Selma Fraiberg, M.S.W., is Professor of Child Psychoanalysis and Director of the Child Development Project, Children’s Psychiatric Hospital, University of Michigan. Her thirty-five years as a social worker have been spent developing theory and writing, lecturing, and teaching child psychoanalysis.

The following conversation with Mrs. Fraiberg is excerpted from an exchange which will be published in full as one of several conversations with leading teachers and practitioners in social work. The book, Profiles in Social Work, by Mary L. Gottesfeld and Mary E. Pharis, will be published in 1976 by Behavioral Publications.

On Her Beginning in Social Work

Clinical Social Work Journal. Let me first ask you, “why social work?” What led you to choose this field?
Selma Fraiberg. I came from a family in which philanthropic commitment was very large. Members of our family were prominent in Jewish community welfare organizations and philanthropic organizations. So I grew up with a tradition that was very easily adapted to the profession of social work.

CSWJ. Are you the first professional to move in that direction in your family? 
S.F. Towards social work? I was the first in my generation. At the time I came into social work in the early 1940's, it was the most exciting profession for a young woman. And since everyone in my generation was very much affected by the depression or the war and by commitment to actively participate in reshaping the world, social work was really the natural choice.

After graduating, I started out in public assistance in the early days of ADC without any certainty that I would go on to graduate school. I had one year that I consider one of the most valuable years of my life in ADC. I got a sense of the complexity of human problems, of the effects of poverty and the broken family upon children. I learned a good deal about interviewing and listening, and I had good supervision, and it soon became apparent that if I wanted to be a social worker I would have to go to graduate school, which I did. I entered the school of social work in 1941.

CSWJ. At Wayne State?
S.F. At Wayne State. At a particularly auspicious time. And very luckily, (all of this was luck because so much depends on your supervisor, as you know), I got a first rate, most admirable supervisor, Miss Clarice Freud. She remains my friend and is a consultant to our own program here.

This was in a child placement agency which I think threw me into the depths of human problems. It was very painful for a young social worker to see children removed from their own homes. It was even more painful because of the fact that this was the time that Hitler's refugee children began to come over, and we were responsible for the placement of that group of children.

I wasn't sure that I could survive in social work now that I really understood how much suffering one would have to share with patients, and small children especially. And it was only, I think, through the steadiness of a supervisor who allowed me to feel but also showed me the necessity of containing my feelings so that I could be truly helpful to my children, that I stayed in social work at all. Thereafter I had a second year in a family agency, again with great supervision, and I think my whole story would have been different if I had not had first rate supervisors and first rate training. Again I had a caseload of impoverished families. I learned the methods of social work, methods of social treatment for a wide variety of families with a wide range of problems. I also carried direct treatment cases with children under supervision, and again had the feeling of how little I knew and of how much I would have to know. I had been carrying some cases under analytic supervision in both my field placements. . .

CSWJ. Was that a matter of routine at Wayne State, or was this also just good luck?
S.F. Really, you know, it wasn't a matter of luck. Nearly every major agency at that time had an analytic consultant. Usually, by the way, they were the best men and women available; so I had good teachers. Then because there were very few child therapists, and my work was known to some of my supervisors, I began to get child patients whom I carried under analytic supervision. And in a way I can't really