Margaret Lazarus Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: So, I want to make sure the mic is picking us up. Yes, that seems fine. So, did I tell you a little about what we are doing?

Margaret Lazarus: I have a sense of it. Why don't you tell me again?

JR: OK. So, basically, this project started -- OK. So, I just want to make sure -- I'm always nervous that the mic is all of a sudden not working, but no, it is working. I'm sure you're familiar with these anxieties.

ML: It's actually a rather nice microphone.

JR: Yeah. We just got it. Last year I did this all with tape recorders, which was fine, but not great.

ML: Not high quality.

JR: Not high quality and not so great in terms of long-term usage. But this is very cute and, so far, has worked fine. So, let's see. Today is the --

ML: The eleventh.

JR: -- the eleventh. I'm so confused. I don’t know how it got to be this late already. July 11. And I'm here in Belmont with Margaret Lazarus and the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. OK. So, I just wanted to start by asking you a little bit about -- if you could tell me about your family and where you grew up and where you were born, those kinds of questions.

ML: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and stayed there for about a year-and-a-half in Flatbush. And then my family moved to Queens and my parents, when I was very young,

were schoolteachers. My father worked at an elementary school in Manhattan and my mom worked at an elementary school in Queens, and then my father went on to take different exams and get promoted through the system to assistant principal and eventually ended up as an acting principal. He was at a junior -- he was an art teacher as well at a junior high school and then he was a principal in -- on New York City. And my mom was a teacher of third grade for many years, and then went back to school and did her work in librarianship and became a school librarian and a regional librarian. And during the cutbacks, in the New York City school system, in a financial crunch, they closed a lot of the libraries, and she went back to grade school teaching. So I fundamentally grew up in Queens in a -- Queens is interesting. My childhood was -- Queens was a growing multicultural community but, primarily, we were in a very Jewish neighborhood and also a Jewish -- yeah, a Jewish neighborhood and Jewish schools -- schools where the predominant religion of the people attending the schools were Jewish. My mom also for a while as one of her second jobs was a Sunday School teacher at a Reform temple, so we did that on Sundays. Besides where I grew up --

JR: Did your grandparents -- did you have siblings, grandparents --

ML: Oh, yes. Very important. Very important. I grew up with both sets of living grandparents. Well, not exactly -- let me preface that. I grew up on my mother's side living grandparents who had immigrated as very young people. My grandmother came over all by herself at the age of fourteen to the United States from the Ukraine, from a settlement outside of Kiev. And, in fact, I was thinking at the Women Who Dared dinner that, in some ways, that was a woman who dared: fourteen years old, on a boat, all by herself, sent for by her older brother, but nobody -- she knew nobody on that boat. She didn't know -- she was operating on faith that her brother was going to get to the other end and pick her up when she got deposited at Ellis Island. But, you know, I thought that was quite amazing and very brave. My grandfather on that side was also from the Ukraine, from an area near Odessa. And I think he came over by himself, too, roughly at

the same age, with less of a family structure to support him as well. And I think part of the strong motivation for him to leave the Ukraine at that time was the conscription of young men to the Czar's army. He came over and became a bookbinder and worked for a bookbinding company and was very active in Workmen's Circle on the Arbeiter Ring. And spent his whole life in Brooklyn. They both spent their whole lives essentially living in Brooklyn, which is where my mom was raised, and she went to Thomas Jefferson High School and then on to Brooklyn College. My dad's life was a little bit more arduous. His mother, her last name was Carmen, and she and her husband, Lazarus, Max Lazarus, was from England, from London. And, I don't know too much about where she came from before. I know she came over as a fairly young woman, too. I think there was some sense of her -- I think she came from Poland, but, before that, there was some sense that the family had originally been part of the expulsion from Spain. My grandfather, Max Lazarus, was kind of a very active and energetic young man who was very artistic and was designing dresses. And my grandmother was very talented as a seamstress and could literally look at something and design a pattern. And they were starting off creating a dress -- a designer, a dress-designing business. And in 1918, my grandfather died of the Asian Flu. So it left my grandmother with a two-year-old son, my dad, and very little family support because her -- and desperately, desperately poor. And so they had quite a rough time coming up. She never remarried until much later when my father was grown and married, so she supported this little boy all by herself on her sewing skills and, of course, lived through the Depression and a bunch of other very difficult times and they moved around. They were on the Lower East Side and the business they had started very quickly went under-- people wouldn't seem to deal with her as a woman running it. And so the business-- didn't survive his death. So she survived by taking in sewing and things like that. My dad had to work his whole life. He worked as a high school student and he went to City College at night and, eventually, got a job in the Railway Mail and also as a teacher, he did graduate work. But everything he did, it took him quite a long time because he was always working and supporting himself. And he met and married

my mom in 1941. He didn't -- I'm sorry. He didn't meet her then, but he married her in '41. And they lived in Brooklyn and there was a time -- I'm kaleidoscoping things. It wasn't '41. Well, maybe. And they went -- as part of the war effort, they both went to Nebraska and he was an instructor in the Civilian Air Corps and she worked for the Army in materials. And after the war, they came back to Brooklyn and lived there and pretty much lived there until they moved when I was a kid.

JR: And when were you born?

ML: I was born in January, 1949. And --

JR: Did you have siblings?

ML: I had no siblings. I'm an only child.

JR: How would you define your parents' class status growing up?

ML: Well --

JR: Your family's class status?

ML: -- I would say that they were middle class. There was no family money in any way and anything they had was from their work. And the pay scales of school teachers at the time was not particularly high, but it was certainly enough, and we were not poor but we certainly didn't -- you know, I remembered my father at some point, particularly when my mom was not working when I was very little. She went back to work when I was quite young but, for a period of time, I think he had three jobs: he was teaching at school in the day and then he was working for the Railway Mail in the afternoon and at night he had one other job he was doing. So it was not -- it was certainly doable. They never had any sense of themselves as poor or underprivileged in any way, and they had done very well in getting this work, but it was definitely a step up from their parents who were poor.

JR: Were your parents involved in politics at all? Was that something your family talked about?

ML: Yes. They were. Well, my dad was a member of the Young Socialists in college, and they were very active in the union and they were also very active in progressive and, I guess, what we term now anti-racist work in terms of -- I remember my dad was in study groups. Well, I remember my dad was part of a huge project that took all of the readers in the schools and they were trying to show their white bias. And I remember as a little kid helping him make sample "Dick and Jane" books in which we changed the backgrounds from like Middle Town USA to like urban apartment buildings and changed the color of Dick and Jane by painting their skin in brown and their hair in black and changing some of the words. And I also remember my father going to Puerto Rico. There was a large Puerto Rican community in the schools that they worked at to improve their language and to get a better sense of the culture, of the people they were dealing with. And my dad was in a lot of study groups where they were all -- bunches of people were studying to take the civil services exam for progress, you know, in the school system. You had to take an exam to be an assistant principal and principal. And the study groups were filled with African Americans and Puerto Ricans. And it was a very important part of their, what they saw -- not mission -- but it was a very important part to sort of share these study skills so that everybody was progressing. All of that came to a crashing halt during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville IS -- the strikes around community control --

JR: In '68?

ML: I am unsure of the date but that strike pitted the unions against -- I was in high school and I remember all of this -- it pitted the unions against the communities in terms of seniority. And they were very ardent union supporters. And also their whole progress had been based on the merit system, and so they thought you passed the test -- and they

understood the tests were bias. I don't think they were that naïve but that the community could say we want this person and we don't want that and supersede the union and everything else. They just got very upset. And a lot of the social environment -- the progressive social environment, that part of it, in terms of their anti-racist activities really ended then. I bet you've heard that story before?

JR: Yeah. Yeah. It's a really interesting story.

ML: It's an interesting story and it had enormous impact on me. I mean, I'm still, of course, figuring all that out now. I mean, I just -- because I had been imbued and this -- it relates to their form of Judaism, which was not particularly temple-based. It was certainly not based in prayer and worship. It was very much based in the notion of social justice and some of the modern -- not necessarily modern, but some of the Jewish philosophers, Buber and everybody else, and the emphasis on you are your deeds and your job as a human being is to make the world a better place. And so that was very much the impetus of their Judaism. And also just their social -- my mother less than my father, just their whole progressive, urban, perspective. And that strike was very interesting to me because I saw, at some levels, the nature of that commitment and where it got challenged and it was very interesting.

JR: It's really a turning point for a lot of people I think in terms of the civil rights movement. But you were just mentioning the kind of social justice-influenced -- flavored Judaism that your family sort of communicated to you and I was wondering how they tried to transmit that.

ML: I think in their deeds and their actions in trying to show -- and also in conversation, arguing, talking about, reading the newspaper. I mean, I remember being for Adlai Stevenson and understanding why -- I remember -- they were patriotic Americans. I think they were very, as most of their Jewish peers were at the time, very cognizant of the fact that they were lucky that they were in the U.S. and they were not in Europe and they

survived and that the U.S. defeated the German Reich. And so they were very patriotic, but I think they really had a healthy concern about militarism and McCarthyism and it wasn't “my country right or wrong;” everything was approached kind of critically with a level of analysis. And I think -- also, I learned that from my environment too -- I mean, I think growing up in the community -- I remember being in the seventh grade and having one of my good friends, Larry Wang, defend Cuba and Castro--and growing up in high school and going to Greenwich Village, and doing the things in Greenwich Village that one did. Being very influenced by listening to Bob Dylan and just hearing about the beatniks and coffeehouse scene and challenging the status quo. I think people in my parent's environment liked Kennedy but we were already very early on concerned about Vietnam. So it was environmental and by deeds.

I also remember going to many services and bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs. And bat mitzvahs were important in our Reform environment. Girls, they were important, and that was early for that attitude as well.

JR: Did you have a bat mitzvah?

ML: No, I didn't. I was never -- we didn't go to Temple with enough regularity and I think that I was absorbed in a lot of other things and I looked at the task of learning Hebrew--with the piano lessons and I was painting, I was studying at the Pratt Institute Saturdays in the Art Students League and the Brooklyn Museum School of Painting and I had an incredibly full schedule, even as an 11- and 12-year-old. It wasn't something I chose to add in and there was no pressure on -- I mean, it was certainly happening, but it wasn't like de rigeur as it became later on. So, I didn't.

JR: And did your family -- were you involved in any outside the synagogue Jewish activities? Like summer camps or youth groups? That kind of stuff?

ML: No. The only thing that filtered down were some of the activities of my grandfather at the Arbeiter Ring. But we didn't live with them -- my grandmother came to live with us later, but we didn't live with my grandparents and so they weren't that direct.

JR: What about Israel? Did your family talk about Zionism at all?

ML: Somewhat. I grew up as a young child with horrible fears of Nazis and dreams of -- I had a room in the attic that you really couldn't see. It was a closet and it was papered over and I had obviously read Anne Frank and I had a place where, if the Nazis came, I was going to go. And I had this sense from my parents that Israel was the one safe place on Earth. That, despite the fact that they were very patriotic, that there was always a concern that, you never know, the Jews in Germany thought it was the greatest place, that they were totally assimilated and everybody loved them, and you never know. Thank goodness for Israel. We never went to Israel and -- but I also didn't hear any question of Jews' rights to that land. I mean, no notion that there were Palestinians there. The people there. I had the impression it was a perfectly empty place. It was all desert. The Jews came. There was nobody there. They planted the trees. It was great. So that was my impression of Israel. There wasn't a lot of challenge to that.

JR: And how would you define yourself Jewishly now?

ML: I think culturally I'm very Jewish. I mean, what are the pieces of the culture? I am very culturally American from European Jews third generation. Food is an important part of culture and I cook all kinds of Jewish food. My grandmother, who lived with us, and my other grandmother, too, taught me all kinds of Jewish cooking, which my partner, Renner, keeps trying to remind me is mostly European cooking and a lot of it is German Rhineland cooking, but --

JR: Right.

ML: -- I can make all kinds of stuff and I love to do it. I also feel very connected to the Jewish tradition of arguing the world, of arguing until you reach the truth somehow. Arguing, arguing and getting to the truth --questioning, of challenging. And most importantly of looking at this basic commitment of how do you make the world better? And that I believe to be a big part of the best of Jewish culture and I believe it should influence your life. The other things don't matter as much to me and so that's how I -- that's kind of how I define myself as Jewish.

JR: So it sounds like you see your activism as being related to Jewish values.

ML: I think so. The best of what I consider Jewish values. I mean, I think it's a very -- Jewish value.

JR: That's true.

ML: I, surprise surprise, think I come from the best tradition.

JR: Right.

ML: Gee, isn't that strange. But, you know. Yeah.

JR: That you've chosen the pieces for yourself that make sense.

ML: Right. Yes.

JR: So, I'd like to hear a little bit about how you got involved in the kind of work that you do.

ML: Well, as I mentioned before, I was very focused on art and painting. But somewhere, when I was -- I went to -- I graduated from high school very young. New York City had a system where --

JR: The skipping grades.

ML: -- skip, skip, skip -- so I had just turned 16 when I was out of high school and I started -- my parents, I was an only child, and so they really devoted a lot of their assets to me. I mean, I went to Europe, I remember, when I was 13 and I remember being told by my mom, I only wanted one kid because I wanted her to -- I wanted this child to be able to do things and if I had more, I couldn't afford it. But, when the time came to go to college, I got a Regents Scholarship and so I really didn't have any -- it had to be New York State, so I thought of either Barnard of Vassar. And I just wanted to get out of the city. So I went to Vassar. And I did early decision. I mean, there was no question. I think that -- I mean, I may have gone some other place but that was just the economic path that was strongly suggested to me, and it made a lot of sense. I think--I think I remember tuition, room and board, everything at that point, was $4,000 but that they got at least one-third of it, so that was significant. And they had always been very generous to me. So when I got to college, I did a lot of studio painting. But somehow in the process of it, I was influenced by -- I remember painting, but I would be painting these huge large images of -- I remember I did one that was sort of a Pieta, but it was a woman holding a dead American soldier. It was Vietnam. I remember always being drawn to that, even though I had these strong aesthetic connections and drawn to the social content of what I was painting. I didn't believe -- I wasn't of the formalist school in art. I just -- I couldn't let go of the content. And based on real. I realize now I have had a career in non-fiction and even though I love to write stories, somehow, what always drew me, was non-fiction, truth. Well, there is truth and there is Truth.

JR: Right.

ML: And somewhere in the course of studying and painting and thinking that I might want to be a painter, I came across this very -- my sophomore year -- the perfect sophomoric notion -- that everything in painting had been done already. So it was totally appropriate. So I was already kind of -- I was painting but I was looking for some other form and I got a little interested in what was called Happenings and which are sort of the

derivative of what are installations. And -- but I got intrigued by film and, in particular, documentary and film based on the Real. And I took a film course in college, the first one that was offered, and I kept being intrigued. So when it was time to go to graduate school, I applied in art history but I also applied in communication, in media. And ended up doing that. I ended up going to the place that offered me a full teaching fellowship, which was Boston University. And I had some notion -- I remember writing in my--who knows how true it is, but I remember writing in my graduate school application that television had this enormous power to change and educate and that I kind of was following that course. I met Renner in graduate school and the first jobs we both had were in commercial television. And at the age of 22 or 23, I was -- I had started out as a researcher on a Westinghouse show for kids and he was a cameraman editor on that science show for kids, and then I got a full job at 22 or 23 as a producer-writer at Channel 7, which was, at that point, the CBS affiliate here in Boston and I was producing -- it was a very unique opportunity for women because -- it was an unique opportunity. There had just been a lot of FCC regulations and the people were challenging licenses galore and the stations were under the obligation to provide a certain amount of programming that -- kind of -- what was the word for it? Public -- it was like documentaries and -- educational value, even though they were commercial stations. It couldn't all be game shows. And they had this slot, from 7:30-8, where they were not allowed to -- I don't think it was allowed, but they strongly understood that they shouldn't just put on the network programming. They needed to produce their own local origination programming. So they hired a bunch of people on and I think this was also the women's movement, which had deeply began affecting -- I mean, Vassar College was a wonderful place to begin thinking about these ideas and the women's movement was -- already, people were starting to think it was time to hire women, so they got me and got me inexperienced, they got me cheap, they got me for $35 a week less than they paid my male counterpart. But they got a woman --

JR: Right. They were ready to hire women, but not quite ready to pay them.

ML: Right. They got me as a producer, and I worked very hard producing a weekly Public Affairs program. That's the word I was seeking. Public Affairs, it was called. And, I was, again, inexorably drawn to social issues. There was a very interesting host, a woman named China Altman who had made her reputation as one of the first wire service women reporters and she strongly influenced me toward a feminist approach. I met this very interesting woman from NOW who had put together -- her name was Elizabeth Hogan. She had put together a slideshow about women's images in the media. We did a whole show on that. I did a show on suicide and had people thinking about death and assisted suicide and dying. And, basically, I think the budget was like $500 or $1,000 and they really didn't care what we stuck there. It was like their throwaway half hour. It was for FCC and it was a fabulous opportunity. But-- and Renner, at that same time, was freelancing, so he produced a program for my show about unnecessary surgery, about colon cancer -- not about unnecessary surgery but about cancer surgery and a colon cancer operation and we became interested in learning more about unnecessary surgery, that that seemed to be happening to people. We became more and more interested in the medical field, still loose and vague, but kind of tinged with women's stuff, women's concerns. But I was kind of emboldened by the fact that I was ignored, and at a certain point I wanted to do a show about the fact that we were still in Vietnam and the program director finally said -- and this never happens in television. Everyone self-censors themselves and so this is unnecessary when people reach the producer’s level but I forced the issue and finally the production manager said, I don't trust you to do this. And I also knew, even from my prior job -- I'm sort of back-tracking -- as a researcher for this children's television program science show, that I was actually let go. I was not re-hired for the second season because we were doing a show on weather and the executive producer asked me to get an Indian in full regalia to do a rain dance. And I said, no. I said, I can find you this woman from the local tribe who can talk about Native American -- or Indians -- and their relationship -- I think it was Indians then and their relationship to the weather and the land and the climate, but I don’t think

that an Indian doing a rain dance would be a good thing for children's television. And he said, basically, you're going to get me an Indian to do a rain dance or I'll find someone else. And at that point he didn't fire me right then, but it was close to the end of the season and I was not re-hired. So I knew I was somewhat of a -- and it became more and more obvious in the course of the time I was doing this independent programming and more and more obvious to Renner, too, that we kind of politically didn't fit in. I mean, one of the crowning things was we did this show about the images of women in advertising, and it was surrounded in the breaks with advertising, and no one knew when the program ended and the commercials began. And it was -- duh. And, I guess eventually, through our connections with progressive people, we knew it was possible to produce films independently outside of the television world. There were things going on in town and film, women's film, and we knew it was possible to go it independently. So, we both quit our jobs in television and decided what we wanted to do was make our own independent documentaries that would be an alternative to what was coming through the mainstream media. And we founded a non-profit organization at that time. We found this lawyer to incorporate us and this lawyer donated his time. It was a heady time it was 1973, '74, and we didn't think it was morally correct to have a business that made a profit from socially progressive films. So we founded a non-profit organization and made our first film about the women's health movement. This was an issue that captured my imagination. I had a growing interest in feminism and--that's my home phone and no one is home. Do you mind for a moment?

JR: Sure.

[break in audio]

ML: I was interested increasingly in women, their representation in media, and also how they were treated in medicine. I was feeling like -- that the medical system was tremendously patriarchal, and this insight began with some ads that Betsy showed me

that came out of doctor's magazines that we used in this first film, of women as fixtures in a waiting room and the message was, drug her up, give her this tranquilizer. And other things -- I think of all of the images that I had looked at and we put in the program -- the ones in the medical magazines, for some reason, not that they were the most sexist, but they had the most resonance for me because it struck me that the women's roles were meant to keep them subservient, listen, the doctor knows best, the patriarch knows best, and that that had the most immediate, direct negative consequences that I could see. I saw this as a systemic kind of thing that supported a whole industry, something to get your teeth around. There was an organized and revered enemy. And I think part of the appeal was the level of reverence that was paid in our society to the medical profession. And so -- and Renner had the experience of working with some very high-powered surgeons doing these medical documentaries and feeling like, oh, the way the patients were treated when they were on anesthesia and the doctors were just talking about them, the way it was such an old boys' network. At that point, there were very few women doctors. So these two ideas kind of coalesced and I made some contacts with Jane Pincus because her husband, Ed, was a filmmaker and Jane is a member of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, and she started to talk to me about different projects, that their group -- they had written "Women And Their Bodies," that’s the forerunner of “Our Bodies Ourselves,” and it just struck me that there was something out there -- this growing resistance to the patriarchy. And so this was going to be the subject of our first film, and Renner was very excited about it, too, even though it was going to be about the women's health movement, he felt that there were so many of the issues that he had discovered and this was the first organized way in that had some potential for really being growing opposition. So we made that first film. We sold -- he had a Porsche that he had bought in college, an old 356B, and we did the bodywork and he painted it and made it absolutely gorgeous and sold it for a couple of thousand dollars and donated that money to Cambridge Documentary Films. We had friends from our years in the industry, in fact, one of those phone calls -- that phone call was Joseph Vitagliano -- who worked as a

cameraman but then he processed the film that the news people shot. So they would shoot -- they would have a 10 minute reel of film and sometimes they would only shoot five minutes, and he saved all of the short ends for us. And so we shot short ends. We edited original, and I don't know if you know about film in those days, but we just didn't have the money to make a work print. And we made cuts in the actual original film. We borrowed equipment, just begged, and made this first film -- I connected with-- I had read "The Doctor's Case Against the Pill" by Barbara Seaman, and I felt that this -- here's somebody really concerned about patriarchal medicine and I contacted her and she was a wonderful resource and introduced me to other people and also I just -- everything she said had so much relevance that I kind of used her interview as narration. I connected up with a group of people at the Feminist Women's Health Center here. I knew about the L.A. Feminist Women's Health Center, Carol Downer, and all of those folks. But there was a woman here named Jennifer Burgess who had done work out there and started the one in Cambridge with others, Terry Plum, and she was doing self-exams and we filmed her doing one and she was booked to do one at Bellevue Medical Center in New York. And I, then, I kind of -- and as I mentioned, I made connections with the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. I felt the home birth movement was really a part of this. Even though it came out of a somewhat more different, hippie, tradition, I felt that the resistance for medicine and at that time there was a very, very, very small midwife movement. It really had -- it didn't exist then.

JR: It wasn't legal in a lot of states.

ML: It wasn't legal for, still, years later, but there still later was much more of a lay midwifery program. And, at that point, I think Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English wrote "Witches, Midwives and Nurses" and people started like -- people were just thinking about it. But it wasn't connected up with the women's movement the way the self-help was and the way the Health Book Collective was. And there were people in the Health Book Collective. I remember Norma, a very dear friend, who has changed her

mind since then, looked at home birth: I don't know. I don't know if we want to support that. But, anyway. So we made this move and we got some help also from -- we said, OK, now how do we get it out there? How do we distribute it? And we checked out film distributors and they took -- in my olden days I see why -- because they didn't make much money either, but they took 75 percent of your rentals and sales and we thought, hey, we should keep it all. We were very much -- hey, we can do it all. So we decided to go into self-distribution and we were helped by this collective, New Day Films, particularly Joyce Chopra who made the film "Joyce at 34." She explained what distribution was, demystified it, film distribution. And, at that time, was a very good period of time because libraries were buying. They were buying film and they were spending $400 and they were well funded and they thought nothing of spending that level of money and schools were buying, colleges would spend $400 for a 16mm film. And the women at the Health Book Collective gave us a list -- first of all, they gave us $2,000 as a grant. I remember Judy Norsigian arranged for us to get this money -- to help us get the film distributed. And they also gave us, more importantly, a list of everyone who had -- who bought clinic copies of "Our Bodies, Ourselves." So, that got us started and the film took off and people wrote to us all over, from all over the United States, saying things like, I knew we were out there doing this thing, but I didn't realize there is a whole movement. And, in some ways, in a funny sort of -- we were documenting it, but we were also supporting it. It was this kind of a feedback situation. It was absolutely the first film about all of that out there. And we were on the phone distributing it and hearing from the people who were using it and how they were using it, and they showed it to this group and people like this, and they wanted more about that. Of course, we also ran into enormous opposition. I remember there was a film festival at that time called the American Film Festival, which was probably the defining film festival for our purchasers, which were the libraries and the universities. And if you got a gold ribbon -- I mean, a blue ribbon or a red ribbon in that particular festival, you really were on your way to getting distribution. And I remember our film was screened -- was in the medical category and, because we were

very much influenced by George Crile's work and then locally this Doctor Oliver Cope, who was a friend of Norma's, who was thinking that a radical mastectomy was a far-too disfiguring and unnecessary operation and that the results were better from other things; because we showed a woman choosing not to have a radical mastectomy, it said we were perpetrating dangerous medical misinformation and we were, we didn't make it to even the final round of that festival. We got kicked out. And there were other places I remember screening. We were pulled out of a screening at McGill Medical -- at the medical college there and things like that. On the other hand, there were enormous positive responses: women medical students were organizing and showing the films at their schools. In 1975, there was the Women's Health Conference and that was thousands of people and seeing the film and cheering. And we had an opening in '74 of the film -- which was a benefit for the Feminist Women's Health Center here – and it was very strongly attended. So that film really, as I said before, it really was a movement builder in some ways as well. But part of our experience from that was that we were in touch with our audiences --

JR: Had you been involved with the women's movement much before you came to this topic?

ML: Only intellectually and only at work in the television station, feeling -- I mean, I was reading a lot of stuff. And actually, I was drawn in through the whole media imagery angle. And, through meeting individuals. I met people like Lisa Leghorn and Betsy Warrior who wrote about battered women. I was meeting a lot of people. I was meeting people at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center. A lot through the film work too, though. So it was kind of -- it was slowly happening. One of the things that was happening when we talked to the different women's organizations who were using our films, who were using "Taking Our Bodies Back," is they all said to us, oh, so many of our patients, so many people deal with rape. You've got to do something on rape. And that really was something I was very interested in because I also felt that there was imagery in popular

culture, particularly in movies, that were contributing to a climate of a lot of confusion and pathology around rape, defined it as a crime, but somehow it was that women really weren't saying the truth. They were saying -- they were saying no and meaning yes. The media presented very complicated and conflicting messages culturally around rape, so this fit into my whole media analysis approach too. So from that we started -- we did our usual method, which is approaching different women's advocates: people from the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center, who I began to work with personally. People from the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. One woman from the D.C. Rape Crisis Center actually ended up working on the film with us. And we made a film called "Rape Culture," which we pretty much coined the term. This was in 1975 and did we release it in '75? Yeah. So we were making it in '74, '75. And basically -- did you see that one?

JR: I did see that one.

ML: OK. And obviously -- it was very interesting for us because we talked to people like Mary Daly and Emily Culpepper and feminist theologians and I was very intrigued by Mary Daly's “Unholy trinity of rape, genocide and war.” I was very drawn into her thinking. And, on the other hand, she didn't want Renner to shoot any of the film. She didn't want a man in her environment, which created its own level of conflict because I was clearly in a partnership emotionally, physically, everything, with Renner. But we all worked around it and that film, despite the fact that it was done in ’75, has so much relevance for today, so it's kind of amazing. Anyway, we kept working on different projects. From that one, I began looking at -- the women's movement sort of drew me back a lot to my social issue roots as a child and seeing the connections with the civil rights movement, but also seeing the connections with the economic analysis of things. And one of the lessons that we learned with the women's health movement is that things seem to do really well when we could create these small collectives, these islands, and we could handle things like abortion and infection. But the minute that we ran up against other kinds of health issues, people getting cancer for example, we had to enter the

traditional -- or there were complications in childbirth, it seemed like we ran up against huge economic vested interests – and our little islands of independence collapsed. And almost nothing was more emotionally illustrative of this to me than Renner and I attending the home birth of one of the members of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, her first home birth. And many of -- she was a dear friend. She has since died. And many of the other members of the collective were in the waiting room. And she ran into uterine fatigue she had a transverse presentation of the baby. So, Renner and a bunch of us had to carry her down the stairs and we ended up going to the emergency room at Cambridge City Hospital. Well, we get there and somehow the chief obstetrical surgeon was on call then and he somehow figured out that this was a member of the Boston Women Health Book Collective and we were out there -- I don't know -- but the guy was wearing a Superman cap and did one of the most hostile interventions -- I mean, just kicked the husband out. He was moaning in the hallway, poor Nathan. I mean, it was such a scene and it was like, well, she did run into trouble. It would have been irresponsible for us to stay in that other form. And here we were at their mercy and the guy was like -- oh, he was lording it over the group there. He was just so thrilled that this is what had happened. It was experiences like that which kept pushing me, not to lose my women's focus, but to start looking at the other isms that were in operation at that time. And there were clearly, at that time, rather fringe left groups, international socialist worker party -- nothing had very much appeal to me except to look -- I kind of got thrown back into history, which has always been a very big interest of mine. Well, the long and the short of it is that both Renner and I became interested in an indigenous, populist, socialist and labor leader, Eugene Debs, and we made a historical documentary about him. "Eugene Debs and the American Movement." And we distributed that.

JR: I didn't find that.

ML: Schlesinger didn't buy that.

JR: But I didn't find about Minutemen either, I don’t think.

ML: I don’t think so. I mean, it would have --

JR: I would have used that for detail.

ML: Really?

JR: Yeah. I taught American history.

ML: Really? Well, we should give it to you. We found, at that point in '77, one of the sole surviving people who had actively worked with Debs and we had a wonderful time with stills and a little bit of archival film. I'll loan it to you.

JR: Thanks.

ML: Just throw it back in the mail. By this time we were distributing three films: "Rape Culture," "Taking Our Bodies Back," "Eugene Debs." And then, in fact, Joe Vitagliano, the guy who called, said, oh I met this woman who I had actually met before who does this really interesting lecture on images in the media and we made basically a film out of the lecture on Jean Kilbourne called "Killing Us Softly," and it was very much in the area that I had known and researched. And that did very well. And it was just basic enough -- it was very -- also, unlike "Taking Our Bodies Back," which one -- a New York Times critic described as a "messy film." I mean, he just looked at that cervical self-exam and freaked--

JR: Right.

ML: -- and gagged. This was much more presentable on the lecture circuit. And it became kind of feminist 101. That, and its update, "Still Killing Us Softly," I think has been one of the most widely used women's films in the educational market in the past 20 years. Every college seems to own it. A lot of high schools have it. It didn't blame men

so directly. It didn't get involved with any racial analysis. But it simply talked about the power of advertising and I thought that was important to bring to the public consciousness because that was my way into feminist activism; first being horrified by the imagery then seeing that had an economic purpose. Let's see. Then we -- what else?

JR: So did you -- so did you find that there were issues that you were interested in that kind of led you to making the films better? Or did making the films --

ML: No.

JR: -- kind of lead you into the issues?

ML: It was the issues that led me into making the films all of the time. That's just the way it was. So that was '79. "Killing Me Softly." Then we did, in the late 80s, we did -- oh yeah. And then I was an active member of a woman's organization which worked on sexual harassment, sexual coercion and also really active in the women's movement, I became more and more interested in -- I had many friends who were lesbians. Close -- at that point I would almost say that my closest friends in the world, for some reason, were lesbians, just oddly enough it happened that way. And I remember getting into discussions with people -- my parents, progressive people, who felt no compunction about saying things about lesbians and gays, that they would have been horrified if it was about African Americans, Native Americans -- disabled – they would say “they're abnormal, it's just not meant to be.” Otherwise, liberal progressive people were saying incredibly homophobic things. This was in '81. And so we -- I kind of created -- Renner and I being straight, connected up with basically our friends and formed a group of nine, a collective of nine, and we made "Pink Triangles," which was about prejudice against -- it was about homophobia, essentially. And we used the very basic paradigm of the fact that before they were rounding up Jews, they created the Nuremberg Laws and thousands of gay men were incarcerated by the Reich. And we thought, isn't that a

powerful example. Now won't that get the liberals thinking? And we created a whole philosophical…Some of the folks we worked with were active in the Gay Speaker's Bureau. So, we talked about issues that affected -- just about the whole range of homophobia. We worked with Barbara Smith, who talked about relating homophobia to racism that she had experienced as an African American. We talked to lesbians of color. We just tried to present the whole gamut about homophobia and it was a real exciting process of working in a collective, which I had done for my women's organizations, but I had never done it in a mixed group. I had briefly done it with the Left stuff and found it really awful around -- around, just really kind of coming up with so many of the same problems of the women that they had written about in dealing with SDS. So this was really a fun experience. And the film was extremely well received. It was the first time homophobia had been looked at this way. I remember we had a one-thousand-person opening at the Harvard Science Center. It was just great. Again, that's my home phone. Again at that time, I became active in the anti-nuclear movement.

JR: Mm-hmm.

ML: So we started out with a concern around nuclear power, Seabrook. We were part of the Clamshell. And through our actions there we got involved with a group of people and we talked about the fact that the U.S. had threatened using nuclear weapons. Many times -- nuclear weapons hadn't been used just at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They had been threatened throughout the course of history and Ellsberg had done this analysis. And then we got more interested in U.S. interventions, so we interviewed Howard Zinn and we talked to Noam Chomsky and we had fun. We made --

JR: Do you want to say a few words about the Clamshell?

ML: Oh. What about the Clamshell? Just -- I mean, this was just part of our efforts to oppose both nuclear power and also our particular affinity group in the Clamshell was focused on nuclear weapons. Some of the people in our affinity group were members of

Physicians for Social Responsibility and so -- or the precursor to that. So, we were getting more interested --

[conversation about a phone ringing not transcribed]

ML: So we made this film called "The Last Empire," with people from the American Foreign Service Committee and the Mobilization for Survival in a group about U.S. intervention and nuclear threats. And it was all -- all kinds of folks were in it besides Chomsky and Zinn and Ellsberg and Helen Caldicott. It was an example of us finding stuff that we were obsessively concerned about and making documentaries about. And this kind of went on. I mean, every variation of every film we did after that, you know, the ones on domestic violence. We did one on trauma and recovery. It all related to our political action. We just recently released what we considered the third in the series about women, imagery of women, women's bodies and women's -- how women's consciousness is affected by media imagery. It's called "The Strength to Resist." We tried to take a new tack with that in that we thought that, it has been over twenty years of saying, here's a problem, so we tried to talk about concrete solutions, strategies for resistance. And I should -- I'll loan you that one if you --

JR: That one, I should be able to find at the library. I just --

ML: OK.

JR: So do you see yourself more as a filmmaker or as an activist? Or are they inseparable for you?

ML: I see myself actually more as an activist because I'm discovering at times I've taken to writing. I mean, I've -- for a long time, particularly after "Defending Our Lives," which got an Academy Award, kind of catapulted me into the world of writing. I was approached to write a series of op-ed pieces on different things. And I wrote a whole series on racist imagery in "The Lion King" and things like that, so I think I'm an activist

who just happened to express herself through film. I've got a couple of projects we're working on now. One is about rape as a human rights violation. We're revisiting the topic of rape we did 25 years ago and there's been a lot of new stuff going on, particularly rape classified as a war crime. But what's happened is that some parts of the human rights community in the progressive world is willing to look at rape as a form of torture and a human rights violation. And particularly what happens within the context of war. But are less willing to release certain patriarchal attitudes when it happens within families or within acquaintances. So we want to really strengthen the notion of rape on a continuum and the similarities. We did a film in 1998 called "Strong at the Broken Places" about -- it came out of the film we did on domestic violence. We noticed that some of the people that had survived these horrible ordeals were not only being tortured and abused and raped and in prison and everything else, but also killing their abusers and their guilt. And once they were released from prison, some of them were doing pretty well and some of them weren't. And it seemed to me anecdotally at that point that the ones who were doing better were the ones that were willing to talk about the very issues and the ones that were not doing well were the ones who said, I just want to get out and get life back to normal. I don’t want to deal with it. And they were falling back into other things, addictions. And so I worked with another fabulous woman who should be a Woman Who Dared at some point, Judy Herman. She wrote "Trauma and Recovery" and "Father-Daughter Incest." She's a psychiatrist. She just braved this territory. And she mentored us. We found people who used working for social justice as a way of healing incredible traumas that they had experienced and then we took four very disparate people. One was a woman, Marcia Gordon, who had experienced rape and incest and child abuse. She had been battered and eventually became an addict and ended up in prison. She turned it around and said, I'm going to help women, and used that to strengthen herself, and, for the past 15 years, has been one of the leading lights in the domestic violence movement and organizations here in Boston. Another person was a young man, Arn Chorn, who grew up in the killing fields of Cambodia and, at 10 or 11,

became a Khmer Rouge soldier. And he works with youth in Lowell and now back in Cambodia and is a part of bringing Cambodian artists and singers to teach Cambodian youth about their cultural history that has been so destroyed. And he used, in doing that, restorative work, as a way of healing himself and his community. And the third person was a man who, at that point, started one of the gun buyback programs here in Boston. And he had grown up in Southie and lost brothers to basically gun-related violence. He went on to write a book after we did the movie. And it's Michael MacDonald.

JR: Oh yeah. I just read that, actually. It was a great book.

ML: And the fourth person was a guy who had lost two legs and an arm in Vietnam and became active in veterans' rights and then became the head of the VA for Carter and now is the senator from Georgia, Max Cleland. And their lives are very different but their traumas and recovery processes were very similar. So we're working on a project that extends that idea somewhat and it's about international survivors of genocide and war and how -- what they have to teach us as survivors about social healing and restorative actions. There is a woman from Nigeria. And there is going to be a young man from -- that we filmed already -- and some guy who led a Jewish community effort in Sarajevo and ended up saving Muslims and Croats and, you know, things like that.

JR: How has it been working with your partner on things? Have you felt like -- one of the things that I'm interested in this year in exploring with the Women Who Dared is that so many of the people are people whose professional work has been their activist work and so one of the things I wanted to sort of think about is what their relationship is between professional work and other parts of life, since activism is another part of life where there is this kind of blurring.

ML: Well, it's obviously much easier if your partner joins you in your activism.

JR: Right.

ML: And it doesn't feel like, why are you helping everybody but our family? So it's been an enormous advantage. But sometimes it's a disadvantage if you work together. If you have a fight about work, you take it home; if you have a fight at home, you take it to work-- that’s unpleasant. We're also raising two kids, which is its own level of activism. So it's got its pros and its cons. I don’t think, frankly, that I could have -- I think Renner was -- I think if I had not met Renner I would not have had -- it would have been much harder for me to pursue this course. I would have had much more of a sense of it's me against the world, even though I have these compatriots in the world. And having the support of a partner is extremely empowering. It is a trite but true word.

JR: Right. How do you -- do you talk a lot with your kids about the stuff that you're working on?

ML: With varying degrees of success. I think that the best you can impart is their ability to question and challenge authority. I think that part of becoming an adult for a kid is to -- particularly an adolescent -- is to challenge. I love the fact that my 14-year-old is skeptical about so many of my political opinions and agrees with some of them. But supplies his own kind of standard to them and challenges which ones he thinks. And he's not -- I mean, I worry that -- I've tried to be kind of like a little lighter-handed about this than I normally feel because I feel that -- it's the one thing -- I remember when my 14-year-old son was about 10, he said, I think I've figured out what I want to do. I want to become an advertising executive for the military and encourage people to fight wars and torture women.

JR: Right.

ML: He was teasing, but he had already sussed out -- we all laughed and he said it as being a joke, but there was --

JR: He got what you were doing.

ML: Yeah. There is some level of truth to that. You know, you have to be concerned that if you push really hard, that what you'd be pushing -- actually, I've noticed that about religious stuff, too, is that I really felt it was important for my kids to have, despite the fact that my partner is not Jewish, for them to have some sense of Jewish identity, and they've attended all kinds of Jewish activities and services. But also I've made it open for them to go to other religious things and I have not pushed very -- I haven't pushed as hard as I feel. Because I think -- I just don't want to push them into opposition. Renner argues with me about this approach. He says if you want it, you have to just insist on it, but I remember myself as being so oppositional at this age that I want to just make sure that it's things that are really worth being oppositional about and that I don't push certain things on them so hard that they move away just to be oppositional. Who knows? Time will tell to see whether this method works.

JR: What would you say have been the greatest challenges for you in the kind of work that you do?

ML: Well, I think part of the biggest challenge has kind of been the failure of so many of the movements that I worked on to really do anything but be co-opted. And, have the easy and acceptable pieces of them be accepted into society but the hard challenging things, which have a lot to do with social justice and equity, be -- not only ignored, but I feel that sometimes we've lost a lot of ground. So you see tons of women in medical school now. You see more than half the doctors are women. And at the same time you see the same inequity in terms of care, that poor people are getting worse care than ever and that you see all kinds of -- and poor women do just terribly. We got rid of -- we got a slow down of the development of nuclear power for a while and there was some environmental movement, environmental efforts, and now it's like -- nobody even personally thinks twice about having a SUV. So the biggest challenge has been my dismay at watching essentially the economic engine, using the media, being able to assimilate those things that really don't hurt it. And people deluded into thinking that

there has been a major change. There are so many young women that you talk to and so many young people of color that you say, well, prejudice has been improved. Yeah. And some of them are more overt things, legally certainly, but what really happens? What really happens to a young person and their expectations? Do you really think you're on a level playing field? No. So that's been, I think, one of the greatest challenges: seeing some of the ideas I cared about, ideas which we thought were so profoundly revolutionary, seeing some of them so easily being adopted but the big equity core of it not being adopted.

JR: Let me just quickly switch the --

[END OF FILE ONE]

JR: OK. The next question I had for you is just whether you felt like you had any challenges, particularly as a woman, in this field. It might be different for you given that you work for yourself, basically.

ML: I think that that has been helpful to be a woman. I think that it's been an advantage, just briefly, because I grew up in an exciting period where, for the first time, there was a special niche for and interest in women's actions. And also, as you mentioned, I largely avoided institutions, powerful institutions. I always tried to adopt the women's health model movement of alternative organizations.

JR: And what would you say have been the most rewarding things for you in the work that you've done?

ML: Well, seeing some of the direct change that's happened -- I mean, for example, some of the films we made were really before their time. "Pink Triangles" is a perfect example. People were really not ready to hear about homophobia until much later, until other films about gay stuff got much more prominence. But making the film on domestic violence was a combination of -- you'll laugh when I say we were behind the curve there.

We were on the curve. So we made that film and then the O.J. Simpson thing happened and a lot of other things and of course the Academy Award generated a lot of attention. But we seem to have a mainstream effect. We were part of a whole movement of activists working for the release of women who had defended their lives and killed their abusers in self-defense, and eventually, every one but one got out of prison. So we saw direct change as a result of our film activism. It's been incredibly rewarding to be part of that and to see things change. And the woman's health movement, that was another example. It was just great to hear about people saying, I never knew there were other people like me. We all have to get together. Or I never thought about rape in that way. Rape? Really? We are being fed a whole bunch of myths about rape. My favorite movie was "Gone With the Wind" and I didn't realize that Scarlet was maritally raped and was shown loving it. I forgot that. And people saying things like "I just saw "The Strength to Resist" and I want to have it in my bedroom so that when I start to hate my body I can watch it." So things like that have been -- they've been extraordinary. They've been just great

JR: How do you think your work has impacted you?

ML: I don't really know how to answer that. I remember I was asked to give some sort of distinguished alumni address to a group of people who were going into media and I said, "you are what you produce. And I said, what I mean is if you are producing a lot of low-value crap, guess what, you're not just waiting until you can get on to do something better. That's what you are." I've always had the notion that everything -- that you have to be judged by what you produce, and that you're allowed to make mistakes, and no one is perfect. And I've made films where I look back on them now and I say, oh, I wish I had had a greater sensitivity to this issue or to that issue. But at least we were trying to make the world better.

JR: Do you have role models in doing this stuff? Who would you say your role models are?

ML: I had a lot of different role models. I mentioned some of them. Of course, the people who influenced me from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, from the first television show I did. A lot of different people

JR: One question is just whether, and I'm just sort of thinking of things I haven't touched on that I meant to ask earlier about, is that if there had been other causes that you've been involved in that you haven't made films about yet. If you could talk about that.

ML: Yeah. I think I've always--I've had some very strong beliefs about equity in a lot of different things, and so I think they are almost different things we're going to make films about them.

JR: You just haven't --

[side conversation not transcribed]

JR: So that's pretty much the end of the questions that I have. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

ML: I think an important part of keeping my Jewish identity with this was the respect that I got from a partner who wasn't Jewish about keeping that. And I think that that's also an important piece of it, that I was extremely lucky and supported, that sometimes when you don't continue a uniformly Jewish identity, that a lot of it can slip away. I don't think out of any negativity, but I just think that it's simpler and you don't have any religious identity or cultural identity and you just neutralize each other. But I think that one of the important things that I got from Renner was of respect for my Jewish identity. That's real important. And he's very, very firm with the boys, when they say I'm half this. He says, oh, no. Your mother is Jewish. You guys are Jewish. You are Jewish in the eyes of the

world and that's the way it is. So that's been very important.

JR: Anything else you want to add?

ML: I don’t know. I was thinking about how we've been active around sort of trying to reduce competitiveness in the schools. And, in particular around sports and a lot of other ways. I don’t know that we'll ever make a film about it. I'm coming back to that other question. But one of the things that I've been very concerned about, too, is anti-racist education, and I don’t know whether it will be something I do individually, but Erin and I are going to work on a project around boxes for kids. One of them is the Gender Box, but the other one is racism. So I think I'm going to get to every -- hopefully, if I live long enough, I'm going to get to all of the things I really have been active around.

JR: I'm just curious if your kids have issues that are sort of their pet issues. If they're sort of also issue-driven in some kind of way.

ML: Well, my youngest kid is 10 and he's just obsessed with baseball right now. I don’t know, he's pretty issue-driven. My older son did a documentary and it was for National History Day. And, actually, it got first place in Massachusetts and I was very proud of him and it went on to Washington. And it was about the trans-continental railroad. But one thing that he did do that I was really proud of was he took a look at it in its relationship, its impact, to ethnic groups. So he looked at what happened to the Native Americans because of the railroad, and he also looked at discrimination and oppression of the Chinese and also the plight of the Irish laborers on the railroads. And I thought, hmm, where did that come from? And I think that he -- he's very, very, very focused on fairness, sometimes arguing with me about his impression that I favor women, saying things like “look how much you support the women player on his baseball team.” I'm always encouraging her -- there was some question about whether she would be allowed to play. Or my son challenges me by saying “If there is an argument -- if a woman claims X and a boy claims Y, I think you'd believe the woman.” So he's very focused on

fairness to -- sometimes trying to challenge me about as he perceives as my gender bias. But I'm really glad that that's where he is, the 14-year-old. I'll see what happens with the 10-year-old. He's very concerned with fairness, too, but I think that that's also age appropriate and that sometimes slips away.

JR: Interesting.

ML: And I remember one of the most important family legacies was, for me, and if there is anything that characterized what I considered our sort of particular and idiosyncratic form of Judaism, was a concern for fairness. That was our kind of secular Judaism, whatever that is. So, there you go.

JR: Well, thank you very much.

ML: You're welcome.

JR: I really --

[END OF INTERVIEW]