Sheila Decter Transcript

Q: I'm definitely going to circle back to a lot of those things you mentioned because it's really fascinating and relevant. To start, just for the purpose of people who might be listening to this later, I might ask you a few questions that we've already talked about.

SD: That's fine

Q: And that's already on the list. Also, just let me know –

SD: So you should know I don't think of myself as actually very central. I never had Soviet Jewry as my – quote – "portfolio," if you will. In other words, within the Jewish organizations that were up and people who were assigned to do work on Soviet Jewry as their key issue – and mine was more supportive in a general way, although I did pull off one amazing concert.

Q: So when were you first exposed to the issue of Soviet Jewry?

SD: Oh, wow. So I'm a political scientist. I think I was aware of the Jackson–Vanik amendment as a graduate student, but I'm not a hundred percent sure. So that by the time I came back to Boston, which was 1964, I believe I already knew that there were efforts in the Congress to help put pressure on the Soviet Union for human rights, but I'm not – I can picture – thinking about some of the different members of the Senate. I tended to be a Progressive. New York's senator was not usually one of my favorite people because he tended to be more conservative in the Democratic Party. But the one thing that I thought was really useful is the work he had done on this.

Q: So you said you were aware of it when you were a graduate student. When did you first –?

SD: But I don't recall anything out in Wisconsin about it. But it seems to me that very soon after I came back – so, in the late '60s, I knew that there were people going to the Soviet Union in order to establish contacts, and I knew that they were people trying to help get Jews out. But I can't identify exactly what year.

Q: When did you first become involved in some way? The concert that you mentioned – was that the first?

SD: So, I became executive – first, I worked for the Jewish Community Relations Council. Let me just back up a second. So I worked for the Jewish Community Relations Council, definitely in the early '70s. From the time I arrived, I knew that there was a staff person assigned to try to do advocacy around Soviet Jewry. So I'm afraid I can't pinpoint when in the '60s, but certainly, by the mid-'70s, I knew that a lot of people were working on this. Everyone who worked for the Jewish Community Relations Council at the time was aware of different things. I remember personally being responsible once for a huge flat truck that we used. We built the sukkah on it, and we were running it around at various harvest fairs on Simchat Torah to tell people about – the theme was helping to get the Jews out of the Soviet Union. So that's some point in the '70s, but I can't identify exactly when.

Q: Can you tell me more about the concert that you mentioned?

SD: So that's when I was executive director of the American Jewish Congress. What was unusual about that is that prior to that time, it looked like we were trying to be very cautious to talk about refuseniks as distinguished from dissidents. I was not part of the policy (apparatchik?) to be able to say why that policy decision had been made. But almost all the work in the Jewish community had been on behalf of Jewish refuseniks. The concert that I did for the American Jewish Congress was actually centered on [Andrei] Sakharov and [Natan] Sharansky and a third person, which I'm embarrassed to have trouble remembering it – the Hebrew School teacher. So here was this major

dissident in the Soviet Union, a major refusenik, and then the third person also was a person jailed because he was teaching Hebrew. His name started with a B. Here's the downside of meeting here rather than the office; [inaudible] I can't just open the files. We do have some papers that somebody might want to go through. You're welcome to if you'd like, so if you would like to go through the files.

Q: Thanks.

SD: Some of the files are letters back and forth with Ted Kennedy and others about progress on it. We worked directly with Kennedy's office very often in terms of freeing a particular family. There was one family where the wife was here, and the husband and the son were not. At some point, when Kennedy went to the Soviet Union, we got them to talk about that family. There was a great "hurrah" here in the city when the father and the son arrived at the airport. Kennedy had been personally responsible. [Paul] Tsongas helped on some of those. [John] Kerry, but that's later. So we were directly involved in working closely with the congressman. On the concert we did, the concert was the February following Ronald Reagan's election. So both Kennedy and Tsongas, if I remember, were on the stage at the time. We were at Symphony Hall, and it was filled. It was just one among many different things people were doing to keep Soviet Jewry in the news for many years. I personally always felt very badly that some of the organizations that had worked to free Soviet Jews consistently, year after year after year, seemed to get trampled on. In the later years, once the Jews came from the Soviet Union, they had to be helped, and they needed social services. At that point, CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies] and Jewish Family and Children's Service became the main organizations doing that kind of help. I think the community, at that point, once the Jews were here – the two waves that came to Boston. I always felt very badly for the organizations that made it their lifeblood to stay at it day after day after day; they just seemed to be forgotten in the community. They were still so important. They were the only ones that pretty much continued after to have a relationship with the Jews that were

left. I feel like I'm meandering back and forth. I don't know if that's useful or not.

Q: That's okay. No, it's totally okay. You mentioned near the beginning at division in the community, two sides of the community that was working on this. Could you tell us more about how you experienced that?

SD: It was clear as soon as I got involved that there were differences of opinion as to how fast and how much pressure to use. The student struggle was much more aggressive. Then, the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews seemed to be carrying out that same type of theme, and the organized community, the Federation, seemed to be – so we're not as active early on. They did establish the National Council on Soviet Jewry. They did talk about it. They did work on it. But there was clearly a difference of opinion about how fast to go. One other person who is probably not on your list because I doubt if people in the Boston area know he did anything is the Associate Director of CJP, Gil Preuss. Gil Preuss, as a college student, went with another college student – took a train to visit refuseniks, into much more dense parts of Russia that visitors usually didn't go to. So you might find that an interesting piece. So [he] was wanting to be helpful. I remember that he did that.

Q: Did you yourself ever visit the [inaudible]?

SD: So, my husband was sick. Unfortunately, as a result of not feeling I could leave, I never went to the Soviet Union. I always felt very badly not to have visited. But it was a trip that was more than he could take, and I couldn't leave.

Q: Why did you feel badly that you didn't –?

SD: Why did I feel badly? I've always been very active in the Jewish community and worked for the Jewish community from '75 on. So, it was a major part of the work of our community for what? Thirty years, forty years, forty-five years? So just a whole lot of time and attention was being put on trying to get the Jews in the Soviet Union out. It just

felt like if you went, you had a better personal feeling for it. But it was not from a lack of wishing I could go; I just could not. You asked about the question about two sides. There were people in the community who managed to work with both sides. (Davida Manon?). (Davida's?) name is (Davida Manon?). So her mother is the – although I don't know if her mother [had] exactly the same name because that might have been Davida's married name. But (Davida Manon?) is the one that lives on Jordan Road, whose mother was head of the Council of Councils. The person I think of who managed to work with both very effectively was a woman by the name of – oh, dear. It just went out of my head.

Q: That's okay. You can tell us about her role instead.

SD: It'll come back. Her role?

Q: Yes.

SD: So this is a tiny, tiny woman. I am sure her name has been mentioned to you a dozen times. She lived at Jewish Community Housing for the elderly for many years, she was active in the council's, and she was active on the National Council. She was a person who was responsible very much for getting people in the arts community to do major things. I mean, I'm sure you're already aware that, after Jackson–Vanik had been passed, part of the efforts have been to set up different national groups of different kinds of interests in order to pique the attention of different kinds of parts of the total community. So there were arts groups, and they were congressman's groups, and there were sports groups, and what have you. This little bundle of dynamite was responsible for many of those ties with the arts communities, and she just was very, very creative. I can't believe the name went out of my head. I'm sorry.

Q: It's okay. We can also always go back and fill things in later. One thing I'm wondering about is that you've mentioned many names, which is wonderful. You've

mentioned many more women's names than men. So I'm wondering –

SD: This is basically –?

Q: If you can think back, was there a gendered dynamic to the people who were really involved in this?

SD: Not from my perspective because I saw – I certainly saw Rabbi [Bernard} Mehlman and Rabbi Israel, and there was a Rabbi [Avi] Weiss – was a congregation in, I think, Randolph, who went to the Soviet Union many times. I worked for the American Jewish Congress, and Phil Baum was directly involved very often [and] wrote many policy papers to try to help the people in the government who were dealing with human rights. The person who came to us with the idea of the concert was a guy by the name of Edward Lozansky or something like that, whose wife and child were still in the Soviet Union. I think he saw this as some way to help get his wife and child out. But I do believe our concert was the first time, in a sense, that we put together both a dissident, Sakharov – Sakharov wasn't trying to leave the Soviet Union. He just was trying to make it better. Sakharov and Sharansky. The third name that comes to me, and I don't think it's quite right but was something like (Berlatsky?). So then, when we did that, was it mainly men or women in the synagogues? I think it varied. I think there were a lot of men, a lot of women. I think one reason why people may feel that there was a particular abundance of women is that one of the methods used to keep the subject alive because if you think about – if it's thirty-five or forty years, it's a lot of years to keep some subject before your government officers and so forth. When you think about it now, we do everything on social media; you're dealing with seconds and minutes, and whatever have you. But people would get very bored after a while. So you needed to have a fresh idea, a fresh idea certainly by the month, if not by the week. The women were very often the ones that were picking up the lag time in between and doing rounds of letters, bringing stationery to meetings, and having people write letters and various kinds of things. So I

think that a lot of the women's groups were very important in terms of keeping the momentum going. Ronya Schwaab. Okay. Sorry. [laughter] So the little bundle of dynamite that lived at Jewish Community Housing for the elderly was Ronya, R-O-N-Y-A, Schwaab, I think with two A's, but I can't be sure I'm remembering. But Ronya was the one who was big in both those groups in the union of councils and also in working with the Federations. She worked closely with Judy. So I think the women probably helped to keep it out there in between, but I do remember many men being active as well.

Q: As you said, it's a really long period of time. At this time, were you also a member of a synagogue?

SD: Yes. I moved to Newton in 1967. My children started day school about 1973, '74. The day school Solomon Schechter, at that time, was in Temple Emanuel, and so we joined Temple Emanuel at that point, somewhere in – the latest, I think, by '75.

Q: This work with the Soviet Jews was more purely professional for you, or was it also something that you were involved with in your synagogue community or other social circles?

SD: So it's pretty hard to divide those two for people who work for the community. I say that because they're really – it was very hard to keep divisions. If you went to a meeting, which you thought you were going to in your personal life, you were constantly peppered with questions that had to do with your work in the community. You went to shul on Shabbat. Talk to my children; they couldn't get me out of the kiddish afterward because people would surround you, and you couldn't separate the questions that were personal and work. When you work for the Jewish community, you end up working twenty-four/seven. So I think that that's just not possible to divide. I was active on a lot of boards in the Jewish community – Temple Emanuel, Solomon Schechter, a group we put together because there wasn't enough study about Jewish women's history in Jewish literature, women who were teaching, and so forth. Lots and lots of committees and

boards. Then, lots of community boards. We were seen as representatives of the Jewish community. If you did something in politics, you were seen as the person who worked for the Jewish community. Even though you're clearly in the political realm, you are not representing an organization, but that was the way in which you were seen. So it was certainly tied to my professional life. I was not one of the persons for whom it was a central core. That's why I said that. I cared very much about it and was delighted to be able to make a contribution at one time because pulling together thousands of people in Symphony Hall was considered a decent piece, but my contributions were very small.

Q: Do you think that that era has had an impact on your career trajectory within the Jewish community?

SD: On my career in the Jewish community? No, I don't think I did enough to have that stand out as a key. I started working in the Jewish community in '75. I went to work for the American Jewish Congress in '78. So I think that when people look back at what I've done, it's a much broader brush, a lot more in terms of court cases and stuff that the American Jewish Congress was central to. The American Jewish Congress had actually, I think, been very important in helping to figure out the political part of it in Washington. I think that Phil Baum was very important. There was a key piece written by Moshe Decter, who I'm not related to. Decter was my husband's name. To the best of their knowledge, Moshe and my husband's family were not related. But Moshe Decter had written a piece about Soviet Jews very early on that was a key piece, calling this to everyone's attention. It was the American Jewish Congress that had asked him to do it and then distributed the piece. I think he worked for Congress at the time, or else, he did it for Congress. So I think the American Jewish Congress had been very involved in setting it out as an agenda for the Jewish community. Then, I think shared that with the councils, and probably was – I can't answer whether the Congress and the Union of Councils fought or how the nature of – hostility is a little bit too strong, but certainly, the different ways they thought they should proceed, how that developed, I wasn't sufficiently

involved. I think Judy Wolf might be able to give you more on that. But knowing Phil Baum's personality, my guess would be that once he figured out what he thought the right way to proceed was, he was probably pretty stubborn about it because he was always sure he was right.

Q: Is there anything else that you'd like to share about certain stories or involvement?

SD: I think a little more about people. When you think about it, aside from the fact that the advocacy continued over so many years – when you think about how the Jewish community was able to make this a continuing high agenda item for the United States government, I think that that really is a very significant part of it. Maybe as you compare that to the dispute over what American policy should be toward Iran more recently, I think that's rather fascinating. I mean, this was a – when you're dealing with the issue of Iran and the nuclear stuff, clearly the Jewish community is split on how to deal with that, with an important segment of the community feeling it was not in Israel's interest to negotiate with the Iranians, and others feeling it was very important to. I'm trying to think back on the Soviet Jewry. There certainly were, in the country, people who thought that putting limitations on Russia was not going to be the best way to improve human rights. But the Jackson–Vanik people were able to get a majority passage in the Senate, and it was the American policy for the years that followed. The Jewish community managed to make sure that each administration, in turn, did not forget it.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about some of the main issues that you currently work with or have at the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action now?

SD: Yes. So we work on American domestic policy. So we deal with gun violence, health policy, affordable housing, public education. We cover a rather wide range of stuff, but we're interested in getting Jews active [and] involved around immigration, issues of refugees. That's the closest – refugees and immigration is the closest we get to one that you would say really gets to be international at all. Otherwise, we stay on trying

to improve lives for the community at large. We're somewhat less ethnocentric than a lot of organizations in the Jewish community. Our interest is in making sure there's good progressive policy passed by Congress and local legislature that helps the total community. So if you ask what's Jewish about it, we believe it's part of the Jewish agenda to make sure that our communities are as just as possible. So what we try to do is activate the Jewish community to be involved in all those issues. So at the current moment, we have a multi-year campaign dealing with income inequality. As part of it, we're working on family and medical leave; we're working on trying to get the minimum wage up to fifteen dollars an hour; we're trying to get an amendment passed called the fair tax amendment, which would make millionaires pay somewhat more taxes in the state in order to help public education and transportation; and we're working on two ballot issues for this fall. One of them is called the CPA in Boston, which is the Community Preservation Act, and it's for more money for affordable housing primarily. We're working on the public education one, dealing with charter schools, saying that that's not the way to make education policy.

Q: So I'm wondering, do you face any similar challenges, or is the challenge very different in trying to get the Jewish community active on these issues than it was when you were working then?

SD: As we did then?

Q: Yes.

SD: That's a good question. When I think back to the Soviet Jewry stuff, it seemed to me that – something I mentioned before – it was trying to figure out how to keep people interested in the long run. That was key because it just went on for so long. What can we do now to get this back on the front burner of things? So there's that piece that continues on any issue you're dealing with. We've seen a little bit of it this summer. We had a little bit of downtime on this economic inequality, and we were a little worried that

our task forces would get morbid over the summer, but it's just the way it was. State legislature had closed. We had done everything we could do. Basically, there is very little that you could do between June and December. That same kind of thought has occurred to us, and we have worked doing some education on it. Somehow, on the current issues, you do still have this issue of trying to keep people involved all the time. It's almost like you need more bells and whistles on everything. People are so much more used to having instant comments and instant things happening. So are the lessons from that period the same? A little bit. I don't know. Let me come at it a different way. All right? I think that people – it feels like the people who are willing to be active might be busier. So they're less likely to be at some of those meetings I talked about before, where we would take stationery and say, "Here, right now, write a letter." So I send out an email, and I say, "Write a letter." Then, I say, "Let me know when you've done a letter." But I can send out three-thousand emails and maybe get ten letters. If you had people in a room, and you took the stationery, and they knew you were going to collect the damn letter before they left, you could leave with forty letters. Was it more useful? I don't know. The whole way we communicate is different. But it does seem, in some ways, harder to get people to personally take action and advocate.

Q: Over that really long period of time, you've talked about when this was an active issue, did you personally or in the communities you were a part of – were there moments of despair where it felt like this issue wasn't going anywhere?

SD: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

Q: Can you tell us about that?

SD: I was in many meetings where people felt that it was lagging down and nobody had done anything. Whatever the specific administration wasn't doing anything. These poor people couldn't get out. Everything we knew from visits was pretty sad. I was part of groups that collected electronic toys if you would believe – Nintendo. We didn't have cell

phones. Cell phones were very tremendously expensive. So it was rare that you sent a cell phone, but you'd send these electronic games that you could buy for under a hundred dollars. The word was refuseniks could sell something like that and have enough to eat for a couple of months. So you'd send denim pants. We would often hear that refuseniks, who had been fired from their jobs, just had no food or anything, and so that was very disillusioning and very, very scary. So these images of people who were fired and really had nothing were out there, and that was depressing. So you'd meet, and you'd try to think of what new thing can we do that will put this in the public eye? You had to keep the pressure up on the good guys as well as the bad guys. It wasn't just that you were trying to convince people who didn't care about it, but it's like you constantly stay in front of Kennedy's people, in front of Jackson's office and others.

Q: One last question, unless you have more to add. What do you think that others might describe your personal role as?

SD: If they were looking at me?

Q: Yes.

SD: A do-good liberal who was always trying to get people to work on things. Hopefully, they would describe me as an asset to the community who's made a lot of important ties between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish community that has been useful in times of crisis and useful generally.

Q: What about your role specifically in the Soviet Jewry work?

SD: I don't think people would think of me as particularly an – I don't think of myself as a major activist on the Soviet Union. I don't think other people did either. For maybe the year and a half period we worked on that concert, it was just – this guy shows up in my office; I'd never met him before. I don't know. I don't know why he thought of the idea of a concert. I don't even remember whose first idea was to do a concert. But I was

friendly with Joe Silverstein. So I went to see Joe Silverstein of the Boston Symphony, and luckily enough, it was the middle of summer. In the middle of summer, Boston Symphony is at Tanglewood, and life is pretty easy and fun, even though you're working. What could be more pleasant than to be outside all the summer? So, I asked Joe if he thought that the Boston Symphony would do a concert for us. He did a survey of the orchestra, came back with enough names, and from there, we were off and running. So we planned this concert for February. Unfortunately, February is not such a happy time for musicians; you need to go wherever you're going an hour early and warm your fingers up or your windpipe or whatever you're using. It's just harder to practice. You're busier and all that. So that by the time the concert came around, we lost a couple of key people. We had to change the program we were going to do because Joe didn't think we had enough brass people. He was willing to fill in holes with pickup artists, which apparently, musicians do all the time from other orchestras, but he didn't feel he could replace his brass section. So we had to give up not doing the Largo, which I had been looking forward to, [Antonín] Dvo?ák's New World Symphony [Symphony No. 9]. He didn't have the skilled musicians to do New World Symphony. So that was something that came out of our office. Maybe I'm putting myself down a little bit too much because we did do – we didn't do as much of the synagogue-by-synagogue advocacy. But what we did do is we did a lot of political work. We did a lot of political work. We did a lot of notifications of opportunities for people to do things. Phil Baum, who is in our national office, was writing us often about particular things happening with dissidents, as well as refuseniks so that we could let people know about them. But still, I think people still thought of me as [with the] American Jewish Congress primarily rather than – where you take someone like Ronya Schwaab, Ronya Schwaab was just thought as a voice for Soviet Jewry. She introduced us to [Tatyana] Sakharov – I forget her married name – who was the daughter of Sakharov, who was here. She had very good relations with the Soviet Jews, who had gotten out in small numbers in some earlier times. So she had lots of contacts for us. I did have a tie with Sharansky's wife. Sharansky's wife lived in a

duplex in Jerusalem, and on the other side of the duplex was a member of my family. So we had some ties there to be able to ask questions and to know what the latest things were that they were trying [inaudible]. She was here several times, and we would make a lot of her visits. But the push for Soviet Jewry was just one of a number of things that I was working on. All that same time, we were working on lots of cases in the courts dealing with the separation of church and state. We were working on affordable housing. We were working on health care. So for the American Jewish Congress, it was a very significant part of our agenda, but it was one of several things we worked on. Certainly, in our office, we had a couple of designated people who needed to deal with it all the time. Judy Wolf was one of those. She was a layperson, but she was working on it full-time all the time. Then, we worked with Ronya quite a bit.

Q: Wonderful. I think that that's wonderful for us.

SD: So it's useful?

Q: Yes.

SD: All right. I hope some of it's useful.

Q: It's all really incredibly useful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]