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Blatt, Selma oral history interview

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Interview with Selma Blatt by Stuart O'Brien and Rob Chavira

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Blatt, Selma

Interviewer

O'Brien, Stuart
Chavira, Rob

Date

July 23, 1998

Place

Auburn, Maine

ID Number

MOH 035

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Biographical Note

Selma Shapiro was born on April 28, 1915 in Lewiston, Maine to Goldie and Jacob Shapiro. Her father was employed by a department store in New Auburn. She grew up in Auburn, and graduated from Edward Little High School of Auburn. Her mother thought very highly of education, and saved money to have Selma and her four siblings attend college. Selma followed in her eldest sister's footsteps, and went to Bates College. After graduation, she married Arthur Blatt and taught school in the Lewiston public schools.

Scope and Content Note

The interview covers such topics as Lewiston and Auburn in the Depression; Bates in the 1930s; "Townies" in the 1930s; Ed Muskie as a student; the Bates social scene; and fundraising for Ed Muskie.

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Transcript

RC: ... interviewing Selma Blatt, July 23, 1998. Would you start by just stating your full name and spelling it for us?

Selma Blatt: Selma Shapiro Blatt, S-E-L-M-A, S-H-A-P-I-R-O, B-L-A-T-T.

RC: And where and when were you born?

SB: I was born in Lewiston, Maine, I'm a native, one of the rare ones now at this stage, April 28, 1915.

RC: And did you grow up in Lewiston, or did you grow up ...?

SB: I grew up in Lewiston, I went to, in Auburn in fact, I went to Edward Little, I went to Bates College, and I taught school in Lewiston.

RC: And what were your parents' names?

SB: Goldie and Jacob Shapiro.

TOB: Were they also from Auburn originally?

SB: Well, originally they came over from Europe. My father was one of the first Jewish Maine settlers in the state of Maine. He was a merchant in New Auburn at a big department store, and we were five children and, as I say, fortunately my mother was, to her education was very, very important and she would save for each one of us to be sure that we all had a college education, and we did.

RC: Was there a large Jewish community in Auburn at the time?

SB: Well, I would say considering, yes, I think it's probably larger than it is now. That is active Jewish people. Because we were, well, we had to find a common link between the two of us and we practiced our faith and we all knew each other.

TOB: You know Irving Isaacson ...?

SB: Very well, I went to school with him, went all through school with him. Did you talk to him?

RC/TOB: We talked to Irving for quite awhile last month.

SB: Oh, he's the guy, I was going to say to you, there's a guy that really knew him, and of course, I was a townie. I came to school every day from my house, as I say, I walked and drove with friends, and I didn't have the kind of intimate relationship with the whole group there that everybody else had the advantage of.

TOB: Why did you decide to go to Bates?

SB: You really want to know? My sister, I have an older sister, Leah, who graduated from Bates, Phi Beta Kappa, 1925, the same year that, ...ah..Euterpe...ah.., he ran for President [Mike Dukakis], you don't remember the, his, she was a mother ...

TOB: Is this a Bates graduate?

SB: Yes, my sister Leah graduated from Bates in 1925, and she was a Phi Beta Kappa and in the picture... his name escapes me. He was a candidate for president from Massachusetts, he was a Democrat and they made, he didn't do very well.

RC: Is this recent, or ...?

SB: Ten, twelve years back.

TOB: Dukakis.

SB: Euterpe Dukakis [sic Mike Dukakis]. Thank you. Wonderful guy, and as I say his mother, thank you for remembering for me. As I say, I can't always remember everything, I'll try.

RC: Was it difficult at all being Jewish in a predominantly Catholic city, in a predominantly Protestant school, in Bates?

SB: I don't call it difficult. I had grown up in schools that were predominantly Christian and I knew how to get along, and I did. I didn't find any fault with it. It was, we went to chapel every single morning, you heard that. It was a, really a religious experience. I didn't mind it. They took your attendance so you had to be there. And I recall when I had to stay out of school because my mother insisted, for the Jewish holiday, they took three points off for each course for my, yeah, my report card. And of course I was used to being all A's or whatever, B's and so forth, from high school. You think you're a big wheel. But it does something to you and it's a little difficult to handle a thing like this when, you know? You know what I'm talking about. In high school I graduated valedictorian so that I thought things were easy. But you see, when you go to college from high school, maybe you had this experience, you find that everybody is top honors and they're much smarter than you are because they come from big cities where they have access to wonderful teachers and better education, let's say, because we're from a small town.

TOB: What kind of extra curricular activities did you do in high school?

SB: I did, oh everything. I was in all the music, I played piano and I sang in the choir groups, and I was a debater, and therefore I did come into contact with Ed Muskie in the debating room. But of course he went on to big things.

RC: In high school?

SB: No.

RC: In college.

SB: College, yes. I didn't see him in high school. But I did know Brooks Quimby, with the debating coach, and he used to come to our high school and he would be the judge, you know, for the various debates. So I knew him when I got there and that's why he kind of asked me to try out for debating. Well, I did it my freshman year and I found that it was too difficult commuting back and forth, because you needed the library all the time. And it was hard for me so I gave it up after my freshman year I believe. As much as I liked to do it, I didn't have the time.

TOB: What was Lewiston like during the Depression? Lewiston-Auburn area? Were the mills still going?

SB: Yes, the mills were going, the shoe factories were going. We learned to live on a much smaller scale. I would save my money. You know fifty cents was a lot of money in those days, and in fact I used to play piano for dancing classes at Bates College and, of course we all had to take gym in some form and dancing was part of it, they had, whatever it was that they taught us. And I was the pianist and I got thirty five cents an hour for playing piano at Bates College.

TOB: I think the area that was your gym, the women's gym, is now the Muskie Archives.

SB: I believe you're right. Oh, I loved gym. I used to play soccer and field hockey and basketball, you name it. It was forced on us and it was something we had to do and I enjoyed it very much.

TOB: Do you think Lewiston-Auburn was particularly hard hit by the Depression?

SB: I don't think so, not any more than anybody else. I don't know. At that time, I wasn't deprived of anything. I had a good time. I loved Bates.

RC: Now, most students when they go into college they tell you it's a big culture shock because they're leaving home, they're going away. You were somewhat right down the street.

SB: I was here.

RC: Did you feel more comfortable than you think a lot of incoming freshmen were?

SB: I did feel comfortable in that respect. I did envy the girls who lived on campus because they were cliquey, they knew what they had, and they were lovely girls and so forth. We had a town room, and all the girls from town met in this room for lunch or for studying or whatever you wanted to do. But I really didn't get to be best friends with the girls who lived in the dormitories.

RC: Were the dorms much more expensive to live there?

SB: I don't know.

RC: Or did you just live at home because it was close?

SB: Well, as I say, we were five children and there were three of us going at the same time, and my sister had gone to Bates, another sister, not the oldest one. My father, by the way, was married twice, and we were of the second marriage. So my sister who graduated in 1925 was way ahead of her time because my mother saw to it that she went to college. My oldest brother, there were two of them from the first marriage, and he went to school as an accountant, he learned accounting in a school in Washington. But my sister Leah really did very, very well. Taught school afterwards. My other sister, my older sister from, my real sister, not a half sister, Helen, went one year to Bates and didn't like the idea of being a townie at all, and she decided she was going away to college, so she was going to college, and I was in college at the same ...

TOB: Where did she transfer to?

SB: NYU, and graduated Phi Beta.

RC: Now, did your parents, did they bring, what were their political affiliations? Did they

bring you up Republican or Democrat?

SB: We were independent shall I say. I think my oldest brother tended to be a Democrat, although I think he also was very independent. We were mostly Democrats in our family I would say.

RC: Would you characterize Bates as being a Democrat liberal institution?

SB: No, no.

RC: It was very conservative?

SB: Very conservative.

TOB: Tell me about Bates, you can say whatever you want, a little color always helps. It's 1932, you're going to Bates, obviously the first time, you used to have a job there teaching piano, I mean playing piano for dance classes. What was it like to be an incoming first year student in 1932? What did the campus look like?

RC: How was it different than it is now?

SB: Oh, it was nowhere near as beautiful as it is today. Much smaller, the buildings today are spectacular by comparison. It was a typical, oh, not old fashioned, but it was a, contemporary for that time, very adequate. Do you still have Libby Forum? We had classes there, we had classes in Hathorne, and I'm trying to think, the science building, what do they call that?

TOB: Dana Chemistry?

SB: No, another one.

RC: Carnegie?

TOB: It must have had a different name for it, but I think it was, but it's called Dana Chemistry now. But it might, it's right next to Hathorne Hall?

SB: No, it was near the library, in that area.

TOB: Coram?

SB: Coram Library, but the ...

TOB: Hedge Hall, maybe?

TOB: Well, maybe it's not there any more. What was your major, by the way?

SB: History and government, that's how I happened to know Muskie so well. He was a

brilliant guy and a gentleman at all times. I could tell when he answered a question, he knew what he was talking about. He was very, very bright.

RC: And you had courses with him?

SB: Oh, yes. A lot of them. We had Professor Gould.

TOB: Pa Gould.

SB: Yeah, oh, I loved him.

RC: Were there other professors that influenced ...?

SB: I had Professor Hovey, Amos Hovey I believe his name was, and I majored with him as well. I think my thesis was with Dr. Hovey.

TOB: Tell us about what classes were like with Pa Gould, what Brooks Quimby was like.

SB: I don't remember having classes with Brooks Quimby. I knew him as a judge of debate and so forth, but I really didn't know him that well, he was a very kind gentleman. They all were. You don't find people like that today. I can truthfully say we were very fortunate to have the caliber teachers that we had then, really. I think we got a wonderful education.

TOB: People that seem to have come out of Bates in that time period, when Brooks Quimby and Pa Gould were there, seem to have gone on to an exceptional lot of great things. They've really been successful in those years.

SB: Well, I think they left us with some wonderful, wonderful principles, I really do. Somewhere along the line, I don't know where I learned it, but it seemed to come from maybe my college years.

TOB: What was Pa Gould's teaching style?

SB: Oh, he was humorous and he also at the time, I think he was on the school board in Lewiston, or on the council in Lewiston. He was a politician at the same time, and he used to kid around a lot and tell us that he was a Communist and of course we knew very well he was a Republican, but he was extremely interesting and he held your attention all the way through.

RC: How would you characterize what Muskie was like? Like, if you were to meet him, what would ...?

SB: Muskie, a tall stately Lincolnesque, you know? He was a very fine, shy, he was not as outgoing, but he, you knew he was an outstanding student at all times. I felt, anyway.

TOB: You said tall and Lincolnesque, did he stand out even in college?

SB: Yes, he did, he was an excellent debater, he was Delta Sigma Rho, and he graduated Phi Beta, you know very well he's outstanding. And I presume he was very well liked by his classmates and his roommates and so forth in the dormitory, I don't know too much about that.

RC: Did he have a social peer group that people always associated him with, like certain people he would ...?

SB: I wouldn't know, that I can't tell you.

RC: Were Irving and he close?

SB: Ask Irving.

TOB: Did you remain close with Irving during college?

SB: Irving's a very quiet guy, he doesn't socialize a great deal, and I'm quite an extrovert, as you can well see.

TOB: I guess let's go back, let's talk a little more about what your classes were like. Do you remember any of the names of your classes?

SB: I had Mrs. Mabee for my freshman English teacher, I'll never forget her.

TOB: Mrs. Mabee?

SB: M-A-B-E-E. In fact, her son, Carleton Mabee was in my class.

RC: What were your aspirations in college, what did you want to do after?

SB: Bates graduated teachers and preachers, and I was going to be a teacher. Did you ever hear that before?

TOB: No, no.

SB: Really? Yes, many of the fellows who graduated from Bates became preachers and most of the women, I don't say all of them, but many of them became teachers. I know my two sisters were teachers, and I was a teacher. We all taught school.

TOB: What kind of things did you participate in socially at Bates? I know you lived at home so you weren't (*unintelligible word*).

SB: I had a wonderful time my first three years because I had a boyfriend, not my husband but another fellow. And he was two years ahead of me and he was also very bright. In fact, I think he was the student assistant in history.

TOB: What was his name?

SB: You really want me to tell you his name, too.

TOB: Only if you want to.

SB: I don't know that that's for publication, but it doesn't matter. Robert Fitterman, and we were very friendly, we had a wonderful time, and when you have somebody to go to the dances with and socialize with, it makes a great difference. So my first two years at Bates were very happy ones.

RC: Now, speaking of Ruth Rowe Wilson and some other people who graduated in >36 and around that time, they speak really heavily of how segregated it was for men and women. Was it frowned upon to have a boyfriend back then? In college? Was it taboo at all?

SB: Not at all. What do you mean by boyfriend? We were, she had a boyfriend.

RC: Who are you speaking of?

SB: Ruth Rowe Wilson. She didn't ...

TOB: Well, she just, I think, the question, she just ...

SB: Most girls did only because you had somebody to go to the dances with and it made life more interesting.

TOB: I think that Ruth was talking a little bit more about, less about normal courting, things like that, as opposed to segregation in the dining halls and, between men and women, and the dorms and things of that nature.

SB: Oh, yes, they were. There were boys dorms and girls dorms, they were, oh yes.

TOB: And in physical education there was, they were separate, too.

SB: Oh, absolutely, oh, yes.

RC: And she was saying there were only a few times of the year that they got together to eat and to go to dances and so forth.

SB: Oh, was that so? I see. Well, you see, I was not part of that, you understand, because I lived at home, and maybe it was easier for me to have boyfriend who could come visit me at home and take me out or whatever it was. But, I don't recall ...

TOB: What were the dances like?

SB: They were wonderful. We all behaved very nicely. It was not the rowdy, loud music that you hear today. And we had, I think we had a wonderful time. I just find that it's much better

than things are today. Things are too, what's the word? It's too loud, too commercial, too boom-boom, whatever it is they listen to, and I think we were happier as a result.

RC: Really? More personable maybe, as opposed to today?

SB: Yes.

RC: Things are sort of disconnected.

TOB: Definitely, I can agree with you in the one sense of that, like, I'm always a little envious that I've never really become a really good swing dancer or ballroom dancer because you never have the opportunity. And when you do it, it's fun. It's real fun.

SB: Yeah, you want to know, today everybody is doing his own thing separately, you know? We went to dances with people and we danced and it was great fun, it was. I had, every Saturday night Bates College had a dance, so you knew that ...

RC: Just for Bates students?

TOB: Do you think Bates as an institution was insulated from the Depression?

SB: Now you're asking me something I don't really know.

RC: Were Bates students in general pretty wealthy?

SB: Yes, I think, not wealthy. Do you know how much we paid for tuition when I started? Two hundred and fifty dollars a year, not board and room, I'm talking just tuition.

RC: Was that more, not wealthy, but comparatively to other people in Lewiston and in this area?

SB: A lot of people couldn't afford that, you see.

TOB: Ed Muskie couldn't afford that.

SB: Apparently, well, he had a scholarship, didn't he?

RC: It ran out before his senior year, and the dean had to find extra money.

TOB: George Lane, the treasurer, sponsored him.

SB: I know him, yes, yes, George Lane, he was a banker in town.

RC: Were you ever involved with the office of price stabilization?

SB: I knew him when he was, when Ed Muskie was. And this is coincidental, it so happens, by

the way, this oldest brother of mine used to be interested in politics and he ran a fund raiser in his house for people to help Ed Muskie get elected, and I remember being there. I was married at the time and I took my husband, and I and the children used to take a cottage in Old Orchard Beach, and my next door neighbor, we were kind of a group of cottages, five cottages in a row. The next door neighbor was also with the OPS, was it, or OPA?

TOB: OPS.

SB: OPS. He was part of it, too, Milt Wheeler, and he used to bring Ed home with him, and as a group that lived together, we used to party, we used to have lobster feeds and just parties outside, picnics and so forth. So I got to see Ed as a politician.

RC: Was his character a lot different as a politician than as a student?

SB: No, but I think he loosened up, I really do. I think he was, I think that's where he got the idea of becoming, you know ...

TOB: Governor.

SB: Yes, a politician altogether.

TOB: Where?

SB: When he started with OPS and so forth and met people. He became quite, very popular and well known.

TOB: So, Milt Wheeler ...?

SB: He was from Portland, he was a lawyer, as was Ed. And they both worked at OPS and he would bring him home and we would party together.

TOB: Do you remember any specific instances?

SB: No, I really don't. I just know that he was, it was easier to talk to him and much friendlier.

TOB: Than he was in college.

SB: Oh, yes, oh yes, I got to know him, as I say, quite well, but I don't recall any particular episodes.

TOB: Today at Bates there's a, there's a few students that are everywhere. They're always in the newspaper, they're always in the daily announcement, their names are always on the radio. Was Ed Muskie one of those people who was always giving a speech, who was always being reported for some accomplishment, who was on every council or every committee?

SB: I think towards the end in his last years, junior and senior, he was quite well known and

did, well, of course he got to be known as a debater so everybody knew him then. And most bright upstanding scholars get to be well known in college and he, at that time anyway, I don't know what makes you outstanding now, could be other things.

TOB: Do you remember any of the people that Ed Muskie was close, particularly close with, or any of the other members of the men's debate team at that time? This is a shot in the dark, but anyone else that you might remember from your time at Bates that we might want to interview?

SB: You're talking about men?

TOB: Or women, either one.

SB: I'd have to look at the list, I really would. Well, did you talk to Don Gautier?

TOB: No.

SB: You didn't talk to Don Gautier? He's in Old Orchard right now because ...

TOB: How do you spell his last name?

SB: G-A-U-T-I-E-R. He's very active at Bates. He's in our class.

TOB: We'll have to put him on the list.

SB: Yeah, and David Whitehouse, but he's not around. These are boys that, let me give you the letter I just ... *(walks away from recorder)*.

(I don't know what happens here - interview resumes with new subject.)

SB: I know her very well. Nice, awfully nice gal.

TOB: We're going to interview her soon, too.

SB: You are? Oh, you're going to like her.

TOB: She was supposedly really good friends with Muskie *(unintelligible phrase)*.

SB: She was?

TOB: And they, because they had jobs near each other during the summer when Ed would work at the Kennebunk Inn or something like that.

SB: Oh, really? See, I didn't know, that was during college probably.

(Telephone interruption.)

SB: ... then, when he got out, ...

Arthur Blatt (husband): I was drafted, you know.

SB: He was in the Army for four years and in the interim I found myself pregnant. I had of course my first child, and so I had to come back home.

TOB: Was this Second World War or Korea?

SB: This is ...

AB: Second World War.

SB: ... nineteen forty-three?

TOB: So you met on a blind date, huh?

SB: I did. And we are married, would you like to know, fifty-nine years.

TOB: My grandparents are married fifty, sixty this year. Anyway, so ...

SB: See, here's Carleton Mabee, here's Edith Jordan, she was a good friend of mine, did you ever interview her? There's a lovely girl. You want this list?

TOB: Actually, oh, we can get it from the ...

SB: And June Griffith [**sic** Griffin], I knew her well, and there's Irving Isaacson. (Put the light on, Babe. No, the round one, the top one.)

TOB: So who do you think was your, most influential on you during your time at Bates?

SB: Professor you're talking?

TOB: Or professor or friend.

AB: Or dogcatcher.

SB: I can't seem to, I don't think I had too many close relationships with professors at that time. Maybe it was Dr. Hovey because he was my senior advisor and, for my thesis I believe. But, I think that's why I don't have that close relationship, I wasn't on campus. You get the point?

TOB: It seems like there was a definite split. How was the relationship between the two groups?

SB: Fine, when we were together it was great. But the campus girls stuck together, too, and

there were quite a lot of them. We were quite a group that went in that town room, had lunch together and so forth.

TOB: Where was the town room?

SB: Hathorne Hall, one of the, as you go in Hathorne Hall, you step, there's three steps down, the room on the right, that was our room.

TOB: I've taken Chinese classes in there.

SB: Oh, really?

RC: Going back to when you would have parties and Ed would come over and he was part OPS, one of the things I was instructed to do was that that's one of the things we know least about, in terms of his life and how he was when he was with OPS. Do you know anything about the organization itself?

SB: No, I don't. I can't tell you anything about that.

RC: Any anecdotes or just funny stories you remember of getting together?

SB: No, I don't. We did have a good time, that I'll tell you. I mean, he'd let his hair down, he ...

RC: He was very relaxed.

SB: Yes, that part I enjoyed, but I don't, that's a long time ago.

TOB: Did you support Ed Muskie in his gubernatorial campaign of '54?

SB: Yes, I did, I certainly did. As I say, my brother was quite active doing things like that, and he ran a party so that we could ...

TOB: Now, did you brother have a role? Was he ...?

SB: No, he was behind the scenes, always.

RC: When you were supporting Muskie, what was it that was appealing about him as a politician?

SB: Well, I knew him, and I knew he was an exceptional guy, and that he was smart. You don't get smart politicians. There are the few exceptions, I will say. I consider, regardless Clinton's personal life, I think he's a brilliant man. This man has a command of the language and how to handle people and affairs. I just think he does a super job, when he speaks he says something. And we haven't had too many of these brilliant presidents, believe me.

RC: Do you think Muskie would have made a good president?

SB: Absolutely. I think it's very sad what happened to him in New Hampshire, when he broke down, and he was harassed at the time. It was just ...

RC: What incident are you talking about?

AB: Well, they said something about his wife that was ...

SB: And he started to cry.

RC: Oh, I'll tell you an interesting story behind that.

RC: Oh, somebody did say something pretty ...

SB: Responsible for an awful lot of things today, as you well know. Yes, I was very disappointed because I, he made a wonderful governor and he's a smart guy. And I think the state of Maine in general has proved itself to be able to pick intelligent leaders, am I right? You take Mitchell, and Muskie, and Bill Cohen, and so far we've done very, very well. I'm not going to vouch for some of the others, but we've had some names that have been very, very good. You don't find that everywhere.

AB: You know, when your father and mother's a politician, you've really got something.

RC: What were some of the specific issues that Muskie was addressing that you felt made him such a good politician?

SB: I don't remember the issues at the time. Could you enlighten me and I will ...?

RC: Perhaps the environment, I know he was really, conservation.

SB: He was interested in conservation. Okay, I wasn't aware of that one.

TOB: How about this, what do you think Ed Muskie's major contributions were to the state of Maine? What do you think, this is just your opinion, you know, living in Maine.

RC: Being someone who supported him, having a vote like everyone else.

TOB: What do you say he gave to the state of Maine?

SB: I'm not sure what he gave, but I can say that as a brilliant man and speaker and a fine person, I think he gave the state of Maine a good name in the country. When you say, as goes Maine, so goes the nation, he, whatever he stood for was the right thing, at least I felt so, and that's why I voted for him. I think he was an honest, fine gentleman and very, very smart, and I give that my number one vote.

RC: The state of Maine, before Muskie came around, was a very, very Republican state. What do you think he did that all of a sudden just shattered that?

SB: Well, you've got an outstanding person. He himself came across as very low key, very ...

AB: Honest.

SB: Yes, honest, smart, kind.

AB: He was a man of the people, he wasn't way up there with the people down here.

SB: That's right.

TOB: Great, thank you very much.

End of Interview

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