Emily Langowitz Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8, 2015. I'm here with Emily Langowitz at the Meet Me at Sinai Day of Learning at B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. We're going to conduct an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive. Emily, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Emily Langowitz: Yes.

JG: Great. So let's start with your telling me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

EL: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1990. It's two weeks from my birthday today.

JG: What's your birthday?

EL: February 22nd.

JG: Me too.

EL: No way. Birthday sisters. Us and George Washington. My mom always told me I could become the first female president, is what she said –

JG: You better hurry up.

EL: – because I shared a birthday with George Washington. I grew up in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

JG: 1990?

EL: 1990. Yeah.

JG: You may know my nieces.

EL: Oh, really?

JG: We can talk about it afterward. Go ahead.

EL: My mom works at Babson College, which is in Wellesley. She's a business professor there and now the associate dean of the graduate school. My dad is a computer programmer and had an office in our attic - worked from home, company of one. I have two brothers, one older and one younger.

JG: Cool. Tell me a little bit about your family's attitudes towards and involvement in Jewish life when you were growing up.

EL: We were members of Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, which is a Reform synagogue. My mom – her father is a rabbi, and I guess we could say the most prominent Reform theologian of the current age – Rabbi Eugene Borowitz.

JG: Okay. I know who he is.

EL: So she grew up in kind of this rabbi's daughter – very rich Judaism, very thoughtful, deep Judaism. My dad – his parents are totally secular. He says he used to know that he was Jewish because when he sang in the church choir, he didn't take communion. That was his bar. They didn't even go to synagogue on Yom Kippur. He didn't have a bar mitzvah. But his father is a scholar of the Holocaust and specializes in survivor testimony. So he had this sort of cultural awareness of his Judaism, but not in any religious sense. My mom's parents kind of joked that it was this mixed marriage of sorts. My dad says that when he met my mom, he realized that a lot of the values that his parents had raised him with and the ethics and the liberalism that he felt had a home in

Judaism, and he just hadn't had the language for it yet. So he and my mother joined the synagogue that we belong to still when they were first married. We grew up, my brothers and I – I always thought of myself as the most Jewish kid in the town of Wellesley because Wellesley is not a super Jewish Boston suburb, especially to go with your family on Friday night for synagogue was not so common. Usually, it was just you went to Sunday school, or you went to Hebrew school. So I always felt like we were really an observant family, that Judaism was everywhere in my house. It just really felt like a natural part of who we were, especially in the diversity of who our family was – to have like one grandpa who's a rabbi and one grandpa who studies the Holocaust, and my father's brother-in-law – his sister's husband – they lived eight minutes from us. So we grew up around them, and he's a Moroccan Israeli who's lived in the United States. So we had this sort of amalgamation of really interesting Jewish lives, and that all, I think, influenced who I was as a Jew growing up. I was super involved in my synagogue all the time.

JG: What did that mean?

EL: It meant I went to religious school up to three times a week. By high school, I helped teach the kindergarten class, and I started teaching – they had a new literature program for the fourth and fifth graders that I got to be a part of. I taught third-grade Hebrew in small groups. I loved to sing, so I was really involved in the choirs at my synagogue. My cantor was a huge mentor to me –

JG: [inaudible]

EL: – yeah, who I love very dearly. She was really adamant about the importance of me having a voice, not just musically but as a person. So she always invited me – I was very shy, and she would push me along – “Try a solo. Try a solo in a group of three. Try a solo just you” – until, by my senior year of high school, she would invite me to come sing with her and lead services with her once a month. So I just felt really – and I stayed in

confirmation, and it just was really a home to me. It was a place that I always felt like adults valued me and my ideas and wanted me to be asking questions and contributing and thinking. I also had a really – I realize now what a gift it was to have an innate spirituality that I had always felt from a very young age and that that was rare [in] people my own age and even within my family.

JG: Did you have a community of other young people your own age?

EL: Not really. [laughter]

JG: With whom you shared this, I meant.

EL: Yeah. My only Jewish friend – I really felt like I didn't have a lot of Jewish friends. My Jewish friends were people that had been in Hebrew school with me for a while, but not a lot of people stayed in after bar/bat mitzvah age. My closest friend was the president of the youth group. So she would always tell me to tag along with her at NFTY [Reform Jewish Youth Movement, formerly North American Federation for Temple Youth] events and our youth group events. I was a shy – I wanted to talk to the grownups. The grownups liked me, and we talked about ideas, and I didn't want to talk about the latest Limited Too outfit. [laughter] I think I just didn't relate as well to Jewish kids my own age. But that didn't keep me from feeling involved; I just felt involved in a different way. I never went to a Jewish camp. The Jewish socialness of being with your peers was not a strong part of what my identity as a Jew was.

JG: Were you ever interested in going to any of the Reform Jewish camps like Eisner or any of the NFTY programs in Israel or anything like that?

EL: I really wasn't. My mom and her sisters went to a Jewish camp in Canada, where my grandfather had served as the camp rabbi one year. Then she and her sisters all went for many years; her sister's kids went for many years. When it was our turn to sort of – "You ready to go to Camp White Pine?" I thought, "I don't want to go to Canada. I

like you. I want to stay here." So it was never really something I wanted. I went on NFTY in Israel the summer after my freshman year of high school with my older brother; we were in the same group. That was sort of the way that I convinced myself to go, was if I had my brother with me. So I pushed myself to do those things, but it felt like pushing; it wasn't a natural aspect of what my Judaism was.

JG: Where did you go to college?

EL: I went to Yale.

JG: And what was that like as a part of your Jewish journey?

EL: It was interesting because I got there, [and] I knew I wanted to study Hebrew. There was no question in my mind. There was a Hebrew department. It was good. I was going to sign up for the first class on the first day, and that's what I was going to do. I didn't realize then that I would take Hebrew every semester for my entire time there and that it would become a real love of mine. I just thought, "I really wish I knew what I was saying when I prayed more." I sort of discovered within that a real love and even spirituality around the Hebrew language that I hadn't explored before. That was really special because the department was amazing, my advisor was amazing, and I majored in Modern Hebrew. Religiously, I went to the Hillel. You get there, and it's almost Rosh Hashanah already, so you've got to figure stuff out pretty quickly. I would go on Friday nights to the Reform Chavurah. At first, I really had a hard time connecting, I think, because it was so different from being in my synagogue and knowing everyone and feeling comfortable. Again, socially, it was very hard for me because there were people who had been on teen trips with each other and already knew each other. There were people who were very used to the social currency of being young Jewish people together. And I really wasn't. So actually, my friends say that I was a Hillel delinquent for, I would say, maybe the first year. When I came back, my sophomore year of college, I felt like, "Okay, they're really" – it felt like something was missing in my life, but I wasn't

sure I wanted to go to the Reform group. It didn't really seem serious enough to me at the time because it was just a bunch of us sitting in a room in a circle on couches. I missed the feeling of a synagogue and the weightiness of that spirituality. So I went to the egalitarian minyan for the first semester. I would sneak into the back of the room. I would sit all the way in the back. I didn't know a lot of the Kabbalat Shabbat liturgy because it wasn't something I had been used to. And I would learn – I learned all the tunes, and when everyone would go downstairs for Shabbat dinner, I would leave and go have dinner in my dorm with my friends who were not Jewish. Then there was a switch where some girls who were in my Hebrew classes, who had always been in my Hebrew classes, who I was very intimidated by, introduced me to one of their friends who was the new leader of the Reform group. She was so kind and so lovely and so friendly. She said, "No, just come. You'll just come and hang out with us." I started going spring semester sophomore year, and it became a home for me, a home base so that I could feel like, 'Okay, maybe I can participate in the social stuff. Maybe I can get used to this." Then it really became a big part of my life. I led that group for the last two years of college, I joined the Jewish acapella group, and I took Judaic Studies classes. It just became a lot richer once I finally dove in. [laughter]

JG: [laughter] So when and how did you first become aware that gender mattered to you as a Jew?

EL: That's a great question. My parents are very liberal. I want to say that we were a feminist household, but I don't know that we used the word feminist. It was just sort of who we were. Both my parents worked full time, which actually, in the suburb that I grew up [in], was a bit rare. They had morphed their last names together at marriage. That was the story of our family name. It wasn't a hyphen; it was half of my mom's name and half of my dad's.

JG: The Langowitz.

EL: So the “owitz” is from Borowitz, and the “Lang” is from Langer, and they both changed their last names. They were very active in terms of reproductive choice. Politically, they worked on that a lot and were open with us about that being a cause of theirs that was important to them. Every year when we sat down to give tzedakah as a family, there was the women's column of all the different organizations they donated to. It was always clear that whatever my brothers did, I would do, and whatever games they played, I played, and whatever grades they got, I got. It felt very natural. My parents tell me that when they drove me to college, we drove past the women's center, and I leaned forward to the front seat and said, “What do you think there's a women's center for?” That was how much it was just not on my radar screen. It was not on my radar. I guess through being at Hillel – A, being exposed to Judaism outside of Reform Judaism, where the question of could a woman do X, Y, or Z was suddenly actually on the table.

JG: And where were you exposed to that?

EL: At the Hillel in college. It was totally new to me.

JG: Did you try going to other minyanim there? I mean, that way you went. Or more in conversations and leadership groups?

EL: Mostly in conversations, although the summer after my sophomore year, I went to Israel for the summer to work on Hebrew. I came back thinking a lot about outward expression of Judaism, that in Jerusalem, you look at people and you know, like this [snaps fingers], exactly what type of Jew they are, where they are at, mostly – for the most part.

JG: Based on?

EL: Based on how they look. Are they covering their hair? Are they wearing a kippah? How are they dressed? What Army uniform did they have on? All sorts of things. I came back, and I did this experiment that we called “frum week,” where I said I was going

to be frum for a week, basically. I felt like I was doing it from a Reform context, from a context of, “I've never been exposed to what this type of Jewish life is like, and let me see what it is.” Now I think, to be totally intellectually honest, I should have lain tefillin and worn a kippah everywhere. I really was mimicking the Orthodox Judaism of the other girls that I saw [on] campus and was friends with. That was very interesting. I woke up at 6:00 AM every morning to go to minyan. I would be the first one there. I'd have to wait until enough men came, and that was a very new experience for me. So I think all of it was percolating, and a lot of my friends were Women and Gender and Sexuality Studies majors. So they were talking about it and giving me a new vocabulary for feminism in general. And things started to coalesce a little bit. I think in college, it was mostly that it percolated a lot. But it was really starting rabbinical school that made me realize that the question of gender, especially in liberal Judaism, is a little bit taken for granted, that my seminary has been ordaining women for over forty years; what else do we have to talk about? I also was suddenly in a space where I was missing the voices of my feminist friends from college who were always in that conversation with me, and suddenly I was the one kind of trying to create that conversation, and there weren't as many partners for it.

JG: Because?

EL: I don't know. I think because my classmates weren't really thinking about those issues just then.

JG: Do you think that was because they felt the work was done within the Reform movement at this point? Or is done?

EL: I mean, I can speculate about –

JG: Well, speculate.

EL: I think part of it is that. I think part of it is – "What do you mean? I can be a rabbi. I don't understand why this would be an issue." Or some of it was even, you would see this whole concept of the feminization of dot-dot-dot is very problematic to me, but I think was a concept that some of my classmates held of – they're looking at Reform Judaism – either they're men or women – and saying, "Wow, women are really taking over here. Where are all the men? We've added all the *Imahot*. We've added all of this. We've done all of this. What are we changing? What are we taking away from the tradition?" That was very startling to me that that would be on people's minds.

JG: You mean feminization in its negative connotation?

EL: In a bad way, yeah. I just thought to myself, "I don't know why it should be my responsibility. Because I am now becoming a rabbi, that somehow impinges on your ability to be whole as a Jew." I don't think that that – I understand how that's a person's experience, but to me, it rings a little hollow, I think.

JG: Explain what you mean. I don't understand how it would impinge.

EL: In terms of – for women to suddenly arrive in the rabbinate or influence the construction of liturgy, or name one of the many other achievements that feminism has brought to Judaism, that that somehow would be driving men away. That concept doesn't jive in my mind, I suppose. But it would come up sometimes. I think also you get a new language, you get a new structure, you get a new lens, and then you apply it to the things that you do in your life. All of a sudden, all I did was Judaism. So I started to think even more deeply about what does it mean that I'm becoming a leader in a religion that has been patriarchal for so long? What does it mean that all of the texts I study in my core curriculum – because the core curriculum is based on the meat of our tradition – all of those texts were written by men? What does it mean that I finally learned the Hebrew language and understand what I say when I pray, and now all of a sudden, I realize that everything I address to God is *atah*? So it's a lot of grappling, and I think rabbinical

school just brought all of the things that were percolating in college into a sharper focus about the real meeting between the feminism that I had now developed and the Judaism that I knew and what were they going to say to one another?

JG: Can you reflect at all on what it has meant to grapple with those? What does it mean to have all the God-language and traditional liturgy in the male voice? The metaphors in the male person, et cetera.

EL: It's really hard for me, actually. The image that I have been using recently because I happened to have read this story recently is – in Judges, there's the story of Jephthah and his daughter, and he goes out to battle, and he says that he'll sacrifice the first thing that comes out of his house to greet him on his way home if God makes him victorious. So he goes out, and he's victorious, and he comes home, and who comes out of the house but his daughter. I remembered that part of the story, and I didn't remember the second part, which is where he says to her, "I need to sacrifice you now." And she says, "Okay, I understand why it is you need to do what you need to do but give me two months. I'm going to go into the mountains with my women and weep, and then I'll come back, and we'll do this." I see in that the way that I've been feeling in Judaism, which is [that] she agrees to it because she loves her father. This is what I tell myself about her. She loves her father, and she believes in the faith of her father. But at the same time, she knows that she needs to be in another space. She's even willing to sacrifice herself, potentially, out of the love that she has for her father's faith. And yet, she needs to be in the mountains for two months.

I just think a lot about – I really love Judaism. Judaism has been my center of gravity since birth. I will sacrifice a lot of things for that. But there has to be a way to create the space to have whatever conversation she was having in the mountain and have that somehow influence the sacrifice that I'm giving or the love that I'm giving. That it's possible to want to be a part of this incredible religion but also to look at it and say,

“Where are the women? Where is the change? What needs to happen?”

JG: What do you consider the unfinished business of Jewish feminism today?

EL: A lot. Do we have all day?

JG: Yeah, please go for it.

EL: I think, one, to really consider what it means that our textual tradition is missing many, many years of many voices of Jewish women that we'll just never have. I read a book recently in Christian feminist theology, and she speaks about these medieval mystical women, ascetic women. They have their writings because they were living in these big towers, and nobody came to kill them or move them, and they had the possibility of that because there was a monastic tradition. I read that with a bit of a sense of loss that I'm never going to get to have those voices from the women of the Jewish past. So, for me, one unfinished business is grappling with that and figuring out what does that mean? Does that mean we add our own voices now? Do we use our voices to project onto that sort of missing space, or is it something else entirely? I don't know. So that's one thing, kind of *begadol.* Two is, I would love to see more feminist theology. I think twenty-five years is a long time to wait. I know that there's more being written, but, especially in liberal Judaism, I think a lot of the conversation around Jewish feminism now is the incredible energy in the Orthodox movement and the discussion of where men now fit into this reality. I think there's a lot within Reform Judaism, especially ideologically and theologically, that we could be talking about and thinking about. Then finally, I think just the way we run our communities, that our communities are not apart from society at large, and that as much as has changed, as incredible as it is that I can grow up and never have to think twice about whether or not I could be a rabbi, there's still so many things on all the different levels of the way our communities are run – the way we speak to the kids in our Sunday school, what expectations we have about who wears a kippah before they go in to pray, how do we teach Hebrew in a nonbinary world, pay inequality,

paternity/maternity leave. I just think there's so many unopened boxes that I want to see all this energy around, and I sometimes look around and don't see as much energy as there could be.

JG: Where do you see the most energy as you look around your world, the Reform world? Where do you see the energy?

EL: I think I see a lot of energy. There's a lot of great work being done in terms of the professional question of pay inequality or women as senior rabbis or women on panels in positions of power. A lot of the professional stuff, I see a lot of energy around. I think there's a lot of great potential energy. We focus so much on the question of interfaith marriage. I actually think that that's a perfect feminist issue in the sense that it brings questions about parenting. Who's responsible for the Judaism of a family? Who's responsible for the Judaism of a child? All of those things, I think we've – that's a live issue in the movement right now, and I think feminism could add an interesting lens to it.

JG: What about liturgical issues?

EL: That's a great question. It's interesting; we, as a movement, I think are – the new *machzor* is in the works. I haven't seen anything about it, so I don't know what it will look like. And, of course, the movement is now, across the board, translating in English in a gender-neutral way, which I think is great. But also, at the same time, has moved towards more Hebrew. But most Reform Jews don't actually have that circuit running in the same fluency. I think there are some really interesting questions to be asked about re-introducing English as a potential language. Can you be radical enough to conjugate in the feminine in Hebrew? I think we have a tradition in the Reform movement of being able to apply the issues of our time to Judaism in a thoughtful and critical and deep, and intelligent way. So I think that even if the conversation leads to the same point that we're at, I'd love to see it happen.

JG: Yeah. What do you think are the most important next steps in advancing gender equality in Judaism and Jewish life?

EL: I think consciousness-raising is really important. I know that Keshet, out of Boston, does a lot of amazing work on this with LGBT issues. But I think, in general, to have something for synagogues that says, “When you sing at the morning assembly, do you split into boys and girls singing? How do you split the way you sing?” Easy, small things like that. Or to rabbis, “When you give a D’var Torah, how many women have you quoted? How many men have you quoted?” I think those are really easy, small steps and could actually do a lot to change the culture of how our synagogues work. I also think that a really important next step is to return some vibrancy to the world of ideas around Reform Jewish feminism because I see so much energy on so many other issues about synagogue organization and what our synagogue is going to look like in the future and community organizing. Those both on a practical level but also on an intellectual level –

JG: Do you have thoughts about what that would look like, though? What would it be considering if that energy were to go in the directions that you're mentioning?

EL: I think it would be considering, I guess, the things that I've mentioned so far. I don't know if we're having the conversation of what does it mean that we are practicing a Judaism that was written for us by men? What does that mean for us?

JG: I guess I'm asking partly, are you feeling resonance with those questions? Is there energy there to push that agenda of even having those conversations grappling with those issues within the Reform rabbinical schools, within Reform congregations? What's the percentage of women rabbis at this point that are being –? Is it about fifty percent? Even more?

EL: Yeah, my class is probably fifty-fifty.

JG: Yeah. So are all those women –? Beyond the question of the feminization with its negative connotations, are you also seeing and experiencing energy in a positive direction along all these issues that you've been mentioning? Do you see the seeds for that or the actual energy of it happening?

EL: I think less than I wish I could.

JG: Yeah. Do you have a sense of what it would take to galvanize those conversations? Spark that energy?

EL: Yeah. I don't know. You know how they ask sometimes what gets you up in the morning and what keeps you up at night? For me, that maybe is it – how can I make a difference in driving that conversation?

JG: What does your grandfather think about the directions you've taken in your life and these kinds of questions that are so critical to you?

EL: I think he's very proud of me. I know that he is. Both my grandfathers, actually. My, my dad's dad, not the rabbi, but [the] Jewish scholar, I suppose we could say – I was home a couple of weekends ago, and he got very serious all of a sudden and said, “I don't want you to wait fifteen years before you decide you have something to say. I did that. And you're smarter than I was. It's not worth it. You have something to say.” Which was very poignant because he doesn't usually say that. [laughter] I know he's proud of me, but it's never--that's never really happened. My grandfather, the theologian, is ninety-one, almost. So we have these conversations less and less just because of where he's at in life, but I know that he is proud of what I do. I think part of it does feel a little bit like a legacy. Here was this person who, I don't know how but changed the theological landscape of the Reform movement. I don't know if I'm up to that task, but it feels like a gift to be a part of a family that has that in it.

JG: Yeah. Well, I want to say that I really wish you luck in this endeavor since it's a very important one. I suspect your grandfather would – your theologian grandfather would also urge you to take up the baton and run with it. Is there anything else you want to add?

EL: I don't think so.

JG: Thank you so much. It's been really wonderful to talk to you. I'm going to turn this off now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]