

Deborah Markowitz Transcript

Ann Buffum: Hello. This is Ann Buffum and Sandy Gartner, meeting with Deborah Markowitz to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is July 12, 2005. We are at Deborah's office in Montpelier, Vermont. Deborah, do we have your permission to record this interview?

Deborah Markotwiz: Yes, you do.

AB: Do you prefer being called Deborah or Deb?

DM: Deborah's fine.

AB: Okay, thank you. Deborah, we read that both sides of your family came from Ukraine in the early part of the 20th century. Could you please tell us what brought them to the United States and where they settled?

DM: Well, let's see, my father's family came – actually, the Markowitz side of the family came from a contested part of the world, which now is in Ukraine, but switched borders, and his mother's family came from what's now Slovakia but was also a contested part of the world that was sometimes Hungary. They came first, probably to the Bronx and then to Yonkers. My mother's side of the family came earlier. My father's side of the family came to escape the Czar's army and the pogroms that were happening then. My mother's side of the family – my mother was already a second-generation American. It was her grandparents who first came, with the exception of her father, who was – actually, I take that back. Both of her parents came when they were very, very young. Their whole experience was growing up as Americans. Her parents were much more modern in America. My father's parents spoke Yiddish. They were very much old country. My mother's parents, although I think both of them were born in the old country,

really grew up entirely here. So, they were much more modern. They, I assume, also came to escape the bad conditions for the Jews.

AB: Did you know these grandparents at all? If so, can you tell us some stories about them and how they might have influenced your life?

DB: Well, my mother's side lived in Wisconsin, in Milwaukee. All of the families were very large, had lots of children. My grandparents all had lots of brothers and sisters. But the (Chudnow?) side – that's my grandmother on my mother's side – had a very close family, and she had been an opera singer in Chicago. She was a very elegant person. She wasn't much on the domestic skills but was high on the elegant skills and culture and was really funny and sweet. She looked at the world through rose-colored glasses, whether it was rose-colored or not. My grandfather, Harry, she referred to as "Honey." She didn't call him anything else. I remember my younger sister asking if grandpa's name was Honey – Grandpa Honey. It was very fun. He liked to play chess. He died when I was fairly young of a heart attack. I think maybe I was about nine years old, eight or nine years old. My grandmother, my father's mother, also died when I was fairly young, also around that same time, maybe a year later. We went every Saturday to my grandparents' home in Yonkers because we lived close by. They had a big old house with a garden. What's interesting with my grandfather is he loved to garden, but he wouldn't let anybody else garden because he didn't want them to have dirt under their fingernails because they weren't going to be peasants. He was a tailor. He had a tailor shop in the basement of the garage, and the garage had an apartment that they rented up above. His tailor shop was always a very exciting place to go. I remember he'd make us really itchy clothes from the scraps, what was left from the bolts of cloth, and he smoked a lot of cigarettes. He always had a very scratchy face from not shaving enough. I have a memory of not really liking to be hugged by him very much because it was scratchy and smelly. He was very quiet and principally spoke Yiddish. When my brother was born – he was the first grandchild – he built a swimming pool in the backyard

of this house, and he dug it. At the deep end, it was maybe three feet deep. It was a small pool. He had five children, so my father has four siblings. I remember that the siblings were all very sort of mad at him because you can't just build a swimming pool and pour concrete; it'll crack after the first winter. There's special things you have to do if you're going to put in an inground pool and liners and this and that. My grandfather just ignored them completely, poured the concrete, put in the pool, and it probably is still working today. Every year, he patched it up a little bit. It was fine. So I remember summer days there with all the great aunts and cousins. I remember my grandmother loved to complain. I think that was her hobby. I have a memory, a very strong memory of coming over. We'd get there. She was a really big, bosomed woman. She was a big woman. I remember we would hold our breath and count when she'd come to hug us because otherwise, we might get smothered. The joke was how long we had to count before we were released. [laughter] I remember after the hellos, she called one of her sisters who wasn't going to come and said, "My children, they don't love me. They only come once a week. Nobody loves me, my children." I remember crying, being upset, and going to my father and him saying, "She doesn't mean it. That's just her way." She was a wonderful cook. There were always boarders in the house; they always took in boarders for extra money. What was remarkable about them is that both my Grandmother Rose and my Grandfather Martin in Yonkers came with absolutely nothing. All of their children became professionals. My father was the oldest, and it was expected, and he did indeed work to help pay for parochial school, for day school for his younger brothers, and then for college and law school. That was expected.

AB: Can you tell us a little about how your parents met and what your family life was like when you were a young child?

DM: So my parents met in Chicago. My mother went to Madison, and after school in Madison, she was working in Chicago as a speech therapist. My father was in the Army. In Madison, she had a group of friends, many of whom were from the New York area,

and one of whom was my father's first cousin, David. My father had leave, and David said, "Oh, I know somebody in Chicago to visit." At that time, my mom was engaged to somebody else, a dentist. That's all I know about him. But she had a roommate, and so she fixed her roommate up with my father. He got in early, and she had left the key with the landlady. He got in, I guess, the night before he was expected, and he was very tired. I guess he took off his clothes, except for his skivvies, and went to bed in her bed. She came home after a long night, came into bed, and there was a strange man in her bed. That's how they met.

AB: When you were growing up, can you tell us what kind of Jewish education you had as a child? For instance, did you go to any Jewish camps or clubs, as well as having a Sunday school education? Just talk about that.

DM: It was interesting. Being Jewish was very important in my family. My father grew up Orthodox. My mother grew up conservative. We belonged to a Reconstructionist synagogue. We kept kosher, but not so kosher that we didn't go to the Chinese restaurant. We were kosher in the house, and we wouldn't – God forbid – order pork or shrimp, but we wouldn't worry so much with the wonton soup. [laughter]

AB: [inaudible] conversation at lunch.

DM: What's interesting is we're kosher now in the same way. My mother's family was very, very musical. A lot of Judaism is about music for us. My mother was a folk –she played guitar, and she played folk music with a partner [at] a lot of Jewish folk festivals. Our house was filled with Jewish music. We did a lot of those festivals. I went to religious school. I guess it was three days a week. Well, it was two days a week, and then Saturday services essentially. So, it was three days a week until I was bat mitzvahed. Then I went to Hebrew high school at the Conservative synagogue next door to our Reconstructionist synagogue because we didn't have a Hebrew High School. I was part of the B'nai Brith AZA [Aleph Zadik Aleph], but that was mostly to meet boys

who didn't go to our school. One year, we went to a Jewish day camp. It was much more Orthodox, and it offended my mother because she didn't like the sexism. Well, it was much more conservative, and it offended my mother, so we were taken out, as I recall. I think we may have finished the session that we were in.

AB: Could you just clarify, when you said you went to Hebrew high school, was that a separate school?

DM: Yes, yes. It was after school twice a week. It was an after school – my sister went to Yeshiva, but they could only afford one of us. She was the one who lucked out because she was the youngest, and the timing worked for her.

AB: Your dad is Orthodox. Your mom is Conservative. How did you end up Reconstructionist?

DM: Well, my dad wasn't Orthodox. He was raised orthodox.

AB: He was raised Orthodox.

DM: That's right. I think they were both really, very happy to be Reconstructionist. I'm probably the first generation who grew up in a Reconstructionist synagogue. What was interesting about it is that you take what you're given as normal. So, my experience of God and Judaism is, I had no idea it was different than the norm until I came and met Rabbi Wall and had a big argument with Rabbi [Max E.] Wall about the nature of God and faith and whether the Bible is literal. It was shocking to me that there was a Jew out there that had such what I thought of as Neanderthal feelings. The idea behind Reconstructionism is that you study the traditions; you study the Torah. You study, and then you bring into contemporary life what's meaningful. You bring it into a meaningful, contemporary context. You don't have to stay sexist just because they were two thousand years ago. You don't have to keep on slaughtering animals either, just because they were two thousand years ago, but you find what was meaningful in a

spiritual way about those things, and you find ways to make that relevant, maybe in a different way. That was interesting.

AB: Following along on this idea about Reconstructionism as being a branch of Judaism that allows one to be more in the present, would you consider yourself a feminist?

DM: Very much so.

AB: Can you talk about feminist issues that have been important to you and how they were influenced by your upbringing?

DM: What's interesting is my first experience public speaking was inadvertent. I had a work-study job with Roddy Cleary, who's a reverend up in Burlington at – I don't know – one of the Universalist churches or something. She was doing a conference on the future of women in religion. I had just finished reading all these Judaism and feminism books, and our speaker canceled. I ended up having to stand in and speak on Judaism and feminism, which was really thrilling. But I think the feminist part actually came – I actually dropped out of Sunday school and was tutored at home probably when I was eleven because I was more serious than the kids in the Sunday school. I wasn't from the town that most of them were from. Socially, I felt left out. They fooled around, and I wanted to study. My teacher was Mrs. Abramson – read with me the Dinah chapters, and she pointed out all of the sexism in the Bible. We had lots of discussions about it. That really was sort of radicalizing at an early age. I've since told her that she was formative in my view of the world from those discussions we'd have leading up to my bat mitzvah. So, yes, I certainly see myself as a feminist. A lot of it comes from my experiences as a Jew. What's so wonderful about Reconstructionism – and I think Judaism overall, although I can't speak for all the denominations – is that it assumes that you're an equal partner so that you can have a conversation about justice and meaning and ethics. It's an ethics-based faith, and you don't have to just take at face value what you're given, but you can argue. We have the right to argue and disagree.

AB: As women?

DM: As Jews.

AB: As Jews, you mean.

DM: As Jews. It's very easy then to bring it to a feminist place.

AB: I guess this next question follows up on that. We were going to ask you to talk about how these ethical values that you've developed as a Jewish woman have affected your career choice and your work.

DM: Well, Tikkun Olam is central in my husband's and my life, you know. We really have made choices that are about quality rather than quantity. We moved up here instead of taking high-paying jobs in DC. We made this decision to make our family and our homes and our life choices about making the world a better place. Really, in all that I've done or I do, the choices I make, that's the central point. What's interesting is I give a talk – I do a lot of public speaking, obviously. I do a lot of leadership talks. I always talk about Tikkun Olam because that's the starting point for any leader is why. What is your goal? What are you trying to accomplish? You can't be a leader if you aren't strongly grounded in where you want to end up. That's that big question about what's the meaning of life? Why are we here? My Judaism really grounded me in the answer, which is the whole concept of Tikkun Olam. Through my life, through college – in college, I was an activist. I worked on peace issues, on feminist issues, at battered women's shelters, at Take Back the Night things. Then I went to law school, thinking that I would do litigation to help people and maybe feminist litigation. My essay was on why I wanted to do feminist litigation. But then I got out, and I decided I didn't like the lifestyle part of litigation because you don't have control over your schedule, and it's very stressful. I fell into working with cities and towns, which is a wonderful way to make the world a better place. We've got all these volunteers who are trying to do the right thing in

their communities, and they just don't know what the rules are, and they need support, and they need ethical guidance, and they need people to give them what they need to make it work. From there, various things happened. I ended up being able to expand that as Secretary of State in public service.

AB: Let's stop for just a minute. [Tape paused].

DM: In terms of Tikkun Olam and this broader idea, what got me thinking about running for office – a number of things, but one of the catalysts was I went to a lecture that Mario Cuomo gave. He talked about the culture of disrespect for government and how incredibly damaging that is to the social contract. The idea that I think Democrats believe strongly this idea that government has an obligation to even the playing field so that everyone has equal opportunity to have the benefits of the American dream and that government has an obligation to take care of people who can't take care of themselves and to also give them an opportunity to live a meaningful life, and that if we believe that government is corrupt and self-dealing and that government officials are incompetent, then we can't trust government to do these things. It allows us to privatize Social Security. I mean, that's a myth that Social Security is worse because it's the government. It's better. It's been more secure than private accounts. But there's this culture of disrespect for government. That got me interested in moving to a place where I would have more of a bully pulpit and where I could work on good government issues, civics, and democracy. This is a great spot to be in for that.

AB: When you were pursuing these goals, first, your education and your career goals, were you taken seriously as a woman going to law school?

DM: Oh, yeah. By the time I'm in law school, it's a third of the class. Well, no. Half of the class were women. A third of the class at Georgetown at least were people of color. It was a very diverse school. I clerked for the Supreme Court here and had plenty of opportunities. The real challenge was once I had babies, and didn't want the lifestyle of

working a million hours. It was balancing family and career. I think that's the challenge of the age.

AB: Did you ever experience difficulties because you're Jewish at any point?

DM: In politics, any kind of "otherness" is a problem. Not only am I Jewish, but I'm obviously Jewish. Madeleine Kunin is Jewish, but no one would ever guess that in a million years looking at her or by her name. She doesn't gesticulate in the way – you know what I mean? There's nothing about her that sends that message. But with me, it's pretty undeniable. In politics, I'm always aware when people feel like I'm "other." But I don't think it's actually made a difference. It's just like being a woman. There's some people who won't vote for me because I'm a woman. But there's others who only vote for me because I'm a woman. It sort of evens itself out.

AB: Well, let's go back and talk some more about your family. Why don't you tell us a little about your husband's Jewish education and background? Then talk to us about what it was like to move to Vermont and make a Jewish home in this rural area.

DM: Paul grew up in Maryland. He grew up Reform, which is really different than the traditional service. It was all English. He didn't have the same kind of traditional Jewish education I did. He was bar mitzvahed. He was involved with AZA to meet girls, I think. But he was not all that interested in necessarily marrying someone who was Jewish. I actually hadn't ever thought about it either, to be honest. It wasn't on my, you know, checklist, what I was looking at who to marry. But I realized, actually, after I met Paul, that the Jewish part was important because it meant that we shared values. It wasn't the only way you can get there, but it was a shortcut to finding somebody who shared some basic essential values. You'd think that first of all, the miracle of having two people who are Jewish meet and marry in Vermont, that is of our generation – that's a miracle. So you'd think it would have been easy, but it really wasn't because our experiences were so different. With Reconstructionism, you don't have to believe a particular thing. That's not

quite right. I mean, you believe in the mitzvot, but the whole concept of chosen-ness, you don't find that now in the Reconstructionist prayer books. You don't find the sexism in the Reconstructionist prayer books. Even though back then, there weren't Reconstructionist prayer books, I was raised without these ideas that Paul found very alienating. I have memories of synagogue that were just joyous memories. We loved synagogue because of the music because my mother's a singer, my grandmother is a singer. It was about the songs and the music. The prayers were all in Hebrew, so you didn't have to read the English to find out that really, the English was offensive. It was a lovely spiritual experience of singing ancient tunes that were sung for generations. That, of course, was not Paul's experience. His experience was English services with a little singing, where mostly people didn't sing. Right from the beginning, we'd have these – I would go to synagogue, and he would eat on Yom Kippur; he wouldn't fast. He was completely secular. We would have these terrible arguments about whether he'd come with me at least to Yom Kippur or the High Holidays. It was very stressful. Then the rabbi and the wedding thing was a little stressful. We ended up with a fine rabbi that we found that we liked, but it took a while because it wasn't going to be Rabbi Wall, who was the rabbi around at the time, although he's a lovely man. No offense to Rabbi Wall, but he was too conservative for Paul because he was going to say "God" in the service. [laughter] What was interesting is after we had babies, Paul met some Jewish renewal people, and he got this total extreme opposite, where all of a sudden, he became so into Judaism and so the synagogue here. He teaches Sunday School. It's really funny. I had to say, "Hey, Paul, if we don't get the sukkah up by four o'clock, it really doesn't matter. Even though technically, it should be. It really doesn't matter. Let's wait until seven." He was very funny. Like any relationship, you have to find the balance. We have a very strong Jewish home. Our kids love it. Every night at bed, we sing Shema; that's the bedtime ritual. If my son was sleeping over at someone's house, he'd call us up on the phone because it's special. We do Shabbos not every Friday but almost every Friday. We like to have the holidays. It's the way I was raised, not the way Paul was

raised, with a lot of singing and the joyous parts and not the rule parts. We keep Kosher, but not as strictly as when I [was] growing up, but that's because you don't have access to kosher meat. Also, kosher meat isn't as healthy. So we substitute with organic. We just have organic meat, thinking that's the modern-day idea of Kosher. My feeling about it is that it's not the rules that count – it's not what the rules are; it's that you have rules because it makes the act of eating and the sanctity of your home special. It reminds you of the spirituality and that there's a loss of life and resources and so forth for us to live. So, even if my daughter goes out for breakfast and has bacon once in a while, I don't really worry about it at all. Our house, though, isn't going to have bacon. We have fleishig and milchig plates. Although, if she wants a turkey dog, when we're all having milchig, she can take out the fleishig plates and eat at the same table, which would never have happened growing up for me.

AB: In your own home growing up?

DM: That's right.

Sandy Gartner: Let's stop for a second. [Tape paused] Deb, it's my turn. [laughter] Where did you guys meet? Where did you and Paul meet?

DM: Well, we met actually in New York City, but we both were living in Burlington, and it was in 1982 – June 12th. There was a peace rally in New York City. We were both with Bread and Puppet Theater. I had a friend who knew him because he had dated her roommate. She introduced us there because we both are Markowitz. He was the other Markowitz. We just met each other briefly. He saw me on the streets in Burlington and recognized me, and started to chat, and the rest is history.

AB: We did wonder why there was a Markowitz and a Markowitz. We were going to ask that question.

DM: That's how it happened.

SG: Your mother's maiden name is?

DM: (Schulner?).

SG: Did she use –?

DM: No, she was Markowitz.

SG: She was Markowitz.

DM: Yes.

SG: Going back to your work life, can you talk to us about some of the agencies and volunteer things that you're really proud of that you were instrumental in getting started?
[inaudible]

DM: Do you mean as Secretary of State?

SG: Or in other capacities. Well, over the course of the years, there's a lot – I've done a lot of different things. What's wonderful about being an elected official, the head of a small agency, is you really have a tremendous capacity to make things happen. One of my interests and loves is civic education. One of the reasons why our citizen participation has plummeted is because we no longer teach our kids how government works, the value of democracy – I mean, the reason why cynicism is so high is because people have false ideas about what the institutions of government are supposed to do. When you hear, "Oh, the legislature is so awful; all they do is argue," it's like, "Hello, that's why it's there." People with different opinions, getting together, arguing, coming up with compromises. Or "That terrible official. He compromises all the time." Well, that's how democracy works. It's people with different opinions making compromises so that we can all live with each other without war, without coming to bear arms. I focused a lot on developing civics programs in the schools. That's been really very gratifying to see.

We have a whole election and mock election curriculum that's been used by tens of thousands of kids. We have an award-winning Democracy in Action newspaper and education program we've done. We have booklets on the town meeting day for all the different ages that are being used all over Vermont, and we're coming out with a couple of more this year on Vermont history and geography and culture and one on the legislative process. That's been fun. It's interesting. I inherited an office that was just a terrible mess. One of the things I'm proud of is that we've really straightened out the office. The lion's share of what the office does is it licenses and disciplines, professionals – nurses, realtors, mental health workers – forty different professions. There was a backlog of – I don't know – you'd wait three or four years to get your case resolved. When I started, we completely eliminated the backlog, and we actually have prosecutors who are prosecuting, and the system is really working. That's very gratifying to see just sort of the difference in the quality here all across the office, and it really had to do with helping staff members feel empowered so that they took personal responsibility for getting their job done. It was a lot about morale, a lot about training, and a lot about setting expectations and holding people to the expectations. I think the best part is just how much in terms of customer service and efficiencies. We end up with a budget surplus at the end because people are really all working together and are on top of it. That's very exciting.

AB: When you first ran for this job, did you have a clear understanding of what the duties of the job were, or did you grow into it [inaudible]?

DM: No, I had a clear idea of what the duties were. But I hadn't thought that the majority of my time would be doing the administrative piece and personnel because, really, it's an administrative job. I spent a lot of time looking at budgets, figuring out personnel issues, and dealing with the nuts and bolts of running an agency. I was also really surprised at the bully pulpit angle and how so much of what I do and what I can accomplish is about having a place at the table, having the press's ear, being able to talk about issues. One

of the first things I did, for example, is I got a law passed to allow local governments to adopt – or citizens to petition for ethics ordinances. There were no ethical rules in cities and towns. That was a terrible thing. I actually have a new bio that I just finished today that was going up on the web that I can give you a copy of that outlines some of the things that I was particularly proud of accomplishing in the past seven years. When I first was elected, one of the things I was charged with was overseeing open government. We have the State Archives. We're the place that the press calls when they're having trouble getting into a meeting, or citizens call if they can't get a record they think they are entitled to. There was a woman who was tracked down by an abuser. She moved here from Massachusetts. That person who had abused her was let out of jail, tracked her down through the public records here, and shot her. I can't frankly remember if she lived or died, but all of the advocates came and said, "Hey, we've got to close the public records. This is life or death. I was able to work with all the different interested parties and came up with a solution, which is this Safe at Home program, which allows victims of domestic violence, then we expanded it to rape and stalking, who have moved to escape an abuser, they can use our office addresses as their legal address on all of the public records. Then, we forward their mail to a confidential location. So it's cheap, it protects them, and it keeps the records open. They can hunt them down, but they'll get PO Box whatever in Montpelier.

AB: You're a [inaudible] for their personal whereabouts.

DM: What's wonderful is that when you're here, you can make that happen. When you're at the head of the table, you can make that happen if you care and want to focus on it.

AB: Because of your background being so concerned about ethics and making the world a better place, you initiate things like this.

DM: I think because I'm a woman and I can relate to it, it's not just saying, "Oh, sorry, can't help you. Let's close the door." Another issue – we started a licensure for professional midwives, who are not nurses, who do home births. It was very controversial, but there are many midwives out there doing home births, some of them who shouldn't be. There needs to be regulation and licensing. At the same time, women have a right to choose. If a woman can choose to get liposuction where she could die from it, and there's no medical reason ever to get liposuction, then she should be able to choose to have her baby at home, making some balance for risk, right? If it's a no-risk – under the right circumstance. Again, that was something that my personally being here, I think, made a particular difference.

AB: Can I just ask [inaudible]? I'm curious. If you want [inaudible] licensure or for ethics rules, how do you, as Secretary of State, initiate that happening [inaudible]?

DM: Every year, I go to the legislature, and I spend time in different committees, and I have a packet of proposals.

AB: That you bring from your office?

DM: That's right, that we initiate here. Part of having the bully pulpit is convincing the opinion leaders. I meet with leadership in advance to let them know what I'm thinking about asking for, making sure they're on board, and then we can get things done.

AB: How closely do you have to work with the governor in this office?

DM: Well, we have to be in communication, but I'm independent. He controls the personnel system. He's not directly doing it, but he's got people under him. We have to have a collegial relationship, and we do.

AB: Okay. Are there any other things you'd like to share with us about your professional life that we haven't asked about? Or about your personal life? Or life as a Jew here in

Central Vermont?

DM: I think one of the special pieces about doing oral histories of people in Vermont that's important to keep in mind is that we live in a very small state population-wise, and so we know each other more. Even if I wasn't Secretary of State, I would know a lot of the people in the Jewish community across the state. It's a small place, comparable to a small to a medium-sized city anywhere else. But we're spread out. We have to build community in different ways. There are things – we didn't talk much about being a parent and the challenges there, but that's really significant. Sometimes I feel badly that we don't have the choice to send our kids to Yeshiva, although I like the public school system. So, would I anyway? I don't know. They all do sports, and all the sports are always on Saturdays. So, going to synagogue is not – it's not easy to do. There's also not a whole lot of choices in terms of synagogues and where to go, and how you might want to have services. You have to be closer in sometimes uncomfortable ways with other members of your community and figure out how to work together. But as a parent, my kids are very often the only Jew in their class. I think, because of our family, they feel really strongly Jewish identified in a very positive way. But they also feel sometimes isolated, and it makes the choices hard, particularly their two-day-a-week religious school. That adds a lot, and it's hard to get that to be a priority. It's just not as easy. You have to work at it. In other places, there would be – my oldest daughter plays clarinet. From the time she was ten, she's played klezmer music. Well, she's got no one to play with.

AB: [inaudible]

DM: She plays klezmer on clarinet, which is natural because there's not very many types of music where the clarinet has the lead. So, it's an easy shift, but if we lived in New York, she'd have a group of kids playing klezmer, and she would have really been able to develop. That wasn't an option. So, things like that are sometimes – I feel badly about.

So, that's it.

AB: That's it.

DM: Good.

SG: That's great.

AB: That's wonderful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]