

Voices of the 250th Interview with Shelley Frisch 05-21-2026

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Shelley Frisch and Cliff Robinson conducted on May 21, 2026. The interview took place at the Princeton Public Library as part of the Voices of Princeton Project's Voices of the 250th collection.

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Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcript

Cliff Robinson: [00:00:00] My name is Cliff Robinson. Could you please state your name?

Shelley Frisch: [00:00:04] Shelley Frisch.

Cliff Robinson: [00:00:06] Shelley, how did you come to Princeton, and how long have you been here?

Shelley Frisch: [00:00:10] I came in two waves. I came in 1973 to do my graduate work in the German Department. I was here from '73 to '76 and I never thought I would live in Princeton again. I taught elsewhere, and then when the kids were little, for all sorts of reasons, we wound up moving back here in 1991 and we've been here ever since. We've been in the same house for thirty-five years, and our kids grew up here. The older one just turned forty-one. My baby just got married a few days ago. He's thirty-eight. We just came back from California, and they love coming to Princeton, luckily, because, you know, we love to have them here. It's not just Hoagie Haven, but also Hoagie Haven, but they also come to the library. The library is really the focus of our community life. So, we love being here in this building.

Cliff Robinson: [00:01:12] Thank you, and congratulations. Okay, so as you look around at how the 250th is being marked, whether it's here in Princeton, throughout the state, or nationally, what has caught your attention?

Shelley Frisch: [00:01:27] This is a difficult question to answer, because I've been steering away from it, feeling as though it's been co-opted by our current president, who is making it all about him, and I would love to celebrate this country. It's just become very difficult now under the current circumstances. I'm hoping that changes.

Cliff Robinson: [00:01:54] Do you have any thoughts about how the 250th should be observed?

Shelley Frisch: [00:02:00] Love to have a new president by then. And let's see, I'd like the Congress to start working. I mean, these are not things specifically about the celebration, but I feel as though this is such a huge obstacle right now that it's hard to feel celebratory.

Cliff Robinson: [00:02:22] Okay, thank you for sharing. So, as you imagine the country changing over the next fifty years, what kind of political future do you hope for? What concerns you when you think about the ideals of 1776? How do they show up, or not, in politics today?

Shelley Frisch: [00:02:39] Well, the founders had a lot of really great ideas, such as separation of church and state, following the law, the Constitution, all of which are not being followed at the moment. So the biggest change I would like to see is going back to those principles, while retaining the great deal of progress we've made in other regards, equality for women, equality for people of all backgrounds. I'd like to see us welcome immigrants again the way we are supposed to. We're a country of immigrants, and that's been overshadowed. Everything that this country has stood for is now under a terrible cloud, and while I don't want to go backwards,

because there are a lot of things that were very problematic in 1776—slavery, and so on—I'd like to see some of the ideals, not necessarily the practices, but the ideals restored. I'd also like to see us return to some of the the ideas that came up in previous Democratic administrations about helping the environment survive because we all breathe air and drink water and it would be nice if we could do that without dying and I would like to see us strengthen our bonds to other countries, which have been endangered in previous years. So, I guess that's what I'd like to see.

Cliff Robinson: [00:04:14] Okay, is there anything else we haven't talked about, but you wish to include, for example, stories about Princeton's past, which you feel aren't well known enough?

Shelley Frisch: [00:04:26] Some of the things that are well known enough, perhaps, but have continued to strike me as very interesting is how many people I write about who come from all parts of the world, but wound up in Princeton, I translated a biography of Einstein, and I discovered that when he died in the Princeton Hospital, which is right behind the old hospital, right behind my house, that his brain was stolen, and it was stored on Jefferson Road, [... (SF)], which is my street. And this crazy man put Einstein's brain in a beer cooler and ran with it across the country. These are stories that are not entirely unknown. A guy named Paterniti wrote a book called *Driving Mr. Einstein*. Also Kafka. I translated a three volume biography of Kafka, and [... (SF)] he barely left his mom and dad's house, let alone came to America, but he did write a whole novel called *Amerika*, and he had no direct connection to Princeton, or so I thought. But when my author came to me and said, I've discovered that Kafka's best friend's

two granddaughters live here in Princeton, and he needed—the author needed—a photo from those two women, and they had it. They don't speak any German. They've never even been in Germany, but they've become two of my closest friends, Lydia Frank and Miranda Short [... (SF)]. I didn't know them before, so even Kafka had that incredible connection. Thomas Mann, a book [about him (SF)], is something I'm translating right now. I took a German friend to his old house on Stockton Street. He was no longer living there. I mean, this is before my birth that he lived there, but it was then the Thomas Aquinas Society, and I just drove up with her into the back into the parking lot in the back, and they said, "Oh, we've been expecting you," and I said, "Really?" It turned out they were expecting entirely different people, but they were kind enough to take us through, and all of Thomas Mann's furniture was still there, and it was a very exciting thing. So, my feeling is that so many people have intersected. I just translated a biography of Hannah Arendt, who taught here for a while, she was actually the first tenured female professor at Princeton, [... SF] - I knew that already - but I didn't know that that was it was during her stay here that Castro came to Princeton, and she interacted with Castro, and that shaped her book called On Revolution, so I feel as though every time I have a translation book, somehow there's a Princeton angle, not that Princeton is the center of the universe, and yet I feel as though for me it has been. So, go know!

Cliff Robinson: [00:07:39] Tremendous. Thank you so much. Thank you for doing the interview.

Shelley Frisch: [00:07:42] You're very welcome.

[End of Transcript]