Barbara Seaman Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: So I'm going to introduce us. I've turned on the recorder, and I'm going to introduce us. It is October 30, 2005, and Judith Rosenbaum and Barbara Seaman are at Barnard College, doing an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive feminism oral history project as part of the Barnard conference on Jewish Women Changing America. So it's a pleasure to be here and to have you here, and to get to meet you in person.

BS: I'm just writing about a Jewish woman who changed America. Imagine that.

JR: Who is that?

BS: That's Rose Kushner.

JR: Oh, a favorite of mine.

BS: [laughter] Well, I'm doing an article right now. I was so eager to see you that I took time off, although it's sort of my last day. I'm doing an article for Oprah Magazine on a new study that shows that it was a terrible mistake to take out healthy ovaries when women have hysterectomies, particularly now that we know how to classify women who are at serious risk for ovarian cancer. For the last twelve years, there has been absolutely no justification for just taking out everybody's healthy ovaries. It turns out that because of an activist in Canada, a couple of nice doctors in California decided to figure out some way to find out whether it was saving lives or not saving lives to continue this practice. And they found out – it was quite shocking – that out of every ten thousand women, eight – the ones who had the ovaries taken out – 850 of them died sooner [and] had a significant shortage in their life because of having had their ovaries taken out. That was particularly heart disease and fractures and so on. Now I'm comparing this – this

brought up my recollections of dear Rose Kushner, who, after she had breast cancer, wrote a book called Why Me? Then she got herself appointed to the – she was very aggressive. [laughter] She got herself appointed to the government task force on breast cancer. She somehow convinced Jimmy Carter that they had to find out if the radical mastectomy was really worthwhile or if the lumpectomy would be just as good, which is what she believes. So because of her, the NIH [National Institutes of Health] spent a fortune doing these big clinical trials, and she was right, of course. We got rid of the Halsted's radical [mastectomy]. I don't think anybody's really doing it anymore.

JR: At least not in this country.

BS: Well, yeah. At least if they do, they don't admit it. It was said that it was the most horrible standardized medical mistake in the 20th century. So now it's come to light – I'm thinking about Rose, and I've put her into this article I'm writing. I don't know if they'll keep it, but it's come to light that there was a second standardized horrible medical excessive surgery. That was the ovariectomies in women, which are – we're not told that those are really castrations. It's exactly the same thing as a castration in a male, which I think we deserve to know. I think a lot of women would probably have fought better to keep their ovaries if they had understood that. Do you think so?

JR: Yeah, I think it's very hard to know. It's very extreme. It's very hard to know how to fight back when a doctor recommends something if you're not a doctor. The whole issue of knowledge as power is still very much at play in medical encounters.

BS: That's why Rose was so great. She didn't let anybody intimidate her.

JR: Right. She went straight to the books, learned material, presented it, and made it accessible for other people.

BS: She's a wonderful Lodestar for us all to look at.

JR: I think her work and your work are really important reminders for me and for a lot of people about the power of journalism and the power of lay experts.

BS: And being sassy Jewish women. I mean, sassy Jewish women are particularly good at this.

JR: I think so.

BS: Born to fight back.

JR: The ability to stand up to powerful institutions and say, “There's information you're not looking at. There are other ways of looking at this.” You have to reconsider it. You have to study this particular issue and listen to women's voices and their experiences and take those experiences into account.

BS: Was there anything I left out about Rose or got wrong?

JR: No, I think that's great. I want to take a step back. Since we are doing these very brief interviews, just spend a few minutes – if you could talk about your background and your childhood – where you were born [and] what your family was like. We like to have a little bit of that kind of background before we leap into people's own activist lives.

BS: Well, did I tell you about my great-great-grandmother, Bella Dropkin?

JR: No.

BS: My great-aunts used to say I was put here to vindicate my great-great-grandmother, and I'll tell you why. I was her namesake – you know, Barbara/Bella. My mother was her favorite great-grandchild. They were very close. Bella Dropkin lived to be 102, and she attributed it to the fact that she walked four miles a day. When she got to be very old, none of her relatives, except my mother, wanted to go walking with her. So my mother was this little eight, nine, ten-year-old girl who would proudly take these walks with her

great-grandmother. So Bella died in 1920, and she died under the knife having a hysterectomy. I remember when I was a little girl at our festivals, the great aunts would come in, and they'd see me, and that would remind me to get into their argument again about how did this happen, that a hysterectomy was done on a 102-year-old woman? Most of the aunts felt that the doctor was crazy or greedy to do that to a woman of her age.

JR: Yeah, practicing or something.

BS: But my mother said – and remember, she was only twelve when Bella died. But my mother said, “No.” She said Bella told her – when she was about to get the operation, she gave my mother her locket, her own Shabbat locket on that occasion. She said that she might not come back, that maybe she was going to pass on from the operation. But she said, “You know how I haven't been able to walk? It's because there's something wrong with my inside.” Her uterus had dropped. She said, “I don't think I want to live if I can't get out there and take my walks. I don't want to be an invalid, so I'm going to take my chances with this.” That is what my mother said she recalled Bella saying to her. So, in that case – and she thinks that Bella had to argue the doctor into it. That's a very different picture.

JR: Yeah. That’s interesting.

BS: So “hysterectomy” and “under the knife” were the first two medical terms I ever heard.

JR: It sounds like you grew up in a family with a lot of strong women.

BS: I don't know. I mean, obviously, Bella was.

JR: Do you have siblings?

BS: Oh, I could tell you about my other grandmother. Let me tell you one more thing about a strong woman. My father's mother was one of these women who came from Eastern Europe by herself when she was about fifteen. She was in the Hungary area – Hungary, Austria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia. I'm not quite clear where it was exactly. The Jewish families would often send over not necessarily their oldest child but their child who was really skilled at a craft. Because then they could come over – I'm sure you know much more about this than I do, but they could help earn some money right away.

JR: Right, and bring more people.

BS: Yeah. So my paternal grandmother Rose Horowitz came over when she was fifteen. She was a very skilled confectioner, and they knew she'd be able to get a job in a bakery or a candy factory. She came over – no relatives here – and stayed with some landsman for the first few weeks until she got a job, and then she moved out and lived by herself. She didn't know any English. I mean, the whole thing is amazing to me.

JR: It is mind-blowing. It's hard to imagine.

BS: Yeah. A lot of us had ancestors who did that. She had seven children. She had a husband who was very bossy. I didn't much like my grandfather, although I guess in some ways he was – I don't think he ran around with [inaudible]. But two very interesting things about her. One is that she took care of these seven children. But once a week – I think it was on Saturday afternoon – she'd go out by herself for a few hours, and she would never under any circumstances give that up. So all her children and her friends were always wondering what she was doing. She was very secretive about it, and they had different theories. Some of them thought that she had a lover. Some of them thought that she liked to play the horses or play lotto or something. Some of them thought that she was going just window shopping. Some of them thought that she was going to literacy classes because she turned out to be much more well-spoken than my grandfather, even though he was the one who was outside of the world. He had a tailor

shop and a little factory, and she was the mother staying at home. But she wouldn't read Yiddish anymore or anything. She read the English papers. She spoke very well. So they thought maybe she was secretly taking classes, but she didn't want her husband to know because he didn't want her to be better than him. So she was a very lovely woman. Then she had very tragic things happen. Her youngest son, Jerry – after him, my sister was named – died in World War II, just before his twenty-third birthday. He was in Africa against [Erwin] Rommel. He was one of the second lieutenants where they put the second lieutenants out because they knew that if they put out the sergeants, they'd lose the people that could really do more for them later on. There was a movie about them called They Were Expendable. It was really sad. Of my uncle's class in the officer's training school, all but two of the graduates were killed in that campaign. The two survivors came around and visited every family of all the others. I don't know how they did it. My grandmother always called them "those nice boys that aren't Jewish." [laughter] She always sent them a Christmas card. So, she lost her youngest son, and then she lost her oldest daughter, Sally. You may know about that. That was my father's twin sister, who died of endometrial cancer.

JR: When the doctors warned you –

BS: That it was from Premarin. At the time that Sally died, my grandmother was in the Jewish Home for the Aged. Her children didn't want to tell her that Sally had died; they thought she wouldn't be able to handle it. So a year or so passed, and, of course, Sally never came to see her, and they were making up these excuses that Sally had a cold, or Sally had gone off to visit friends in Florida and blah, blah, blah. I used to go to see my grandmother every couple of weeks. I would take my kids in to see her because they were her first great-grandchildren. She just loved it when they would come. And one day, she called me aside and she said, “I want to ask you something.” I said, “Of course.” She said, “I want you to promise you're telling the truth.” I said, “of course.” She said, “I'm asking you about this because you're my oldest granddaughter, and I don't

want you to think that I'm stupid." I said, "I don't think you're stupid at all." She said, "All right, well, Sally's dead, isn't she?" I said, "Yes." A couple of tears came into her eyes. She wasn't a hundred percent sure, but she was prepared to hear that. She said, "I knew it." But she said, "Don't tell your father and your aunts and uncles that I know because it makes them feel better to think they're fooling me." [laughter] So I think she was really a nifty person.

JR: Growing up in this family with a lot of these strong women for mothers, what was your sense as you were growing up of your role as a girl and as a woman and of the role between boys and girls that you saw around you and your family or in society?

BS: I think I talked about this in the book The Conversation Begins. Have you seen that book?

JR: No, I haven't.

BS: Oh, I should try to get you a copy. It's by [Christina] Looper [Baker] and [Christina Baker] Kline. It's a mother and daughter, and it's feminist families talking to each other. Actually, it's good. And there are a number of – I think Letty [Pogrebin]'s in there.

JR: The Conversation Continues?

BS: No, The Conversation Begins. It's by Looper and Kline. It was published about ten years ago, maybe '96 or something. There are a number of Jewish – although there are two funny stories about it. There are two people in it who dropped out because their daughters wanted to talk about the housekeeper who helped raise them, and the mother didn't want to. One of them was Bella [Abzug]. [laughter] The other one was Marilyn French, if I remember. I don't know if she's Jewish. I don't think she is.

JR: I don't think she is either.

BS: No. So as I explained in that interview, my father, being a twin, felt very badly that in his family, the girls had to quit, take a business course, graduate from high school early, and help pay for the boys to go to college. There were four boys and three girls. He felt that was really unfair because he loved Sally very much, and he always felt she was smarter than he was. [laughter] So he used to say to us that if Sally had only been able to have the same education that he did – if she'd only been able to just go to college, she would be president of the Eagle Pencil Company and not the executive secretary to the president. [laughter] He was great. He had three daughters. He seemed to not miss having a son at all. He always encouraged us to do our best at everything. Whenever I didn't get a perfect grade in anything, he would get furious at the teacher and say, "What's wrong with that teacher?" [laughter] I do think, from having occasion to talk to other women whose fathers were twins, that there is this tendency that men who are twins of sisters are probably unusually good fathers for girls.

JR: That's interesting.

BS: Yeah, I think I lucked out on that. Another thing for my family that helped me was that my parents had met at a socialist party picnic: the YPSLs [Young People's Socialist League]. That was Eugene Debs [and] Norman Thomas. As a matter of fact, they always said it was Yip Harburg who introduced them. I don't know if it's true; I think it probably is. I had protection when I was at Oberlin. It was at the height of the McCarthy era. I arrived there in January 1952. Oberlin was one of the only campuses where they had not had to sign a loyalty oath – the faculty didn't. So, there were little groups at Oberlin. The Oberlin Y and a lot of the kids from the groups that had been – the missionary kids whose parents had been off in – they'd been born in China and Africa, what have you. They were very kind of dissident types. They would go down to – they did a lot of civil disobedience during that period and a lot of protest against McCarthy. I was among the few middle-class Jewish people there who were able to join them because of the protection of being from this Debs socialist political group. We were

called the pink diaper babies. My parents had gone to Russia to take notes for Norman in the thirties on their honeymoon. They hated Stalin, and they hated Russian communism. Somehow they knew that in the Senate. They were told they had to leave us alone. So I was able to do civil disobedience and all kinds of stuff during a period when very few college students could do it. I guess I'm going on too long about that, but I just wanted to say that I think that was a factor in my – I had earlier training in protest.

JR: Right. That's true for a lot of activists. I think you learn a lot of skills at home. That's often true, especially for Jewish activists. You've mentioned in passing the importance of Jewish women with big mouths. So I'm curious how you see your Jewish identity as playing into the work that you've done [inaudible].

BS: Well, that's interesting. It's a little hard to say. A lot more was – my parents sent me to socialist Sunday school and all that, and it wasn't until after the war when suddenly they realized what had happened. Then, my sisters were bat mitzvahed. Well, the older sister had to be confirmed. They weren't even bat mitzvah-ing yet. She was eight years younger than me; she was born in '43. But my sister, Elaine, who was born in '49, was one of the first girls who had a full bat mitzvah at a Conservative congregation. It was Judah Nadich, the Park Avenue Synagogue. He was the first – I think the first in New York, anyway, maybe United States – to start giving bat mitzvahs to girls. I mean, among the Conservatives. He had only daughters. [inaudible] In fact, my daughter Shira was sort of named after his daughter. I mean, that's where I heard the name. So my family became very involved in Jewish stuff, but not until after World War II. My father went to Israel as a consultant to set up their welfare department because he was very experienced, and that was what his career had been about.

JR: Let's transition into talking about some of the stories that you wanted to share.

BS: May I mention one more thing, though?

JR: Of course.

BS: When you were asking me about – when you said there was a lot of activism when people were young. I was very fortunate. When I was four years old, I was sent to a nursery school in Lower Manhattan in the Village called City and Country School. The woman who started the school was a friend of Pete Seeger's stepmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger. That was 1939. That was the year that he dropped out of Harvard and decided to come to New York to make it as a folk singer. We were one of his first gigs. He used to come – his stepmother's friend would invite him to come and sing for the nursery school kids. I guess she gave him two dollars or maybe five dollars, but probably two. So I fell in love with him. I just loved him. Every time I heard that he was performing, I went to see him. When he said we should come in and march in front of some General Motors building or whatever it was where there were strikes going on, I'd go on and get on the subway and the buses and try to find the place and march with the strikers.

JR: How old were you?

BS: I started doing that when I was about maybe ten, when I was old enough to ride around on public transit by myself. So I just loved him. Then, after he went to jail – see, that was the kind of thing that I could do that a lot of my friends couldn't do. When he got out of jail, I said, “Oh, let's bring him to the campus.” People didn't know how to bring him to the campus. Some of the students with the student council were scared because he was believed to be a communist. A few of us started a group just for that occasion; it was called the Oberlin Folk Music Society. We wrote him a letter and asked him to come, and he said yes. He was a huge hit. He did so well that right after that, Antioch invited him. Then he started being back on the liberal colleges route, and he was able to earn a living. Some years later, when I had occasion to sit down and talk to him at an event, I asked him if he remembered when he came to Oberlin. I told him I had written the letter. I was the secretary of the folk music club. He said, “Oh, don't you know what

that meant to me?" I said, "No." He said, "I was thinking of suicide because I couldn't get any jobs. I didn't know how I would take care of my family." He said, "It was the most terrible thing when I got out of jail. I thought there would be people around to support me, but there weren't. They were scared." He said, "When that letter came from Oberlin, that was the change. That was when I was able to start out again." So, gee, I've almost got tears in my eyes because I was so proud that we had been able to do something for Pete Seeger.

JR: Yeah. It is amazing to think of the small ways that you can make a huge difference.

BS: Yeah, and the things that make you feel that your little actions can make a difference. I think maybe it was in – I probably had this conversation with Pete sometime shortly before I began getting very active in the women's movement or around that time. I keep thinking maybe it was '67, '68. I think remembering what he told me or learning what one little – maybe that's why I wasn't afraid to write to Senator Nelson when he asked –

JR: That's fascinating.

BS: – because I know I had done one letter that made a big difference.

JR: Right. So, talk a little bit about how you got involved in the women's movement.

BS: Well, now I want to talk about transformation because up until this moment of the [Nelson] Pill Hearings, I don't think there was any transformation. I think what I was doing was in my normal background.

JR: In what sense?

BS: Well, like when I fought back against the doctor on breastfeeding. The first article I sold was on how to – it was really a pretty subversive article. It was in a mother's magazine manual in 1960, and it was on how to subvert the breastfeeding practices in most hospitals, where they give you alcohol swabs to clean your nipples, which, of course, dries them out.

JR: And they taste terrible.

BS: Oh, it gets even worse. Oh, God. I shouldn't say this. I know your father's a very nice doctor, but many of the doctors that treat women are just so crazy. They put Nupercainal. Then they would give you Nupercainal to put on, supposedly to keep your nipples from – supposedly to overcome the drying from the cleanser, but of course, the baby wouldn't suck if you had Nupercainal on. [“Yuck” sound] Anyhow, I wrote this article, which was quite – I'm surprised – well, the other reason I got it in was because a good friend of the family was the medical – she was a radical pediatrician, public health pediatrician in New York. Her name was Jean Pakter, another Jewish woman who was very – she was instrumental in Roe v. Wade, which I can tell you about in a minute. But this was back in 1960, and she got the editor to publish this rather radical piece of writing. This magazine, which had a circulation of eighty-thousand, got two-thousand letters. That was when I realized that a lot of women who were sitting compliantly in their gynecologists' offices were really getting pretty angry about the way they were – the natural things that mothers and babies do were being intervened at that time. Forcing us to give them infant formula instead of breastfeeding and refusing to let the women who wanted to stay awake and not get too much anesthesia and the episiotomies and the C-sections were starting to go off. And then, women wanted natural childbirth, which had started in Europe.

JR: Right.

BS: The doctors here were just absolutely against it at that point. So I got involved in all that, and I wrote about all that, but that was still within the path of what I'd been taught to do.

JR: Your work.

BS: You write a letter. I mean, in my family, you got mad, you write a letter, you go out and get the vote to get someone out of office, all that stuff. So you march. [laughter] You don't cross picket lines. That was one of the things that was one of the most sacred things – not to cross picket lines. But the thing that I call a transformation was meeting Alice Wolfson at the Pill Hearings.

JR: Of DC Women's Liberation?

BS: Yeah. That totally jumped me to another place.

JR: So, talk a little bit about that experience.

BS: I think she was much more brilliant and much more of an original thinker than I am. By the way, her name is Jacoby. She's Jewish. She went to Barnard.

JR: Interesting.

BS: She'd been active in the student movement, the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, so she'd been, I'm sure, a brilliant planner in all these groups, but they never had her – and she knew how to do sit-ins, and she knew how to do civil disobedience. But they were having the women bring the coffee and run the mimeograph machines and all that. She had just a very high consciousness about all these things. So, I realized that my liberal activism wasn't enough to really bring women further. That there were certain things embedded that were – I mean, when she said, “Why isn't there a pill for men? Why aren't patients testifying?” That just brought me to a different

understanding of how – even this lovely man, Gaylord Nelson, wouldn't let the women patients testify. He was willing to tell his staff they could work – suggest to his staff that they worked with a journalist, namely me, and take the people that they called to testify from the book and all that kind of stuff. But in fact, it never bothered me. I was so proud that my book was being used that it never bothered me that I wasn't asked to testify. Although, I guess if I'd been a male journalist, I probably would have been. I don't know. I don't know for sure. I just started looking at things with a much more skeptical light and a more far-left light. I knew, for example, that we were going to have to keep doing civil disobedience, and we were going to have to form groups that were very militant.

JR: What were the next steps that you took then in response to what you learned from Alice?

BS: Well, my writing became – you'll see there's a change. Up through The Doctors' Case Against the Pill, I'm writing in a women's magazine style, and I'm respectful of the doctors and scientists. I just keep assuming that they just didn't understand what they were doing, that they meant well. Except for the population control – as I had gotten pretty pissed with them. Some of them were so horrible. There was this guy who was head of the – he was a Nobel Prize winner who was president of the medical school deans, and I heard him give this speech where he said that the population crisis is so severe that some women are going to have to risk their lives in order to keep the population down. That was a click experience for me. Women? Why didn't men have to do it too? Why not have universal vasectomies? So then my writing changed, and my stance changed. I became much more of an outsider. Up until that moment, I was a somewhat critical insider who was trying – I kept saying, “Well, the Planned Parenthood doctors just didn't know how many blood clots there were because, after all, when you get a blood clot or a pulmonary embolism or stroke, you don't go back to Planned Parenthood. You go to the emergency room.”

JR: Right. They wouldn’t see you.

BS: Yeah. I even asked these people all the time, “Did you tell the prescribing doctor?” Most of them said no, they didn't want to. They didn't want to have anything to do with him. Oh, I'm glad this came up! I have to think because I should really figure out in my own mind what the extent of the change was, but you can see it in the writing. It became much more sassy and ironic and less for a mass audience and more for a more specialized audience. Then in the ’70s, I did more writing for Ms. magazine and less for the very popular women's magazines. Although the very popular women's magazines were pretty good to me on health issues in the ’70s, they did take a lot of my stuff.

JR: It sounds like you got a lot of response from leaders in those magazines also, so you [inaudible].

BS: Yeah, I did. Yeah. Well, remember the difference in the size of the audience is huge. I don't know. I think the Ladies' Home Journal probably had a circulation of six million, and Family Circle probably had a circulation of eight or ten million. Ms., which in its heyday was very influential, but I don't think it had a circulation of more than half a million, tops, maybe 250,000.

JR: Well, we have about five minutes left, so I would love to – you had indicated you were interested in talking about successes and challenges also, and I'd love to hear a little bit of what some of your thoughts were about those issues.

BS: Has this stuff that I've been telling you been of any use?

JR: Oh, totally. It's very interesting.

BS: Well, I thought by the time I reached the age of seventy, the drug companies would get off my back, but they haven't stopped, and sometimes, it really gets me down. You know, if you read the book On the Pill, the Johns Hopkins book; it was the Harvard

thesis. She talks about how the–

JR: Andrea Tone's book?

BS: No.

JR: No, no. The other one. I know which one you're talking about.

BS: Liz Watkins.

JR: Right, right.

BS: She has a whole chapter about us, about Alice and me. She said it was the beginning of informed consent in a big way. But she talks about how there were efforts to stop it from Planned Parenthood and from the drug companies and so on. I mean, the fact that the drug companies and Planned Parenthood tried to stop the book from being published – well, Planned Parenthood tried to stop it from being published, and the drug companies tried to stop it from being reviewed. When some of the science writers got – fortunately, I was active in a science writers organization. At that point, when they saw the letters that were coming in, they took my book out of the wastebasket and decided to review it to help fight suppression. So, in a sense, that was very good for me. But then I was fired from my Ladies' Home Journal column, which was very painful. That was by Johnson and Johnson, and they did it by dint of – I think I told you this. It was by dint of the fact that they had a lot of ads for their baby products and their OTC [over-the-counter] things. See, people who are so angry about the OTC now, the direct to consumer advertising, they don't realize that it was more stealthily done before because most of these drug companies, or many of them – see, nowadays, if you see an ad for Premarin, and then you see an article talking about the great benefits of Premarin, the average intelligent woman doesn't give too much credence to the editorial material because she says, “Well, they're advertising here.” But in those days, Johnson and Johnson could get the women's magazines to write favorably about the pill by advertising with more of the

Johnson and Johnson baby products. Well, that didn't –

JR: Necessarily connect.

BS: – connect. [inaudible] So, I don't think the readers knew how much manipulation there was even then. So they got me fired. Just when the pill Senate hearings were coming along, the publisher – the ad executive for some of the J and J products took the Ladies' Home Journal publisher to lunch and said, “Oh, we have this new product. We're deciding between McCall's and Ladies Home Journal. We're going to do eighteen months alternating the centerfold and the back cover. We're leaning toward the Ladies' Home Journal, but we have one problem. You have this columnist who's crazy on the topic of our most valuable prescription drug. She's paranoid, and that's bothering us.” So I came home, told the editor-in-chief – he fired me. They got their ads. Then the articles editor took me out for a drink after work a few weeks later. He said, “I think you deserve to know what happened.” It happened again at Family Circle with – I don't think I'll go into the details too much. Again, I had said bad things about – and this time, I had said bad things about Premarin in Free and Female in '72. So, American Home Products owned Ayerst Labs at that time. Well, actually, I think they still do, although they've changed all the names. They made Easy-Off Oven Cleaner and hemorrhoid – and a lot of stuff, the kind that was published in Family Circle. So, they got me fired. Then most recently, there was the thing with Eli Lilly and Hadassah. That's very sad. Eli Lilly supports the Hadassah Women’s – do you belong to Hadassah?

JR: No, actually, I don't.

BS: No? Well, in many ways, it's a good organization, but they had this women's health organization that takes a lot of money from Eli Lilly. They do a lot of programs and everything. When I took the job at Hadassah, I said, “Look, I know that the organization's getting money from Lilly.” And they said, “It’s a complete firewall. They do not bother us about our editorial content in the magazine.” I said, “Well, all right.” So for almost three

years, I did this column every month; it was very popular. I was very critical of the drug industry. Then, I sort of knew this was going to happen when I was finishing my last book, The Greatest Experiment, but I put in some stuff about how Eli Lilly was involved in getting DES [diethylstilbestrol] to be approved by the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] in 1941 and what little tricks they had done to do it. This was important because – and I knew this was going to be very incendiary for them because I had testified at the Joyce Bichler trial in 1978 or ‘79. Joyce Bichler was the first DES daughter that ever won a big case, and she won it against Eli Lilly. She had vaginal cancer. The judge certified me to answer one question because he wouldn't consider me an overall expert. But he said he would accept me as an authority on the history of Eli Lilly with the FDA. Then he said, “Is it possible that Eli Lilly knew at the time that they asked for approval from the FDA that DES was carcinogenic?” I said, “Oh, yes.” I told the jury about the first report that some honest Eli Lilly scientists had given to the FDA, which had about a hundred different animal studies where the DES produced cancer. It even had studies where they gave it to pregnant mice and rats and rabbits, and the offspring were born with the same kind of peculiar tissues in their reproductive tracts as have come true with humans. So I said that they knew that, and then they withdrew it and did different papers, submitted them to a different division at the FDA, and got it through. Well, Joyce won her case, and afterward, one of the jurors came up to me and said, “I was going to vote the other way.” She said, “I want you to know that the one thing that finally convinced me was your specific information about the dealings with the FDA.” So here I go – I mean, maybe I have a will to fail, but there's something about me that, at this point in my life, I can't conceal things that I think people have to know for their survival. So I did do a little stuff about this in The Greatest Experiment. Well, obviously, Eli Lilly got hold of it, and suddenly I was fired again.

JR: What year was that?

BS: '03.

JR: Okay, when the book came out.

BS: Yeah, it was a few months after the book came out. Just before it came out when those galleys were circulating, I did get word from someone not to write about hormones anymore.

JR: Interesting.

BS: Then I did write another column or two about hormones.

JR: So things don't change that much is part of what you're saying.

BS: Well, but the thing that really hurts me now that I've been just feeling very badly about in the last few days – and I'll end with this – but activists have to be warned that they have a lot of enemies who are – it's like the invisible corporation behind the scenes that's kind of trying to shut you up or punish you. When The Greatest Experiment came out, now it did get quite a bit of attention. I was on The Today Show, and I was on Good Morning America – not Good Morning America, on the news show American Morning. I was on Bookspan; they came and taped me giving a talk at the Y and that kind of stuff. I got pretty good reviews. In fact, two library journals – I was on some of the best books lists. Not the Times, although the Times was new and notable. But I was on the best book list of The San Francisco Chronicle, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Barnes and Noble had to do their own list of the favorites of their editors and stuff like that. The really good ones were that both of the library journals, Booklist and the Library Journal, had The Greatest Experiment on their pretty short list of the health books that they recommended for all public libraries. That was good to be in both of them. It was the only health book – well, the only women's health book in '03 that was recommended by both of them. So that was nice, but I got this really terrible review from a guy named Dr. Gilbert Ross, who was from this group called the American Council on Science and Health, which is an industry front group mainly working for the chemical industry on pollution and all that, but

partly for the drug companies too. There's a guy named Dr. Gilbert Ross, who's their medical director. He did this really smashing review which ran in The Washington Times, which is Reverend Moon's newspaper; it's not a good newspaper. So here was this horrible review, but I figured, well, ACSH, Washington Times, it's not going to make a big difference. Well, lo and behold, for the whole first year, it was always there on the front page when you Google it or Yahoo. Not only that, often, it was the first, second, or third thing to pop up, but it was never lower than eight or nine. So that review followed me around. It was quoted a lot by people, and it was really very destructive. So, guess what I just found out. People who knew about it started sending me clippings. There's a guy who writes for Mother Jones; he found out that Gilbert Ross had been in jail for two years, shortly before he did my book review. He did terrible things, I mean, and then he lost his license and this and that. Maybe he got it back, but I mean, he actually was a criminal. So that's number one. Then number two, I went and looked it up again, and I found this newsletter from the American Council on Science and Health. The newsletter – first of all, they talk about their great placements in the last few years. They said that Gilbert Ross had reviewed my book in The Washington Post. I thought that was interesting. But then it said, “We're doing so well. Our reviews are so popular. On Google, we're like one of the number one most popular websites. We're very close to the top most of the time.” Well, I happen to know from two people – one of them was a former intern of mine from Columbia – that there's this whole business going on of people who learn how to manipulate this for corporations. So here I am at this age, and that farshtunkene little group that has such a bad reputation, and they are not ashamed that their doctor who's doing the book reviews is a jailbird. Then on top of it – I could live with all that, except that on top of that, they have this manipulating thing where – now I think they don't bother with it anymore now that the book is – it’s three years old; it's not selling much. But that they would do that. I know that I was cut off from – well, for one thing, I had a fight with – what's it called? – Current Biography. They asked if they could do a biography of me. I said sure. They sent it to me to approve. She practically quoted most

of the thing from Gilbert Ross. She was very nice about my past work, but then she said, “Well, clearly, this book was not considered to be objective” – the last book. So I complained to the editor. I said, “If you're going to keep this in, you have to say that this guy is an industry front.” We got into a big argument. Finally, I said, “Look, if you're going to leave that in” – because he wouldn't put the industry front in. He said he would take – when he saw that it was Reverend Moon, he said he would take the source out.

JR: That doesn’t help.

BS: Anyhow, I ended up saying, “I'm going to withdraw if you don't take this out or specify what it is.” Then he said, “Well, I think we should forget it then.” That was the end, so I didn't get into [Current Biography]. I think there were other things where I was blacklisted, where people would start to invite me to give a talk, and then they would see that review, and it really damaged the book.

JR: It had an impact.

BS: It did have an impact. As I said – that thing about the Google thing. With each decade, they have new tricks. They do this to activist journalists. I'm not saying that I'm singled out at all. I'm sure there are people who get worse stuff than I do, but I want people to know about this. I want them to understand why – I mean, all these people say now, why aren't more journalists publishing – more of the critical journalists publishing more in the mainstream press? Well, we can't. We can't. There's all this advertising. There's all this pressure on them. The corporations own them. You know what this country is like; it's an oligarchy. So I'm just very lucky that once in a while, I get a piece into Oprah. It's almost like a miracle. But it's because Oprah is just so powerful and so rich. If you ever look at that magazine, she doesn't depend nearly as much on pharmaceutical advertising as most magazines do. So, that's it.

JR: Well, good luck with that piece. I, unfortunately, have to stop because we have to move on, but thank you so much. This was really such a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]