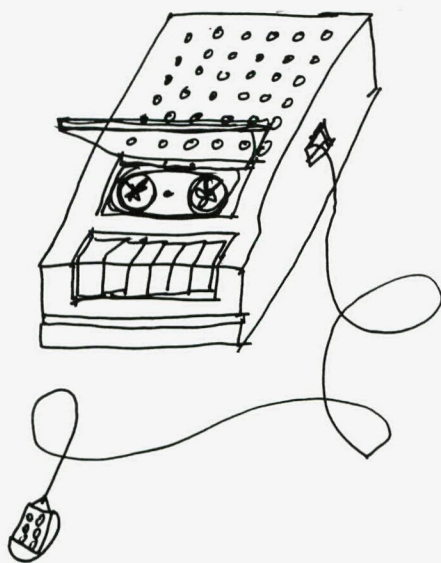


## A Narrative Interview with Mitchell Ginsberg

*Mitchell Ginsberg, Professor Emeritus, Columbia University, NY was Dean of the School of Social Work, 1970-1981, and Director of Human Resources Association for the City of New York.*

by Joshua Miller

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### Introduction

I conducted this interview, with Mitchell Ginsberg, whom I have known my entire life, in his apartment in New York City. Mitch, somewhat frail due to numerous medical ailments, brought clarity of thought and impassioned reflection to the interview. The session was tape recorded and transcribed. He has reviewed the transcripts and edited them for accuracy.

The oral interview loosely followed a three part structure, where I initially focussed on what led Mitch into social work; then what his experience as a social worker was like; and lastly what this experience meant for him (Seidman, 1991). There were no pre-arranged questions. The squared brackets [] indicate words that I have inserted as oral statements do not always translate well to the written page.<sup>1</sup>

Mitch Ginsberg was born in Boston in 1915, growing up in impoverished conditions. He was greatly influenced by the Depression and The New Deal as he came of age, attended College and trained as a social worker. His career was interrupted by a four year stint in the army which he describes vividly in this interview. He worked in settlement houses, became Dean of Columbia University School of Social Work, and served for over four years as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Social Services (DSS) and as Human Resources Administrator (HRA) under Mayor Lindsey in the late 1960's.

He is a former President of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and The National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW). He was involved with national social welfare policy planning and enactment during the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies, and was deeply involved in major policy initiatives, such as the development of Head Start, the debate over Nixon's Family Allowance Program, and the development of Supplemental Security Income.

I believe that this narrative offers an important historical perspective on changes within the social work profession, the development of national social policy, New York politics and welfare policy, and the dynamics and influence of the Columbia School of Social Work during what was perhaps its zenith as a major force within the profession. But most importantly for me, this story offers

<sup>1</sup> With the permission of Joshua Miller the editors changed the initial interview sequence to place the narrative in a current context. Those seeking the original interview may contact Joshua Miller at Smith College, School for Social Work.



a glimpse of the life and career of one of social work's leaders, and his own doubts and internal struggles, despite his considerable accomplishments. I have a great deal of respect and affection for Mitch Ginsberg and therefore this interview, like all interviews, is subjective and reflects my own biases as well as the relationship that Mitch and I have, the context in which the interview is embedded.

Joshua (J): How do you feel about the fact that you have been a social worker all your career?

Mitchell (M): I look back on my career overall as a social worker positively, but I also think that I could have comfortably gone into policy out of a somewhat different background — political science or something like that. I would have wanted to be in public policy.

J: That was your love and social work was a pathway to it?

M: Really that was. Although I hadn't defined it quite clearly at the beginning. But after all I was a kid of the depression and then the Kennedy years. You know we did many [things] while I was Associate Dean — we ran the Peace Corps and VISTA at Columbia University — we had students who went to Venezuela and Columbia and India. So you have to think of the times that I grew up in — at least in two periods when public service, concern and so forth were part of the atmosphere. And I was out of a poor, desperately poor, family so I kind of fitted into that opportunity. So I'm positive generally about social work. I think we have turned away from some of the things — the group and the community and policy in ways that I don't like. I understand private practice but I think that we over-do that. I saw recently in the NASW News Paper an [article] about supporting the health program. It gave 7 reasons, but 6 of them were [about] what

it would do for social workers in private practice and only one had anything to do with the health of poor people. I find that very disturbing.

I guess when you get older you always think the other days were better — I don't know — some things weren't so hot — but I think we have moved away from some of the concerns that were basic to the profession. And I don't mean that we should concentrate on only poor people, I think we have a service that is good for a lot of people, but I wish we could get more in to the public service and public policy or the social policy and the movement that I see away from that is my deepest regret.

J: What led to your entering social work as a profession?

M: Mostly chance. I had a cousin who had gone to Tufts(Boston) and I had been there a couple times and liked it. And I think I was influenced too by two very close friends, we all decided to apply to Tufts and went there. I was [part of] the National Youth Administration(NYA). Does that mean anything to you?

J: Was that a Roosevelt program?

M: Part of the New Deal, and it provided for poor young people who wanted to go to college, it provided a stipend if they worked. The first year I worked at it, (this was Tufts in the winter), I was assigned to a group that dug up the sewer system and put down a new one. That was pick and shovel in the cold, very hard work for 30 cents an hour. The second year I got promoted and was assigned to the Boston Public Library to go through the files of the *New York Times* from 1915 to 1918 and write down the headlines of any article dealing with the World War. My third year, they assigned me to a settlement house — Hecht House — a neighborhood house in Dorchester (MA) where I was a club leader and [played] basketball and sports with



the kids. But that still didn't take me to social work. I went back and I got a Master's in History and Education at Tufts (1933-1937).

J: So you really went right back.

M: Yes. I did practice teaching in history in Medford High School and I was pretty good, but I got into some [hot water]. By chance the principal came to my class a couple times. I've been a Lincoln buff since



I was four years old—and I [was] talking about Lincoln's concern with the working man and I remember the principal called me in and he said he found it very interesting and truthful, but he wasn't sure when the students went home and talked to their parents how they would feel about it. Then by chance he came again when I was talking about the industrial

revolution in the United States and the idea of a man working on the assembly line and turning the same bolt or part and what that meant—so we went through the same thing, [although] actually they offered me a job. As a career it wasn't for me.

Then the following year I worked at the Boston YMHA. I had a cousin there—Nat Cohen—who once was the executive director and in a way encouraged me to think about social work. Mid way through the year, a colleague, Mark Tarail, the Executive Director of the Y, came to me with an announcement from the New York School of Social Work (now School of Social Work, Columbia University), saying that they were offering three national scholarships to prospective students who would go to the school, get tuition and [also] get \$30 a month for food and room in a settlement house in return for working 20 hours a week.

J: So you would live and work in the settlement house and get a scholarship?

M: Yes, the settlement house would be a job and I would do my field work somewhere else.

J: Was [the settlement house] particularly for young Jewish people?

M: No, in fact, it was somewhat the opposite. I was placed at Christadora House—"The love of Christ." Christadora House was on 8th Street and Avenue B.

Now it's a fancy condominium. Then it was a settlement [house] and a residence with a poetry corner. It was highly religious, but at any rate I went there, lived and worked there for two years. I was really sort of the boy's worker although I hadn't had any training. The New York School of Social Work insisted that all students had to have casework. There were only four of us who were in group work, so I did my field work in the Jewish Family Service in the Bronx. That was my first year. My second placement was at the 92nd Street Y. I was there for almost two quarters. I was working in the boys division and they didn't have a supervisor—they didn't have anybody in charge, so I acted as the boys worker, even though I was a student. Well, after 2 quarters, the School decided that wasn't such a good idea and so they transferred me to the National Jewish Welfare Board where I did community organization with Nat Cohen who was then the associate director. He was my supervisor. He was very good.

J: And what kind of community organizing were you doing?

M: Oh, helping the Jewish Community Centers organize and so forth. I was a student but they used me quite broadly. So I [finished] I guess May of 1941.



J: Can I ask just a couple of questions about your experience at Columbia? What was the overriding philosophy at the time? Who were some of the key figures?

M: Well, it was an exciting time. I think it was the high point of the School in many ways. In casework we had Fern Lowry, Gordon Hamilton, Lucille Austin, and Dorothy Hutchinson, all major names. In group work we had Clara Kaiser [and] Sol Bernstein. In public welfare (which I became somewhat interested in), we had a distinguished former state administrator, Robert Lansdale and Phillip Klein in research and he was great. We had a philosopher social policy type — Edward Lindeman — world famous, who used to come into class and say — “last night I had dinner with Franklin and Eleanor and I told him this and that” — and it was all true. It was that kind of a thing [that] we were very impressed by. The school in that sense was stimulating, exciting in many ways and I was enormously impressed with the people and with the commitment generally speaking to do something about social problems. Some of the casework faculty felt differently, but generally though that wasn’t so. That stimulated me as did some of the work at Christadora House.

I was a bit of a trouble maker. Christadora House was kind of a old line settlement and I would try to get them to do things differently and the Executive [Director], Herbert Biele [felt that] I thwarted him and I annoyed him. I think [that] he would have liked to fire me, but I was there as a school assignment and it would be complicated. The school had sent me and I had the commitment of a scholarship — he couldn’t very well fire me. But at one point, he jumped up in a meeting and he pointed a finger at me and he said, “you’re the worst social worker I have ever met since Harry Hopkins” — and I was delighted.

J: That’s a back handed compliment, if I have ever heard one. What was it that you were doing, that he was so upset about?

M: We had been trying to move the settlement to be more related to the poor people in the community. It saw itself as an art center and with a strong religious orientation and it had a poetry corner and an art corner and it attracted a lot of older [people] — mainly women and it paid little attention to the neighborhood. It was a low income neighborhood.

J: What was it like ethnically?

M: The neighborhood was a mixture of Italian and Jewish and they had little to do with the settlement where we worked at trying to [involve them]. Meanwhile I had been doing my field work at the Jewish Welfare Board, and they offered me a job. I came very close to accepting it, in fact, they thought I had accepted it and maybe with some cause. But I went to The National Conference of Social Welfare in Atlantic City (N.J.) — that would have been in 1941 — and I met John McDowell who was [to become] the head of the National Federation of Settlements but then he was the Executive Director of a combination settlement house and housing project called Terrace Village — the First Public Housing Project in Pittsburgh and they conducted a program there. He persuaded me over a glass of orange juice (because he was a nonalcoholic type) that I should go to the settlement. He offered me \$1560 — that was in 1941 and I was going to get \$2200 at the JWB, but I found myself attracted by him and by what he said and I took the job at the settlement house. I went there as a boys’ worker.

J: What was the name of the settlement house?

M: Soho Community House, in downtown Pittsburgh. We worked up on the hill at



the housing project. I worked with Margaret Berry, Harry Bray, and others. Gertrude Wilson and Wilbur Neusteder were with the School of Social Work and even though I was new, they had me working with a student. Bernie Shiffman was there as a student at the school. And Pittsburgh was an exciting place.

J: In what way?

M: The settlements [such as] Soho were very involved in the community — they were doing the kind of things I liked, [like] working with tough kids. There was a group called the Feather Merchants. I lived in the settlement and I arrived there on a Sunday. I remember those kids broke into the game room downstairs — which was in the same building and they started to shout up the stairs, "Mitch, Mitch you son

of a bitch, come on down here." John didn't want me to go — but I figured if I was going to work there I had to — so I went down and had a fight with them and I threw them out. Physically! I got them by the collar. But from then on the Feather Merchants were my big supporters. So it worked out alright.

J: What were they ethnically, the Feather Merchants?

M: Polish — Polish and some Irish — I think — or Italian, I don't remember.

J: And was it an issue for them that you were Jewish?

M: I think so — sure. That was part of the taunting. I was the only Jew on the staff — it was strictly a non Jewish community,





heavily Catholic — overwhelmingly Catholic. So that was a problem, but I must say my colleagues on the staff were great. Everybody was very helpful. I was only there until March — when I went in the Army.

J: This was 1941 — 1942?

M: '42 — I arrived there in September of '41. Pearl Harbor was in December and by March I was in.

J: One of the things that I wondered about was, what was it like living in both of the settlement houses?

M: Exciting. Remember I was young and all the time I had gone to Tufts and everywhere I had lived, at home and [where] I had grown up in a very poor, but strictly Jewish neighborhood. I really hadn't been exposed to non-Jews until I went to Boston Latin School and of course, to Tufts. But during Latin School and Tufts I was side by side with these two very good buddies of mine — David Goldenberg and Ephraim Gale — we did everything together. So I really hadn't had much contact with other people. Soho and Christadora House — opened my eyes to all these other groups and I was interested and stimulated. It was difficult and anti-Semitism was a factor, but I can't ever say that from the job point of view that it stood in my way. John McDowell and Margaret [Berry] and Soho couldn't have cared less.

J: A lot of people don't know what it was like — on a daily basis, like did you have your own room, did you eat communally — did you ever get away from it?

M: We each had our own room both at Christadora House and Soho. We would eat communally — we never ate by ourselves unless we went out somewhere which was a rare occasion — we did most

things, especially when I was in Pittsburgh, together. All my contacts were with the other social workers and people like that. It was exciting. We were concerned about the same things. We were enthusiastic about the work to be done — to try and help [change] the conditions. I don't remember all of it, but I don't think I ever felt particularly lonely or isolated

J: I would imagine that the sense of community and esprit de corps must have been stronger there than other work situations.

M: I thought that we were doing something worthwhile. It was a short period but I still look back on Soho as a very good helpful happy experience and it was totally different — after all for a Jewish boy from Dorchester. Right next to us was the church. I remember a place — the public baths — there was clearly a lot of anti-Semitism, but except for those first days, I didn't have very much trouble.

J: What kinds of things would you do for people, what activities?

M: Well we ran a full range of the usual settlement house activities. Plus, we were heavily involved helping with housing, helping with food. I remember we used to put out a little leaflet called "Helpful Hints: How to Use Food" you know — things you could buy that were nutritious but low cost. I edited that for a while. We used to put it out every 10 days or so. And then of course we were working heavily in the housing project which was new and trying to help people, to live together. We were concerned — after all this was 41, the depression — with jobs and support and so forth, to some extent — but there wasn't much. The welfare program wasn't so hot, but we worked with them and heavily in the job field, trying to find jobs.

J: Were these immigrants who had come over about 20 years before?



- M: Well, there were some who had been there a long time and then their families joined them. There were a number of elderly Polish women and some Italians. People came because they had family there or knew somebody — and it was in its way a tightly knit community. They saw themselves as separate from the rest of the world. Some of them got jobs in the steel mills. It was heavily steel then, but a lot of them weren't prepared [for the jobs]. Part of [our work] was helping them [to] become apprentices. We didn't have a limited agenda. I'm sure there were some people who would say, "what has that got to do with social work?" To us it had everything to do with it. But we didn't do a great deal of counseling as such. We helped if the kid got into trouble with the law, which often happened, but that wasn't a major focus. We were much more community oriented and group oriented and that sort of thing.
- J: Was there a clear cut mission and philosophy that everybody was aware of or was it more informal?
- M: It was more informal. We talked about settlement traditions and so forth and as we defined our role, they seem to fit together. I don't remember any serious disputes among us about which way to go — there was a lot of work and the thing was to do it and help one another. So we just did what we could.
- J: Were there any people of color or Blacks or other minority groups — or were there just White ethnic groups?
- M: White ethnic groups. There were Blacks in Pittsburgh, but not in the area where we were and I am sure there were others at different times, but not particularly, as I remember them related to the settlement, except for some in the housing project.
- J: When did you enter the service?
- M: In March 1942. And they sent me to Fort Devens because my home was Boston. I waited there for a long time to be assigned. You know, they interview you on what you did. The [interviewer] had a big book of occupations — civilian/military equivalency. And I said I was a social worker and the young man looked at me in despair and he looked through the book and said we don't have it in there. [Laughter] It took me two hours to explain but it did no good, and finally he said out of desperation, you must have done something else — I said, "well I was captain of the tennis team and I played basketball" and he said "that's it — athletic instructor" — so that is what I went into.
- I stayed in basic training a long time, and then I was assigned to the infantry. I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama. A little town of Anniston — population then 3000 and over a hundred thousand soldiers — it was a disaster for everybody. There was a large number of Black recruits.
- J: In separate companies or were they integrated?
- M: Separate companies, but remember in basic training we were all pretty much there, but in separate squads, but we were all together. We had a bunch of Northerners right from [New York]. We were allowed into Anniston every two or three weeks. We went in once and a group of the southern soldiers and others jumped on the Black soldiers. A group of us from the north — Jews, but not only Jews — joined in on the side of the Blacks and had a big scrap. We all got arrested and brought back to camp and then they never let us out again till the 12 weeks of basic training was over.
- J: That must have been very difficult?
- M: Yes, the non-commissioned officers especially were Southerners — overwhelmingly — and they didn't like

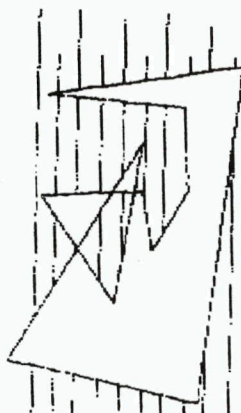


Northerners and they certainly didn't like northern Jews. I was a particular target because by then I had 3 degrees and they kept after me. When I finished basic training, they assigned me to the 44th infantry division in Kansas. They had a first sergeant — and they had to call out the names of the new recruits. He had a clerk do it and when he came to my name, I saw the clerk whisper something to this sergeant and he looked at me and said, "college boy, you must be stupid, it took you seven years to do what everybody else does in 4." When you are in the army there is nothing to do, there is no responding.

I got shipped from there with the 44th infantry division to Salinas, Kansas. During the maneuvers I was injured and shipped to the hospital. It turned out that I had a serious stomach problem, some of which went back to when I was born. I was born with a congenital short esophagus. It had started to bleed internally and they wanted to send me home, but I didn't want to go home. I stayed around in charge of a medical unit in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I had a lot of German in Boston Latin School and some at Tufts. There was something called, the Army Specialized Training Program and they were looking for people who had language skills in German and Japanese. I was suddenly transferred to a beautiful little college in Grinnel, Iowa (with a bed and sheets) and assigned to live with a German who was under instruction to speak only German to me.

J: Was he a German-American?

M: Yes. I studied German and all about the country's political system. I was supposed to go into Military Intelli-



gence but by sheer chance, somebody had given me a subscription to *PM*. That was [a] news-paper out of New York City considered liberal. I reported to the Major for assignment and he asked me one question, "you have a subscription to *PM*?" I said, "yes, sir." Next day I was on the train back to Camp Polk, Louisiana in the infantry.

J: Because you were too Leftist? Was *PM* socialist?

M: No, not even socialist. Progressive. Actually, I never knew who sent me the subscription and most of the issues never reached me. So I went back to the infantry — although I was still supposed to be [in] limited service and somehow they caught up with that and sent me to three different German Prisoner Camps In the United States as an interpreter for the commanding officer of the camp because I had all this German. In Nevada, Missouri the German prisoners were treated much better than the American soldiers, most of whom were Blacks and served as guards. I and a couple others got in a fight with the colonel. He threatened to have me court martialed. Nothing ever happened because he needed me. I was the only one that could interpret for him. But it was an unpleasant experience and then came an order that I was to take a German prisoner under guard — that meant me with a revolver — to Topeka Kansas. He was emotionally disturbed. I got on the train and took him to Kansas to The Menninger Clinic and turned him over and came back by train.

When I got back, the colonel said to me, "there's an order, transferring you — but it is optional. You can stay here with me, I will be glad to have you." This was the guy I fought with all the time. I couldn't imagine wanting to stay in Nevada. [The transfer] was to Camp Carson, Colorado. There was a woman [Elizabeth Ross] in the War Department in Washington, who had





been looking for me for years [because I was a social worker], but I had been in so many different places. Anyway, she caught up with me in Nevada. She was with the War Department.

J: Social workers for what purpose?

M: To staff psychiatric units — set up for people in training and for those who had come back from combat, so I was ordered to Camp Carson, Colorado, a beautiful spot, right at the foot of Pike's Peak, where I was the head of the social work unit. I was then ultimately promoted to Master Sergeant. I was in charge and I did some supervision and a lot of group counseling. They had been in combat and of course I hadn't and you kept running into: "what do you really know about it?"

J: Were they experiencing what we know as 'post traumatic stress syndrome'?

M: Yes, it was called battle shock or fatigue. It was where I heard about FDR's death which was overwhelming. I was a great supporter, couldn't conceive of anybody else being president. I stayed [on] because as the soldiers came back there was more need for me — so I didn't really get out until February 1946.

J: So you were in the Army for 4 years?

M: Yes.

J: Was that a good professional experience — the psychiatric counseling?

M: The psychiatric was — some of the other was difficult. I was walking into an officer's club and the man in charge of my battalion, by the name of Major Thummel said to the other officers, "see that guy, he has 3 degrees, graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa and he's here — I have assigned him to clean our toilets."

That was part of what you went through in the army— given my background I went through a lot of it.

J: So I assume that you couldn't go back to your old job, when you got out of the Army.

M: No, I went back to work at Hecht House where I had been part time during the time I was on NYA and I was the director of activities. Then I got a call from the Jewish Welfare Board and they offered me a job. I worked with the Jewish Community Center and Council, a combination group work/community organization job in Manchester, New Hampshire.

J: At this stage in your career, did you have a clear sense of being a caseworker, group worker, community organizer — or did you think of yourself as a generic social worker?

M: I didn't have too clear a sense. I knew that whatever I did I would end up in some combination of group work and community organization, including social policy. And I wasn't going to be a caseworker.

J: Was that because it fitted you better, or you philosophically felt more comfortable?

M: I think it fitted me better. I had more interest in that and I believed that is where I could make a more significant contribution. That seemed right for me and the Federation of New Hampshire in a sense deflected from that. It was an administrative experience. I got into some trouble because we had a lecture series and by sheer coincidence, those on the board committee had picked 5 speakers, who were somewhat controversial by being too liberal, and by chance we scheduled them for December 7th, Pearl Harbor Day. The American Legion picketed, and the Manchester Union Reader — I don't know



if you know that paper — it's very right wing — they bombarded us. But I have to say that the board stood by me. But anyway, after a while I got very ill — almost deathly ill. My esophagus had torn and I had internal bleeding and all kinds of things, which have been a problem ever since. I was out of work for about a year.

J: And this was your first executive position? Did you just learn how to do that on your own?

M: Yeah, I really did — of course, they saw that I had been given a good deal of semi-administrative experience and I had been a boys worker — even when I was in field work, [but] I didn't have any special training in administration. But I didn't find it very exciting and it wasn't very stimulating [or] very difficult.

J: Looking back was this a major point in your career where you shifted from being a direct service worker to an administrator?

M: I don't think it had that much [effect]. I've always thought of it more as an interlude in my career. It just happened that I had some sense of the direction that I wanted to go in and Manchester didn't change it. When I was recovering from my illness, Sandy Solender, who was Director of Personnel and Training for the National Jewish Welfare Board, called me and asked me to come to New York as one of his two assistants.

J: Was it very different working for Jewish organizations than it had been for non-sectarian agencies?

M: It was different. It was stimulating in some ways. There were some very smart and able people that I got to know. But some of [my] interest in the community and so forth wasn't there and I tried to make up for that by being active in professional

organizations and in community groups here in New York, but it was different. Well in 1952 my last year there, the [Columbia School of Social Work] asked me to teach a part time course. It was still the New York School at this point.

They asked me to teach the first year part time and then after that one year, they asked me to come on full time. It wasn't the easiest decision, but I thought that I needed a change.

J: What were you teaching?

M: I came in to teach group work and community organization (C.O.)

J: C.O. was a fairly new sub-section of Social Work. Nat Cohen, the associate dean was interested in C.O. and I was — so gradually C.O. developed somewhat and so I went there in 53 — not necessarily thinking social work education was going to be my career. I didn't have a doctorate. I had no serious intention of getting one, although — at their suggestion I enrolled in a program [in] which I was interested (New York University). They had a degree in Human Rights and Civil Rights. I took all the courses, but never got around to writing the dissertation. In those days, it was sort of different — nobody pushed me — it didn't make any difference.

J: Did most of the faculty have doctorates?

M: Some, not most. There was a tendency to come there and then to get your doctorate — you know right there. But there was no pressure on me — that I can ever remember. I wrote some things, mainly articles and speeches. I was active in the community, professionally and interested in Public Welfare — so I became more and more a policy type. About 1955 or 1956, I became an Associate Professor — then a few years later, I was promoted to a Professor and given tenure with no doctorate — and there was no issue about it — nobody said



you don't have a doctorate. It never came up — it just sort of went routinely. One irony is that in subsequent years I received 4 honorary doctoral degrees.

J: When you say you became more of a policy type, had you always been interested in policy?

M: I had always been interested in policy. I think that really began with FDR. I had been interested in poverty, unemployment. My father was a desperately poor man, [he] worked 7 days a week in a garage, for twelve dollars a week and my mom managed for us and was determined that I go to Latin School and College. Summers I worked in a parking lot. During the depression, one summer I got one ten cent tip and ten dollars a week. I had always been interested [in policy] and then there was a lot that stimulated [this] — the New Deal and all [of] those things.

J: It was an exciting time for policy. It was an unprecedented time for seeing policy in action.

M: Yes it was. With all the programs, the Social Security, and everything else — and I was very much involved. I don't mean

directly personally involved. But I was interested in working locally and sought out the people who felt the same way. It was an exciting time from that standpoint — it really was. So I had that in my background and the school in that sense gave me the opportunity. I got involved. I got to know people in Washington. I was involved with Dick [Cloward] in the Mobilization for Youth. A couple years later, I was involved in Washington and consulted with various congressional committees.

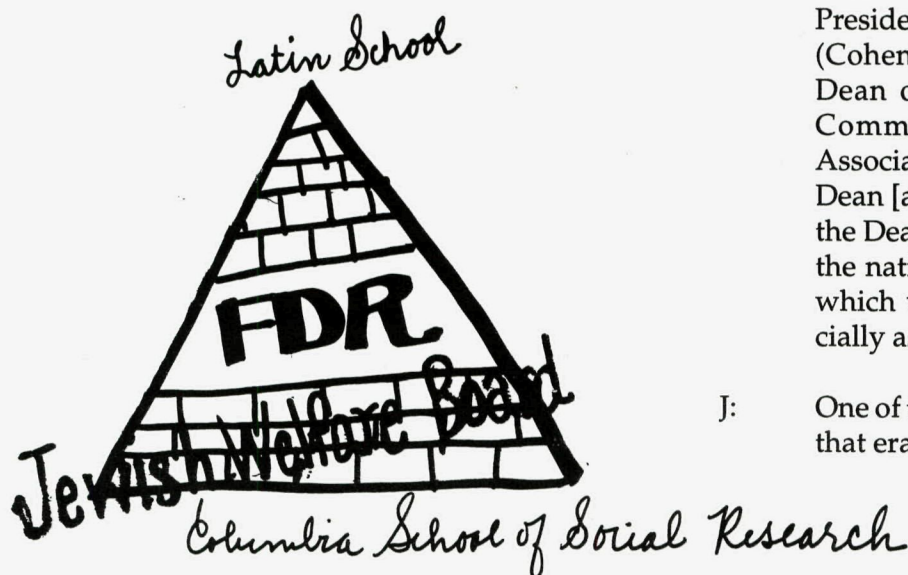
J: How did you get involved with that?

M: Well I had written a few things about public welfare and related concerns and there were people who were involved in the poverty programs, and whom I had contact with.

J: These were Kennedy and Johnson's poverty programs?

M: I got to know the President and all of the Kennedys. The Kennedy I really came to know the best and worked the closest with and admired the most was Robert. And so I was well known and I was active in professional associations — I was chairman of the New York City Chapter, then later President of the NASW, still later, President of the NCSW (1962). When Nat (Cohen) left (Columbia) to become the Dean of Western Reserve, the Faculty Committee asked me to become the Associate Dean. Clara Kaiser was Acting Dean [and then] Fred Delliquadri became the Dean. By 1962 I was asked to serve on the national committee for Head Start — which was an exciting experience, especially as I was the only social worker!

J: One of the most successful programs from that era.





M: We organized it, reviewed it and I travelled all over the country evaluating programs. Subsequently I met Marion Wright — now Marion Wright Edelman — she headed the Head Start Program in Mississippi. It was in trouble and I went down and consulted and gave a speech and about 2 months later, the National Business Conference had me speak in New York to a Conference about poverty issues. One of the other speakers was this young Black woman, Marian Wright, whom I had met in Mississippi. We liked each other and went out and had a drink. A week later I had an appointment with Robert Kennedy in Washington, because I was doing some advising. Peter Edelman who was his chief aide was there and I said, "I had met this young woman and she was very good and you ought to make use of her", and so forth and so on — I told them who she was and they both started to laugh and said, "Marion and Peter are engaged to be married." Later we were invited to their wedding and we had a great time. I worked a lot with Kennedy on welfare.

J: With Robert Kennedy, he was a senator then, for New York?

M: Yes and a wonderful person to work with — very nice to me — very supportive. I genuinely liked him. That was how I got involved and active in poverty programs. Then one day in 1966 I was speaking in the Commodore Hotel, some man handed me a note — it said, "Mayor Lindsey, he wants you to call him." I didn't know the Mayor then. He was a Republican and I was a Democrat, although I had voted for him. I never told him that. I didn't get to call him until the end of the day and his secretary said, "we have been looking all over town, the Mayor wants to talk to you." He got on and he said, "hello, would you take the job of Welfare Commissioner?" Just like that and I said, "thank you, Mr. Mayor — no." And there was kind of a silence and he said, "what

do you mean no?" Well I said, "I've got a lot of other things to do — many other things to do." I had been invited by the Governor of Hawaii to consult on poverty programs. I said, "no I can't do it." Then I remember he said to me. "let me get this straight, you have a reputation in this city of being concerned about what happens to people and you are going to tell the Mayor 'no' without thinking about it!"

Well what can you say? I said, "well, I will think about it, but it won't make any difference." Then, about a week or two went by and the President of Columbia University — Kirk — called me in one day — the only time he ever did — and said: "we understand that you have been approached to take a job with the city, it is very much in the interest of the University that you do it." This was the only contact I really had with him in all my years at the University but I said, "thanks, but I am not going to do it." He argued with me and Jaques Barzun, the Provost called me in urging me to do it.

J: Do you think he was getting pressure from the Lindsey administration?

M: Sure. I told [him] I wasn't going to accept but we remained friends. At any rate, Lindsey called me and asked me to meet him and I went down to the East Side — he was speaking to workers and others interested in poverty programs and what his plans were for the future. When I walked in to the Educational Alliance — I noticed somebody pointed me out to him — he had obviously tipped him off. So he stood up and brought me to the platform. And it was funny, a couple other people in the audience in the discussion with him stood up and said, "if you really want to help your poverty program, you ought to hire Professor Ginsberg." So, anyway, after the program, he had to make a lot of visits, all over the city and I rode around with him and for a while we talked about the job and I explained why I couldn't do



it. I had even prepared a list of names of people who could do the job and he tried to persuade me with this and that. I said, no I couldn't do it. [My wife] that day said let me know if you do it. I said, "I won't even call you because I am not going to do it."

While we were going back towards City Hall, past the School [of Social Work] on 91st Street I said drop me off here and then I will call you. And he said, "Oh, no, it's much easier for you to say no on the telephone than it is to me personally." At any rate he needed to make a call and we stopped at a phone booth and he didn't have a dime, I lent him the dime, he came out and we started back to City Hall and we were talking about something totally different and he suddenly turned to me — for the first time he called me Mitch, he said, "Aw come on Mitch, we'll have fun together." I shook his hand and that is what happened. I really had no intention of doing it that I knew of.

J: Why did you feel so strongly that you didn't want to do it - it seems like such an exciting opportunity?

M: It was an exciting opportunity, but I was heavily involved in the School and University, in Washington and with other projects. I felt if I took this, I wouldn't be able to continue much of what I was doing. I was sure, that it would be a tremendously time consuming task and — I don't know — I have always suspected afterwards that deep down within me, I wanted to do it. That's why in the end I did do it.

J: Do you think he sensed that in some way?

M: I think he may have; he was a smart guy because he didn't give up — he could have easily after all. But I did it — it was extraordinarily difficult, for over four years. Lindsey called me in and asked me to [take] the HRA position and I took it. It was extraordinarily demanding, but I have

no regrets about doing it. It was exciting, it was frustrating, all the things that you would think of, but it gave me a chance to try some things, some worked, some didn't work.

Senator Long, Chairman of the Finance Committee (Louisiana) called me down to the Finance Committee and I got to know Wilbur Mills, Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and I was often testifying — with Kennedy and with Johnson and so I was very heavily involved. I found it stimulating, and exciting and doing what I really wanted to do.

J: You really had a chance to make and influence policy.

M: I had a chance to — sometimes it didn't work. I was active in the Family Assistance Program — the Nixon Welfare proposal that most social workers opposed. I and a number of others supported it because we thought it was much better than what we had and we could build on it. I worked very hard with Moynihan, Ribicoff and Kennedy. I was defined as doing more lobbying on it than anyone else. John Gardner, Secretary of Health Education and Welfare offered me a job of Assistant Secretary. I almost took it, but Lindsey talked me out of it. But at any rate a group of organizations — the League of Women Voters, A.F.L./C.I.O. asked John and me to visit the Democratic members of the Senate Finance committee to try to get them to support or at least consider the bill. The first one we went to was Gene McCarthy (because when he was running for President he announced during the campaign who his cabinet would be if he were elected and there I was — listed as secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), although I had never met him. I was called about six o'clock in the morning by some radio or TV station and they told me that — I thought it was a big joke — and I started to laugh and McCarthy



heard that and got insulted — he thought I was not treating him seriously.)

And [McCarthy] said, "Commissioner, understand, the whole topic of welfare bores me. I never attend the committee when that is on the agenda." Very different from his public stance. We went to see Fullbright and he said, "I am only interested in the international field, I'm not interested in even talking about it." The funny one was Senator Joseph Montoya, from New Mexico. He didn't know anything about it, but he said, "I have in Santa Fe and Taos a large number of hippies who are living on food stamps — my constituents don't like them there — if you can do something to get rid of them I will vote for your program." That killed that. At any rate the House passed the bill in the end.

A few of us, including Leonard Lesser, of the Center for Community Change, with help from Tom Joe worked with representatives of the Secretaries of HEW and Labor and worked out what seemed to be a fair compromise to both groups. Leonard and I then met with Senators Ribicoff, Kennedy, and others, and they all agreed to the plan.

Then I called Moynihan who was upstate in New York — Ribicoff asked me to call from his office — and I explained it to Moynihan who was handling it for Nixon [and he] said, "that's a fair settlement — I'm sure that the President will go with it — I'll call you back in a day." We never heard from him. Many years later he told me that McGovern had come out that same week, with his welfare proposal — a kind of extreme one — and Nixon felt it was better to run against welfare [rather] than as an advocate. So that killed it. Actually I think Senator Long might have killed it anyway.

J: This would have been the guarantee of a minimum income. — a guaranteed annual income at the time. And that is what killed it?

M: It got through the house. I was testifying before Senator Long and he said, "since you've got so many people on welfare my wife can't find anybody to do my shirts." Such arguments! And another time he said, "my friends and I — we like to fish from the banks of the river in Louisiana and the banks are crumbling. We used to be able to get these men to build up the banks and now they are on welfare and they won't take it." This was in public session! That was the nature of it.

J: Is this when Supplemental Security Income (SSI) came down as an alternative?

M: Yes, that was interesting. And we didn't, I think, we didn't realize it was as important as it was at the moment. When that passed some people saw it as a kind of sop — because you can always do better with aged, blind and disabled. [This] was no great surprise, but it was a surprise that it went so quickly.

J: Was it frustrating to have gotten so far and then have it swept off of the table?

M: It was frustrating — to have it killed quite that way and then never [revived]. You know there were various efforts to revive it, but I remember — Robert Kennedy — he worked with me [and others] on another bill — I remember his calling, saying that if his name as a sponsor would help, that would be fine, but if his name as sponsor would hurt, to take it off.

J: That illustrates genuine commitment and not just a political one

M: Exactly. And he was there and in many ways Ted Kennedy was similar. While I was commissioner, Robert Kennedy went to Israel and suggested to them that they bring me over as a consultant! It was funny because John Lindsey had apparently thought of the same idea and it was a question [as to] who would get credit for



it. At any rate, the Israeli's invited me. I facetiously [said] something to the press, "well now that I have cleaned up all the problems in New York City, I might just as well go [to Israel]." And the Times wrote an editorial and the headline was, "thanks but no thanks", and it went on to say, "there is enough to be done in New York and even though the Commissioner was facetious, he should turn it down and stay here."



lot more to offer. It is the kind of job that weighs you down and I really began to think as I walked in that I wasn't sure that it [might not] benefit from somebody else taking a fresh look at it. Bernie [Schiffman] was leaving and some of my other staff felt it was time to leave.

J: Nixon disliked social workers, didn't he?

M: Yes, he did. But I have to say this about him, once when I met him and shook hands, he said, "you have a tougher job than I have." But he disliked social workers and almost everybody else. I think, one of my better quotes, that ran in the *Wall Street Journal* on the front page, was [after] Halderman had said when Nixon got his welfare plan, there wouldn't be any jobs for social workers and they would have to go out and earn an honest living. I was President of NASW, and the *Journal*, among others, asked me for a quote or a comment and I said "how would he know what an honest living is?"

J: How did you decide to leave this position?

M: When Bill McGill was appointed President of Columbia he asked me to take the job as Dean. I was reluctant. McGill came back to me and said, I want you as Dean but I also want you as my personal advisor in community affairs, in close relationship with me. He said, "I'll make it a real job and we work well together." And I wasn't sure. I was torn. Lindsey wanted me to stay I remember it was a Sunday night and [my wife] and I went down to City Hall by appointment to see the Mayor. When I walked in the room, I wasn't sure what I was going to say. The job had attractions to it. On the other hand I had been there for more than four years and it wasn't just that I was tired, I wasn't sure that I had a

J: What had Bernie Schiffman been doing?

M: Bernie was an associate administrator, and Major Owens, now a Congressman, was the Commissioner of Community Development and Carl McCall, now the State Comptroller, was Chairman of the Council Against Poverty and Deputy HRA Administrator. I walked in and as I walked up to him I said, "John I am going to leave" and that was hard for him, because we had become very close. I never had any criticism — anything to criticize him for. I made some not so hot appointments but they were my appointments. They weren't pressured from him.

I did hurt him once badly and I didn't know it. I should have. His wife told me later. I was interviewed for the *New Yorker* by Nat Hentoff, in a lengthy article. In the course of it, he asked me who I thought would make a better president, Robert Kennedy or John Lindsey. And I said I thought Lindsey would make a great Senator, which I did, (I thought he would be a wonderful spokesperson for a job like that), but I thought Kennedy might be a more effective President. When I went back as Dean, Lindsey said, "Mitch be careful. You may think you're getting away from politics by going to the University, but politics at the university are worse than they are in the city — only the people doing it are not as good at it." And he said, "make sure you sit in the last row, so nobody can stick a knife in your back." But I have to say at the University with



McGill and then Sovern, (McGill was president most of my years), were very supportive.

J: It sounds like both with the city and with Columbia you were very fortunate in having a boss that you worked very well with and whom respected you.

M: Whom I respected and who respected me. You know the School, like the city, had a lot of problems and generally speaking we didn't do all the things that I would have liked to have seen done, but....

J: What was the particular change that you wanted that you were particularly disappointed in?

M: There were 2 things that I wanted. Of course, one was the welfare [reform]. Alvin Schorr was a close colleague and we were strong advocates of something like the Children's Allowance or the Family Allowance and Mondale at one point was supportive. I did some consulting with Jimmy Carter too. He was very smart about the details but not about the politics of it. So that rarely did we ever get anything we wanted to get and reach the national minimum standard in welfare, a key factor in bringing about change. We thought that it was utterly unfair that Aid to Families and Dependent Children is the only program that is not adjusted to the cost of living and never has been and that is simply because of who the constituents are. And we fought for that, failed all the way down the line to have any really significant improvements. Some of the things that happened were because the courts outlawed the residency laws. When I came to Department of Social Services, my very first executive order was to outlaw "midnight raids,"... that was executive order Number One.

J: And that set precedents in other welfare systems?

M: And it became national policy. Workers used to go in the middle of the night and go in the back to see if they could find a man.

J: That was a major accomplishment.

M: And, I contacted the Civil Rights Groups and the Legal Service Groups and I said if they ever heard of it happening again, after I had outlawed it, to get in touch with me. It never happened — I never heard about it. When I found caseworkers could discuss any subject but family planning with clients, I managed to change that. Rockefeller and the legislature were opposed to it and Lindsey, of course, when I turned to him, was delighted with it as an issue and we forced it through the legislature and changed that. It was a ridiculous policy.

J: So, they had up to now not been able to discuss family planning and after this they were able to as an issue.

M: It didn't change the world but it was an accomplishment.

J: Now was child welfare part of your department?

M: It was and there were things I wished we had done more of — but we did open up — and it lasted only, I think while I was there — a 24 hour service using home-makers. Homelessness was not much of a problem — it was a Bowery thing. I went down once and opened up our first homeless shelter.

J: Was that the Men's Shelter on East 8th street?

M: It was a men's shelter, that was the first one. Remember, the HRA was also a community action agency, an employment agency, and an addiction service. The mayor appointed me his educational



liaison for the Board of Education and in 1968 was the strike in Brooklyn and I was running back and forth. I was spending two or three days overnight at Gracie Mansion during the negotiations. I would report to the Board of Education in Brooklyn, bring a counter offer — so there were a million things to do.

J: Was it a seven day a week job?

M: Yes, but it was an exciting job — I have no regrets. I found that the best for me was a combination of an academic setting and working in the public sector. The ability to work in both settings was very valuable. I would not have wanted to miss that. Because as I look back on it, it would have been wrong for me to turn the job down. I would have missed public service and I am glad I did it, and I say to my students to this day, they ought to get into — spend part of their time—in public service.

J: When you look back do you view that as a high point in your career or is that stating it too strongly?

M: No. I think it is the high point in my career.

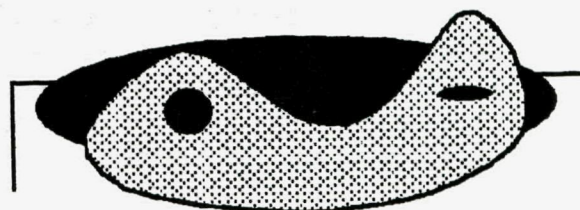
J: You became really a national policy leader and you had a base of operations — it was different from being in a university.

M: Yes, exactly. I couldn't have done some of those same things through the university — so yes, that's the high point. No regrets, but I also think — deep down within me — that I made the right decision about the time to leave. About a year later a wonderful reporter Peter Kihss of the *New York Times*, who followed me all the way — very smart — supportive of me when he thought I deserved support, critical when he thought I deserved criticism — and a year or two after I left, he came to the School and he said, "I want to do a story looking back on it — how do you feel about it — how much difference

do you think you made?" I remember, I thought long and hard about it. I wasn't sure. I said, "the issue I am not clear about that I wrestled with then (and the truth is that I wrestle with now — somebody asked me just the other day and that is a question that I have never been able to resolve) is how much difference did my being there make to the people who were the constituents? There is no way of knowing that. They were better, I think, because there were no midnight raids and there were other changes in approaches and attitudes but did it — knowing what has happened to poor people in general — did it really make any difference? Did I make any difference? I'll carry that one with me until the day I die. Because I don't know. I don't know the answer. I know what I would like it to be. But late at night when I can't sleep — I think about it — I still think about it. Did it make any difference? I don't know.

J: When you are having those thoughts, are there things you think of, that you wish that you had done — is that part of it?

M: Yes, there are things that I wish I had done. While I was Commissioner, we switched from surplus food to food stamps which were clearly an improvement, which taught me something I knew already. I went to my colleagues at the School of Social Work and elsewhere and asked for advice, [but] rarely was it any help — they were too out of touch with [reality]. The choice we had was between surplus food — you know what surplus commodity food is like, peanut butter and rice — and





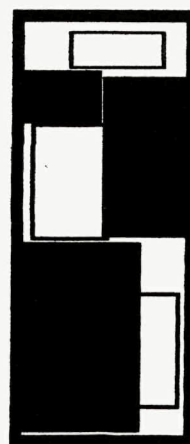
food stamps, [which had] become an alternative in parts of New York State [but not in] New York City. I thought [food stamps] was better and I went and I talked to people and invariably at the school my [social work colleagues] said, "oh, neither of them is any good, give them more money." But that wasn't the alternative that I had! People were always saying [that] to me. I knew that. I knew more money [would be better], but that wasn't it and I had to make a choice between — and I learned that — you have to make choices among the alternatives that are available to you.

And it was always like that. I knew there were a lot of things that could be done — that could have been done differently but one operates — I had to operate within budgetary restrictions. But it was a dramatic time in some ways — we moved to food stamps and then we started Medicaid. People — wise people — urged me to defer doing anything for a year and it probably would have been better — so we could have gotten better prepared, but on the other hand I felt and the Mayor agreed with me, that it was time to do it. But if I had said the other way, I think he would have backed me.

Poor people needed the service even if it wasn't as good as it could be. It was better to start the service than to wait, so we went in with something like a three month start up period and we made mistakes. But it was an enormous kind of program. I found [that] the fraud that we were worried about had happened, but a lot of the fraud was by the providers — dentists, doctors. We found a dentist who charged for removing the same tooth 3 times. And when I went to the New York Dental Society they said, "well who are you to be telling the doctor or the dentist what to do." The doctor would come into a tenement and stay on the ground floor and call out to everybody, "how are you," and then charge us for each one.

I was always in hot water with it. Then we had 2 strikes and that was a hard time for us. But we were able to keep the operation going. But I still remember as I walked through picket line at one of the centers, a striker was carrying a picket sign that said, "Quo Vadis Liberal Dean." I thought that was creative. And I got it, he gave it to me. And those [situations] were hard. There was a lot of [hate mail]. I always thought the most creative one was the one that wrote to me and said, "I am going to stone you to death." For awhile the mayor and the Police Commission insisted that I have a 24-hour guard [because of the threats] There were two groups — some people thought we weren't doing enough for clients or that we were doing too much. I can't tell you, I must have gotten, over those years — better than a hundred telephone calls, mainly business men. One said, "I was in Montana or I was in Wyoming — there is a lot of open space — why don't you ship those clients out there, they will be better off." Serious, big businessmen. And I would say, "you know there is a constitution in the United States." I would try to meet with them and they would say, "welfare destroys by giving them some money — welfare and social security destroys their incentives, they won't save for the future." And I would say, do you have retirement programs, pretty good ones?" "Well sure."

"Does that effect your incentive?" "Oh, well that is different." And I even went once to the IRS and I asked them — (I was concerned about fraud) — I asked them about fraud in the IRS and I told them about our figures, which were running 7 or 8 percent. And he laughed at me and he said, "our fraud figures triple yours." But cheating on the income





cheating on the income tax is the great American game.

J: I guess part of what I am hearing you say is that in that job you had to make certain compromises, and is that some of what was difficult was hearing from some of your colleagues that you were not being true to [certain] ideals.

M: Yes, I heard that and don't forget I had been President of the NASW and was active in that and that is the nature of those jobs. One, you have to choose, as I said before, one of the alternatives that are available. And two, progress and change comes very slowly. The notion that you can make sweeping things or change everything around — Alvin Schorr and I both worked hard for national health insurance; well it never got anywhere! Probably never going to get anywhere now. So you do have to understand that if you are going to be part of a city or a state or federal government, there are a lot of restrictions. You fight for more money. I used to fight for higher welfare allowances at the state legislature.

I still remember, I went out West somewhere and made a speech on welfare reform — this man was a state legislator — Wyoming or Montana — he came up to me afterwards and he said to me, "Commissioner, you explained the program very well and I understand it, but to you welfare reform means improving welfare and adding people to it — out here welfare reform means cutting back on welfare and saving money." So that is a reality, you do your best for them.

When my appointment [as Commissioner of DSS] was announced on the radio, Richard Cloward called that night and he said, "don't do it—we had a meeting on welfare rights organization today and we decided to make New York City the number one target." Well, I said, "Dick, do what you have to do and I'll do what I have to do." And we agreed at that time

that would happen. But it didn't change the fact that we were personally friends. I was having a meeting with the welfare rights organization, because we organized welfare advisory groups. The welfare rights groups and Beulah Sanders, a big woman who was head of the welfare rights [organization], were screaming at me, as they always were because that was part of the game — you know, this and that, denouncing me. Then, in the midst of it, surrounded by her friends, she dropped her voice and she said, "Cloward and Piven saw you outside and they thought you looked tired, you should go home awhile and rest." And then she went right back to screaming.

J: How long were you at Columbia as Dean?

M: I took the Deanship at the beginning of 1970 and I resigned June — the end of the second semester — in 1981 — so I was the Dean for 11 years. I stayed on as a professor from '81 to '86.

J: And you have kept teaching since then?

M: I keep teaching part time.

J: Did you teach throughout the period as Dean?

M: Most of the years I taught — we had something then which I organized called the Dean's seminar. I taught a few years — most of the years I taught at least a class. Even when I was Commissioner I came back a couple times, having a class on social policy.

J: So you came back to other people's classes. Did things change a lot when you were Dean. Were there any directions that you tried to set [for] the School?

M: I was of course pushing us to do more in group work and community organization. Social policy I obviously had a deep



interest in. I worked on trying to develop closer relations with the public agencies. We worked out some of those fellowship alliances by which students could come to the school, so they could go back to their [agencies]. I wish the school could have done more, but it is not just the school's fault. Some of it was.

J: Last question I guess — what meaning has it had for you — having been a social worker all these years and having done all the different things you have done?

M: Well it is meant a lot. It's done a couple of things. It has made me proud that I was able to do certain things. It's made me at the same time — I don't know if humble is the right word — but troubled that I wasn't able to do more, so for me it is a mixed feeling really.

J: Are you glad that your career went the way it did?

M: Glad I had that mixture of public and private. As my wife said I was lucky to meet and work with some interesting people. Just the other day, you may have seen the announcement that Erik Erikson died and in my office I have a book "Ghandi's Truth" which Eric wrote. I had set up a special advisory committee at HRI, Eric joined it, so I got to have quite a lot of contact with him. And in the book he draws an arrow between truth and the bottom of a page and he says, "to one who understood the truth — to Mitch from Eric." I have a number of them from the Kennedys and so forth. So I don't mean just those people, the people I've met or have been exposed to were very important, mainly they have been in the profession or related professions. I learned a lot from people like Richard Titmuss, Alvin Schorr, Tom Joe, Leonard Lesser, Mel Glasser and Israel Katz. So I look back with great satisfaction.

There are many people whom I identify with — we have had some differences of opinion- but a deep feeling of respect and love for some. I have been helped very much by close friends, such as Irving Miller, Harry Minkoff, Bernie and Wilma Schiffman, Jim Dumpson, Sylvia Hunter, Jack Goldberg, and Arnold and Helen Gurin. Most important of all is my wife Ida. You know I have had a very checkered and busy career and the reason while I am still around — shaky, but still here, is more Ida than anybody else. It's been an exciting career for me. I wouldn't have minded if it had been in some ways different. But I always like to think, it will make some difference in the future but I have no way of knowing that.

J: But I think you have had a remarkable career and I hope that when you are up at night thinking about what you haven't accomplished, that you are also thinking a lot about — that you have accomplished so much — and the fact that you did go into the public sector when you could have just stayed in an academic setting — so few people do that — that is a real commitment and statement that certainly inspired me and I am sure many other people.

M: Well I hope so. I appreciate that. □

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