Gilda Bruckman Transcript

Nicole Zador: This is Nicole Zador, interviewing Gilda Bruckman on Thursday, November 10, 2022. The interview is over Zoom, but we are both in the Greater Boston Area. So, to start off with, why don't you share a little bit about your family background and your family history, I know you're interested in genealogy so you can –

Gilda Bruckman: Right. I grew up in New Jersey, in suburban New Jersey. I was born in New York. My parents were living in the Bronx with my mother's parents. It was just post-World War II. My father had just come home from the army, and my parents got married two weeks after he was discharged. But his story prior to that was rather complex. He was born in Bessarabia and grew up in a family that probably spoke Russian and Yiddish, initially, then fled across the Dniester River and we're in what is now Romania, and languages were switched, so he went to school in Romania. Then Romania was taken over by a fascist regime and he continued his education in Czechoslovakia, probably in German language, and then went to France to study in Strasburg, and did that in French, and then came to the United States in 1938. So, he had a rather complicated history before he ended up in suburban New Jersey.

My mother was the daughter of Polish immigrants who had come early in the 20th century, and had grown up – she had grown up in New York. I had a very suburban 50s-60s childhood, in a community that had no Jews at all. There was one other Jewish family. We were culturally Jewish. We were ethnically Jewish. We were not at all religiously Jewish. My mother had a large family with whom we had some connection until my grandparents died when I was eleven and thirteen, and then much less. My father's family was scattered over Europe, largely, with the exception of a brother in Queens. So yeah, my entire Jewish education as a child consisted of four weeks when I was at Cejwin Camp, Camp Cejwin. My parents were going to Europe for the first time

after the War to see my father's brother, and they needed to find a camp to put my brother and me in at the same time. I was eleven and he was six and somebody knew somebody who was in the administration at Cejwin, and they were going to keep an eye on us. I never saw that person, but I had a great time.

NZ: That's good. Was that an isolating experience being one of the few families – ?

GB: Totally – Well, I mean, my family was Jewish, my extended family was Jewish. My parents' friends were Jewish. But nobody, none of them were in the community we lived in. And the community we lived in was not only not Jewish, it was largely Dutch and very Anglo Saxon and very Christian. There were seven functioning churches in a town with 11,000 people and that was a big part of what life was like in that community in the 50s. I think my father was very careful not to mow the lawn on Sunday, so as not to offend the neighbors for whom it was their day of rest. But, you know, we had cordial relationships with everyone and antisemitism was so minimal that when somebody in my brother's – in the neighborhood, who was the same age as my brother, probably around seven, called him a "dumb Jew," he came home and said to my mother, "Why did he say that? I get much better grades than he does." I mean, he was just unfamiliar with that kind of slur, and I didn't encounter any of it either. I think my parents picked that community because it was placed where they could actually buy a house and land and there were no audible objections.

NZ: Were your parents very politically active at all?

GB: In their youth, by the time I came along, that piece of life was behind them. I think the War was such a disruption to their coming into full adulthood, that they were really eager for normalcy. The rush to full suburban fulfillment was paramount for them. So I know that my mother was politically active before she was married, and my father was in Europe as well. Postwar they were solid Democrats who voted religiously any chance they had, and my mother belonged to the League of Women Voters.

NZ: When thinking about, I guess, your queer identity, did you always feel different? Or was that –

GB: No, I didn't, well, no, not really. I kind of slipped into my full identity very smoothly with a good deal less trauma than I think a lot of people have experienced. Whatever difference I might have felt was pretty much assuaged by the fact that I had acquired a boyfriend at the age of sixteen and maintained that relationship until I was twenty two. Although it wasn't intense in the sense that we were eagerly going to get married – and we didn't – it was enough of a relationship to keep any suspicions at bay, for me, and there was no context for understanding anyway. I mean, I didn't know anything about gay anything. It just didn't exist as a concept. I lived a very isolated and largely idyllic youth, you know, we didn't know from therapy or gay or, you know, not many people were – I didn't know anybody whose parents were divorced. It was oppressively wholesome.

NZ: That’s a really good phrase. I like that.

GB: But it served me well, you know, I don't have complaints about it. It’s just – it was the 50s.

NZ: Right. Then, your teenage years, kind of similar to that?

GB: Yeah, pretty great. Yeah, I was a Girl Scout. I was a very straight out kid. I fit in well with groups. I was focused on school. In retrospect, my parents were pretty fabulous. You know, one generally thinks one’s parents are idiots when one is a teenager, but in retrospect, they weren't all that bad. So, no, I was active in all kinds of school activities. I was a Girl Scout. I was kind of athletic, though there were no girls sports then; it was before Title IX. I think that was the one – if I had to think what did I miss in my childhood that I would have had now? Title IX would have been it, but I can't say, you know, my life has been ruined because I didn't play basketball.

NZ: So, how would you express your kind of athleticism? What would you do?

GB: You know, I played intramural volleyball in college. What did I do in high school? I went on an American Youth Hostels cross country bike trip. I went ice skating on ponds locally that were frozen. They're no longer frozen. You know, I did. Nothing very dramatic. But I did intramural sports. I never objected to gym class.

NZ: Then, when you went to college, you went to Clark University?

GB: Uh-huh, yes.

NZ: Did that feel like a very – a continuation of, kind, of your high school experience?

GB: No, that was radically different. For the first time in my life, I was in the company of a lot of Jewish kids my age and I immediately gravitated toward a small cohort who were in my dorm who were all a year older than me, and we became a very tight group. It was pretty exciting. One of those people is still one of my closest friends. Yes, it was big. Suddenly there was a comfort level and a sense of identity that resonated with that group of friends that I had not had before.

NZ: Around this time, I think, at the very end of your kind of undergrad experience Stonewall was happening? Was that something you heard about?

GB: Not much, I think the salient memories of gay life or political activism were – not Stonewall so much as the kind of beginnings of feminist activism on campus, which I didn't particularly relate to. There was a student who was – suddenly disappeared from school, who was rumored – a woman in my dorm – to be having a relationship with another woman. But I, you know, it was kind of mysterious. It wasn't a source of deep ridicule. But it's like, hm. So, I was not particularly conscious. I really didn't become conscious in terms of either feminism or gay issues until I got out of school and entered the work world where the – I guess I accepted the fact that school was a rather infantile –

it was an infantilizing experience for me, and once I was no longer in school being infantilized in that way, it no longer seem appropriate. I accepted it in an academic setting. But I didn't accept – I didn't accept it in a work setting. That really was the beginning of my awakening. But I think part of that was really being aware of what was going on. I was starting to be more conscious, and there were – there was more happening. So no, I was a pretty oblivious undergraduate. And only marginally more aware as a graduate student.

NZ: But did this, I guess, undergraduate experience, kind of, shift the way you saw your own Jewish identity? Because you were now in a bigger community? Or was it just increasing comfort?

GB: It was, there was an in – there was a sense of fulfillment. But I also – I was comfortable in my parents' identity. They were not observant, and they were not community connected people, they didn't have a community, which I find quite shocking now because I feel like my community is so vital to my existence, and they had no community that I could see. But I wished I had had more access to some kind of learning. But I had gone to an Ethical Culture Sunday school as a child, because in the very church-oriented town I grew up in, my first grade teacher used to ask the children every Monday morning, "How many boys and girls went to Sunday school?" Yes. Kinda shocking. We read the Bible and said the Lord's Prayer and saluted the flag every day for, you know, all of my elementary school years. So I have some familiarity with the Bible because I went to an American public grammar school. But when that teacher asked us who had gone to Sunday school, and I was just about the only kid who didn't raise their hand, I went home and I said, "I want to go to Sunday school." My parents were in a quandary because they weren't going to send me into a religiously oriented program. If there had been a Workmen's Circle program nearby that would have been fine, but there wasn't because they were way out in the – in what was then almost rural New Jersey. But there was an Ethical Culture Society that met in a nearby town and my

parents actually had friends who belonged to it and they had a Sunday school there. My parents never joined. They weren't interested in participating. But I went to Sunday school and really liked it. I stayed there for years. If that first grade teacher had known what I was being taught, she probably would have stopped asking.

NZ: What kind of things did they teach there?

GB: It was very humanistic, and very devoid of any kind of dogma, and an insistence on respecting everybody's beliefs, and celebrating everybody's holidays, and being aware of everybody's differences, and knowing that that was how things should be. That you should respect whatever other people believe; you should not force your beliefs on anybody else, and nobody should force their beliefs on you. Whatever you wanted to believe was just fine as long as you treated people decently. I remember making a drawing, I must have been like, six years old, seven years old, I was a horrible artist, so it was as all stick figures, with, you know, some gory cut on the arm and red blood pouring out and all the stick figures were different colors and underneath, I wrote, “We are different on the outside, but on the inside, we are all the same.” That was kind of what I was being indoctrinated with, you know. I have to say, it stayed. It probably had a deep effect on me.

So, but I didn't get any – the Jewish youth group experience, I didn't have. I had that one month at Cejwin, where I absorbed everything religiously Jewish that I could, minus the faith. But I learned songs and I learned prayers and, you know, it was at a time when I could mimic sounds. We listened to a lot of folk music in my parents house. So, you know, I knew Theodore Bikel and I knew a lot of Israeli folk songs, and they listened to folk music from all over the world, but definitely Israeli folk songs. But you know that was the only Hebrew I knew. So it didn't really make up for that until much later in my life.

NZ: What led to your decision to, kind of, go to grad school?

GB: Passivity, probably, I had no idea what else to do. I was an English major. I had gone to school thinking I would be a psych major, and that I would be a psychologist. But at Clark, psychologists were thought of as people with PhDs. In order to – I didn't know anything about clinical social workers, nobody ever mentioned that to me. I had no idea that existed. In order to major in psych at Clark, you had to take Statistics, and I was still in my post-adolescent math-phobic phase of, "I can't do math." I could, of course, do math. But Statistics at Clark was known as "Sadistics." I had placed out of a whole year of English when I entered, and I thought that was a good sign. And so I became an English major, which even then didn't offer a lot of pathways to a professional life. So, what I knew I had to do was go to school. So, I thought I'd just do more of that. So I got a master's degree, which I'm not at all sorry I got, and has served me well in numbers of ways, but definitely was not a career path. Or at least I didn't use it as such. [Editor's Note: Gilda received her M.A. in English Language and Literature from Boston University].

NZ: So, after graduating with your masters, what did you end up doing?

GB: I was working in a bookstore while I was in graduate school. I had finished the program and I was still working in the bookstore. Almost everybody, it was in Harvard Square, and almost everybody on the staff had either most of a PhD done or at least a master's degree. It was the most, you know, over-educated group of people, but they seem pretty congenial. I was working in a bookstore in Harvard Square. That seemed pretty cool, although it really wasn't. We were very underpaid. But I began to be much more aware of the ways in which I was being treated as a woman compared to the – my fellow workers who were men: given less responsibility, paid less money. It just became much more apparent to me. It was Reading International, which specialized in a lot of periodicals from all over the country and all over the world. I was sitting there selling Playboy on a regular basis, it was not – it was not something I wanted to be doing. My consciousness just, kind of, you know, went up. Because there was more to read and

more to find out and more awareness for my experience. Then while I was doing that, the possibility of New Words Bookstore, the women's bookstore that I was involved in for so long, appeared, and that was the next chapter.

NZ: So, how did that opportunity arise?

GB: So, at the time, which was 1973, in Boston, there was a, there was beginning to be a fair amount of feminist activity. There was a TV channel, Channel Five, which a woman named Eunice West, owned a piece of, and she was a feminist, and she had created a show that aired on Sunday afternoons, called Your Place and Mine. It was hosted by Emily Culpepper, who was a graduate student, divinity graduate student at Harvard, and was very active as a feminist. I used to watch this program on Sundays before I went to work. I think my work shift was like three to eleven. So, I watched this program, and one day she had on Mary Daly, the feminist theologian, and several of Mary's acolytes, fans, students, friends, one of whom was another woman at Harvard Divinity School, who was also a graduate student there, and when she was introduced, Emily said, “This is Jean MacRae, and she's going to start a women's bookstore.” I thought, wow, that's really cool. But I had a friend at Harvard Divinity School [Judith Plaskow] at the time, who was on a fellowship there and I said, “Do you know this person? Jean MacRae ?” And she said, “Oh, yes, she's very nice.” I said, “Well, you know, I have bookstore experience. So I'm happy to help in any way I can.” So she put us in touch. Jean had a partner in this process, Mary Lowry, and I met with them. By the time I met with them, they had already acquired two more partners who had had the same idea at the same time, and rather than compete, the two sets of partners got together to talk about doing it jointly. I just, “Whatever I can do to help, I'm happy to help.” So, I just – Yeah – Can you hear me?

NZ: I can still hear you.

GB: Fine. “Whatever, whatever I could do to help, I'd be happy to do,” and they said, “Okay.” None of them had any bookstore experience. Then one of those four women dropped out, she decided she needed the money to continue her graduate education. So, I became the fourth and the three of them, you know, put in an amount of money to get the store started. I had no money to put in, but I had experience and we just went forward from there. I continued working at Reading International until, I think, October of 1974. We opened the bookstore in April. The people at Reading International didn't know I had anything to do with this. I just kept my shift, and, you know, said I was working two jobs. But yeah, that was the beginning of New Words. But it came about very serendipitously because of this television program that I had seen. Otherwise, who knows if I would ever have encountered this.

NZ: This was fairly shortly after, you know, you're, kind of, awakened consciousness. Right? So where are you still learning about feminism?

GB: Sure, I mean, that was a long learning process. I mean, once I started learning, it wasn't a fixed – It wasn’t like, “Oh, my eyes are open, and now I can see.” There were dimensions and awarenesses that were constantly growing and changing. Somewhere during that time, I also had had my first real lesbian experience, and started to kind of put all the pieces in place looking backwards and was still kind of in the process of figuring stuff out while we were starting the bookstore. It was a pretty unformed phase. But definitely direction – I had, I definitely felt like I found direction.

NZ: During this kind of initial phase, did you all have the idea that it would become kind of this cultural touchstone or meeting place? Or were you really just thinking like, bookstore?

GB: We wanted to create a bookstore where women's writings would be accessible. So that was one thought. If you went into a bookstore at that time, you might find one Virginia Woolf book or one Jane Austen book, and then not much else. We wanted

everything and e wanted information. So, the Women's Health Book Collective, Boston Women's Health Book Collective was happening at that time, and lots of small presses were happening. And we saw the possibility of collecting a haven of resources, really.

What it would become in terms of the community, we had no idea, but we had a very clear idea of what kind of space we wanted to make. We wanted it to be welcoming, and we wanted it to be enlightening, and we wanted people to feel – women to feel comfortable there. We wanted to have working conditions that did not replicate the working conditions that we had experienced; and we wanted to respect each other's need for quality of life. So, you know, if you had things that were essential to your life, space was made for them. I was involved in a martial arts practice for decades, and I left work at five o'clock, because I had a class at 5:30, or I left work at 5:30, because I had a class at six. So, if everybody else stayed till six, and I left at 5:30, that was fine. You know, there was never – those issues were never a problem. It was never like, “Oh, I have a doctor's appointment,” and or, you know, something else has come up, and I have to do this. We respected each other's need for that. We also did not have day-long meetings. We did not get very entangled with each other's lives. We were – we socialized together to some extent. But we all had other networks and friends outside of the bookstore.

NZ: Can you describe a little bit more what it was like in those early years? Because New Words was one of, like, the first, I guess, feminist bookstores – what it was like to be working without necessarily a direct model, right? You don't know exactly what to copy or what to do.

GB: Right? Well, we – first of all, I think I was – in ’74, I was twenty six when we opened the bookstore, Jean was twenty six. Mary was older, she was probably forty-ish, nd Rita was in her mid-thirties. So, we weren't all kids, exactly. Everybody had worked. We all had a pretty good sense of what we didn't want andd we quickly learned what we needed to do to make the bookstore function. But we were really focused on creating an

environment and a space that would serve as a unique function in the community. It quickly became a kind of haven. The sense of general invisibility and oppression that so many women experienced in their daily lives – for that, the bookstore provided an escape where there was a sense of recognition, of acknowledgement, of common experiences, of support. That was really what we wanted, and women were frankly just blown away by walking in seeing how much stuff there was that had been written, and was being written, by women. There were small presses being published at that time, there was a lot of activity in feminist press publishing and writing in journals. And it was a pretty exciting time. I kind of thought I had the best job in the world.

NZ: I mean, yeah, I mean, it sounds amazing. What was your collection process like? How did you decide which books you wanted?

GB: We were all pretty literary, so we have fairly high standards. So, you know, we were literally to the point of, you know, some people would say snobbish. But we didn't do a lot of mass market, what were then cheap paperbacks, you know, women's romance novels are – not not that there is anything wrong with those, and I actually have friends who have written them. But at the time, we didn't think that highly of them. I'm sure they've evolved now. In many cases, or not, I don't know. But we were, you know, selective in terms of quality. We tended to, and we wanted to cover breadth. So we had books on psychology, and we had poetry and we had health. At some point, we developed the section on theater and film. Later, we had a section on African American women, and then we had a section on Native American women. We had a section on Jewish women. As books began to come out, we began to realize how they could be grouped in ways that would be useful for our community. But we were picky. I mean, we did not – we were kind of discerning about what we, what we picked, especially in areas like, I would say, psychology and health and stuff. So, we tried to reflect and serve the needs of the community. But we also, you know, were kind of serious about what we would provide. So, yeah, how do we do – and there were a lot of feminist presses. We

would publish almost anything that a feminist press put out. We were really interested in supporting other women's endeavors in terms of doing what we were doing.

NZ: Was the community's reaction immediate or did it take a little?

GB: Yes, pretty much. We opened with a party. The original bookstore was space rented from a restaurant. So we were adjacent to the restaurant, it was called Peasant Stock. It's kind of legendary, from the 70s. And that was started by a group of Harvard Divinity School students, too, I believe. And that was our link to that space. I think Jean knew some of those folks. And so the back of the bookstore connected to their kitchen. I think I – and they focused on cooking French country food. I think Julia Child used to pop in occasionally. I never saw her there, but she was in the neighborhood. But I think I ate quiche for lunch for a solid year, and then I think I never ate it again. But they were very lovely people and they supported us in all ways that they could. We had a big party on our opening day, and we had food and we had punch and it was, you know, a great success. It then went on to be a bigger success. People just flocked. I got to witness all sorts of reunions and meetings and all kinds of things happened in the bookstore. But it was just generally a sense of overwhelming relief when women walked in, you could kind of hear a collective exhale, of, you know, relief to be inside that space. It was just different.

NZ: And you ended up moving to Inman Square pretty early on. Did that kind of change anything at all? Right being, like, geographically so close to a lot of other feminist businesses?

GB: Yeah, it did, and we got much, much, much bigger. But yeah, at the time, we were – we rented the space at 186 Hampshire Street and the building was owned by Mel Chalfen, and his wife, Judy. And he was really the quiet benefactor of feminism in Cambridge. He was renting to feminist and progressive groups, just because that's who he was and that's what he wanted. He was a lovely guy. He lived in Newton; he raised a

family there. He was – he'd inherited this property. And he was just a totally lovely human being. So when we moved in there, Goddard-Cambridge Graduate Program in Women's Studies was upstairs. I think Focus, which was a women's counseling center, was already there. At some point, during our tenure, the Feminist Federal Credit Union was in the same building. Then down the block was the Women's Community Health Center, and across from that, shortly thereafter, was Bread and Roses restaurant. Up the street from us, and the other direction was Gypsy Wagon, which was a women's craft store. We just thought we had landed in feminist heaven, and we were going to, you know, paint a trail or something. We thought it was just great. There was a lot of activity, you know, among, among those organizations, as people went from one to the other.

NZ: So, did it feel kind of like a community, like everything was connected? There was –

GB: Yes, we felt very connected. Oh, Clayground was also down the street. Yeah, we were creating, you know, a whole world. We were very conscious of the fact that we were creating it, and we wanted to create it, and those connections were vital to us.

NZ: At this point, were you still figuring out your identity as a lesbian or – ?

GB: By then I think I had figured that out. [laughter]

NZ: Was that a big process for you, was it —

GB: No, it was a little process, it was a quiet process. I'm not a very big person. I just kind of, you know, it became, I kind of slid in with the times. I didn't do anything very dramatic. But, you know, I began to recognize that most of the people I was really close to are the people I was around, or a lot of them, were lesbians, and I was too. It became, kind of, the, you know, it felt normal at that point, and I would say, not terribly dramatic, except for the ups and downs of relationships, which are always dramatic. But the actual process, once it happened, was, you know, that was like 1973 or four, it was like, I had gotten past that.

NZ: Do you remember any, like, specific programs that stood out to you?

GB: Oh my god, we did so many programs. There are so many programs, we had readings and we had presentations, and we had – over the years we did probably thousands of programs, and all of the, all of the information on that is at the Schlesinger Library, and to try and dredge it up, it's nearly impossible. But we had a lot of authors, and they were always – it was always pretty exciting to have people come to the store and readings – we had regular series. I mean, that happened like the third Thursday for years. We had programs on Sundays and we went through different phases of how to schedule them and who we were doing it with, but yeah.

I remember one program when the Women's – fairly early on – the Women's Community Health Center, which was down the street, came to the store. It was when the women's self help health movement was really coming into its own and they did a demonstration on how to examine yourself using a speculum. It was a time when owning your own plastic speculum was kind of de rigueur so a lots and lots of women had acquired their own – looking, looking inside yourself was a big deal, because that had been kept from us because only doctors looked inside us and there was a feeling like “We should know what's going on down there.” So, you know, seeing your own cervix was a big, a big thing. So they did a demonstration in the bookstore with somebody examining herself and everybody got to look. That was kind of, you know, that was kind of interesting. What other kinds of things did we do?

We created meeting space, once we were at, on Hampshire Street, we had meeting space. We had a semi-finished basement, and so we created meeting space for lots of organizations. So for years Dykes on Bikes met down there and the Women's Fund had some of its very most formative, initial meetings there. They were, you know, it should have been chronicled in a much more deliberate way. But it all exists, and is probably at Schlesinger. But we had events where lines went around this block. When May Sarton

read at some point in probably the 80s, maybe late 70s, early 80s, the line to see her – she was very iconic, she's kind of faded from view at this point, but she was a very big deal then because she wrote one of the first pieces of fiction that was contemporary at that time, with lesbian characters. We were just desperate for books with lesbian characters. It was such a, an object of desire for us, and she wrote one, and it was published by a major publisher. She was probably in her 60s or 70s, by then, and the line for her just went around the block. Adrienne Rich, also did a reading at the store or a signing or something, and, you know, the line went around the block. bell hooks, at some point came to read, and we had to set up a PA system. Gloria Steinem was there at one point, and we you know, people were outside and everywhere. We had some really big names, and then we had some much smaller names. We tried to cover everybody. We tried to give women opportunities, and we tried to give our community the opportunity to see people who were really in demand.

NZ: Did it ever surprise you, how big it had gotten?

GB: It did. It did, but we did it. It did. I mean, at some point, we stood back and said, “Oh, my God, we're like, the largest or second largest grossing women's bookstore in the country.” But it was just what we did for work. So, it kind of grew seamlessly. You know, we celebrated the growth. We would have an annual party every year, and for a week, for a weekend, we would discount everything in the store 20%. It was wild, it was just incredibly packed. We would rent an extra cash register and bring in extra people to staff it, and it was really intense, intense, but it was jubilant. So were we surprised? Yes, to the extent that you get surprised by your own life. Yes.

NZ: That makes sense. Did you ever feel like your Jewish identity had to be put aside in some of these spaces? Or did you always feel like you could be your complete self?

GB: My Jewish identity was an evolving process or, or its centrality to my life became an evolving process. I don't think I ever felt I had to put it aside. In fact, I was always on the

lookout for books pertaining to Jewish women and feminism and Jewish history, and we did have a Jewish women's section in the store. So no, of the initial four of us, two of us were Jewish. I don't, no, I don't think I don't think the store or store life had any, any impact on how my Jewish identity evolved, except it gave me more access to what was being written. I mean, the most fun part of that job was finding out in advance all the books that were coming out and being able to acquire them. It was like, you know, it was just like wandering around the toy store for me.

NZ: Yeah. I was wondering if we could talk a little bit about the awards that you guys got, I'm not sure – I was just wondering if –

GB: We began to be incorp – we began to be recognized by the, by other organizations in the women's community. We had thought of ourselves as pretty marginal in a lot of ways. I feel like, you know, I have reached a stage in my life when I've become a kind of walking archive, which I never thought I would be, but who does think that? But yeah, various gay and lesbian groups and and mostly LGBT groups began to recognize us for our contributions to the community. We would – we received a number of awards and recognitions in that context. I got a Peace and Justice Award from the Cambridge Women's – Cambridge Peace Commission, maybe? It was the city of Cambridge, and I can't remember what – if the source of that was – I think the Women's Commission did not exist at that point. I think it was the Peace Commission, but it was a Peace and Justice Award, and, and another award. Also, and, you know, we began to be recognized for our contribution, which was always a huge surprise. It just was a surprise. But very gratifying, and it was quite thrilling. Because that community had really taken shape. I mean, they now had the substance to bestow that kind of honor, and for it to mean something, and that was important to us.

NZ: Did you feel like you were really a part of, kind of, cultivating that in this area? In Boston?

GB: Yeah, we did feel like we were part of it. We definitely felt that we were connected to all of these organizations and saw ourselves as community and had – and that was very gratifying. I think what was really surprising to us was that we began to be seen as significant and, and more than just legitimate, in the bookselling world. That was really a surprise. Because we had felt so peripheral when we started out and so marginal and so invisible. Over time, we were seen, not only as part of the feminist community and the LGBT community, but also the bookselling world. That was, I thought that was really kind of amazing. We never expected to achieve that degree of larger legitimacy. But we did.

I was on the New England Booksellers Association Advisory Council. I had been asked to be on the board and I declined. The feminist bookstores nationally got together and we managed to orchestrate a move so that one of the women's bookstore owners in Chicago became the president of the American Booksellers Association, which felt like we had just taken over the world. So, we made a lot of – we became a very visible presence, and that was really a function of the rise of feminism in a national movement.

NZ: In your personal life, what, kind of, was going on at that point, in terms of –

GB: Oh, my personal life was always very exciting. Well, aside from the personal personal life, I was involved in a martial art that I'm still kind of involved in. So, that took a piece of my time but in my personal life, I had some initial relationships between, oh, I don't know, twenty five and thirty five, of the – as one does. Then really settled into a long-term relationship which was very significant and vital and central to my life. That lasted for twenty six years until my partner died. That was, you know, that then my personal life became much more, well, a solid support and everything else.

NZ: Yes. You mentioned the martial arts. It was Aikido?

GB: Yes.

NZ: How did you start to get involved?

GB: When I was in graduate school, I had two friends, a straight married couple. They were sort of scrawny academics, and they had started doing this martial art. They were very excited about it. They were not a particularly physically impressive pair, either of them. But they were very excited about this martial art, and I was looking for something physical to do. I wanted some activity and I was also very interested in self defense. That had become a thing in the women's movement. It was beginning to be an idea that was circulating among women, the idea of protecting ourselves. So they said, “Oh, you have to come see this. It's so great, it’s so great.” I went and watched and I said, “Oh, that looks like fun.” So, I waited until I turned in my last paper for graduate school, and then I joined, and I got hooked. You know, it's fifty years later, and I'm still connected. I lost three years during the pandemic, but I still am occasionally teaching.

NZ: Yeah. Have you gotten any? What do you find it adds to your life? Like how did how does it kind of –

GB: I think it had a really big impact on my life. It's a non-violent art. It's not oppositional. Its power is based on learning to blend with the force of an attack, without doing harm to the attacker. So involves a lot of falling and rolling and throwing, there's very little punching. The idea that you're using your opponent's energy rather than opposing your opponent's energy, has been very helpful to me and has worked in many situations, and has become kind of a guidepost in a lot of scenarios. Also the general philosophy that you're not out to harm or kill or destroy, but really, to protect yourself and dissuade, so that there's a sense that you're responsible for what happens to the person with whom you're engaged, has also been appealing. It's a very subtle art because in other cases, you can develop strength and speed and get stronger and faster. But in Aikido, you really have to learn how to blend, which isn't a matter of strength and speed. It's really a slow, slow process. So, it's a pretty subtle art and there are nuances that reveal themselves over years. So I still feel like I'm learning in many ways, but it's very gratifying.

NZ: I just wanted to pause now and see if you want a break for any –

GB: No, but I would like to see if I can get my camera back on. I know what happened. I kicked the wire and –

[Break in recording]

NZ: Okay, I was wondering if we could talk a little bit about the switch from New Words as a bookstore to New Words as the nonprofit, the Center for New Words.

GB: Yeah, so as the women's movement became a more recognized force in everybody's life, and as our customer base matured, it became less a matter of urgency for people to be in the bookstore. For many years, there was a real sense of refuge as women walked in. There was a sense that we were providing something so rare and exclusive and essential. That diminished over time, which in many ways was a good thing, because the sense of dire need, at least among our customers, had, I think, lessened. Also women moved into more settled lives. As people age, they created families and had children, responsibilities, many of them, or high-powered jobs or just demanding jobs or, or they were too far away. So, it seemed, in some ways, like a natural process. Also, it became harder to park in Inman Square. We were a ten minute walk from a T stop, but parking became more and more difficult, and that was an impediment. We were constantly looking out for parking opportunities. That was for several years, our chief focus is like, can we get our hands on this piece of something to rent for people to park.

So it diminished I mean, sales diminished, traffic diminished, and we could see where this was going. We did not want to run it into the ground. We did not want to create debt for ourselves. We had started a nonprofit piece of this, kind of, to help support the bookstore and to cover events and programming and separate them from the bookstore. I think this is not an unusual plan now, but it was pretty unusual then. So, we created

first, New Words Live, and then the Center for New Words. At some point, we saw that the bookstore was just not going to be viable in the space we were in, and we closed it, which was a long, sad process for many people. We – you know, by the time we did it, we accepted it. But customers came in and cried and left us – we left out a book and they wrote wonderful things. We had a big party and it went on for a whole weekend. It was, it was a difficult process. But we really had no choice at that point.

What we wanted to do was not waste or squander the resources we had accumulated in terms of community connections and knowledge. We were an integral part of the community and to just withdraw seemed like a huge waste of resources. So, we were trying to figure out what we could do that would enable us to continue to contribute, but would not be retail. We came up with the Center for New Words, and the mission was to promote women's voices in whatever ways we could through programming, that were possible without stepping on the toes of other organizations. We didn't want to replicate what somebody else was doing. We didn't want to compete with what anybody else was doing. We wanted to create cooperative ventures.

So, one of the earlier things we did was [with] On the Rise, which is a safe haven for homeless women just outside of Inman Square. It was very close to where we were, and I had known about it because I had been to some of their fundraising events, and with a woman who had done a reading for us, who had a new book out at the time in like 2002, I approached On the Rise and said, you know, “We have this organization. We want to promote women's voices. Do you think the women in your program would like to have a writing group?” The woman I was working with, whose name is Anika Nailah, who was a local African American writer who had been published by a major publisher and had done a lot of work – community, writing group work, had said she was interested. On the Rise said, “Sure, we can. Yeah, that'd be great.” It was Anika’s program to do and I said, “I'm going to be your sidekick. You know, I don't know anything about running writing groups, but I'll do whatever you want.” At that point, I think On the Rise had a health and wellness

grant. So, they paid the Center for New Words and we paid Anika.

That was pretty interesting. I'm still at On the Rise, twenty years later. I just, I tend to kind of stick with what I'm doing. Anika had to leave after a little less than a year, she got a job in Western Massachusetts. She said, “Keep the group going.” I was like, “You're kidding, right?” But (A) I couldn't find anybody else to replace her. She was pretty irreplaceable. And (B), who fit the description of what we were looking for, who had time in the middle of a weekday to come and do a writing group in Inman Square. So, by then, I knew the women at On the Rise well enough, and I said, “I’ll, just, you know, make it work.” So, you know, I did, for many years, I did that writing group. After, you know, we – I think after 2008, we separated ourselves from what had become Women, Action & the Media, and closed the Center for New Words. You know, I just kept doing – and On the Rise didn't have that funding anymore. But I've been doing this on a volunteer basis now, since I don't know 2003, or 2004, or something.

So, but I think the most significant thing we did was to start Women, Action & the Media, which promoted women in doing editorial writing, and other media involvement. That really grew out of an awareness that women's voices were completely absent in the absence of – in the aftermath of 9/11. There just were no women's voices in the media or editorials that were present. That created a huge impetus for activity. Laura Zimmerman and Jaclyn Friedman were the two parts of the Center for New Words who really made that happen. Ultimately, Jaclyn took it over, and the Center for New Words closed. We [had] continued, you know, working in – first, we worked in a backroom space at 186 Hampshire, where the bookstore had been, and then we moved to an office at the YWCA for several years.

NZ: I'm wondering if you could share a little bit more about Mapping the Feminist Cambridge, and I guess about the importance, not only of remembering the past, also seeing where it was and being aware.

GB: Yes, that's part of my having become “archival material.” I began to realize, I guess, because we were beginning to lose members of our community to old age and disease, that if we didn't get this history down ourselves, somebody else would come and do the research, and it wouldn't necessarily be what we wanted to say and the way we wanted to say it. So a part of this was a function of having found a pamphlet by Tim, I'm going to forget his name, but I can, I can grab it if that is not too disruptive. Yes. He did a couple of pamphlets called Mapping Out Utopia. They were pamphlets on the counterculture in Boston in the 1970s, and earlier. Problem, he is very modest, and so his name – ah, Tim Devin, and he’s in Somerville. So, I had seen a couple of these and New Words was in one of them, and that was kind of exciting. And I thought, well, you know, this plan of feminist utopia that we experienced on Hampshire Street, I mean, maybe this is the time to commemorate it. Maybe we could get – I was always very interested in the history plaques in Cambridge. I’m kind of a history nut. And I thought maybe we could put up plaques like, there, these wonderful Black history plaques on various locations throughout Cambridge.

Cambridge prides itself on its social and political history and the value of that in its identity. I thought, perfect, we should do this for some of these spots that were so significant at that time and played such a formative role in the women's movement locally. So, I went to the Women's Commission, and I proposed this idea. Kimberly Sansoucy, who is the director, got that the idea of commemorating these things was important, but she said putting a plaque on something in Cambridge takes ten years; it's really hard to make it happen. But let's see, you know, what else we can do.

So we brainstormed and came up with this idea of Mapping Feminist Cambridge. At first it was going to just be Inman Square, and then it burgeoned into something larger. But I'm very pleased with the idea that our history is getting recorded by those of us who made it, as I am with the Jewish Women's Archives for doing this kind of project. I think it's really invaluable. I think it's pretty appropriate in Cambridge, where social and

political history is considered part of the cultural value of the community. So, I was very pleased about that and the Women's Commission did a really fabulous job.

NZ: Are there any other volunteer groups that you're a part of that you'd like to mention?

GB: Currently, currently, I'm sort of bouncing all over the place. Currently, I'm involved with On the Rise on a number of levels. I am still peripherally involved in Aikido. I'm fairly involved in the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston. What else am I doing? I work part time, and I'll support almost anything that has to do with creating historical records of any of my communities and their contributions.

NZ: How did you start getting involved in genealogy?

GB: Ah, I had what I consider a typical experience in that my understanding was that WASPs had ancestors and Jews had grandparents, and that's how it was. But being kind of historically oriented, I was always fascinated by history and by my friends, by the idea that you could trace your family back to somewhere was just like, you know, not that they were necessarily notable or, but just to imagine them at – imagine people related to you from a previous time seemed fascinating to me. But I had been told when I asked my parents, “No, there are no records, everything was lost. It was all terrible. Nobody did anything. Who cares?” Like that, yeah. “Not possible, and we don't care.” They had something of the immigrant experience. You know, “We're here, we're starting this life.” Being a generation away from that, I was quite fascinated by what preceded this life.

But I didn't think it was possible until I saw an announcement somewhere for – it was actually in The Forward – for the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies Annual Conference in Boston, in 2013. I said, “Jewish genealogy, what's that?” So I immediately investigated, signed up to attend a meeting at the Boston Jewish Genealogical Society, and signed up for the conference. I think that was like, February or March, the conference was in August. And I was so knocked out by that conference,

which had like twelve hundred people there. It looked like, you know, the New York City subway had emptied into one of the Boston hotels.

But the idea that I could find out, and the things I discovered were amazing. I have had such an incredibly wonderful experience doing this in terms of how it's shaped my life and my sense of my family and who I have around me. There's also been a time when I had lost both my parents and my partner, so I was really feeling kind of devoid of family and missing, missing them on some essential level. So getting into this really allowed me to create a world, which was then populated by family, and also intellectually pretty satisfying because I was solving problems and hunting down mysteries. So, I've continued to really enjoy it. But I recognize that for some people, this is utterly fascinating, and for others, not the slightest shred of interest, and I've just learned to accept that.

NZ: Did this shift, I guess, the perception of your Jewishness at all, like finding out about your roots?

GB: Yeah, I found out that I had a great-grandfather who's a rabbi, I had no idea. No idea. So, that was interesting, too. By the time I met my grandparents, they were all kind of socialists and non-religious. Very Jewish, but very non-observant, but I didn't know what had come before them. In the course of doing this – and I discovered a whole lost piece of my family that had been split by the Holocaust. I had no idea I had any relatives who were affected by the Holocaust. But of course, that's ridiculous. Almost every Jew has relatives who were affected by the Holocaust. You know, that that was a big revelation that kind of changed my brain – that became less history and moved into some other sphere in my psyche. So yeah, I think it did. It gave me – I was always looking for ways to be Jewish that felt kind of ego-syntonic for me – that were like not, that weren't wrapped up in observance. So, I was very interested in klezmer music when that became a big thing in the 70s. My partner was the director of Voice of the Turtle, which

was a group that did Sephardic music. I learned Hebrew at a certain point when we were going to Israel, and then I just kept up with the study, and this gave me yet another entree into my way of connecting to my Jewishness. That was, has been very satisfying.

NZ: Did you find a community of other people, the genealogical community?

GB: Yes. Also family. I have both made friends within the genealogical society. But probably even more thrilling, I have found family and connected with family. I sort of see myself as dangling this information out there in front of as many relatives as I can, so, if anybody's interested, they know who's got the information and can contact me and I like, I'm sort of like the genealogical bird feeder for the family. Whoever, you know, lands on the perch, I'm happy to share the information. It's been really fun.

NZ: I know we're getting a little bit close to time, but I just wanted to see if there's anything that I didn't cover that you've been really wanting to talk about?

GB: No, it's really a matter of what the function of this, this archive is, and what it is you're trying to amass. So I don't know if I've missed anything.

NZ: It's definitely, I might have missed, I definitely missed stuff. I guess. We never really know how a resource is going to be used by people until it's out there. But maybe any changes that you noticed in the Boston LGBTQ community over the years, the changes in the city itself. Any trends, any, like, experiences that really were profound or like impacted your life in a major way?

GB: I guess, I think the thing I would want to talk about most at this point is my relationship with my partner, Judy Wachs, who was the director of Voice of the Turtle, and I know that somewhere in the Jewish Women's Archives, there's a piece on her because she really did alter my Jewish identity in the sense that I was with somebody who really had a serious Jewish upbringing, was very much in line with where I was at the moment, but had much to share and to and to teach and that relationship really

broadened my understanding and sense of belonging in terms of my Jewish identity. First, there was the music, and then when Voice of the Turtle was invited to Israel for the first time, in, I think ’84, I took an *ulpan* course at Hebrew College. I had had no experience with Hebrew. Liked it. I took that course because I really don't like the experience of illiteracy when I travel. Then came back and thought, “Well, I did one semester, I might as well do another.”

Then got a teacher who kept the class together for almost five years, and I became not exactly fluent, but very, very good at eavesdropping. Fairly, you know, I could communicate. We used to talk in restaurants in Hebrew, so people wouldn't understand us until there was a huge influx of Israelis around. It's like, that doesn't work. But yeah, and I just gained a lot of familiarity with a more traditional experience of Judaism because Judy had had it, and because also her daughter had become very religious. So, in order to accommodate her, we had to be – I had to be more knowledgeable.

So, I've always been enormously grateful for the serendipity of that relationship, which allowed me to really have a much more solid sense of myself and my Jewish sense of ownership, not identity. But I feel like I’m comfortable now in a whole range of Jewish settings that I wasn't when I was a very young person because I didn't know anything, and I knew that I didn't know anything. So, that made a huge difference. We would have, we would, I'm still doing Seders at my house with all of her family and some of my friends. We started doing that, we started doing Seders, also, with my family of origin, with my parents, when I had cousins who emigrated from the former Soviet Union in 1991, and we started going to New Jersey and doing Seders for them. My parents, who had been so ferociously anti-observant, got a kick out of it. We always brought a very feminist Haggadah, you know, that was, like, really pretty radical. But we had a great time. So I mean, that was a huge, huge piece of my, my Jewish persona was shaped by that relationship.

NZ: What was your relationship like with her children? Like, how does that –

GB: It persists, it endures. One of them is in Israel and very orthodox. Two are here, and I have a relationship with them and with their sons. It's, you know, an ongoing, important piece of my life, and it's pretty exciting to see the kids grow up and watch them become people in their own right and figure out how they're going to relate to me. I can't look at them without thinking how much they're missing because their grandmother was so amazing, and I'm not who she was, but the possibilities are, are there for ongoing growth.

NZ: Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your life with her?

GB: In the context of this, I think the important piece was, you know, the huge part of my identity that was shaped by that relationship, and by what we shared, in terms of Jewish life. It really, it felt like a homecoming, which I think is what a relationship should feel like.

NZ: Yeah, that's beautiful. All right. Well, I think that is it for me.