

ARNOLD SALTZMAN  
Interviewed by Ben Cohen  
January 23, 1995

ABSTRACT:

Mr. Saltzman, with an MSW from Tulane University School of Social Work, was employed as a social case worker in Chicago and in Tulane with Jewish family agencies. After a period as an administrator in the Tulane Family Service, he went to work as director of the Los Angeles Jewish Family Service, where he was for 16 years before becoming the General Manager of Mt. Sinai Memorial Park in Los Angeles. This interview describes his entry into the field of social work, the progressions in his career, and why he took the directorship of a cemetery.

COHEN: Arnold, have you been the subject of an oral history interview before?

SALTZMAN: I don't think I've been interviewed in a formal way. People may have asked how I got into the field, but in terms of an interview with this number of questions (referring to the interview guide that had been mailed in advance of this interview), with a beginning and an ending, I don't think so.

COHEN: So there isn't any place where something is stored that might supplement this CSWA interview?

SALTZMAN: No, I don't think so.

COHEN: Okay. Let's go back to your beginnings as a social worker, Arnold. Tell me a little bit about how you happened to get into the field; a little bit about your history.

SALTZMAN: I was a student at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. I had just returned from a six-months stint in the Army to fulfill my military obligations and came back with the idea that I wanted to complete my degree. At that time, I was majoring in history and began a minor in sociology. As I was approaching the end of that semester, which was, in fact, the last semester before getting my degree, I was really struggling with what I wanted to do with the rest

of my life. The sociology professor suggested I attend what was called in Texas, a “roundup” weekend. In Houston, roughly 90 miles from Beaumont, they had several of the graduate schools represented at this weekend. There was LSU, Tulane University, the University of Texas - seems to me there was a fourth one: I just can’t remember. They would come in, describe their graduate programs of social work. The professor thought by virtue of the way I participated in the sociology classes that he was teaching, that I would be inclined to be interested in social work. After that weekend, I was really impressed with what they described as the course of study and the approach to field work and so on. I was about to leave that weekend and return from Houston to Beaumont, when someone, and I can’t remember who, mentioned that if I was going to pursue a degree in social work, they knew the Jewish Family Service in Texas was looking for someone to provide a scholarship to, and pay their way to graduate school with the understanding that you would come back and fulfill an obligation of one or more years with their agency. That’s what did it. The Jewish Family Service was a clinical agency. It’s possible that the Jewish Community Center approached me and also said, “We have a scholarship.” I really didn’t distinguish, at that point, between the clinical and the Center field or any other field, but I did get the scholarship from the Jewish Family Service, interviewing there, and they said conditional upon my being accepted by a school of social work, they would provide funding. I did and went to Tulane, and I went back to the agency to work for them for two, actually, three years.

COHEN: So you more than fulfilled your obligation.

SALTZMAN: I did, yes.

COHEN: Where did you go from there, and how long did you stay there?

SALTZMAN: I was in Houston for three years, and in the third year, I attended a workshop, a seminar given by Frances Sherz . She was with the Chicago Jewish Family Service, and she was espousing the virtues of family therapy: meeting with the family as a unit, and confronting the issues - it had more to do with systems theory - confronting some of the today and tomorrow kinds of issues the family was dealing with, and having them look at each other and feel with one another in this group setting. I attended that seminar, and it felt right to me. I went back to the Houston JFS and began to employ some of the theory and concepts that I learned from that workshop and was encouraged to do so by my supervisor. But then, after awhile, she recognized, and I recognized that if I was really going to refine my skills in that area, that perhaps, going to Chicago and working under Frances Sherz would be the way to do it. So at the end of the three years in Houston, I left and went to work in the JFS in Chicago, working with Frances Sherz.

COHEN: Let's put some years on that. You graduated in.....

SALTZMAN: Okay. I graduated in 1961 and worked at the JFS for the three years following my graduation, so in 1964, I went to Chicago. I was in Chicago for about two-and-a-half years, left there in 1967 to take a position as the Director of the JFS in New Orleans. Now at the point I left Chicago, I had become an Assistant District Administrator. That was a title where I was an assistant to the director of the regional office. I had taken on some administrative responsibility at that point, supervising a student or two, and that sort of thing, when I received a call from the New Orleans Jewish Family Service, a very small agency. There some people knew me from my days of going to Tulane, and suggested that I come and interview for the job as director of this small JFS. One interesting note: while in Houston, when I was a caseworker for the

Houston JFS, Ted Tanner was the Assistant Director of the Jewish Community Center there. That's when I first began to work with Ted. We did some joint programming between the Center and JFS.

COHEN: Interesting, because Ted is from Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, and I'm from Scranton, Pennsylvania, now the twin cities. So we both have a connection with him. I had an early connection.

Of all the three positions with JFS .....

SALTZMAN: Four.

COHEN: Let's see, there was Houston, then Chicago, then New Orleans, and now to get to how you got here to the Jewish Family Service in Los Angeles.

SALTZMAN: Okay. I left Chicago and went to New Orleans in '67. I stayed in New Orleans for eight years, was Director of the JFS there for two to three years, and was asked, at that point in time, to become an Assistant Director of the Federation. This was an opportunity to try myself out in another way, in the field of social work, without having to make another move. It was during that eight-year period that we're back in New Orleans - or I'm back in New Orleans with Barbara, whom I married in 1963, is with me. Our three children were born there. So we spent a nice, eight-year period in New Orleans, where I was, for a period of time, Director of JFS, but then, Assistant Director of the Federation. Then I became the Associate Director in 1974, and somewhere in there, the Board approved my becoming the Director of the Federation. That was roughly in November of '74. The Director was going to go into endowment work. He was at the point where he was considering at least partial retirement, and I had indicated to them that unless I could see that I was going to become the Director there, it probably was time for me to

move on. So they did, by Board decree, name me the Federation Director. Somewhere shortly after that, around February, 1975, I got a call from Los Angeles, asking me to consider applying for the JFS position here. I am not sure, but I suspect that may have been prompted by Ted Tanner, who was the Assistant Director,.....

COHEN: I wouldn't be surprised.

SALTZMAN: He may have known of my work in New Orleans and had at least thrown my name out to the local group. So I came up here in, roughly, February of '75 and interviewed for the position and then returned to assume that position in June of '75. At that point, it was a question of staying in New Orleans and become the Director of the Federation - again, it's sort of an intermediate-size city - or return to a first love in the service field, as a director of a large agency, in a large community. We wrestled with for a little bit, but we decided to make the move.

COHEN: How did that turn out?

SALTZMAN: A wonderful experience. For 16 years, I remained as Director of JFS here, watching an agency grow from somewhere around a million-dollar budget to one, when I left, which was between 13 or 14 million. It was a very exciting period of time, because it grew as a result of so many Jews coming in; it grew because of government programs related in the main to elderly persons. We got into a whole wide range of services to the elderly, and did whatever we could to sustain what was called the "core" of the agency, which was family service and family counseling. That was the toughest part of the agency to maintain in terms of funding. So it was an exciting period of growth and very rewarding and very satisfying. That lasted until 1991, when a former Board president of mine suggested that I be considered a candidate for the

position of General Manager of Mt. Sinai Memorial Park.

COHEN: Which you did.

SALTZMAN: I did. I think of it still as doing Jewish Communal Service work.

COHEN: That's very interesting.

SALTZMAN: It's one end of the spectrum, where you're dealing with people, Jewish, who were experiencing loss and struggling to cope with that, and although I'm an administrator, I'm an administrator of an agency or organization that's dealing with the Jewish community, dealing with families who are very vulnerable. Because of that work, today's meeting with the President of the Jewish Communal Service, it all fits together. I feel it's been sort of a continuation of Jewish Community Service work, but obviously, in a different setting.

COHEN: It's been interesting to me to see the way in which the Mt. Sinai Memorial has used the fact that they have hired someone who comes out of the Jewish Family Service to impress people with the kind of treatment they would be getting.

SALTZMAN: The caring.

COHEN: The caring.

SALTZMAN: Caring and concern for family. That was purely an advertising strategy and decision. We hired a new advertising firm roughly a year after I got to Mt. Sinai. They'd had a pretty large advertising firm for many, many years at Mt. Sinai. Somehow, we felt things had gotten a bit stagnant and stale, and decided to hire a new firm headed by somebody who did an internship here at Federation - I didn't know him at that time - Dan Katz. They did their research. They really went out into the community and came back to us and said, "We think that what might set Mt. Sinai apart is expressing a real care and concern for family. In that regard,

we've identified that Arnold Saltzman, who had for many years served as Director of the JFS, and we suggest that he serve as the spokesperson for Mt. Sinai." The Board liked the idea and decided to try it. It's really created a very positive response. Even if people are calling to complain, because they're unhappy about something or another at Mt. Sinai, they do it in the context of that ad: if I really mean what I say, that I care about family, I would get on the phone. I think the message has been heard, and it's one that we want to have heard, a positive caring for the family.

COHEN: This is very interesting. Do you know any other people from the field of social work doing this work?

SALTZMAN: It's really very interesting. When Ben first approached - it was before he was as close to retirement - he said to me that he was thinking about retiring in about three or four years, and that he was looking for a junior person to work with him and be groomed to succeed him, and did I know of some assistant director in the field or some small agency where there would be a young person who would be willing to come in there and spend three or four years, learning. I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I'm going to a conference. Let me check it out." When I did speak to my colleagues, it was really as though - they almost laughed me away. They just would not consider the idea of going to work for a mortuary or a cemetery. I came back and said, "Ben, I tried, but nobody is interested." At that point, he really wasn't talking to me so much as a candidate, but later, and I think this is partly because of his heart attack, the idea of retiring came more quickly for him, and his whole philosophy in terms of the search changed. They decided to go after a senior person who would, in a much shorter period of time, succeed Ben, and would I consider becoming a candidate myself?

I must say, I wrestled with my own future about that, but I'm glad I did it. It's really been a nice change.

COHEN: Tell me something about the kinds of personal experiences that you've had in your entire careers, such as frustrations, satisfactions, and so on.

SALTZMAN: Okay, well, certainly, at first, I started as a clinician. What was exciting in those days was attending a seminar and learning a new approach, and then coming back, trying it, seeing a family and rising above their conflicts, and seeming to function better, working with children, seeing them perform better in school. So there was a great deal of excitement, working with families. I must say that still has a very positive feel to me, and one day, when I think about retiring or semi-retiring, the idea of going back to clinical work is something that still has a lot of appeal. But then, there were certain realities one faced in terms of the salaries, and when the opportunities would come to be a part-time administrator and a part-time clinician - which was the case in Chicago - was presented, I took advantage of that. I began to find that doing supervision, managing a couple of workers in an agency also felt good. I derived some reward from that. When the idea of going to JFS in New Orleans to become the director came up - at that point in time I was beginning to see that perhaps administration was the way to go in order to accommodate the professional interests I had as well as some of the financial realities I had to face. But there again, in New Orleans, it was a small enough agency where I was just a director, working with a board of directors, but I also had some cases and did some supervision. I was also teaching at Tulane in Family Treatment. In some ways, it was the best of all worlds to have these different opportunities there. Each one was exciting and rewarding. I enjoyed them all,

so that the leaving of the critical field was done with some degree of mixed feelings, but you also took on something that was exciting. The Federation was probably the biggest departure from what I went into the field for, that is working with families - clinical work - when I started to get into a little fundraising. I got into it in 1969, and if you will, it was the golden year for the Federation, though unfortunately, it was going through some pretty serious problems and wars. The fundraising was difficult, but not as difficult because there was a kind of excitement generated by saving Israel and supporting Israel, and we had the Moishe Dyans and the Golda Meiers and the Aba Ebans heroes. I was there, involved with them, planning things with them as they would come to New Orleans for the various fundraising events. The gentleman who was the Director of the Federation there, unfortunately, had a lot of medical problems, so I was oftentimes the Director, the Acting Director, really in the middle of all this. So it was very exciting.

COHEN: I've always felt that the Federation benefitted from having people who have worked in agencies help the Federation. They have a better understanding of what the agencies are like, the needs are like, more sympathetic to the plight of the workers.....

SALTZMAN: I agree. The other thing, Ben, that's associated with that is that when I would see people who had been volunteers, make their way through an agency or agencies into the Federation, I observed them to be much more sophisticated in their Federation volunteer activities than the person who by virtue of just giving a big dollar amount, suddenly became a leader in Federation. They don't have the sensitivity to what the community was needing and was all about. Both staff and lay people going through the agency system was very important.

COHEN: How about moving from city to city? How was that?

SALTZMAN: Unfortunately, it's so often a necessity.

COHEN: How did it affect your family?

SALTZMAN: It did, both positively and negatively. As I look back, I suppose it wasn't as critical when it was just myself or Barbara and myself, making those moves. She grew up in Chicago, and when we left Chicago, she was giving up friends and family when we moved to New Orleans. Of course, we had children then, and they became part of toddler groups, and then they started school, and soon, when we started to leave, they left something behind.

Interestingly enough, the decision to leave New Orleans was one certainly driven professionally, but it really followed on the heels of some very traumatic experiences in New Orleans. One was that probably my closest friend in the world and President of the Congregation we belonged to, was unfortunately shot and killed. He was used as a hostage in a bank holdup. That was - it was Halloween Day the year before we made our move. But it also followed on the heels of the fact that we happened to live in a duplex. Upstairs from us was the Director of the Anti-Defamation League. About two or maybe three years before we made our move, he had been involved in an FBI- ADL-kind of setup where they entrapped some of the Ku Klux Klan people in Mississippi. As a result of that, his home, which was in effect our home, became the target of a gentleman who was in the news not too long ago, Byron DeLaBeckwith, where he was tried for and finally convicted of the killing of Medford Evars. But they caught DeLaBeckwith coming from Mississippi with a map and time bombs and rifles, and so on. The plan he had was to set a bomb off underneath the house where we were living. There were some traumatic things going on.

We moved out - the Federation, in fact, moved us out of the house when that incident

occurred. That was 1973, I guess, because it was a week later, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that this was going on, and then the Yom Kippur War broke out. So we moved out of the house to a downtown hotel, but we couldn't really concentrate on looking for another place. Barb was pregnant, and we ended up moving back into that place. Interestingly enough, the police had gotten a tip on this when they moved Botnick out. But they left us in there. Anyway, those things were going on in New Orleans with me, professionally. It contributed to us leaving New Orleans and starting someplace else.

It did have an effect on the kids - the changes had an effect on Barbara and the friendships that you make, and starting all over again. Also, it's a way of life. New Orleans was a small city with a small Jewish community. Los Angeles is a big city with a big Jewish community, spread out. There were all kinds of adjustments to make in the name of advancing oneself professionally.

COHEN: What social movements and activities were you involved with that seemed to be important, but didn't lead to the goals you wanted to attain? Were you involved in any social movements?

SALTZMAN: Yes, if I go back to the Chicago days, I was involved in the Civil Rights Movements, and certainly, I participated in the marches and that sort of thing. Did it work out? I think it did, but still needs a lot of improvement. Certainly, I think there were advances.

Things that didn't work out - I don't know, Ben, that's giving me trouble. I can't think of any failures. There were disappointments and there were frustrations, but I can't think - the only thing that I can say to you is that concomitant with my making the move from JFS to Mt. Sinai, there was a feeling at that point, three or four years ago, that the Federation had sort of

plateaued in terms of its fundraising capacity, and the United Way certainly was having its difficulties, nationally and locally. I was looking at an agency that had really enjoyed such tremendous growth and was providing such a wealth of meaningful services, that I sort of wondered - I didn't think that would continue. I thought there would probably be a lot of cutting that would need to take place. It seemed like we had gotten to a very exciting period, and maybe we were entering a not-exciting period. I must say, the agency is doing very well, but the change is that since I'm away, the need to do more independent fundraising has intensified, many-fold. What I would have been doing, as the director of that agency, would have been very different from what I, let's say, had intended or wanted to do. But my role was not fundraising. So I think that's a disappointment, that it looks as if it's heading away from that.

COHEN: Even further.

SALTZMAN: Absolutely. It takes away from that which I wanted to do, which is why I went into the field: provide clinical services, programs in services. But here, you're becoming a fundraiser, which, as I grew up in the field, that was what Federation and United Way did.

COHEN: I would say if you were still the Director of Jewish Family Service, you might be considering the possibility of opening an orphanage. (Laughter) Right? That's hot, today.

What's your view about measures that the social work professional can undertake to affect programs for policies that would be more or less effective if pursued? Measures that you might have taken while you were in your positions, or that you have taken?

SALTZMAN: Most of the programs that were added to the agencies, over the years, came as a result of trying to keep a pulse of what was going on in the community; being responsive, and trying to generate volunteer support, which would translate into funding support, either through

fundraising efforts, locally, or through going after government grants. Just a couple of things that are on the scene right now: you hear about family violence, abuse. We began to see some evidence of that in our cases. The AIDs issue: you began to hear that there were young people out there that were in trouble and in need. I think it was more being open to what was troubling the community, than trying to develop a program. We began to see and hear that our young people, particularly young Jewish people on college campuses, were being lured into cults. We began to move in those directions. It's almost as if, when you look back, you say you did this, and it all seems easy. I remember the day when people would say, "Well, AIDS. That's not for us in the Jewish Community. There are no Jewish gays." It was just denial of a lot of the programs that are in place now.

COHEN: Certainly, there were no alcoholics.

SALTZMAN: That's right. Exactly. I can remember going before the funding sources, and their saying that sort of thing. So I think it was really identifying those issues, and then try to mobilize the forces, if you will, to seek and gain support for those programs that now everybody seems to take for granted. There was really a lot of denial, then, about whether or not these were Jewish issues and needed any kind of Jewish response.

COHEN: Had there been times when you had gone after money that was available through governmental agencies where you regretted that you did it?

SALTZMAN: Well, I would tell you that a part, again, of my struggle, and, I'm sure, as a factor of my decision to leave JFS, was that there is no question that as you take on more and more government programming, you're going in directions that are not in the interest or concerns that brought me into the Jewish communal field. Your doors are open. Certainly, in Los

Angeles, you can satisfy that you're serving the main, the Jewish Community. There is going to be more and more challenges, too, if you're accepting all of these dollars; government dollars. What about your Board of Directors? Why is it only Jewish? Shouldn't it reflect more of the constituents that you are here to serve?

COHEN: What about the staff?

SALTZMAN: And your staff. Some of the things that were exciting to me as a Jewish professional were going to be of some degree of conflict as an individual person, religiously Jewish. As you see the agency going more and more in that direction, those conflicts are there, and the struggle is there, and where it's going to go, I'm not sure. I think it's clearly going to be less concentrated on the Jewish community and more on serving in the general community. For me, that represented a real source of conflict and struggle. I hope the agency continues to struggle with it, and never, never forgets why it's here. I know where they're going, and I'm not even questioning that they're going in that direction, but I think they ought to struggle with it every step of the way.

COHEN: I don't know whether I should enter into this, as I'm going to. This made me think of something. I did some student work when I was assigned to Jewish Family Service, during my second year at the USC School of Social Work, and I did field work there and attended some Board meetings. I found that the Board, at that time, had the feeling that Jewish Family Service was something that was started by the Jewish community, but that there was not to be anything Jewish in its program. When new ideas were introduced about things Jewish, a very large - I don't know if it was a very large, but least some of the Board were very resistant to the idea of making this a secular agency. This is an agency that's supposed to serve everybody, and an

agency that if you were going to serve just the Jewish community, you ought not to introduce Jewish things to the social service that you're doing.

SALTZMAN: That's interesting, because as I come on the scene, I find one: we're members of the Family Service Association of America, which at that time was the non-sectarian national organization, but we had not joined the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Service Agency. So after my first year here, I went to a first meeting and joined, bringing to them a president to that Association - myself. I guess that bears out what you're saying.

Then, however, over the years, as we contemplate and move more and more toward those government grants, we would have ordered retreats and exercises where we'd say, "If we could get dollars from the government to do this program, should we accept it," and I'm just taking a percentage here, "if we have to serve 30% non-Jews and 70% Jews?" The Board might say, "Yes, that's okay." The next year might be 60-40, and then 50-50, and then it got to where, and I'm not sure what they're saying right now, "so long as we serve a significant number of Jewish people in a meaningful and helpful way, let's not concern ourselves with what the percentages are. Let's go after the grants." Again, because of the way LA is set up, I think the agency still serves a great majority of Jewish people. It still works.

COHEN: But the staff is exclusively Jewish?

SALTZMAN: No, I don't think so.

COHEN: I mean the professional staff.

SALTZMAN: Again, Ben, I don't think so, but there would be not a lot of non-Jews. Having said that, I think there's another interesting dimension, and that is that not many of the staff are hired because of a government grant. In some respects, they see themselves as working for the

government and don't see themselves as Jewish communal service workers. So even though they're Jewish, they're not Jewish in the sense of being connected to the Jewish community, necessarily. That's a further dilution.

COHEN: They're helping families to become Jewish.

SALTZMAN: Right.

COHEN: They're there to do a good job as a social worker, working in a Jewish agency.

SALTZMAN: So that's a further dilution of what I might want to see happen, but reality suggests something else.

COHEN: Okay. We've talked a little bit about changes that you've observed between social practice when you went into the field, and the way practice is done today. Anything else you'd like to say?

SALTZMAN: One thing I see - and this goes a little beyond the practice, so to speak - it seems to me that there are more and more people reluctant to give to the Federation, to the concept of Federated giving, of whether to the United Way or Federation. They want to give to a cause, they want to give to something they can get close to or touch, feel, or maybe get involved with. I think that's affecting what's going on in the Jewish community, because, along with that goes then the independent fundraising, the agency becomes more independent, not tied to this entity called the Federation, which, to me, is more than just fundraising and planning. It creates a kind of a spiritual togetherness. I'm afraid that's changing. I don't like the way that feels. Perhaps it's a reflection of age, but you see these changes: some are inevitable, life will go on, and contributions will be made. From where I was when I started, and where I am today, those changes don't feel as good to me as being a Jewish communal service worker. The meeting we

attended today, the Association of Jewish Communal Workers of America - between the lines, it's falling apart. The numbers are down dramatically. That says something, too, about the way in which the whole field has sort of gone off. The Federation goes off and has its conferences; the Family Service has its conferences, and then when you try to get them all together to kind of look at what's going on in this field, everybody either doesn't have the budget or doesn't have the interest to go to another conference. There's been a collapse of this national body, which, again, doesn't feel good to me.

COHEN: Anything else that you want to put into the record, Arnold?

SALTZMAN: Well, I've had a chance to espouse my truths and concerns. I'm sure as soon as I walk away, I'll think of more, but these questions are a pretty good bit of it.

COHEN: Let me ask this final question. Do you have any personal papers, pamphlets, or items that can be made available to researchers and other scholars, and that you're willing to contribute to our Social Welfare Archives project?

SALTZMAN: I have one paper - there was an article printed in one of the journals, one of the Jewish journals. And then papers that I've given over the years are probably more related to board/staff relations. I could try to identify them and make copies of them.

COHEN: Now they go to the Arlien Johnson Social Work Library at USC. We'd be very happy to get some papers from you, Arnold. They'd be very useful for us to have. Also, I didn't ask you for a bio. We should have a bio and a picture of yourself. So if you can get that to me, I'd appreciate that. That would go with the transcription.

SALTZMAN: Where is this kept? In the USC archives?

COHEN: Yes, yes. It's stored at the Social Work Library. That's the Arlien Johnson

Library.

SALTZMAN: Okay, so find papers and pictures and send them to you, then?

COHEN: You can, yes. I'll see that they get to the library. All right, Arnold, this has been very, very interesting to me. I'm sure it will be very useful in our archives. Thank you very much for your time. It's been a pleasure to do this.

SALTZMAN: Thank you.

