the list are two musical pieces that I presume he heard on Friday night. They are sung

on Friday night in the liturgy, and I presume that he heard them on Friday night at Mishkan Tefila, and what I learned about Mishkan Tefila is that was the big music night. Those familiar with the Jewish liturgy know that is a much shorter service on Friday night. Moreover, because many Jews worked on Saturday in that period, many of them would come on Friday night to worship, and because the liturgy itself is fairly short you could embellish it with this wonderful music, unlike Saturday morning where if you embellished it you'd be there all day long. So it's much longer. So Friday night, two pieces that he would have heard is "Yigdal," which is actually a hymn about the, it's a hymn version of the essentials of Judaism as set forth by Moses and Maimonides.

25:00

Most Jews don't know this; they just know it as a hymn. And it's set to music. And "Shalom Aleichem" is a well-known, sung in many Jewish homes to this day, Friday night, welcoming the Sabbath, originally composed in the period of the mystics in the 17th century and becomes enormously popular. You welcome the Sabbath queen, and both of those would undoubtedly have been sung at the synagogue. Honestly, I don't know what he meant by Judith, there is a book of Judith, and I think there are various classical composers who put music to it, I don't know what he had in mind. I don't know which psalm is "proud humility," which is a contradiction in terms. The "Song of Songs" is of course a biblical book actually, I doubt read at Mishkan Tefila, but traditional Jews often read the love poetry of the Song of Songs again on Friday night, but the Song of Songs also brings us to the next group of music that interests him. The Song of Songs is read also liturgically on Passover, and his last two suggestions are both Passover. The first is "And it came to pass at midnight," and he parenthetically writes "Haggadah." That is a, that is a hymn that is still found in the Passover Haggadah. Those who know any Hebrew, it's "*Vay'hi b'chatsi halaila.*" I do not myself know the music to it, but somebody must have created music. It clearly was once sung, and Bernstein must have known it. He must have been heir to some piece of music, I'd love to know what it was; I'll bring it into my *seder*. But it was part of the Haggadah which is the home liturgy on the first night, or the first two nights, of the Passover seder. And the second point, which is a very well known Passover song, is "Dayenu," which is a kind of well known thematic song that becomes normative. Even on the radio, if it's Passover time, you're likely to

hear that music. Much as there becomes iconic music for Christmas, “Dayenu” becomes the kind of iconic music for Passover. So you have here hints of his early music, that’s how I read this document. The first part being Mishkan Tefila on Friday night, and the second part being the music of the Passover Seder, both of which he would have experienced as a child. And I have a sense that what he is really saying is that this music that he heard growing up at Mishkan Tefila influences his attitude forever after. In 1964—by the way, also suggests very importantly whereas certain other composers didn’t have a rich tradition of Jewish music, their music that they learned was purely general music and didn’t know Jewish music, what is so amazing about Bernstein is he is heir to a tradition of fine Jewish music that he’s heard in the synagogue. You certainly would not have heard that in, had he gone to any other synagogue but Mishkan Tefila. And I suspect that his belief that Jewish tradition and fine music are compatible is in fact rooted in this childhood experience, because that’s what Mishkan Tefila believed. But it certainly would not have been the case had the family gone to Kehillath Israel or Temple Emanuel or any of the other congregations in Boston which didn’t have this very strong musical tradition that so inspired him, and although I don’t know the piece, Bernstein we are told in the history of Mishkan Tefila actually sponsored the publication of Braslavsky, this is the music director, Braslavsky’s “Unesane Tokef.” “Unetake Tokef” in Sephardic Hebrew, but he’s saying it in Ashkenazic Hebrew. “Unesane Tokef” is a central well known piece of music connected with the high holidays, one of the high points of the high holiday service is this stirring music to this prayer, the key point being who will live and who will die. You can imagine that this is easy to set to stirring music. This Braslavsky did, apparently it’s a very long piece. I’ve never heard it, I don’t know it, but it would be interesting to find it to see why Bernstein in the ‘60s when I guess he goes into his Jewish revival, I sort of wonder he’s spending so much time with African Americans, he sort of has his own sense of revival maybe, I don’t know, but anyway at that point he has his ethnic revival and sponsors that.

30:00

I point out, and then I’ll try and move quickly because I’ve naturally spoken too long, another thing connected with Mishkan Tefila: in 1932 all the books tell you, he attended his first symphony concert. That, too, is connected with Mishkan Tefila. That concert is

something that Mishkan Tefila has bought a bunch of tables at the concert, it was a benefit for the Zionist Trade Union movement known as the Histadrut, and the interesting thing is that the conductor at that concert is Arthur Fiedler. Arthur Fiedler—that's by the way where Bernstein heard Ravel's *Boléro* for the first time, and it made an enormous impact on him, and he also reports that even his father liked it, so it helped to suggest to his father that there was a such thing as music that could move people—in any case, what interested me is that Fiedler was the conductor because Fiedler was himself Jewish. His father had actually immigrated to Boston, so you have a Boston musical tradition involving Jews. Fiedler's father comes from Austria in 1885 to serve as the first violinist of the symphony, and Arthur is a prodigy. Arthur joins the symphony at the age of 21. He is the conductor of the Boston Pops from the age of 30, I think until he dies, and there is a bridge for him and so on. He is a very, even I remember him as a very important local figure. Every year Arthur Fiedler would put on these concerts. I don't know much about the relationship between Fiedler and Bernstein, but the fact that a Jew could hold such an important position in music must have had some influence. We forget it today but in the interwar years when you were thinking about a career, one of the questions you asked was, could a Jew possibly make it in this career? If your career in that period, I don't know, to be a bank president, it was hopeless if your name was Bernstein. If your career, you wanted to be, I don't know, a president of Harvard, it might be fine today, but it never would have happened in the interwar years. There were just plenty of doors closed to Jews, and the fact that Arthur Fiedler was known to be Jewish is very interesting. It's quite interesting when you look at Bernstein's early years how many Jews he associates with. It cannot be accident. Koussevitzky admittedly is a kind of a convert to Christianity, but you have to understand that in the Russian context, not the American. It was a formal conversion in order to be able to be part of the Russian musical establishment. He always associated with Jews. Copland, Blitzstein, he is part of a group of Jews who are making their way into music, and I'd love to know more about the Fiedler connection. Sam Bernstein, as I said, to come back to that story, he succeeds, he does what Jews in Boston do in those years when they succeed. The rule was, if you move up economically, you move out geographically. Very different from, say, from the Irish in Boston or the Italians in Boston, who tended to live with the family.

Jews proved that they were moving up by moving out, and that's really why they move out to Chestnut Hill, Bernstein is fifteen, in 1933. That is a move made with people at Mishkan Tefila. It is a reminder of, these folks are serious in that synagogue. The wealthy members of the synagogue are moving to Chestnut Hill; we'd better move to Chestnut Hill, and indeed they move next to a significant member of the synagogue whom they soon quarrel with, but that's neither here nor there. This is early in Newton's Jewish history; there are only about 1,400 Jews in Newton in 1930. You don't really have a Conservative synagogue in Newton until 1935—that's Temple Emanuel. I don't think the Bernsteins were associated. Most of the Jews who come to Brookline and Newton are going to come after WWII. That's when Mishkan Tefila itself moves to Newton, and notice it settles in Chestnut Hill because that's where its wealthier members had settled in the interwar years, so it follows them. And similarly Sam Bernstein follows the patterns of conspicuous consumption of these rising East European Jews by getting a summer home in Sharon.

35:00

That becomes a kind of watering hole for wealthy East European Jews who go to Sharon in the summer. It only has about 100 Jewish families at that time, not like Sharon today. Most of those families left after the summer. Just like New York Jews would go to the Catskills, certain kinds of Boston Jews would go to Sharon. It's only after the war that you begin to have a Jewish community. Sam Bernstein actually settles in Sharon. Leonard is by then in New York, but Burton writes about it very unhappily. He was miserable in Sharon because there weren't any Jews there. There were some very well documented—I think we talk about it in *Jews of Boston*—anti-Semitic incidents in Sharon as the Jewish community begins to rise. But today it is a community with a Jewish majority, one of very few communities, not even New York City has a Jewish majority, but Sharon does. Just a couple other points. They live in Newton, and isn't it curious, Leonard Bernstein commutes to Boston Latin School. It wouldn't have occurred to you to send your kids to commute to Boston Latin School, but the truth is Latin School was magic for Jews. It was – they saw it as a kind of gateway to success if you prized education. I still knew kids who commuted to Brookline when I was growing up in the '60s to Boston Latin School, and their parents paid. I'm not sure at that point it was a

better school than Brookline High School, but it had a sort of aura that you've gone to Boston Latin School, and it traditionally got quite a few of its students into Harvard, and Arthur Fiedler had gone to Latin School, and Teddy White, *The Making of the President*, and the great art historian and critic Bernard Berenson, also a Jew. Again, interesting how many cultural Jews being in Boston. Nat Hentoff, Robert Coles, these were the famous Jews at Latin School. And Teddy White writes, "It accepted students without discrimination, and it flunked them with equal lack of discrimination." But apparently Bernstein survived. He then comes to Harvard, which again is a kind of rite of initiation for Jews. If you got into Harvard, you were accepted as Jews into the priesthood of the elect. Remember that Harvard has a very strict anti-Jewish quota. It was much harder for Jews to get into Harvard. There's a new book called *The Chosen* about the quota system in these years. I think Harvard's is about 10%. Bernstein faces discrimination at Harvard. There are clubs that he can't be part of because his last name is Bernstein, but of course he makes very important connections here, notably with Copland, and gets great experience composing, conducting, performing. He graduates in 1939, takes off for New York, and that's where my piece of this story ends. So I'll stop there and open it up to questions. (**Professors:** Thank you so much).

Stephanie Samuels:

Despite being of Ukrainian descent, Bernstein's father Sam used the German pronunciation "Bern-stine" as opposed to "Bern-steen." And we were wondering, given the dynamics between Eastern European and German Jews which you've talked about, what do you make of this, and how common was it?

Sarna:

I make of it that he was a "wannabe," that is to say, he grew up not only East European, but after all on the wrong side of the East European tracks, that is to say looked down upon as Hasidic, not quite up to the intellectual rigor of Lithuanian. But his boss, the man, and we have some hints, that Burton has, that he truly looks up to the head of the company who has been something of a mentor to him, and he's German, and Bernstein wants to be German. This is quite common. You might want to take a look at an East

European film, it's one of the last of the talkies—I'd say one of the last of the silent films—called *His People*, and you'll see the same thing there of the son of the East European Jew, in that case he wants to be a lawyer, and he becomes connected with a German Jewish lawyer who helps him, and how he Germanizes. And there were many East European Jews who kind of Germanized. But it's complicated, because as he still seems to have loved certain elements of his background.

40:00

But the “Bern-stine” was a sense of wanting to be seen as part of the elite I think, and the name, significant. It is no less significant to my mind that Leonard Bernstein refuses to Anglicize that name. It is suggested to him that he should not be Bernstein, be Burns, like George Burns or something like that, who was I think also Bernstein. Not related. And he refuses. Many, many in this period accepted—almost all the great actors and actresses, so it's a real statement of his deep Jewish identity which shines through over and over again, and I believe that is why he becomes so associated with Israel. That's why he helps the new Brandeis University when it gets started. There's something about this sense that I've got to help Jews make it in America. And Abe Sachar, in his history of Brandeis, more or less an autobiography, hints that those were the arguments he used to persuade Bernstein to commute to Brandeis. It was kind of a professor's dream; he could come three days a month. But he wanted the name, and he wanted to show that we were going to train Jews at this highest level at this Jewish university. And it wasn't going to have a quota, and it wasn't going to mistreat Jews and keep them out of certain musical clubs the way Harvard did, and I think that's really what's important.

Kaskowitz:

You talked a bit about the changes to the neighborhoods where the Bernsteins lived. You talked a lot about Newton and Sharon. And I'm wondering if there's anything else we should know about the changes in Mattapan or Roxbury that were happening.

Sarna:

Well, what's interesting is, this is a period of very considerable tension in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, between Jews and their Catholic neighbors. Anybody, really when

we worked on the *Jews of Boston* project, I was astounded. I think without exception, everybody we interviewed, and every memoir we read talked about being chased, being beaten up. Read Nat Hentoff talking about it, or read Teddy White about how he took his life in his hands every time he went to the Boston Public Library. Remember that Father Coughlin, the anti-Semitic radio priest, is active in Boston in the '30s. By tradition at least—this is now being questioned by one person—but that Boston was the most pro-Coughlin of any American city. He gets the keys to the city, and the tension between Catholics and Jews is enormous. By moving out to Newton, Leonard Bernstein escaped most of that. And that memoir doesn't talk about this tension with neighboring Catholics. He escaped it first of all because Newton was not nearly as Catholic (Newton was waspy but not as Catholic), and second of all because you just didn't live on top of the Catholics the way you did – Jews tended to live between the parishes; there's a very interesting book by Gerald Gamm, essentially *Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed*, and part of what he shows you there is the geographic patterns, that Jews lived really between the parishes, and you can see how, where they needed to cross what happened to them. So that would be, if we were teaching Boston Jewish history in those years, that's the big theme. And that's what all of the folks who grew up there remembered. That is not apparently part of Bernstein's youth, and that makes him an exception. He's escaped all of those tensions by moving out.

Kaskowitz:

Another thing I was wondering about was any relationship between the Jewish community and the African American community in Boston, specifically because Bernstein talks about jazz and knowing jazz, not from the radio. (Sarna: That's really a good question). So I guess, we were just wondering if there are any other border communities we should know about.

Sarna:

That's really a good question. We have some material in *Jews of Boston*.

45:00

I mean, the answer is that you do have some African Americans beginning to move out, although you have it in Roxbury. Mattapan, that community is going to change after World War II. What's interesting in Boston about the relationship of blacks and Jews is, what's fascinating about it, is that they almost switch houses of worship, so that the oldest synagogue in Boston becomes an African American house of worship. But as Jews move into other areas they take over Black churches. The migration is very interesting, but it seems to me it's slightly earlier than this era. I can't really tell you, I think it would be a good thing to look at the extent to which he has interactions with African Americans. There is some work on African Americans at Boston Latin School, and it would be interesting to know whether any of his classmates are there from kind of the elite community. Much of the interaction that people remember is really as you have the black migration northward after World War I, of course they begin to move in, first to Roxbury, and then to Dorchester, and really Mattapan is a much uglier story, but it's a much later story. It's really a story of the '60s, and it has something to do, Hillel Levine and somebody wrote part of that story, it's disputed by Gann in *The Jews of Boston*, but everybody agrees that Mattapan, unlike the earlier communities, changed very, very quickly from white to black. And there was, uh... It was rather ugly. You had the block-busting tactics, and there's no question, uh, that there were people who, um, made it happen, that it changed so very quickly. In ten years, the community changes its character, and in the middle of the 1960s, the Jewish community actually helps to pull the last of the Jews out of Mattapan after several attacks on Jews, including, uh, the throwing of acid in the face of Rabbi Gerald Zelermyer, and that kind of symbolizes the end of Mattapan. A big Orthodox congregation closes up [inaudible], but I don't think Bernstein was involved in any of that. So, it's a long answer that says, more work that needs to be done on that interesting question.

Samuels:

You talked a lot about how the Boston Jewish community really grew much later than in other cities, and we were wondering how you think maybe the lower profile and smaller size of the community helped, uh, cultivate and redefine a sense of community, um, during the earlier part of the twentieth century?

Sarna:

Well, you did not have the fierce tensions between the Germans and East Europeans that characterized so many other Jewish communities, because the German community was so very small. The Polish community felt much closer to the East Europeans, because geographically, they all spoke Yiddish and all know each other, so some of those Polish Jews were bridge-builders. And it's not accident—some of you may know that, uh, this is the first community in America with a Jewish federation that brings everyone together, in 1895. The reason, in my view, you could have that Jewish federation was in fact, that they all got along because the German community was so small. Whereas in New York City, you don't really unify things until the 1960s, because the two sides, you know, didn't quite want to sit down together in quite the same way. So, in that sense, it is a tight-knit community. It may well also be that East European Jews could feel like elite members of the community, precisely because you did not have an entrenched, central European elite. I'm not saying you had nobody. Louis Brandeis *is* here, but it's very, very small. And it allowed for earlier immigrants who made good to really have power in the community. Whereas in Cincinnati, if you were part of the East European community, they never let you forget it, and you couldn't do anything about it. When I got to Cincinnati in 1979, it still reported in the Jewish newspaper, "So-and-so of an *old distinguished German Jewish family*, got married to So-and-so" [pause] without any descriptor.

50:00

The second so-and-so, you know, was the descendent of the East European riff-raff like me. And, you know, this certainly did not take place in the *Jewish Advocate*. I was shocked when I got to Cincinnati and saw that they still maintained those old, old traditions. And that's—Boston is different in that way.

Kaskowitz:

We know that Bernstein was an advocate for Israel, and we were just wondering if you could tell us about the roots of Zionist movements in Boston?

Sarna:

Good. Excellent. Um. Boston is one of the most Zionist cities in America, and the interesting thing about Boston is you do not have significant anti-Zionism. And we talk a bit about that—in fact, in *The Jews of Boston* there's an article on Zionism where we actually suggest that the well known flag of the state of Israel—that blue and white, Star of David—actually has its roots in Boston, Askowith family. But even if you don't buy that, there are reasons why it's so Zionist. First of all, the fact that Brandeis converts to Zionism and is so powerful in the Zionist movement on the eve of World War I legitimates Zionism. If the Supreme Court Justice, the great hero can—of Boston—can be a Zionist, surely anyone can. But there's much more to it. In my view, Boston was full of Irish nationalists, and that legitimated Zionism. They want to restore Ireland, Jews want to restore Palestine! They're pretty well the same arguments, they talk to one another, they interact. Uh, they're interested in restoring language; they're interested in restoring language. So, Boston—even if you look at the Reform congregations, which in many places were anti-Zionist, you will see Boston never had significant anti-Zionist rabbis. I'm not going to say everyone was pro-Zionist, but it's astonishing that the kinds of people who might have been strongly anti-Zionist elsewhere, in Boston were. So I don't know that Bran—that Bernstein was really exposed to a huge debate growing up. All sorts of people were pro-Zionist, and uh, it was perfectly public. You had important Zionist conventions in Boston. It was just *the movement* that Jews experienced, *and* – the Rabbi of Mishkan Tefila is a very significant—Rubinovitz [sp?] and later Kazis...I'm not sure how well Bernstein knew Kazis, but in any case, they are deeply involved in Zionism, and it's not accident, as I mentioned, that first concert that Bernstein does do is a benefit for the Zionist trade movement. That's not controversial, that's, you know, kind of what we're all doing: Just as the Irish are building Ireland, we're building Palestine. And so Boston is distinctive. It would be altogether different if he had grown up in Cincinnati. Different story completely, and it would have been a very different kind of statement in my view.

Kaskowitz:

One other... You just mentioned Bernstein's orchestra concert that he attended, and that was a Pops concert.

Sarna:

Right.

Kaskowitz:

One question was about whether the BSO was widely attended by middle-class Jews at this time, if you know, or whether Bernstein was sort of stepping outside...

Sarna:

I don't. You know, it's interesting to me, and that's why I mentioned Fiedler, because what Fiedler wants to do is really bring music to the larger community, and that's what he's remembered for, and that's why he is, you know, a bridge, and so on. And he was very popular for that. And I was struck by the fact that of course Bernstein in his own way also wants to bring music to a larger community. That has a lot to do with his television presence and so on. So he clearly is inspired by this idea that music is not simply for the elite—by the elite, for the elite, rarefied, and...and so forth. Um, but the extent to which...the only thing I would say is I was struck by the fact that there are Jews involved with the BSO very early.

55:00

Clearly, being Jewish didn't keep you out of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It may have kept you out of the Dedham Country Club—it did! It also would have kept you out of the Brookline Country Club and most country clubs, but it does not seem to have kept you out of the BSO. And...and, I don't know enough, you probably know more, I don't know enough about the different orchestras around the country to know which ones accepted Jews, which ones didn't, and why, but, the fact that—I know you had Jews in the orchestra from the nineteenth century.

Professor Carol Oja:

It's a fascinating question, and I don't know of anyone who has really studied it.

Emily Abrams:

Ayden knows.

Oja:

Other than -

Ayden Adler:

Well, I mean, I know that while the board of directors and the subscriber lists, there are no Jews on them until like the 1960s...

Sarna:

The board of directors of the symphony had no Jews until the '60s. Interesting.

Oja:

The BSO?

Adler:

The BSO board of directors. [inaudible] Jewish philanthropists involved with the symphony until later. And I also looked up subscriber lists, and I only see Jewish names appearing toward, as we get toward World War II, but still not a significant presence earlier than that. But in terms of people playing in the orchestra, that sort of the "help," was Jewish, for sure.

Sarna:

Interesting.

Adler:

And it was dominantly German musicians that made up the BSO when it was founded. And among those there were many Jews, including Arthur Fiedler's father.

Sarna:

Interesting. Yeah, Aaron Fried does a book on the Jews of Boston before ours. It doesn't have an index, and it's a kind of compendium of data, but interesting data. And if you go through near the end of the book, you'll find a little section on Jews in music in Boston. I didn't—except for Fiedler—I didn't know these names. It's not my field, some of you may know it, but it clearly is a Jewish musical tradition that he was aware of, but it's interesting... I know—I mean, this is more oral, I mean a sense that in the last decades where these institutions have opened up, so Jews face a kind... the Jewish philanthropies feel, oh, now, the museums and the orchestra that used to keep Jews out are now competing for that kind of money, whereas once upon a time, all of the local money went to the Jewish equivalent: Yes, we'll give to the Jewish hospital, we'll give to the Jewish university, because those other folks won't accept us. Is it different with the Pops?

Adler:

Well, I have a little database... my dissertation is on the Pops between 1930 and 1950, and I have a little database. And there are 30 concerts in that time period that are devoted to Jewish philanthropies.

Sarna:

Really?

Adler:

That are sponsored by temples and sisterhoods, Zionist groups, Jewish youth groups, and also the Menorah...

Sarna:

Right. Menorah was very popular. Menorah is cultural—I mean it starts at the university level—but this is... they have a very prominent intellectual journal, and the Menorah Society at Harvard is very significant. This was prior to Hillel. This was *the* group of intellectual Jews—more cultural I would say than religious. So that suggests that the Jews

gravitate toward the Pops, and that WASP Boston gravitates towards the symphony, is what you're suggesting.

Adler:

Well, I'm not actually suggesting that because I'm not sure who was in the audience at the symphony. Because it's only at the Pops that you have these special nights that are sponsored by the community, whereas that sort of set-up doesn't even occur. So I'm not sure that they weren't actually at the symphony, but I know for sure that they had some nights at the Pops.

Sarna:

That's very good. And interesting.

Samuels:

Also related to the tensions between cultural and religious Judaism, we were wondering—you talked a lot about Boston Latin and Harvard serving as gateways for Boston's Jews, and we were wondering if the students at these institutions tended to be more assimilated, or if they retained Jewish lifestyles?

Sarna:

You know, that...second generation clearly tended to break away. Uh, you have to go person by person. I mean, the generalization of course was that they moved away, and certainly if you were to go down that list I read to you, you know, Teddy White talks in his autobiography, you know, how he eventually breaks down and eats pork, I think in China when he's fed it by, uh, there.

1:00:00

And Nat Hentoff—all of that crowd retained strong Jewish identity but not a deeply religious identity. Uh. Clearly there are plenty of second generation Jews who are deeply part of religious life in Boston, and Mishkan Tefila is particularly eager to keep them in, as are the other Conservative synagogues. Uh, until recently this was a very significant Conservative Jewish community, by which I mean, that although you had prominent

Reform congregations, the majority of Boston Jews would identify as Conservative Jews, and many of the largest congregations were Conservative. Mishkan Tefila would have defined the left end of the Conservative movement, and Kehillath Israel would probably have defined the right end of the Conservative movement. And the difference would be that Kehillath Israel did not have a mixed choir and did not have instrumental music, and Mishkan Tefila did have a mixed choir and did have instrumental music. Conservative synagogues, however, all moved towards mixed seating between the wars. Kehillath Israel...Mishkan Tefila early, Kehillath Israel late. And one of the symbolic differences between Orthodox and Conservative will be that the Orthodox separate men and women in prayer, and the Conservatives will have family seating in prayer. You know, probably the Conservative would have made his wife, who converts at Mishkan Tefila—it would have been much easier to do conversion at Mishkan Tefila than had they gone to an Orthodox synagogue to have done that. So those would be some of the kinds of differences.

Samuels:

Also related to that, what was sort of the Jewish community in Boston in general's response to Harvard's quota system, and how did that fit into sort of the larger wave of anti-Semitism during that time?

Sarna:

Actually, of course Harvard is so very important symbolically to Boston Jews. I think that the quota actually hits very hard, the local Jewish community. Now, remember, there were still Jews who got in, although if you actually speak to many of them, they felt pretty isolated. Now some of them, unlike Bernstein who lives there, Boston Jews—some of them were simply commuters, and commuters never feel a part of a university community the way those who live on campus do. But it is perfectly clear that especially in those years Jews felt apart, and Jews felt the blow very strongly, uh, just as later, when Harvard has, you know a Jewish president, so the Jewish community feels pride, so the other side, you know, they feel the opposite. And it got a lot of attention. It was something, even—I knew Harry Wolfson, who was the Jewish professor, the Professor of

Jewish Studies at Harvard, really in all of this period—I don't know if Bernstein had any connection with Harry Wolfson, but he was kind of this symbolic Jew. He used to call himself "a non-observant Orthodox Jew," meaning he was Orthodox in his beliefs but not observant. Uh, Wolfson was one of the greatest minds, at one point called "the sage of Harvard," one of the greatest minds here. And you know, he had his own key to Widener Library—he was the first one there, the last one to leave. As you can imagine, he didn't have a family; they would never have put up with it. He used to keep his manuscripts in the refrigerator. Literally—it happened, when my father asked him, you know, "Is it true that you keep your manuscripts in the refrigerator?" to which Wolfson replies, "Vat else should I keep there?" [Laughter] He ate all of his meals at the faculty club. [Laughter] But, I mention all of this because Wolfson was a junior faculty member on the committee at that time, and you could tell even from the way he spoke about President Lowell—whose name he always intentionally pronounced: "President Lovell," he would call him, and I'm *sure* that was conscious—what it meant.

1:05:00

So it's not always easy, you have to pick up hints. But there is a very long chapter on this now, in this new book, *The Chosen*. It's about 700 pages, and I dipped in, but I have to say, it's more than I wanted to know at the moment on the subject. But for you, it may be worth looking at if you're interested, because he's done astonishing research on the quota system, and the whole sociology of the quota system at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. And that will give you a sense. But it set a certain view—you didn't want Harvard to be too Jewish, you looked at Jews in a certain way. You wanted to make sure that the Boston Anglo-Saxon gentry could still maintain their place. And you might want to take a look—still, a very good book on this is Barbara Solomon's *Ancestors and Immigrants*, where she talks about how the elite of Boston really turn around in the late nineteenth century. President Eliot and an earlier group of Boston elite really believed in the almost unlimited power of assimilating these immigrants. So you brought them in because you felt that it would be easy to turn them into, into Boston Brahmins—honorary Brahmins. But with the coming of mass immigration, both of Jews and of Italians, that turns completely. The high society of Boston closes its doors against Jews. You can see some of that already—which Bernstein would not remember—but, in the debate over the

nomination of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court, which is fiercely opposed by the Boston establishment. And there was thinly veiled anti-Semitism there, although there are certainly other issues at stake: they saw Brandeis as a radical. But it's interesting that Brandeis turns against them, some have argued, because at the end of the day he realized that he may have done better than all of them at Harvard, but he was still a Jew. And that tradition certainly is maintained. And I have to imagine that Bernstein never was able to forget that that's who he was. Uh, he didn't get into the Hasty Pudding—he couldn't have. And that's not unique to Harvard; he couldn't have gotten into Skull and Bones at Yale, either. And, uh, those kinds of hurts had an unconscious impact, although I don't remember ever seeing Bernstein talk about it. The closest I've come is this hint that that's why he wants to be at Brandeis, and goes to some considerable trouble to commute there when it's founded, and some of his friends are also involved—Irving Fine being the most important one there.

Shelemay:

Will you humor us and see if we can open this up to any other follow-up...

Sarna:

Yeah, they're great questions. Oh, I don't know, I might get up. Yeah, that's alright.

Shelemay:

Marc?

Marc Gidal:

Thanks so much for a great introduction. I wanted to return to the paper above. [This is Bernstein's notes re: a possible cantata on Jewish themes]. Maybe you mentioned this, and I just didn't take note of it, but it seems to me that you were indicating that the first half of the list were tunes he probably heard in synagogue, and were probably part of Braslavsky's modern and traditional mixture; whereas the second list were from Passover or Seder, therefore—this is the part I didn't know if you mentioned—therefore he probably heard them more at home.

Sarna:

Right.

Gidal:

And given that his father has this Hasidic background that might not be the same as the synagogue's musical background, you know, how much would you...how much weight would you put to speculating that his father is bringing in songs from his youth into the home Seder, versus this type of repertoire, or music that they're going to hear in the shul.

Sarna:

Right. I should point out: I think there are really three. There are the first two, the middle that I can't really identify—don't know what...I mean, I know what the book of Judith is, but I don't know what he had in mind, and I really—I tried to figure out what “proud humility,” which song he would have had in mind, and I couldn't quickly figure that out either. I only got it yesterday. And the last three Passover. I think that is—Song of Songs may or not be thinking of Passover, although it is connected in the liturgical year.

1:10:00

And the last two are Passover songs. Uh, I think that's very likely. I've got to imagine that “Dayenu”—that's the very last song there—there's really only one traditional...it's such a traditional piece of music, and I don't know its history, but it becomes iconic quite early, that that becomes known. The other probably was a tradition that his father brought in, and it's particularly interesting to me because it's a lost tradition. You know, I actually know something about some of these songs of Passover, and I don't think I've ever heard a piece of music connected with the...uh, there's a chant, but not a kind of music that you would want to put in your cantata for *Vay'hi b'chatsi halaila*, “And It Came to Pass at Midnight.” So I would love to know what tradition it was, and it would be kind of interesting thing to find out whether some of the Hasidic...a good thing to ask a Hasid who knows Hasidic music, whether there's some significant piece of Hasidic music for that. You know, that might suggest something.

Shelemay:

And hearing that, we might be able, then, to trace the specific Hasidic lineage of...

Sarna:

Right. That he's coming from. And where...right, the lineage, and what traditions of Hasidic music he was heir to.

Gidal:

Is it also possible that it's not so divided synagogue versus home? I mean, when you said that "Shalom Aleichem" is something that's sung in synagogue on Friday night, it occurred to me, if they were at home doing a Friday night service, they might also sing "Shalom Aleichem" at home.

Sarna:

Yes, absolutely right. It would be part of a home ritual. I sing it on Friday night as well. Absolutely could be. Although we don't—I don't remember an account of this deep Friday night home ritual, and indeed...you see, the very act of having a Friday night service implied that you were not sitting down to have a long Friday night dinner, because instead of having that, you had transferred religion, so to speak, from the home to the synagogue. My guess is that Sam Bernstein, like so many people in this era, worked six days, or perhaps five and a half days a week. Saturday morning was not a time he could have gone to worship. This was a big trauma for immigrant Jews, but the fact was most of them knew if you didn't come in on Saturday, they would tell you not to bother coming in on Monday, and therefore, uh, you wouldn't have gone much to services Saturday morning, but you would have gone on Friday night. And therefore you would not likely have had a long ritualized Friday night dinner, because you had transferred that to the synagogue, where you heard the spectacular music, where you probably heard a sermon, where you had a service, and where you would likely have had a Kiddush. You would have had some kind of post-service reception. All of which was really part—and we know very well, even in my day, Friday night service was very popular in Boston, especially in the winter months, more than in the summer months.

When it gets dark early, you would have these seven o'clock services, and they were ubiquitous. At a certain point in time, but not in the '20s, you begin adding the bat mitzvah to that Friday night service. Certainly it's common by the '50s. I just don't know when Mishkan Tefila begins the bat mitzvah. In my *American Judaism*—I didn't bring it—I have some data on the spread of the bat mitzvah, and one can get some possibility—I don't think it's critical to your findings, anyway.

Shelemay:

Drew?

Drew Massey:

Yeah, thanks for coming in. I had a question—talking about the mixed seating at Mishkan Tefila got me thinking about the role of women in the Jewish community in general, and particularly there's this sort of fraught relationship between Sam and Jennie Bernstein in their domestic life, and this is occurring against the background of what I assume to be a very domestically-centered community. So I was wondering if you could sort of trace out how the...women worked in the Jewish community in Boston...

1:15:00

Sarna:

It's a very, um, interesting question. First of all, you always have to remember that you can't generalize from the group to the individual, because the individual may be an exception. So I don't really know anything about, you know, the extent to which Jennie was interested in Mishkan Tefila, or religion, or what. As a rule, we know that in a European setting, women rarely went to the synagogue; it was really a place for men. In America, where religion was very much in women's domain, Jewish women early on—already in the Colonial period you hear many more Jewish women coming to synagogue, and that continues the tradition. And indeed, part of assimilating into America is that women, who once did not go to the synagogue, begin more and more to be part of the worship. So much so that today, in Reform settings, you very frequently find far more women than men, which is true, of course, in most churches as well, Protestant and Catholic alike. My friend here, who teaches American religion, wrote an essay in which

she argued that American religion *is* women's history, so important are women in religion, and that has a big impact on Judaism. Now, at Mishkan Tefila, you had a mixed choir, you had mixed seating, but certainly in the years Bernstein was there, men had many more opportunities than women. Men could lead the service; women could not. Men could be called to the Torah; women could not. It was a Conservative congregation, as I say, on the left end, but it's only after the war that you have the beginnings of the kind of egalitarian Conservative Judaism that we would know today. Many Conservative synagogues had significant sisterhoods. I do not know the extent to which Jennie—that's something one should probably find out.

Shelemay:

We have a book of the brotherhood, a historical book that we've got on reserve, that they gave us when we were there a few weeks ago. But I have not seen a sisterhood book; we will have to ask them about that.

Sarna:

Yeah, and very often you have lists, and it would be interesting to know whether she is involved in the sisterhood. One has somehow a sense that she's less involved. I mean, that was just...and I don't know why I got such a sense. I think from Burton's book.

Shelemay:

Yes, but I mean, Carol just made the point...

Oja:

Well, that we've dealt, in going to the synagogue now recently, we've dealt only with women, or largely with women.

Sarna:

Oh, right.

Oja:

That's one thought. Another is, in terms of "echoes of a life," this term of Kay's—we've heard there lots of stories about Bernstein, and one of them, from these women at Mishkan Tefila, is that Jennie was seen at services constantly.

Sarna:

OK. That's interesting.

Oja:

Now, they're talking about probably the '50s and '60s, so whether or not that was the case earlier...

Sarna:

Right. I mean, look, you have younger children, it's not so important, but that would be, in that case, it may...well, that would certainly be common, that you had significant women's presence, something that would not have been known earlier. And a Conservative synagogue, you know, would have welcomed that. You had, I can remember at Kehillath Israel, growing up, that you had families, you know, where you had old men and old women both coming together, and there were places where it was the men who came, the women were not interested, and vice versa. So you had all three possibilities, and it would be interesting to know...

Oja:

Well, yeah, also though, hearing memories of the Bernsteins, Sam is characterized, at least by the people I've talked to at the synagogue, as a leader. You don't hear that word in connection with Jennie. It's just that she's there.

Sarna:

No, you have a sense that she's not very happy to be, you know, schlepped out to Newton and brought into these various places. One has the sense she would have been quite happy to have stayed in the midst of the intense Jewish community of Dorchester – Roxbury – Mattapan much longer. And remember that it was not such a simple matter to

get from Newton to Mishkan Tefila. That was a considerable commute at that point, and that most surely have taken them away from that world.

1:20:00

Shelemay:

It may also reflect gendered patterns in driving and access to automobiles.

Sarna:

Sure.

Shelemay:

Can I ask a quick question? When you made the comment earlier, that—you said, had Bernstein grown up in Cincinnati, his story would have been completely different. Is there anywhere else in the states, any other American Jewish community that is comparable? I guess I'd like to know how exceptional the Boston Jewish community is during the period of Bernstein's life, roughly. And you're the guy who knows. There's no one else to ask.

Sarna:

Oh, that's dangerous. Uh. [Pause] Of the major communities, it seems to me that Boston is distinctive. I'm thinking of, uh, the major coastal communities, which, you know, each is distinctive in its own way, but Baltimore is entirely kind of tradition, New York certainly different, uh, Philadelphia, different with its long colonial past and—and significant German community. Um, Chicago is different in, you know, a different way, I mean, because of its very rapid growth it has a very significant German community in Chicago.

Shelemay:

Texas is all German all the time.

Sarna:

Right, I mean...Texas, exactly. The East European Jews are not going to get sig—and you're going to have a distinction there, as in much of the South, you have "Synagogue Jews" and "Temple Jews." And, in a place like Memphis, I'm not sure they've met each other yet! But, you know, you certainly had a different tradition. Uh, you know, one always gets a little nervous about these things, but it does *seem* to me that in that respect, Boston is, um, is somewhat...is in many ways, uh, distinctive. I do think, I would say, that in communities where Jews were present early—like San Francisco, like Cincinnati—yes, you did have Jews who were involved in high culture by virtue of the fact that they were there so early. Uh, but they tended not to be the children of East European Jews unless they had a certain patron, and then the story would have been, you know, how central European patron had helped this, uh, brilliant East European, uh, prodigy, to move up. And we don't have that kind of story here.

Oja:

I have a question I want to ask. It has to do with John F. Kennedy, Boston Jews and Bernstein. And in Leon Jick's chapter in your *Jews of Boston*, he talks about Kennedy as having been trusted by Boston Jews. And I find that really interesting because Bernstein was so close to Kennedy, so admired him. The *Kaddish Symphony* that we—I hope!—listened to for today, was dedicated...

Sarna:

Absolutely right.

Oja:

...was dedicated to Kennedy. And I just wondered if you wanted to riff on that a little bit.

Sarna:

Yeah. Um. Kennedy...it's very interesting, because of course Kennedy's father, coming out of the older Catholic tradition, doesn't have a lot to do with Jews, uh, has a rather bad record, uh, in terms of what we know, uh, in his views in World War II. And Kennedy the son long had Jewish friends and associates. Uh, there were very sig—the early Jews

in politics here, uh, were very close to Kennedy. If you read, there's a private unpublished autobiography, but there'll be a copy here by a judge named [pause]—I think it was a judge, named Weinstein. Louis Weinstein maybe? And he talks about this closeness with Kennedy, um, there. And there were others. Um, Kennedy grows up in Brookline, so he...by the time Kennedy's growing up in that area of Harvard Street in Brookline, there are significant Jews who he surely knew, and that must have been, must have made some impact. You know, if you go there now, to the Kennedy house in Brookline, it's a very Jewish area, but there already, that had Jews. And Kehillath Israel, you know, he saw all the time, marching up Harvard Street. And, um, his early political career is very significantly assisted here by, uh, Jews.

1:25:00

So much so that, uh, Kennedy knew how to make jokes. Uh, there's a story...um, told at—I'm not sure all the details, but when Kennedy was given a Torah, which in those days was the tradition. He was given the Torah, and I don't know, maybe he held it upside down or something, and the story is that one of the Jewish labor leaders said, "Mr. President, you're holding it wrong." And Kennedy says, "Oh, don't you know? I'm Reform!" [Laughter] And in order to make that joke, you had to know something about how the Jewish world, um, how the Jewish world worked. And, um, so he—it's not at all surprising to me that he was part of that group. But I think if you look you'll find that some of the Mishkan Tefila crowd is especially significant in funding, uh, Kennedy's campaigns. And he certainly had a lot of ties, so it's an interesting question, which I hadn't really thought of.

Shelemay:

One wonders if, uh, also Harvard could have been a connection.

Sarna:

Yeah. That's also right.

Shelemay:

Scott, and then Lily.

Scott Kominers:

You talked about the acceptance of Jews in the music profession, uh, both with their participation with the Pops and probably in the BSO, and also with Fiedler. Um, why do you think it was that music was such an acceptable profession for Jews?

Sarna:

Well, that's not...well, there are two questions. One is, why Jews are interested in music, and the second is why did they accept them within the world of music, which are very, very different. I mean, Jews had a musical tradition, I mean, uh, you know, later it's kind of obscured, but, uh, you had a klezmer tradition, you had an interest in music. As I remember, King David had some interest in music, so, [laughter] I mean, you can take this...it is really not correct to assume that there was no, uh, you know that it was a purely cerebral tradition with no interest, um, in music. And it is clear that there were...I mean, just look at Italy, de Rossi—it's clear that there were places where there was a strong internal Jewish musical tradition. The acceptance...I mean, you know, music had this sense that it is international, the international language, and so on. And maybe that's why it's accepted. Or it maybe in tradition...you would know much more about this than I would, whether there were traditions that in music, you know, it's just the quality of the music, and we pay no attention to who the composer is. And of course, notice that African Americans have a role in American music long before, uh, you have African Americans who are, you know, accepted in society. Uh, but you would want to ask someone who has worked in the sociology of music to get a better sense of how you drew lines between the elite and the non-elite, and especially the kinds of music. I have a sense; classical music is totally different than your ability to come up with other kinds of music. I'd even wondered whether the fact that Fiedler is with the Pops is a statement...that Jews...you know, that kind of music, but if you want to have CLASSICAL music, that's for the refined, uh, folks. But that's only a hypothesis that would really need to, uh, be looked at.

Shelemay:

And Lily did you have a question?

Lily Yeh: ...

Shelemay:

You need to speak louder so the microphone will pick it up.

Yeh:

So was Bernstein a very religious person by nature?

Sarna:

That's interesting. Uh, how do you define "very religious"? I mean, if you define "very religious" the way—I don't know, what's the name of your Lubavitch rabbi here, would define it, the answer is clearly no. Uh, he didn't worship three times a day, he didn't keep a kosher home, he certainly didn't keep the Sabbath. By the way, it's almost impossible in America to be deeply involved in music, where so many of the concerts are on the Sabbath, and Jewish law doesn't permit you to play music on the Sabbath. So, I mean, in that regard, certainly not. But, uh, you have a sense nevertheless of a spiritual person who is deeply in touch with Jewish heritage, who not only is in touch with it, but wants to make it part of American music.

1:30:00

He doesn't rename his music to efface its Jewish origin. We know exactly where it's coming from, and that's significant. Uh, you know, there are people who argue, a lot of American music has certain Jewish roots that are covered over, that Irving Berlin and others took music that they remembered and Americanized it, without giving it any credit. But here, you're dealing with somebody who was very, very open about what he's learned, and is—is deeply committed, I think, to Jews, Jewish peoplehood, Jewish identity. And remember, unlike today, they were living in a world where it was assumed that you didn't choose your Jewish identity; you *were* Jewish, just as some people are black and some people are Asian, you *are* Jewish. Harry Wolfson, whom I mentioned earlier, wrote as a young man, "Some people are born blind. Some people are born deaf.

Some people are born dumb. Some people are born Jewish.” [Pause – some laughter] I’m not sure, I mean that may tell you about, something about what Wolfson thought of his Judaism, that he put it in that context rather than, you know, “some people are born Asian,” [laughs] and so on. But nevertheless, it was seen as—as, as, I mean, the word that is an invented word, the word doesn’t come into existence until the thirties, of “peoplehood.” Earlier, Jews would have used the word “race,” uh, and certainly Bernstein deeply saw himself as part of that Jewish people with its heritage, and a heritage that he seems to have been proud of and wanted to, uh, bring forward. That’s at least my sense. Yeah.

Shelemay:

I think we should leave it there. That is just extraordinary. I think you have served as a bridge, getting us into the meat of the discussion of the class, and a bridge between the historian of Boston and the Jewish community, and someone who has grown up and lived in the community. So you talked about bridges, but I think you’ve done it. And I think on behalf of all of us, uh, we thank you *so* warmly, for not only sharing your knowledge, but you’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to deal with the literature and the subject matter that we’re working with in here. Jonathan, thank you.

Sarna:

It’s a pleasure.

[Applause]

(Interview ends at approximately 1:32:40).