

Interviewee: Judith Ferrara  
Interviewer: Jalyssa Reinoso and Simone Sawyer  
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Worcester Women's Oral History Project

**Abstract:** Judith Ferrara was born on December 31, 1942 in Buffalo, New York and now lives in Worcester, Massachusetts. Judith was a professor at Fitchburg State, and she describes not being able to immerse herself into the Worcester community until she left full-time teaching in 1997. Judith is very interested in the arts and became a member of the Worcester Art Museum. Currently, Judith teaches in the WISE program [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts. In the last eight years, Judith has been working on one of her greatest accomplishments, a study of the Worcester-born poet Stanley Kunitz. Now she is working on a book about the life of his mother, Yetta Kunitz Dine. In the interview, Judith allows us to have a glimpse of what the life of a woman is like and her greatest challenges. Judith reflects on her challenges in this statement: “Well, I’ll tell you one thing I know, and that is, in the day, [there was] silence. You did not speak up, and when you did, you had the one right answer... Girls didn’t talk out.” In this interview, Judith also recalls her experiences and greatest accomplishments as a working woman.

**SS:** All right, so to start, we just wanted to let you know that it is being recorded. What is your full name, including both married name and maiden name, if applicable?

**JF:** Okay. (There is a little story in that...) I’ll go forward with that. My name is Judith Marie Ferrara. Should I spell it? -- But you have it on the paper I gave you... Judith Marie Ferrara and my husband’s name is John Gaumond. And my maiden name was Schifferle, probably not on the paper I gave you, but S-C-H-I-F-F-E-R-L-E. Why do I have a different last name now? Because in 1989, I decided that I wanted to honor my maternal grandparents by taking their name. And it was one of the best things I ever did, because up to that point, lots of people thought that when you’re married, you had to adopt your husband’s name. I just wanted to be proud of the name that I was carrying because my grandparents paid for my private school – high school. As soon as I was able to work, they let me take over the tuition. So, the last part I paid for but – they gave me that opportunity. I’ve never forgotten, because Mount Saint Mary’s in Buffalo [Kenmore N.Y] was a wonderful school with wonderful nuns. They had a tremendous art program, but also good classes in the sciences, and so on. It had a strong business program, and my mother, knowing the situation with not having a lot of money, thought I should I take on a business major and become a secretary. We had fewer options back in the day. So, I said, “Okay, mother.” I listened to her. [SS and JS chuckles] But I ended up going to college anyway. I was able to go to a state school [Buffalo State], as you’ll see in my paperwork. I became a classroom teacher, with a minor in English, so I kind of already knew that my heart was going in that direction. When I did my Master’s, it was in secondary English. So, it became kind of a snowball thing, but I did abandon making art... As my artist statement tells, “...abandoned my practice of art.” When I went to college, my mother said, “Art teachers are the first ones they lay off” and you couldn’t take the chance. I listened to my mother, you see... And even though art was ... my whole reason for living, and I loved painting and doing everything with art, I knew that she was probably right.

I actually never let go of my intense love of art... So, every museum, art gallery no matter where ever I was for decades, I was there. And I would read books about artists, and really, that was my hobby, I suppose you'd say... [SS and JS chuckles] But that word sometimes diminishes something. [JF took a deep breath in] – So, anyway, but then, when I left full-time teaching at Fitchburg State in '98... '97 rather, I said "Well, I'll start back to practicing art" and that was 20 years ago [JF chuckles]. I'm still painting. I built my own studio. Took my last dime and built it on the back of the house, and so now I have a place to go. I'm a studio painter, not an [outdoor] landscape painter. I've tried it, but it isn't for me. So, I have a studio, and I also have a home office where I do all my writing. The whole house is filled with books and more books and paintings. And I have a very privileged life at this point. At my age, I can say that it's tremendous, and I don't want to stop working...because there's that definition of what makes you happy. Work has always made me happy, if I can choose the work, and right now for the last twenty years, I've been doing exactly that. **ALTHOUGH I DO LOVE TEACHING!** [All chuckle] I really did. I did it until I didn't love it anymore, and I was able to leave it and then kind of switch into this other double career – triple career really, because of poetry and then writing research, and then visual arts – it's real, it's beautiful, it's interrelated, it's organic. Is that too long an answer?

**SS:** No, that's fine.

**JR:** Just make sure it's still running. [Voice memo recording interruption]

**SS:** Oh, okay.

**JF:** Is it doing it?

**SS:** Yep. [All chuckle.]

**SS:** So, now, I know that you mentioned, that you lived in New York. Were you born there?

**JF:** Buffalo, New York.

**SS:** Okay. You already spoke about your marriage. Do you have any children?

**JF:** Nope. -- I have stepchildren and – I don't have children, no.

**SS:** Okay. What culture or ethnicities do you identify with?

**JF:** Sicilian and German. My father was German. Schifferle is a Swiss-German name. So those are the two cultures, but definitely heavier on the Sicilian side because – because of the situation when I was younger. My parents didn't stay together, and it wasn't a happy situation. And, ... TMI [too much information], but basically as a family, it was the children and my mother, who kind of solidified us ... That's my story. [All chuckle.]

**SS:** Do you want to tell us any more information on your parents?

**JF:** Hmm. ... My father was a carpenter and a veteran of World War II. It did a number on them. And, uh, he just was damaged by a lot of things. People in that generation - mother and father - lived through the Depression. My mother - it's interesting thinking about her right now with what happened last [year]. My mother had to quit high school in her senior year because my grandfather and my uncle - my other uncle was not old enough - could not find work because of the Depression, so she could and worked in a factory. She was a seamstress and made dresses. She learned how to work a very complicated sewing machine. The factory turned out - I think - thirty thousand dresses a week. ... she learned how to do a lot of things. [All chuckle.] I wrote a poem about it actually, and in fact, the reason why I'm kind of smiling about this is because of the exhibit I had at Assumption. They were all paired paintings with poems. One inspired the other. There's a collage that was about my mother, and it's made with dress patterns and a picture of my mother. You know, it's very emotional and a poem had to go with that. So that exhibit was here in this library, in fact. December 14, 2016 was my mother's birthday. She would have been one hundred. She loved coming to the chapel here when she visited. So, I gave a donation to the chapel here in her honor. So, Assumption means a lot. I'm a neighbor and all that, and I'm teaching in the WISE program [Worcester Institute for Senior Education] and I'm connected in a lot of ways here, but this interview is a very special thing... I get to honor my mother, Josephine Ferrara (and then Schifferle, because she married my father). So, that's what I think I want to say about my mother. [All chuckle.] My hero.

**SS:** Now, did you live in Buffalo, New York your whole life?

**JF:** No, I lived there until I was about... I believe I taught one year there. So, I was 23 when I moved to New England. So, it was good for me to [leave] the place where I grew up... A friend who came from Concord, Massachusetts - her relatives were still here ... kind of made it so I would get a job interview, and so I ended up - it's who you know - teaching in Concord, Massachusetts for a few years [and it] was great.

**SS:** That's pretty cool. Do other family members live in New England area?

**JF:** No. I'm the only one out of the five children.

**SS:** Now, since you've been in Worcester, which challenges do you think the city still faces?

**JF:** A-hah! Hmm. I [have] lived here since 1973. I think that it's meeting more challenges right now than it's failing. The biotech industry and UMass Medical [University of Massachusetts Medical Hospital] are all major employers. The real struggle was prior to this. The challenge has always been housing - affordable housing, which doesn't exist for people, and that is very tough. I'd say that's ... about it. And, of course, they're tearing up the street right now, so that's a big challenge. [All chuckle.] Infrastructure. All right, Worcester is pothole city.

**SS and JR:** Yeah, that's true.

**JF:** It is something that I think the city could do more about. I think they are trying, but I think it's all in the federal funding, and I understand the problem. But, it's still a major problem. The roads and our potholes are very embarrassing.

**SS and JR:** Yeah.

**JF:** I think that's the best word I can use. [SS and JR laugh.] We have embarrassing roads, and it's just too bad. Yeah, but I must say another plus is how the art scene is really becoming...

**SS and JR:** Yeah, [chuckles] like Elm Park.

**JF:** Did you see the sculptures?

**SS:** No. [SS chuckles here.]

**JF:** This is the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> year, maybe more years that they're doing that. It's just spectacular.

**JR:** Every year, it's something new. It's awesome.

**JF:** I know, I know. And then [there are] the murals - if you haven't driven around to see them, the murals are all over! They should provide a map, so we can go online and find that out. I know they're spectacular. For two years, this effort [POW WOW Worcester] finds muralists who put in proposals. It's breathtaking, just breathtaking. Yep, so it's gotten to be really good going for art, I should say. Worcester is coming around. [All chuckle here.]

**SS:** Do you want to go in more detail about the changes in Worcester over time?

**JF:** Over time - actually, from my point of view, I was working in Fitchburg and my husband was at Fitchburg State, too. So, I didn't really get to know Worcester, until I left full-time teaching. And he had just retired. Therefore, I really wasn't really a Worcesterite [someone from Worcester] and didn't feel any real connection to it, except that we lived in this neighborhood. We would leave at 6:30 in the morning and get home late at night. And so, I really didn't know a lot about the city. I knew about the art museum, but we weren't members then - we both loved coming to the colleges for poetry readings, when they had poets come and have readings. We loved to follow poets around - that was our big thing. So, the big change was that I woke up to the fact that there was a Worcester in the late '90s. Because I had no reason - no time, I'm sorry - no time in the summer [either]. I was usually studying, or we were working on the house. We had a little cottage and we did everything ourselves just about, with gardens and that sort of thing. So, we lived in this tiny little cottage on this land. My husband is a great gardener, and he has made this immensely beautiful garden. In the late '90s, we started going out more and joined the Worcester County Poetry Association. That's a big one. And we joined the Worcester Art Museum, where I took classes, so I really became a member of the community more -- more in the late '90s. The decades prior to that to '73, we drove in and out. Period. And I think that, you know that's just how it was. You've got to work. [Everyone chuckles.]

**SS:** What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been generally?

**JF:** Generally speaking, -- see, I'm really not that familiar...I don't like to speak about something that I'm not really familiar with. I think overall you see a lot of businesses that were

run by men now having more women in executive positions. Certainly, in the judicial system. I know a few women who are working in that area. It used to be dominated by men, and that was kind of assumed and expected. But I think a lot has happened in that regard. There are more choices for women, and that is reflected in this city, as well as I think nationally. It's not pay-wise – it's still, let me tell you... in big trouble. My retirement as compared to my husband's retirement (and this is college teaching) - I came in at a lower salary, and he came in... 'cause he's a guy, higher. That all reflects in your retirement later. And so, he has a good pension, and I kind of do not, so I keep working. But I'm so excited by all these art-connected things I'm doing that I'm not really serious about making a lot of money. I hope this lasts for a long time [Everyone chuckles.] 'cause who's going to give 75-year-old a job? I don't know - this is something you all face in the long run... You don't often want to look at the big picture because a lot of things happen when you're older that aren't fun to think about. It's where I am and what am I doing now that might affect my standard of living and the quality of life later on. And I think the choices we make are very important. I didn't make the most economically smart choices, but I'm a happy person.

**JR:** At the end of the day, that's what matters. [Everyone chuckles.]

**JF:** Now, I think so, but some people say, "Well, no, no, if something happens to your husband and if you lose your house," and all that, but you know, I will do what I have to do.

**SS:** Yeah.

**JF:** I'm not saying live in the moment, but I think I'm where I want to be now, and doing what I love, and I'm passionate about it. And how many people can say that? How many people are even passionate about something?

**SS:** That's very true.

**JF:** And you know what—but I can't lecture on that, because everyone is their own person. Our lives are complicated in all different ways. Some women get very bound up in family things – not that I'm not, because I am. But it comes to what dominates: there are more needs in some areas, and sometimes you are able to balance the weight. "I want to do this [project]. I want to do that project." And that's going to need quite a focus. You have to make smarter choices. And people – I have to say this about people as an artist and a writer, you have to—I have to accept the fact that I am a very selfish person. And I am very self-centered, because I know when I'm on a project, I will finish it, and it will take a while. My husband is very understanding, because he knows that I disappear in some ways. I may be in the house, but I am just intellectually and emotionally all bound up in something – and he gives me the space to do that. So, that's the best kind of relationship as far as I can see—is that we give each other the space to do things that we are passionate about. But we can do that, you know... I say it's a privilege, and I mean that. If your circumstances, like mine, are going to allow that, then you are one lucky person. So, I appreciate it.

**SS:** So now, we are going to get into the education portion of the interview. So, the first question is, I know that you mentioned Buffalo State. Where did you attend school?

**JF:** Well, I went to Buffalo State for undergraduate. Mount Saint Mary's for high school, various grammar schools – we called them grammar schools back in those days. [JS and SS chuckle here.] I'm going backwards but, Buffalo State – then I came to New England after undergraduate, and I went to Boston University for CAGS [Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study] – that's like a Master's... but just before that, I was at Fitchburg State for my Master's [Secondary English], and then they hired me to work in the campus school. I love learning, I love teaching, ... I love writing. In the 70's, [there was] something called the writing process—the reading-writing process movement in education. Students wrote about what they knew, and they had the freedom to pick their own books. This had to do with students being involved in their own education. That really appealed to me, because I think that is the way children learn – learning, [not just being taught] to take a test. But let people [students] follow their own projects. It's very project-oriented. Anyway, at U.N.H. [University of New Hampshire], the best of the best people who originated that particular philosophy were there. I would go summers and I would take classes, and I fell in love with the whole concept – well, it's the idea of being immersed in the whole philosophy, and you practice it—and so, I thought, “Well, if they do a Ph.D. [program]—I'm doing it.” I didn't think they would accept a 48-year-old, because that's pretty old. They don't usually do that, but they did, which was really neat. I spent four years at U.N.H., driving back and forth, frequently staying with friends, that sort of thing. After four years, which I think it ends up being 1992—no, 1994 when I got my Ph.D. From that, I moved back into college teaching. That brings me to '97 when I left full-time teaching. So those are my schools. [All chuckle.] That's a good variety.

**SS:** Now, it's Jalyssa's turn to ask you a few questions.

**JR:** What were some challenges you faced in education?

**JF:** Hmm... Challenges... Well, I'll tell you one thing I know and that is in the day, [there was] silence. You did not speak up, and when you did, you had the one right answer. I think in general, you were polite, good – and I think this is gender-related. Girls didn't talk out. If you were going to be a good student, you follow a set of behavioral rules. I found that it was like that. What I gave up—being able to question, and what that does at an early age when you should be learning how to be questioning and curious and critical—you are silenced. I would say over my whole life, I've had the struggle to open my mouth. And even today, if there's an intimidating lecture and I'm really excited by it, and I know I have questions, I'm so afraid someone will think I'm stupid. So, that had to be the worst thing for me intellectually, with how long it took me to wake up to the fact that I could question something, that I could examine something, and also just take a chance. Being a risk taker wasn't rewarded, and I'm not so sure that it is now. I don't know. I think it depends on the type of school you go to, but I know that I missed out. But I'm making up for it now [all chuckle] in this important way. I have my WISE class today. [They are] studying the work of Stanley Kunitz, the Worcester-born poet. We met in his boyhood home. My students have said to me in class (and these are all senior people), “This is a class I come to, and I'm not afraid to say what I think. Nobody is going to stare at me askance.” That is the best compliment that I could ever [receive]. The atmosphere of trust just has to be deliberately constructed so that people feel safe. I've always worked on that very hard, because I know the price I paid for not having it. [All chuckle.]

**JR:** I know that you spoke about it earlier; but upon finishing your formal education, what did you see as your options?

**JF:** Well, because I was 52 when I finished my formal education, [my option and choice was] college teaching. But also, having time to write and publish and choose my own areas of interest. My options were pretty good, and my education paid off [by having] connections with people who were at U.N.H., for example. Just knowing where to send work and that sort of thing.

**JR:** You kind of just said that, but what support network and mentoring have been important to you?

**JF:** What was the first part?

**JR:** What support network and mentoring have been important to you?

**JF:** Well, that would be first - my mother. My mother knew that I could do no wrong [JF chuckled]. Well, she didn't know everything, but—that's what she thought. Whatever I decided (not becoming an art teacher), you know she was very much present in my decision-making. But the idea was that I felt supported, as long as I could find a job and pay for it – my education... because she wasn't able to step into that part... she would be behind it, and she was. She was so proud of me --- and there is a mentoring in that, that she allowed me to make the choices. In the day, there weren't a lot of choices: you could be a secretary, you could be a nurse, you could be a teacher—and that's pretty much the way it worked. Education was big in my mother's family. My Sicilian immigrant grandfather (and it was very unusual to say this to a girl) from the time I was little, he'd say, "You got to get you education." [All chuckle here.] That was ingrained in my head. As it was important for me. Not that I was a boy – there were grandsons - but that he was saying it to me. There was something that I knew intuitively was different about that. I think there is mentoring that starts from when you're real little. – [JR comments here.] In the artistic [area], I had so much encouragement from my art teachers, and I took a little bit of art in college as well. I kind of made that my elective, and so I [learned and] improved because people gave me good feedback on my work. Certainly, at Fitchburg State, I had some [great] professors. When [I did] a writing project for class in the Master's program, they encouraged me to send it out. "Get this shaped up and get it into a journal." It was just that somebody would think my writing was good enough – that's mentoring to me...telling you that you can do it – you know, there is more rejection than acceptance. [JF chuckles here.] You have to get ready for that - you send out many things, and you might get one rejected... I mean accepted. So, just keep doing it and [believe] that you're able to do it. So, yeah, Fitchburg State, definitely from my English professors, [they] really helped me there. And then my husband... There is nothing that I have in my mind to do that he – I literally could do anything, and he would support me. So, so many good mentors for me. I think that's why I'm in a good place. I can just devise a project, and go for it, and do it. Sometimes, it just gets stored somewhere [until] I know I'm finished with it, and I'm proud of it, or I might go back to it and revise it. I'm talking about a painting, or a poem, or an essay, but it's this idea. I love coming up with an idea and seeing if there's anything that I can do about it. It's a good life. It really is.

**JR:** So, was your first job teaching?

**JF:** My first job that I made money?

**JR:** Mhm.

**JF:** I was the neighborhood babysitter. And you say, “Oh, well, big deal.” [All chuckle here.] But I learned how to manage money. And then I worked in retail, when I was fifteen or sixteen years old. I went a little bit early into the workforce. I worked retail at a really nice ladies’ clothing store – in Buffalo, which gave me discounts. I could buy really nice things, even though I wore uniforms [at school], it didn’t matter. All the other times, I could really wear nice clothing. I worked in retail, and it got me through college...So, that’s workwise. Then there was classroom teaching. What I’m doing now, for the last eight years of my research, is working, but it’s volunteer. I haven’t been seeking [many] grants... but I don’t know where this book proposal...now is going, but there may be something involved there. That has to do with money and royalties. Once in a while, I would get royalties from books that I have written, but if you are thinking about being a writer, that does not last long, and it is not very much. [All chuckle.] You will look at the check and say, “Really? How long did I wait for this? This comes down to three cents an hour for the amount of time I spent.” So, you don’t do it for [money]. You do it to have the book finished. Does that answer that question?

**JR:** Yep.

**SS:** Mhm

**JF:** I talk fast, so you are going to get it? [All chuckle]

**JR:** So, I am asking what you do now, and you already went into that. How did this work come to you? You can talk about your publication if you want or...

**JF:** The project?

**JR:** Yeah.

**JF:** All right. I am working on my art series. I am doing a series of ink pieces now, which keeps me working a different part of my brain. So, I am happy I am doing these ink pieces, because when I do too much text... I start to become a little crazy. I have to balance what I am doing, and so, I go to the gym. You’re a whole person. You have to figure that out. But anyway, what happened was [this]. About eight years ago, I became a volunteer at this... event (Can we talk about it now?)

**SS & JR:** Yes.

**JF:** The Stanley Kunitz Boyhood Home, which is at 4 Woodford Street in Worcester, is one of the four places that he lived [here]. He was born in Worcester in 1905, and he left in the late 20s.

Three out of four of those places are empty lots now on the east side. Do you know where Providence Street is?

**JR:** Mm.

**JF:** ...that's where his house is. Anyway, this couple [Gregory and Carol Stockmal] bought the house and started restoring it. Then they met him and became very good friends. The Worcester County Poetry Association had asked my husband and me to volunteer to room sit when they would have house tours. You walk into this place, and it just has vibes. [SS and JR chuckle.] I started thinking, "Wow, this is really interesting!" Then the husband of that couple passed away. He was the one who had been doing house tours, so his widow asked me to develop a docent program that didn't exactly mirror the Greg Stockmal tours. He would tell a personal story, but I had never heard it, because I was room sitting upstairs. I never had the pleasure of hearing him give a house tour. [Carol Stockmal asked me to] train docents to give house tours, so that [visitors to Worcester] would know the literary heritage that was available here. I said, "Yes" and this is the docent outline. [JF shows document.] It is a reference guide, and it grew from 36 pages to 200 pages of information about the house, Stanley Kunitz's poetry, and his parents' life. This ended up in Princeton University's Archives and Special Collections because Stanley Kunitz gave, no, he did not give, he sold his papers to them. Princeton has 115 linear feet of his papers. I went there to do some research, and then I [finished] this [Reference Guide], and they accepted it into the papers. I feel very, very, very, very proud. So, this is not published in the normal way that you think about, in a book, but it is available for researchers. It will be there 200 hundred years from now, and that's the real joy - knowing something that I spent the time [to write] and used to train docents who give house tours... [is there]. This was just great, but what happened was, I also... I'll show this, too, at one point... do we have enough time for me to just give highlights?

**SS:** Yeah.

**JF:** This book is one of Stanley Kunitz's books - it's called *Next-to-Last Things*. You can see that I have to keep it in this bag because it is falling apart. I remembered reading "My Mother's Story," a six-page excerpt, well, actually, a condensed version, of his mother's memoir. So last fall, this is how it all started... I taught a class here in WISE, and it had to do with looking at Kunitz poems that dealt with Worcester and his family, but most especially, [we looked] at his mother in his poems. His mother comes across as a very cold, cold person. A line from a poem is "My mother's breast was thorny" --- and that will give you an idea of the ways he represented, for art's sake, his mother. People in the class were up-in-arms --- "What! How could she be so awful?" And the most "awful" thing she did was, when she was seven months pregnant [with Stanley], her husband [Solomon] committed suicide in Elm Park, and she would never let the subject be talked about. So, he grew up not knowing what had happened - his sisters gave him little bits. You know that imagination sometimes can be really tough, because you are going to make up things that are even worse than they really were. When you can't know, how much worse can that get? Anyway, he really was unhappy with the way it was, and the silence [surrounding] the black-hole of a subject. So, he wrote about it in his poems. And so, we read his poems last fall, and people were up-in-arms, and I'm thinking, "Well, you know, there has to be another side to this story." I remembered [reading] "My Mother's Story," a chapter in *Next-to-*

*Last Things*, so I contacted Kunitz's daughter [Gretchen] out in California and asked her if she knew where the entire memoir was and had anyone transcribed it? If not, I'd like to try it, and she emailed me back and said, "Nobody's done it - it's up in my attic, and I would be so glad if you would." I got this package in the mail - yellowed, brown - unbelievably brittle - every page. I had to be very careful, or the edges would crumble. Anyway, I started transcribing this memoir. There were also some...really important letters in the package. [I figured out that the memoir] was written in 1946. That is not what he said in his book. He really does a thing with dates - it's just - WHAT? [JR & SS chuckle.] There was also a notebook, which Gretchen...found up in her attic because I told her that there's a mention of a notebook. And so, she went back into the attic --- she found the notebook, and I transcribed it...all this past winter. Long story short, I asked her if I could develop a book proposal in Yetta's name with Yetta's chapters. [She wrote about] being born in Lithuania, then coming to Manhattan's Lower East side in 1890. There's a big gap when she moves to Worcester, and then there's the [1951] notebook [written while she was in a] rest home. She died in 1952. The proposal says I will do only light editing, because she was a terrible speller and didn't use punctuation too well. But she was a wonderful writer, a great storyteller (the apple does not fall too far from the tree 'cause Kunitz's writes vivid poems). And I will write the chapters filling in the gaps. As of right now, September 26, 2017, his daughter, Gretchen and I are waiting to hear from either an agent or a publisher. The proposal is out there, so this is a work-in-progress. [JF shows a two-volume copy of the memoir transcription.] I was able to store everything in archival materials, so that they will be preserved. This is all Gretchen's property. She gave me permission to talk with you about it. She will either gift or sell [the collection] to add to her father's papers. Everything will be together forever, and [available] for researchers. As long as there is an archive at Princeton University, it will be there. Just to show you - I'm not going to go through every single thing - but this is the whole thing ---it's handwritten in pencil. She wrote margin to margin - there are some pages that are...like this [she was flipping through the book]. There are some words that would crumble off the edges. I went through the whole thing. That's what you do in a transcription - Can you imagine that?

**JR:** That's a lot.

**SS:** She wrote in cursive?

**JF:** I know. She wrote in cursive. [JR and SS chuckle here.] The paper conservator at the American Antiquarian Society looked at it. She's from Germany and said immediately, "Oh, a European writer." Letters are very pronounced, as far as the shapes. I had to try and decode it when transcribing [the pages]. And so, the [correspondence], the memoir, and the notebook, are all transcribed [and photocopied] in these two volumes. And when I did it, I decided to do an unamended transcript, which means every standard error, every punctuation error, or what are called [standard usage] lapses had to be [left in]. So, I had to turn off my spell-check. For clarity, I would put in brackets to get to the end of what I thought was a sentence. She did this in English. She lived in America from 1890 until...she died in 1952 - but it was still her second language. So, halleluia! this woman was telling stories about working, stories about what it was like to live on the Lower East Side in 1890 in the tenements. She does not blanch at all and tells exactly how people used to throw their garbage out on the street, how there used to be cockroaches - she would tell it all. She wouldn't call them cockroaches - she would call them "the little neighbors" [all laugh]. She has such style as a writer - it just blew me away. As a

transcriber, I was thinking, “This woman needs a book of her own” and that’s what my goal is now, besides having the primary documents at Princeton, and that’s what Gretchen Kunitz agreed to do. Isn’t it wonderful? [Simone comments, “I love it.”] I know when you do research, as I said before when we started out, you can search and search for a topic and do it because you’re committed. Sometimes you get a gift, and this was ... one that came through teaching at WISE when my students felt so upset, because [in the poems], [Yetta] was so cold and withheld herself and her emotions from her son. There’s a whole lot more to that story, and let us hope that in about two years, we will be able to actually hold her book in our hands. That’s my new – my eight-year-old - project.

**JR:** What does this work mean to you?

**JF:** It’s meant a lot in terms of a major project which I knew I would be immersed in and doing a lot of research (city records and birth certificates and all that sort of thing). But what it meant to me personally is that this was a woman who went through an awful lot, as immigrants [back then] and today do. They are really struggling to make sense of the world, to make a living, to keep their head above water, in the face of a lot of prejudice. In New York – it was like, “Yeah you can work in my sweatshop, but you have to buy the sewing machine, and I won’t pay you for two weeks, plus you are going to give me five-dollar payments on the sewing machine. And you will work seven days a week, twelve hours a day.” She lays it all out [in her memoir]. This is definitely not a new story, but new in her words...an eyewitness account...She writes so beautifully. What else did she have to deal with? Loss. I mentioned the suicide of her husband, and then she remarried. Her husband, Mark Dine, owned a factory on Water Street in Worcester. She was the manager for nine years. [They built] the house on Woodford Street, and [a few days after they sign the mortgage], he died of a massive heart attack [while hanging curtains]. So, for the second time around, she was a widow...trying to support her children. Losses [connected with being] financially up and down, while she worked [to keep the factory open]. Losses of [having had] 7 children and [only] 3 lived - all that loss and heartbreak. Her two daughters did become adults [but they died young]. Once she lost the house [on Woodford Street] ... [Yetta] would [live with either of] her two daughters...Sophia Isenberg on Pleasant Street, but she died at thirty...and Sarah Baker in Manhattan...Sarah was forty when she died. [She then lived with her great-niece, Roselyn Moses in Tarrytown, New York. She had a stroke in 1951 and] ended up in a rest home. Stanley and his second wife [Eleanor] paid for her to stay in the rest home, where [she wrote her] notebook...It is just heartbreaking. She just wants to die...She doesn’t even have a dime to call somebody. It’s heartrending, and it’s also a life lesson...After all she did and worked for, she is alone in a rest home, in the bleakest of circumstances and brokenhearted. But the last thing in her notebook is a poem. There is no other poetry from her that exists...There was a lesson for me in the notebooks and this memoir. [Writing] connected her to hope. I think that’s a lesson for all of us, in that as awful as things can be, there has to be a way for us to hang on. In this memoir, I really identified with Yetta, because in the bleakest of moments, I’ve turned to writing. It’s very important for me to have that. If I couldn’t write, I wouldn’t know what I would do. If I couldn’t paint, I wouldn’t know what I would do. I see how it affected her. It’s a life lesson, as she says in her notebook: “I wish I managed my money better because - look where I ended up.” I’m afraid of that. When you are [over] seventy, you think, “Where am I going to end up, you know?” ... And so, [her writing] is a cautionary tale. I did learn that from her. And she mourns the loss of her family. I...lost my sister last year, and I read

it right at that time...and was very touched by how she struggled with loss, and how she knew she had to carry on. It's really hard to move on, on a day-to-day basis. There's a lot in this project, and [I'm] putting myself into it...because that's what makes you passionate about something...you connect with it. I say that it was gift that was given to me at just the right time in my own mourning process...I want to see other people have this opportunity to connect with her and say, "This is what the immigrant life was like. This is what life was like in Lithuania." [During the 1863-64 Polish-Lithuanian Uprising, her father was] providing grain for Russian horses. He had gotten a letter of protection from Russian officials and had given it to his wife...They used to take Jewish people down to a tree by the river [and hang them]. That was an example to the rest of the community: this is what happens to the people who do not cooperate. [One night, soldiers came to take him. One had a rope.] ... They left, and his wife remembered the letter the letter. She ran after the soldiers, and said, "Look! Read this!" And they read it and let him go. But her father was never the same [after the incident]. That's what she writes about...what it's like to be Jewish in Lithuania - what the opportunities were ... [it was a backward village where] they did not have paved streets...everybody took a community bath once a week. They had blood-letting - if you weren't feeling too good, they would [place leeches on your body]. This is how people lived, and she wanted you to know that she did not have to live like that anymore. She goes to lower Manhattan and lives a while in the tenements, then she comes to Worcester.

**JR and SS:** Yeah.

**JF:** And that's how it is. I hope that others will [be] affected...as much as it is affecting me...

**JR:** Okay, so this has nothing to do with that, but [JF responds, "All right, now for something completely different.")] what were your primary responsibilities in terms of housework? You don't have children, so I'm assuming there was no childcare.

**JF:** No, there wasn't, so I was able to work without any encumbrances like that. I consider that a double-edged [blessing] because women have the gift...of raising children, and that's a wonderful thing. My mother raised me on her own and things were hard...and we tried to do our best. My responsibilities are to clean the house and...keep everything nice and to make dinner...that traditional thing. My husband goes out and shops for the food. We have a little...agreement. He does the laundry, and I do the ironing, so in a sense, we even things out. It's kind of like a partnership, which is ideal in every way. We both have time to do our own [chores], plus we have time to be doing our projects, too.

**JR:** How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, interests, and roles in your life?

**JF:** Well, the balance part - I'm kind of a type A, so how I do it is very practical. I keep lists, maps of what I have to do - conceptual maps. I need visuals to see or do things. I have to do this for art, I have to do this for writing, I have to do this for personal things, and that's a small list [all chuckle here], but there are different areas... and so, I write it down, look at it and check it off when it's done. Like today is a four-event day for me. Help a friend by taking her to the doctor, teach my WISE class and come here. Then there's a poetry reading that another friend is doing here in Princeton...If I didn't have list making, I just couldn't do it, and I would just fall

apart. So that's one strategy. Is that kind of what you mean? Like how you keep yourself sane and going?

**JR:** What are some of the pros and cons on the path that you chose?

**JF:** Well, the pros and the cons. Okay, the pros are that I am a self-starter. I'm open to projects. I want to learn more, I'm never going to give up on that...when I do, I don't think I really want to be around. So, the pro is that I am very privileged to be able to follow those paths: think of it, set it up, do it. The cons – well, as I said before, artists and writers can be very self-centered, we have to have family commitments, but I think sometimes, and this is a rather recent thought, and I'm looking back and saying, "I wish I could have been closer to [people]." I think I should have made that phone call and maybe gotten together, because they are gone now - because people die. [One of the] cons is that I sometimes get so intense with what I'm doing, and I mean it could be cleaning out a closet, but I give it all to the cleaning out of the closet thing and nothing else matters. I am very focused, but it doesn't allow the light in from other people, because I can't be distracted. [There are] more significant things than cleaning out a closet, but that is significant to keep your life in order. I think it's important to me and not some people, but to me, it is. So, this is the idea ... I wish I would have tried to be closer to some people...without naming names...it takes time, and you only have this much energy, and if you want to...do a painting, or write a poem, or get involved with a research project, you've got to have blocks of time. And so...I have made choices. "I can't do this," - I've heard myself say this so many times - that I can't do [something] because I'm working. My regret is that I should have been more spontaneous: if you really want to do this, I [should have said], "Okay, let's do it." But, my regret is that I just wish I could have been [close] to more people, even though I am close to [some] people. But I feel that is missing [from my life]. I see how close some people are, and it's a beautiful thing. They're close, and it's just warm and friendly... and I'm not, I don't [come across in that way] – "Come, be my friend, and we can hang out and do stuff together." It's just not my personality. I don't know if you want to [include] that, but you can. [All chuckle.]

**JR:** So now, we are going to talk about politics and community involvement. Do you consider yourself active politically?

**JF:** No, I'm not in any organization, but I certainly have an opinion [when I] talk with my friends and certainly my husband. [We talk] about what's going on in politics. Certainly, now I think this country is much more politicized than it has ever been, and it's a very scary time. I was in college in the sixties, so I know some stuff, and I've seen some stuff, but I see this as really frightening. I didn't go into Washington for the march – The Women's March [January 21, 2017]. I should have. That's another thing - I was working on Yetta at the time, and I was thinking I should get on a bus and go, but I didn't. So that's a regret. I would like to be more visible politically, but I say I don't have the time. But that's always a cop-out, because you always make time for what you want to do. So now, I'm not overtly political, but if you ever want to talk about politics, I'll tell you what I think, and we can all talk about it together. [All chuckle here.]

**JR:** Are you religious at all?

**JF:** I am. I believe in a spiritual life, and I believe in treating people in the very best way I know... The whole idea of “Love your neighbor as yourself.” I treat people [the way] I want to be treated, with respect. But I am not any longer practicing any religion.

**JR:** Has your religion played a role in your life at all? Like before, when you did practice or even now?

**JF:** Well, I think that was part of the problem...—how can I say this now? I was doing it because my family had all done it before, and I didn’t feel as though I personally was doing it... external factors made me. External factors made me go to church and made me [be confirmed]. I always tried to connect with the event, thinking that something would inspire me at a higher level. I think it taught me how to be good ... with respect to how to treat people ethically. Ethics are a huge part of religion, and so I figured that out in having a Catholic education...through high school. So, I count a lot of anything good that I have been able to do back to that. There were some events in my life that I could not understand in light of what the answers were in the religion that I was brought up in. So, I fell away, and that’s...the story...

**JR:** Interesting... Have you ever—I know you said you did volunteer work. Do you ever do any other volunteer or community work?

**JF:** Mainly, it’s with the poetry association. That’s been for twenty years...because it’s all-volunteer. If anything gets done, it’s volunteers, and it can keep you pretty busy. Then working at the [Kunitz] house and working on the family Kunitz legacy ... Let’s see, do I have...I volunteered in the Women’s Caucus for Art. I was the exhibition coordinator for a couple of years, and but they were up in the Fitchburg and Leominster. and it became too far a drive. I was a member for about five years, and we did a lot of fun great stuff, but I didn’t stay with that because it was too far away. But, I think that’s about it for volunteering. I’ll come and clean your closet. [All chuckle here.]

**SS:** How have health issues impacted your life or those in your family?

**JF:** Hmm... Health issues, well, cancer and the heart are the two big ones in my family. [They] account for a lot of loss and a lot of sadness. My sister just died from ovarian cancer. She died at sixty-two after a four-year battle. I spent a lot of time driving back and forth from here to Ohio, taking care of her during that time. Her husband was there too, but he needed help... When somebody needs you who is suffering, you just go for it. I also know that, looking at my age, your heart kind of starts doing stuff that it shouldn’t do, and I’m looking at that right now and trying to get a procedure...where it’s going to be solved...If not, a pacemaker or something like that. So, thank goodness, I’m [living] in this particular year when we have [new procedures] available. With my mother and my grandparents, if you had a heart condition, or you had breast cancer, there was not much in the treatment. Especially breast cancer...My husband is healthy at eighty-four...at my age, you think about it...but you also know...that there are more things available now than before. So, be smarter than your parents were and just try to take care of yourself, but also know that it’s in your history, and you’ve got to pay attention to some things.

**SS:** What were your experiences in accessing quality affordable health care?

**JF:** Because I worked for the state, Fitchburg State College, I have the insurance that [it] gives me, [and] it's good health insurance. At sixty-five, Medicare [federal health insurance for the elderly] ... [became the primary] payer, so with health insurance, I...feel secure. I have a couple of cards that I give to the people at the hospital every time I go and give my little co-pay and all that. It's because I had health insurance through teaching. And that's also one of my mother's points: ...if you stop teaching, you will lose your health care. So, she was pretty smart.

**SS:** Are you responsible for anybody else's health now?

**JF:** Well, just... That's an interesting question. My husband, of course. We are taking care of each other, but he is not sick. If he gets sick, of course, and I'm going to [take care of him]. But nothing on his end right now. But I was very involved - we both were very involved [this year] – when my sister's husband had a stem-cell transplant, and something went wrong... We spent July in Ohio taking care of him, because his family was trying to figure out what was going to happen next. So, we gave them that little window of time by staying there. But you never know. You turn around, and it could be my sister-in-law. So right now, ...we just came out of my brother-in-law's situation, and we are just kind of looking around saying, "Who's next?" Because that's what you do if somebody needs you. You are going to literally drop everything. But let me just say this about that. In all the times in four years that I was going back and forth with Jennie, my sister, and even in Ohio with her husband, I would always bring work [art and writing]. I would always bring little art projects because even in hospital rooms, I could do work. I could do collage, I could do inking. There was something about having the relief of putting your brain into a different place [when] you are in a dire situation and someone you love very, very much is suffering, and you have to be strong for them. So, you can't have the luxury of falling apart. You'd better figure out how you are going to do that. Work and reading are always good. Always have your books or your I-Pads or whatever you use, electronic things. I tend to like books, but the idea is: you'd better sustain yourself. Otherwise, you just aren't going to make it.

**JR:** How do you define success in your life and has that definition changed over time?

**JF:** In the one basic respect, I used to think success was being able to pay your bills. I never wanted to be rich - that never was a part of what I was about. But I thought if I had a steady job like teaching that I loved, my success would be to keep that job and keep being independent. That's one of the things in Yetta's [1951 notebook] ... she lost her independence. That would really be hard for me to lose my independence and not to have a pension. So, success is that I can take care of myself, and that I can get the basics, plus a little trip here and there, plus a piece of jewelry, [Everyone chuckles.] and some nice clothes. So, I really have been successful. I don't have a lot of money, but I feel very successful. I am able to volunteer and do stuff that I like, rather than doing it out of guilt. Nobody roped me into anything. I'm doing it all because I want to. So, my success is that I feel successful. I'm in a good place, and I have been for a while, especially the last twenty years ... I needed to change gears, and I did, and it worked out fine.

**SS:** What do you think it means to be a woman?

**JF:** Hmm, what does it mean to be a woman? Well, that you are... I believe [that you had] better have your own self-image intact. From what I've seen and been judged for...all my life, you had better have your own center. You can't allow yourself to be defined [by others] ...It was predominantly male [administrators] in my early career. One example...is that when I applied for the job at Fitchburg State, I was interviewed by the dean...I was married, and he put the salary he was going to offer me on a little piece of paper, and he slid it forward and said, "You know, you don't really need to work anyway. You're married. [and it's a second salary.]" Right, so that was that low salary I told you about. I am still paying the price for being that stupid, but I believed him [and agreed with him] ... But I never thought teachers' salaries were negotiable in colleges. They very much were... and there was a lawsuit several years later, and...many women [received] a chunk of money. The [new] union brought a class action suit against the state and sued them for salary [inequities]. Not that it rectified everything. ...The idea of "Oh yeah, you're right, you know, this is a second income" Don't you love that expression? [It] meant that what you were making was not that important, so you did not have to push [for] anything different. Having a part of me defined by others...if you take this job you would probably end up getting pregnant anyway and have to leave because a lot of women did. They taught for a little bit and then they had babies and stayed home for a while. It's one of those things, you kind of do what the group does, meaning women. You had limited opportunities then, teacher, nurse and secretary. I was bought into a [world where a woman's] greatest success was that you [chose] your china, silver and crystal [patterns]. That's it. You...can set up your house and really be ready to entertain." That's really how very small a world it was to be a woman. Then it changed for me...I just started out and had to keep working, and I loved it. I kept on doing what I did and getting more education, because that's what teachers do. We keep going back to school and then following [our] passion. Being a woman was one thing, but I have to say that the watershed for me was when I figured I'm not a man or a woman—I'm me, and I'm going to figure out what I need to do. I think I figured it out, and it doesn't matter...I became a little more outspoken, because I figured I had something to say. I came out of "Be silent, be good." I just felt more confident. I admit my husband helped me do that because he really believed in what I could do and really thought I could accomplish something. That's it: having someone who believes in you as much as you - almost more than you - could imagine. So, I was very lucky that way, for sure.

**JR:** Do you consider yourself a feminist?

**JF:** Yes, I do, because I do not want to be limited. I am very sensitive to things I hear people say or [what] I see on television. I think that there are things happening with the way women are dressing. [It] harkens back to the day of modesty...Could you ask me that again?

**JR:** Do you consider yourself a feminist?

**JF:** Yes, I do. I do not belong to an organization, but I do...because again...it's more than I'm a woman, I'm not a man, I'm me. Accept me for what I am, and what I can do, and do not limit me. I think that's part of what feminism is. Don't have preconceived notions of what I can do just because of what you see. Of course, there is age [discrimination], but we are not going to go into that. [Everyone chuckles.] Oh, look at her. She's got [gray hair] ... people look at you and dismiss you. I've felt that more recently obviously. I think that is a bigger problem for people my

age, men and women. People just erase you, and they think this old coot is just going to go on and on, like I feel like I am now. Go on. What is the next one? [Everyone chuckles.]

**SS:** If you could change one thing about how society views women, what would it be?

**JF:** Hmm, well, you know I remember reading that and hoped I would not have to answer that.

**SS:** Well, we don't have to. [SS laughs]

**JF:** Yeah, how society views women, I think the over-sexualization of women. That bothers me a lot.

**SS:** Yeah, definitely.

**JF:** A lot, because there are people, men, boys who cannot handle that, and it's the wrong impression they are getting from the way things are presented to them. They think they can... well, look who our president is [Trump]. You know what he thinks. [Everyone laughs] ... That's what I [mean]... and the over-sexualization of children... It is going to take time to figure it out long after I am gone. What [was] the effect of all this? Madonna was one of the people... who really brought that [about] and put [sexuality] in your face, saying that it "freed a lot of people." [I think that it] shackled a lot of women, because they felt they needed to be like that. Again, society puts these pressures on us to belong and ... nobody wants to be an outsider. Some of us don't mind being outsiders, once in a while. They should teach classes on how to be an outsider and be okay with that... Absolutely. Because you don't have to be accepted by everybody... That's what I would change: Give people lessons on how to be an outsider and be happy with that. [Everyone laughs.]

**SS:** Do you want to ask one more question?

**JR:** Yeah, do you believe men have threatened your success in the past?

**JF:** Men have?

**JR:** Threatened your success in the past.

**JF:** Hmm.

**JR:** So, I know you have talked about your former employer at Fitchburg, but other than that, were there any?

**JF:** ... That [incident with the dean] didn't so much threaten my success. I knew that I would end up doing a better job than most people, and I did. It was just about the money, and that I regretted [not pushing] for [more] money. I [probably] would not have gotten the job, even with the recommendation from the chair of the English department. That's how they do things. You know what I mean. You want more money, and you are a woman? See yah! So, anyway, what

was that again now? [Everyone laughs] Yeah, just one more time my short-term memory is going, and I am tired now.

**SS:** Do you believe men have threatened your success in the past?

**JF:** Threatened my success?

**SS:** Yes

**JF:** I would say no. What threatened more of my success is not gender-related. It's that fact that certain people control certain things in certain areas of the arts. You have cliques in poetry and in the arts. You think sometimes that it's a blood sport, you know, getting exhibits, getting into organizations, getting your work seen. That's what bothers me and has kept me back from having my work out there more. There are controlling cliques, who for some reason decided that either my work wasn't good enough, and they didn't want to give it a chance, or that I'm not good enough. People make a lot of judgments about you and frequently you don't really know what they are thinking. They just make those decisions that affect you. They should not stop you from going on. I have been pretty lucky, but... I remember things like that happening. Not gender-related so much for me. Don't forget that teaching is actually male and female now. Elementary and middle school teachers are men and women. It's not just the elementary school mom thing going on anymore. At the college level, it was all men and a few women. But now, you've got a lot of faculties that are very nicely balanced. So, education is a good field, if you want to...

**SS:** Yeah, my sister is a principal

**JF:** Oh, she is? Ok, elementary school?

**SS:** Mhm

**JF:** Ok, so it is a better balance, better way to... yeah.

**JR:** Do you have any more questions?

**SS:** I don't think so.

**JF:** Well, we did cover a lot.

**SS:** We did.

**JF:** My goodness.

**SS:** [...?] Well, thank you.

**JF:** You're welcome. I loved doing it, and if there is any follow up that you think you might want - any clarification, I'll write a little something or other, if you have any questions. And really, do you have to transcribe this?

**JR and SS:** Yeah.

**JF:** I did qualitative [research for my] dissertation and had to do a lot of transcriptions. Are you going to split up the job?

**JR and SS:** Yeah, and just to remind you that you do have ten days, if you choose you do not want this published anymore. Always email us.

**JF:** ... don't worry about that.

**SS:** Okay?

**JF:** Yeah, because I think that I got to talk about Yetta... [Voice memo ended abruptly.]