

Ellen David-Friedman Transcript

Sandy Gartner: Sure. This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum meeting with Ellen David Friedman to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today's November 8, 2005. We are at Ellen's home on Brazier Road in East Montpelier, Vermont. Ellen, do we have your permission to record this? [Recording paused.]

Ann Buffum: Can we back this up again?

SG: Yes.

AB: I just want to get this [inaudible] again. [Recording paused.]

SG: You told us that both sides of your family came from the Pale [of] Settlement [inaudible] perhaps, in the late 19th century? Can you tell us a little about what brought them to the United States?

Ellen David Friedman: Yes. I can tell you what I know, which is limited because I only personally knew one of my four grandparents; the others had died before I was born. But my general understanding is that it was the economic necessity, combined with the conditions of social oppression and limitation that most Jews lived under in the Eastern European regions, what is perhaps now Poland, or what was, I guess, then Latvia. All four of my grandparents, to my knowledge, emigrated at young ages, some on their own. My paternal grandfather came on his own because there was already a brother in Chicago. My maternal grandmother and paternal grandmother actually both came with their families. But as many in that generation did, emigrated, ended up on the East Coast, made their start.

SG: You knew just one of these grandparents personally?

EDF: Yes.

SG: Did this particular grandparent – do you have any particular stories or anecdotes that you remember about them, either with you or their life before your time?

EDF: The grandparent I knew was my maternal grandmother Ida Cades?. She had nine children. We grew up in a very close relationship with all of her offspring, my aunts and uncles, who settled around Philadelphia. There were close and loving relationships in the larger family, also true on my father's side of the family. She had a great, strong stabilizing presence for all of us. I certainly remember from my youth that her – well, this is actually interesting. I hadn't thought of this for a while. Her English was never all that good. She always spoke with a strong accent. We were the only branch of the family that had moved to New York. My mother had – her two oldest brothers migrated to Hawaii in 1929. [laughter] So the two went there. Then, of the remaining seven, six family members stayed around Philadelphia, and we moved to New York. In any event, she would sometimes spend summers with us. She watched soap operas at our house. Television in our house was not a major or prominent feature of our lives; it was an intellectual family environment, I would say. I remember thinking, "This is strange. This is a woman who was obviously mature and self-possessed, had produced all of these children, who were professionals and thinkers and culturally-developed people." At a young age, I couldn't actually understand why she enjoyed soap operas. That seemed to be a contradiction that I never figured out.

SG: You told us that you felt that growing up, you were growing up as a cultural Jew. Perhaps you could explain what you mean by that, and what it was like for you in your early life as a Jew, and whether you had any Jewish education, and what traditions perhaps the family was involved with, either holidays or other traditions during your childhood?

EDF: Sure. Both of my parents would describe themselves even now, and they're both still alive and vital at the age of ninety-one – would describe themselves as non-believers, as atheists. That is also how I would describe myself – how I do describe myself. But we grew up in an all-Jewish suburb. They moved from Philadelphia to New York right before I was born. In about 1950, they purchased a house in a newly established suburb that was almost entirely Jewish. Everywhere around the cultural norms were Jewish; the sense of values, political orientation, the love of learning, music, and a pride of personhood were very strong for me. But they were absolutely secular humanists, and as I said, did not have a faith – didn't have a faith in a deity and were skeptical, if not cynical, about organized religion. Having said that, we did belong to a synagogue, to a Reform synagogue. Both of my older brothers were bar mitzvahed. I attended Hebrew school for a few years, which never had any hold on me in the least beyond the music and the folk dancing. It was an article of faith for me that it was fine to be a Jew and consider yourself a Jew and not participate in the religious conventions.

SG: Do you have any ideas why your parents – well, rejected is maybe a big word but – didn't embrace the traditions of the old country and the religious ideas? Did they ever talk about that? Do you have a sense, looking back, why that might have been?

EDF: I would say the strong cultural milieu for that generation, for the first-generation Americans in their family, was to look outward and forward into the opportunities for a broader social and political life in the new country, that each of their parents varied a little bit. My father's mother was a very Orthodox and observant woman. I remember very vividly a story that my mother told that during the Depression – of course, everybody was dirt poor – my father managed to have a job as a night clerk at a hotel, so he had a little money coming in, but his parents were really struggling. His father had a string of failed businesses that he could never really make go. They got together to all have a big dinner. I'm trying to remember what the sequence of events was. But they had somehow scrimped and saved and put together money for some big family event.

Maybe it was a birthday party. The next day, my mother got up, and her mother-in-law, my father's mother, had gone through and taken all the leftovers from the party and thrown them away. It turned out that she was koshering the house for Passover. My mother used that often to talk about the blindness and the irrationality of religious practice. So, they're rationalists; my parents are rationalists, very progressive politically, and religion was seen as something that held you back, did not move you forward. I shared that view.

SG: Moving on to the work that you've been involved in in your life. Can you tell us how you first got involved in progressive politics? How you got started? What kinds of things you did at an early age with this interest?

EDF: Well, I would say it was as early as I can remember in my life. A worldview about justice and equity was very strong. My father worked in the field of Jewish – actually, Jewish Family Services. That was his first professional work, and [he] worked in vocational services and children's services and then entered into public policy work and eventually ended up as the executive director of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the EEOC under Jimmy Carter. So really reached the top of his career as a civil rights executive, I guess you would say. So I certainly was influenced by him in that environment. My earliest recollection of becoming an organizer was – I would guess I was in middle school in the early 1960s, and the book *Death at an Early Age* by Jonathan Kozol was published. I read it – maybe my father had brought it home – and felt as if the scales had dropped from my eyes. I said, "Really? Is this true? There are Black children in the country living in these conditions of incredible poverty and misery and oppression, and their schools are miserable." Here I am, in this very comfortable suburb. I managed somehow to get in touch with the publisher. I put together my dimes and ordered a case of the book – a case of the books, however many there were. They were shipped to our house, and I set up a reading group. I was probably about twelve. I set up a reading group with a group of my girlfriends. I said, "We have to read this

book.” I got them all to read it. Then I said, “Now we have to go door to door and sell these books.” It was my first experience of going door to door, which I have done almost nonstop since then, and I loved it because, for me, this is the essence of how you build justice is by having deep, probing, challenging conversations with people one on one and helping them think about how they can fix the world – *tikkun olam*, for sure. It was very reinforced by my family. But I think I also just found a calling quite early on that moved me deeply.

SG: Let’s start talking about some of the things you’re doing today. For instance, why don’t you tell us about the Vermont Progressive Party, what particular things they’re up to, and what role you’re playing in the party right now?

EDF: Sure. Well, I came to Vermont in 1970 for the first time, the first summer between high school and college for me, and returned every summer until I moved here permanently in 1974. At the time, I had been involved in both high school and college and radical left-wing student politics. There was already, when I moved here, a third party, the Liberty Union Party, which is where Bernie Sanders got his start. However, I was part of the student left that was not interested in electoral politics; we thought electoral politics were bankrupt and dominated by the corporate classes and didn’t want any part of them. I wasn’t really that interested in electoral politics, but I immediately became involved in grassroots organizing and eventually labor organizing, which is how I’ve earned my living for my whole adult life. However, I kept an eye on the Liberty Union Party, and it seemed a little bit too much on the margins for me. But in 1984, sort of by chance, someone called me and said, “Well, are you interested in working on Jesse Jackson’s campaign in Vermont?” At that time, I began paying attention. Jackson seemed to be saying what you would want someone to say, which was it was an anti-militarist, anti-corporate, anti-racist agenda. I actually did get involved and, much to my surprise, found myself involved in Democratic Party politics. We ran quite a successful campaign for Jackson in ’84. I went to the Democratic state convention there and, much

to my and everybody else's surprise, was elected Democratic National Committeewoman and served from 1984 to '88. This is perhaps a longer answer than you want. But the point of this being that I did get to be quite involved in Democratic Party politics, both in the state and nationally, during this period of time. Once again, I worked on Jackson's campaign in 1988 for president. But as that was going on, I began to see more and more how – it wasn't so much a problem of the Democrats; it was the problem of a two-party system, which particularly since the populist era in this country had increasingly decided to limit political voices, any independent political voices, so that the campaign finance system, the primary system, the Electoral College, and vote-counting systems, party organization, systematically moved in the direction of two parties. Well, this is not the worst thing in the world, but it is quite unique in an advanced industrial country. In fact, we may be the only one that has such a lock of a two-party system. I became personally very convinced, and meanwhile, Bernie had been elected mayor in Burlington in 1981. I became convinced that it is worth at least giving some of my political time towards opening that system up. We organized the Progressive Coalition, which was Bernie's electoral organization in Burlington, and had a statewide Rainbow Coalition for a number of years, then a statewide Progressive Coalition, and ultimately, in 1999, we decided to organize as a major party under Vermont's laws. I have been in the leadership – vice-chair, I think, most of that time. I guess the final thing I would say is, while I remain mostly convinced that what one needs to do to build progressive social change is grassroots organizing. Labor organizing is my particular interest, but of all sorts – organizing among women, among low-income folks, within the disabilities community, on environmental causes. I see electoral organizing as not the engine of social change, but one important expression of it because, for many Americans, very disaffected from politics of all sorts, it is only electoral politics.

SG: So, how would you measure success in a third party? What would you call success for the Progressive Party?

EDF: Well, we actually call ourselves, and I think it'd be hard to challenge this, the most successful third party in the United States in over fifty years because we actually elect people to office on our party line. There is actually no other third party in the country that does that. You do have some other third parties, like the Green Party or the Libertarian Party on the right, and they do run candidates, but the only time they have been able to win office is in nonpartisan elections – school board races or city council races, which are nonpartisan. So we actually run for and compete and win. So Burlington, for example, since 1981, so the last twenty-five years, all but two of those years, the mayor has been a Progressive, and the city council has had either half or a majority of its members have been Progressives. We now have six Progressives in the state legislature. That's certainly successful.

SG: How about you? Would you ever consider running for public office?

EDF: No, I have resisted people's attempts to get me to run for several reasons. One is I don't think I'd actually be very good at serving in office. I'm a good campaigner. I like campaigning. But the second thing is that I'm way too devoted heart and soul to labor organizing and would feel heartbroken if I had to stop doing that.

SG: So let's move on to your heart and soul here.

EDF: Yes, yes.

SG: Tell us about the labor organizing work. Start right at the beginning with – you already told us a little bit – how you got started. Please, in this question, talk to us about what you do for a living at the Vermont NEA [National Education Association] and about the livable wage campaign, the Vermont Workers Center– all of those things?

EDF: Sure, sure. Well, actually, how I got started with labor organizing is another really wonderful story that I remember from my youth. I was perhaps a little bit older, maybe fourteen or fifteen. The United Farm Workers in California had begun organizing the

grape pickers. An older friend of mine, someone who was maybe a junior and I was a sophomore in high school, invited me to go to a meeting at the local Friends Meeting House. I went and was very lucky to meet Dolores Huerta, who was Cesar Chavez's right-hand woman, at the time, [and] has gone on and since become just a powerful figure in Chicano organizing and in the labor movement. She had come to New York to help organize the grape boycott. I thought this was very compelling and then began spending Saturdays for the next number of years traveling around to different grocery stores in my neighborhood and handing out leaflets and asking people as they came in not to buy grapes. It was, as you know, a very, very successful campaign, one of the first modern efforts to support the organizing of a very, very marginal and oppressed group, the migrant farm workers in California, by this kind of national corporate boycott. It felt part of an important trend. So, I loved that experience. Then, the same older friend invited me to begin going with her into New York City on the weekends to take a course in Marxism, which I did and probably understood not one bit of at that age, but somehow the seeds were planted. When I went off to college, I recommitted myself to that study. I studied all the classic texts, Marx and Engels and Lenin and so on all through college, and there became involved also in some labor organizing. I remember there was a big waitress strike in Cambridge, where I was in school.

SG: Can you say what year that was?

EDF: Yes. I went to college between 1970 and '74, and this strike, I believe, was probably in '73. There's a chain of these things called the Pewter Pot Muffin Houses.

SG: Oh, yeah.

EDF: In Massachusetts.

SG: I went to Harvard University.

EDF: In what time? What years?

SG: '68 to '72.

EDF: Right. We overlapped a bit. I went and went on the picket line and started talking to these women who were trying to – single moms and various people trying to just survive. It just always spoke to me. I decided, I think, pretty early on that I wanted to be an organizer. When I got to Vermont, my first work was doing grassroots community organizing. As quickly as I could find work here as a labor organizer, I took it and taught myself how to do that work. That would have been in the mid-1970s or so. In fact, it's interesting; I did the self-designed personal apprenticeship to every old communist I could find in Vermont, and there were a bunch of them. These were these older men – by that time, they were generally in their seventies – guys who had been in the party, were working-class men, some of them native Vermonters, some of them people who retired here, but who had worked in the labor movement in the 1930s, and '40s, and '50s, and who really saw and approached the question of labor in, as I saw it, a very principled and deep way. And also knew how to do the craft because there wasn't any way to learn how to become a labor organizer, and it was a totally male-dominated field at that time. I was this young, kind of idealistic girl. But I must have found six or eight of these guys in the hills over a period of time. That's how I learned to do the work that I do.

SG: Were you getting paid for the work at that point? [inaudible]

EDF: Oh. [laughter] Well, no, in the beginning, what I did was – sometimes I took some other jobs. I worked for three years as a grocery clerk in Chelsea to support myself. Was I married at that time. I guess I got married in 1980, so it was during that period of time; I began to work in the grocery store in '78 or so. My husband Stuart and I were living together in Chelsea at the time. He supported me for a long time as he's a social worker. So I was earning whatever I was earning as minimum wage, working as a grocery clerk. And then I'd volunteer here and there. I volunteered with United Electrical Workers; we were trying to organize the General Electric plant in Rutland.

SG: Did it work?

EDF: It did not work. They are still trying to organize the General Electric plant because, at the time, GE had a plant in Burlington and one in Rutland; the Burlington plant was unionized, so the way they were keeping the union out of Rutland was by giving them the same wages and benefits, but just none of the other protections. For a long time, I did this almost without any remuneration. I worked for the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees for a number of years – AFSCME – and organized police, actually mostly. Then I would say I earned my first real serious professional wage when I went to work for Vermont NEA in 1986. But always did and continue to do a very substantial amount of unpaid work in various progressive organizations, some of which have a specific labor focus, like the Workers' Center and the livable wage campaign, and some of which are political, like the Progressive Party.

SG: Why don't you tell us a little bit more about the Vermont Workers' Center? And then about the livable wage campaign? So explain it for posterity.

EDF: Sure. Well, the thing that I think is worth explaining is that, and again, this actually does, I think, bring us very, very close to the orientation of this interview in these archives about the lives of American Jews is that the labor organizing tradition in this country is deeply, deeply intertwined with the American Jewish experience. I certainly had uncles and aunts and people of that generation and friends of my parents, who were ardent trade unionists. The principles of the Jewish working man's circle and the Bund and so on were things I knew and learned about growing up. But even as I came of age, it was quite apparent that that belongs to an era that was passing, and the great heyday of American labor, industrial radicalism, was in its demise and has continued to be in its long demise, really, throughout my entire life. But the principles underlying it, to me, never seemed at all old fashioned or outmoded; they seemed as central to my identity and my identity as a Jew as anything, which is that for the dignity of human beings, you

must have possession of and self-direction over your most precious commodity, which is your labor. To build a society that is just and rational and allows the flowering of the human spirit, it must be democratic. The idea of oppression by the wealthy few over the many who toil doesn't work. It never works in the long run, and it causes great misery. So even though the inheritance of the labor movement looked outdated, the principles remained the same. So, I have spent a lot of my adult life trying to work in areas that, as I think of now, are transitional modes and transitional strategies. The old industrial labor unions are weak. They're small. They're conservative. What next? And "the what" next is great. It's a great experimental playing field. That includes things like the Workers' Center, which is a labor solidarity organization. What we do is we raise money and have two staff, but mostly it's volunteer-driven. We support groups of workers who are trying to organize unions. We support unions who are trying to achieve contracts or might be on strike. We also do a lot of work with workers who are not organized and can never be organized, meaning they work for an employer that's too small, or they work in a field where the resistance from the employer is so tremendous that they could never hope to organize a union. So, we run a hotline, and hundreds of people call every year for questions about what to do in the workplace. We work with undocumented migrant workers. For example, there was a group of these construction workers, undocumented Latin American construction workers in Bennington; they weren't being paid by the contractor. They'd worked for two months and had never gotten any wages. They reached out to us. We organized some public events and community support, and we got them their back wages paid. We work with the Fletcher Allen nurses in our campaign to try and get guaranteed nurse-patient ratios. We're working on healthcare reform. We do a lot of training and development of labor leaders and labor activists. We're working now on Walmart, helping to organize a Walmart workers association. It's a wide, wide range of things. It's a fabulous organization.

SG: Does this organization have connections to other organizations in the country?

EDF: There are about fifty or sixty workers' centers of various sorts around the country. Some of them are affiliated as we are with a national group called Jobs with Justice. It is an affiliate, a very autonomous loose affiliation. There's no central governance to it. Those worker centers engage in all kinds of different strategies; everybody's experimenting.

AB: You have a hotline.

EDF: Yes.

AB: Do you often go out when you see something? Or is it always people coming to you [inaudible]?

EDF: It is both. Sometimes people call, and they'll just have a question, and it's taken care of quickly. Sometimes it turns into more investigation and a campaign. Because we have been very active and do a lot of outreach, we'll often get inquiries. But then sometimes we will notice something. We'll see an article in the paper, and we'll call someone. We also have people in communities all over the state who are members of the organization or get our newsletters. They're eyes and ears for us. Someone might call from Brattleboro. I got a phone call just this morning, actually, from – this was kind of poignant – a woman who is one of about twenty managers in a Head Start program run by a community action agency. She wanted to know whether there was any union that could organize people who are supervisors. I had to tell her, no, and actually, the law doesn't allow for that. But they're facing some real difficulties. It's a great varied situation.

SG: Do you want to tell us about the livable wage campaign?

EDF: Sure. So, the livable wage campaign is again part of a great experimental upsurge that I described a few minutes ago, which is how to deal with the very particular conditions of the American economy right now. That is that work is being degraded and

spiraling down at just an unprecedented pace at the same time that wealth is increasing. Wealth, as we know, is being generated but in ever smaller, ever fewer hands, an ever-smaller percentage of the population. Good, well-paying jobs, both professional and industrial, are disappearing and being replaced by low-wage service and retail jobs particularly. Without going into a long exegesis about this, the traditional methods of organizing are not successful in helping people raise their wages or their compensation. So, the livable wage campaign here – and this really does exist in many forms all around the country – is an effort to say what we think of as the minimum wage bears no relationship to what people really need to live on. Federal minimum wages 5.15; Vermont, it's now 7.50 – or it will be 7.50 in January, but still. So the Peace and Justice Center in Burlington did its own independent study now maybe six, seven, eight years ago even [and] determined a formula for arriving at what you really need to live on. We were able to get a bill passed in the legislature so that now every year, the legislature themselves certifies a livable wage number. This year, it's \$12.02 for a single person with no dependents and receiving seventy percent of their health insurance paid by the employer. That is the amount you would have to make so as not to be eligible for public assistance. That's what the standard is.

SG: It's a goal to work towards?

EDF: It is a goal to work towards. We use it in all kinds of different ways. There's public education and outreach and training, and then also active organizing. I participate a lot in running livable wage campaigns with Vermont NEA's support staff members, who are the school's paraeducators, food service workers, bus drivers, custodians, many of whom make considerably below twelve dollars an hour.

SG: In these particular things that you're working on, is there anything that you're particularly proud of accomplishing so far?

EDF: I am proud of every bit of it, and my pride has everything to do with this. I think of organizing as just magic. It's just like a magic spell that the task of organizing is to help people recognize that they can take charge of their own lives, personally and collectively, to address the most fundamental problems they face in the social sphere, in the world of work – the economic social sphere. This also has great benefits to people psychologically, but it's an organizing approach, not a counseling approach, I guess. I consider that every time an organization is built out of sheer nothingness as the livable wage campaign, or the party or the Workers' Center is, or from a long tradition, like Vermont NEA, which is over a hundred and fifty years old – but an organization is created that invites people in and makes it safe for them to discover something powerful about themselves and helps them develop both the skills and the confidence to work with their peers to change what looks like a law of nature, like the survival of the fittest and the law of the jungle. To change that, it is so spectacular. Anyway, I feel lucky and privileged and so humble about getting to do that every day. I would have to say, in my world, small and large accomplishments don't matter. The quantitative thing doesn't matter at all. I am as happy if I talk on the phone for an hour with a bus driver, and at the end of that conversation, she says, "I got it. I'm going to go out and do this and this. I'll talk to this person. I'm going to set up that meeting," as if we elect a governor. It's as cool.

AB: We're going to stop now for a few minutes because the tape needs to be turned over. So, Sandy's going to stop things ...

[END OF INTERVIEW]