



Robert (Chico) Frankel
ROBS History Project
May 29, 2007 127

We met at his home in Patchogue, New York late one beautiful afternoon on May 29, 2007. His home was on a street where several other former teachers from Brentwood High School had also planted their roots at about the same time the attractive development was placed on the market, a generation ago for first time buyers by a contractor who designed and built each of them.

The subject of our appointed interview was Robert Frankel, though he preferred to be called by an appellation surviving its acquisition once and forever designated by a burley Italian American high school football coach at Miami Beach High School. Accompanying his family's arrival to the United States from Cuba, and his first experience on an American football team, this coach had affectionately given him the moniker 'Chico', for his diminutive stature, which he'd happily embraced. He, in fact, preferred Chico to Robert. All his friends, including his wife Bobbe, still called him that. He was Roberto by birth and only changed his name to Robert when he became a citizen of the United States. The Jewish religion requires that one be named after someone in the family who had already died. Since there wasn't a Roberto or Robert in the family, and the closest they could come to the name was an Uncle Rudy, it was he who was destined to become the official designee for Chico's Jewish identity in America.

Chico had been living in Patchogue with his wife Bobbe for what would have been thirty-nine years that summer. They had a daughter in Miller Place thirty minutes distant whose daughter

Skyler, was their four and a half year old granddaughter for whom until his death they'd been caring for once or twice a week. They are very close, "*very tight*", and though she calls him "*Booie*", has begun to shorten it to *Boo*. He said he likes that. She likes to laugh and is a very loving child. Given that his wife's name was Bobbe and his name Robert or Bob, we asked if he had ever been bothered by occasional confusion over their names and respective identities. He laughed when he said, "*No, but there had been a time at his fortieth surprise birthday party when his brother hired a "belly dancer" for Bobbe and Chico, and who concluded she would be performing for a gay couple*". Otherwise, there had never been any problem.

I wanted to know how they met. He told us that when he came to the U.S from Cuba and was thirteen, not knowing it at the time, he moved into the apartment house where Bobbe was born. During his senior year in Miami Beach High School he won a football scholarship to Long Island University C.W. Post Campus. He was in his senior year at C. W. Post when Bobbe came to the same college three years behind him. They shared the same guidance counselor and lived only a few blocks apart but nevertheless at that age, three years represents a long time.

He was still on campus when she arrived. He had finished all his coursework that summer except for one class and was working a job at night as a Rent-A-Cop. on campus for Burns Guard. He ate all his meals on campus, so that was how one day they happened to connect. "*Oh, Hi, I know you!*" and then found out they went to the same high school, had the same counselor and she had a boyfriend that lived on Long Island who was going to Ithaca. It was Chico's football coach from Miami who got him started. "*Why don't you go up to Long Island,*" he said, "*check out the campus and at the same time see snow for the first time?*"

Chico expressed his gratitude for having been born in Cuba and having lived that experience. He was also glad he still retained fresh memories of Cuba in the back of his mind. He found Cuban people to be friendly and did experience a little prejudice being Jewish, but as he said, he dealt with it.

At thirteen years old he was happy to leave Cuba. He was having trouble with math, it was a private school and whatever subject that was, it was April, and school was almost over. He was looking forward to the change come what may.

His parents must have had a different experience, but he found school in Miami to be *“not bad at all.”* He first went to a Christian School, and he remembers sitting on a bus while they were singing, *“Onward Christian Soldiers,”* and thinking, *“Oh, Oh, I’m in trouble now!”* *What’s a Jewish guy going to school singing onward Christian Soldiers’?* Next year he found himself in the Public School in Miami Beach, and he liked it.

After a little while the system initiated a bi-lingual class, and because there weren’t all that many Cubans in Florida yet (1959), they decided to combine them all and create one class of bi-lingual students or ESL, whatever they called it in those days. He remembers feeling sorry for the teacher who was the subject of abuse by the class. He remembered the things they did; like putting tacks on his seat. *“What happened was after about two or three days I went down to the office and told my guidance counselor, “You’ve got to get me out of here.”* They asked him why, and he told them, and they said, Okay. *“What saved me was that my mother had forced me to attend special classes at school early in the morning in Cuba to learn English. I still speak a little broken English but at that point in my life my diction was really broken”*

His parents arrived in the U.S. with a combined cash total of fifteen dollars. They were only allowed to take five dollars for each member of the family leaving and nothing else. Everything they owned in Cuba had to be left behind. Chico’s two brothers had already come to the U.S., so they were helpful in assisting the family when it was their opportunity to emigrate legally. Once Fidel Castro came to power and Chico’s parents decided it was time for them to get out of Cuba, his older brother had established himself as a stage manager by the early fifties in Puerto Rico’s television industry. He began as a cameraman and was promoted to Director. The other brother as yet hadn’t established himself.

His father was born in Romania, and his mother was considered Polish by birth. They came to Cuba after World War I, because it was close to the U.S., even though within a decade the U.S had pretty much closed its frontiers to the world. As a consequence there was no choice but to remain in Cuba.

“Did they continue to speak their native tongues?” He answered by explaining, *“Only when they didn’t want me to understand what they were saying.”* His parents were both fluent in five or six other languages. His father had been a jeweler by trade, but Chico recalled he’d been a watchmaker for a long, long, time. His mother had become a Certified Optometrist and ran a store for a short while, but there had been foreboding rumblings of what was to come. Then as soon as they left Cuba the workers took over.

His earliest memory as a child was being rocked in a rocking chair by a governess. *“I can feel it. I can see the room”,* he said. When asked, he described his mother as being very vain. He said she enjoyed anything that made her feel beautiful. *She had once been a beauty queen in Cuba when she was a young woman. That fact had been very important to her.*

Chico said he was born on February 25, 1946. We talked about his grandparents and his memories of them and his desire and as yet unfulfilled hopes of visiting their birthplaces in Poland and Romania. He spoke of his brothers Victor, the eldest now deceased, and his other brother, both of whom he felt close with since they were like parents in a way, both being so much older than he. Each of them left home before they were twenty. His surviving brother lives in the U.S., is retired and keeps in touch. They talk a couple of times a month. Chico spoke of his memorable visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and the effect of looking at a map for the hometown in Poland where his grandmother was born, only to discover that it was nowhere to be found. It had since been obliterated by the Nazis during World War II. He was quite affected by the experience.

Growing up in his family had not been an easy experience as he related it. Leaving one country for another imposed its own set of

difficulties. His mother was in her late thirties and his father his late fifties when he was born, and his brothers were ten years older than he, so by the time his folks got settled in their new homeland by working twelve hour days to establish themselves, Chico had accumulated a lot of displaced anger he had yet to resolve.

He spoke of having a loving relationship with the governess his parents hired to care for him in Cuba, who for all intents and purposes raised him. He called her every Tuesday for years and years. She had family in the U.S. and visited them in Florida and California, and he communicated with her until one day sadly, she died. In a touching statement of affection he confessed, "*She loved me and I felt it*". Her name was Anita. He called her Tia, and then added, "*She was good to me.*"

What inspired him to become an educator? We wanted to know. He pointed to the war in Vietnam, which was raging as he reached college age. He reminded us that there was a draft and his low number was not a good sign. After graduation the draft loomed as a real threat to his future. Teachers were much in demand and were also considered essential to the security of the nation. If you were hired by a school district as a teacher, and you brought a letter from your Principal to the local Draft Board explaining the need for your services, you were likely to be exempted. Chico, like thousands of others who chose not to go to Canada to avoid service, opted instead to become public school teachers to avoid the draft. That's what prompted him to become an educator. He was lucky for the way everything turned out. Some people were not so lucky and got stuck in the wrong occupation. He taught Spanish for five years, and while he didn't enjoy it, he did find career satisfaction by realizing counseling as his true path. He came to love counseling and suggested to Bobbe that she also look into it as a possibility, which of course, she did.

Chico had his own share of inspirational teachers throughout life. In elementary school in Cuba his favorite teacher in second grade was Mrs. Wally. He remembers being in *love* with her. He used to dream about Mrs. Wally at night, and then when he got older she actually came to his house to tutor him. That's when he

knew he was in love with a teacher. Later in his life in graduate school he had a number of teachers who virtually changed his life.

The first of those was Carl Rogers who taught him to listen and get to the core of who he was as a person. The hardest part of his job as a counselor was to listen without having to or needing to say anything. The other great teacher was a lady by the name of Virginia Satire, who was really the Christopher Columbus of family therapy and parenting, being a son, being crazy good and crazy bad.

I asked him to tell us about a rumored gift he had recently received from a class and how it made him feel. Instead, he first gave us a lesson from his counseling experience about foreground and background when he took a break to use the facilities to relieve pressure on his bladder. His example cited our video camera as foreground while being interviewed with a growing need to relieve himself building in his background. Suddenly his focus shifted and peeing became the prominent foreground as our camera slipped into the background. Here we took a brief intermission and then resumed the process.

He started teaching college eight or nine years ago, and when he did, he discovered that he loved it more than anything else he had done prior. When he retired from Brentwood he began teaching in Graduate School. Then, last fall he found out he'd been diagnosed with cancer. It was in the middle of the semester, and that was really tough for him. He started receiving chemo and realized it would be impossible to continue. The only thing for him to do at that point was to end it and bring it to the attention of his Chairman who decided to split Chico's students into two groups and direct them separately. When his students heard that plan they went nuts. It made Chico feel good, although he felt kind of bad for the disappointment they were experiencing. They started a petition to have him teach them on-line. They refused to go into anybody else's class. He didn't think that was such a good idea and neither did C.W. Post.

Eventually the decision was made that he could teach them whatever he wanted to teach and if he didn't feel well enough to teach he didn't have to go to class. He continued to push ahead, and when the class ended they presented him with a picture of all of them in a beautiful frame accompanied by what he called, "a Dear Chico log." It was a wonderful gift to receive, because prior to its presentation he had been feeling crappy. He considered it to be one of the most memorable paydays he had ever had, considering how you never forget those kinds of memorable "*paydays*" you receive throughout your life. The subject of paydays led us to ask him what he recalled as being his very first job for which he was paid. He cited being a newspaper delivery boy in Miami Beach when he first moved there.

His family celebrated every holiday there was, regardless of whose including; Christmas, Jewish Holidays, Chinese New Year, and Fourth of July. When asked about his favorite aromas he confessed to loving the aroma of Cuban food, any kind of Cuban food. His affinity for that cuisine had remained with him since childhood. His first school attended was St. George School in Havana, Cuba from Kindergarten to 8th Grade. That's when they went to Miami Beach and he went to Miami Christian School from April to June. I.M Fisher Junior High School in Miami Beach was next, Miami Beach High School followed that and then C.W. Post College, L.I.U. He took courses in Finland and courses with Carl Rogers first at Fordham, Post, then in Colorado for two summers with Virginia Satire at the University of Colorado. All in all he was Certified to Teach Spanish, he held N.Y. State Certification as a Schools Counselor, was a N.Y. State Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, with gratitude for the knowledge that in coming to Brentwood he had made a difference in the lives of students that he learned about from the people who kept in touch with him.

He came to Brentwood in 1968. He had been told prior that if he really wanted to make a difference in people's lives he should go to Brentwood. It was good advice. He was interviewed by Bernie Steber, the Language Chair who was a classy guy and also a nice person. He knew Joe Palazzola, Jerry McCarthy, Max Sperer, Steve Benza and Gail Alexander. He coached football for several years and

was an Advisor to Junior Classes, Senior Classes, and (FTA) Future Teachers of America. "*Teaching*", he observed "*is not an easy profession.*" He defined his purpose in education as to *always effect change for the better.* He has stayed in touch with several former students even a Spanish student from his first year in the classroom that is now in Tennessee.

He had many second jobs, for during those early years in the classroom economic survival would not have been possible without them. Chico described his first wedding anniversary as consisting of a can of peas and a bag of potato chips but admitted he had not been cheated. He was reminded how we may have been starving then but we had a great future ahead.

His work for the BTA, most of which was conducted behind the lines consisting of volunteering for phone banks and providing a supportive presence, was limited only by the lack of time available. Meanwhile he taught in afternoon school following his morning session assignment then by taking a C.W. Post titled position, Coordinator of The Robert Taft Institute of Government, to help make ends meet. He also worked as an Elevator Operator before automation claimed that job and in the Great South Bay as a clam digger.

He never quite mastered veteran teachers' advice to leave what happens in school at school. His passion for what he did kept him too focused. Was he ever afraid for what he encountered on the job? Yes! He was scared consistently by what he saw in the lives of young people contemplating suicide and floundering in the absence of functioning family support systems at home. He felt blessed to have had his brother Victor in his life as a role model and hero for the time he did.

Ray Perez was another great human being, friend and Counselor for a period. Then quite suddenly he was gone. Chico expected he'd be bored when he retired. He didn't make it. He ran out of time. That time came on July 1, 2001 when he completed his last assignment as High School Counselor in the Sonderling Office of the Brentwood School District after 33 years. He brought home

\$99 per week after taxes his first year and June was still his favorite month. He said it was the best month of every year. *He concluded our time together by saying there was a time when he really thought he knew a hell of a lot – but that time passed.* Robert Chico Frankel was 63 when he died April 5, 2009.