Hedy Ratner Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Hedy Ratner for the Jewish Women's Archive. We are at the Women's Business Development Center, 8 South Michigan Ave. in Chicago, Illinois. Today is Wednesday, January 31st, 2007. Hedy, do you agree to be interviewed and know that this is being taped?

Hedy Ratner: Yes, yes.

RH: Thank you. Where we'd like to start is with your family background, so if you could start with where you were born, and a little about your childhood?

HR: Born in Chicago in 1941. Do you want to talk about my parents?

RH: Sure.

HR: -- to immigrant Jewish parents: my mother was from Poland in Bendin and my father was from Minsk in Belarus. Both came in the '20s. What can I tell you about them...

RH: What were their names?

HR: My father's name was Joe -- Yossl -- and my mother's name was Ruchsha, which is Rose in English. And my mother was born to a poor family, very poor, in Poland. She had five sisters. One died here in this country, the rest came, and she was left in Poland by herself in her mid-teens. Because there wasn't enough money to send for all of the children, they came in two groups, by boat, and then she came later when she was in her teens, and she then came to her parents homestead in a small ranch town, Merriman, Nebraska.-- my grandfather homesteaded in Merriman, Nebraska, after he served in the first World War. He came to the U.S. by himself and joined the army so that he would have property when he was released. ... He came to this country and joined the army

and was in the First World War, because at that time you could get property if you served in the armed services, which he did. He had a small ranch supply store in Merriman, Nebraska. He also was injured…gassed and had shrapnel in some vital organs, so he died quite soon after he sent for his wife and children in two groups. They all came from Europe. My mother was left in Poland alone and came to the U.S. in her teens and went to Merriman, Nebraska, where the family was, and she hated it there, because she was this fifteen, sixteen-year-old girl in a kindergarten class to learn English. So her father sent her to Sioux City, Iowa, to go to night school. There were no Jews in Merriman, Nebraska, so they sent their girls to Sioux City, Iowa, where there was a Jewish community that came from Poland, brought by a rabbi from Poland to this little town. Sioux City, Iowa. So there was a small Jewish community there, and they went to school there...

RH: What were their last names?

HR: My mother's maiden name was Markowitz. Markowitz. And my father's Ratner. My mother met my father in night school in Sioux City, Iowa. And most of her family moved from Merriman or Sioux City to Omaha, Nebraska, which was the big city there. My parents hated Sioux City and they didn't like Omaha either. Despite her being a recent immigrant, She hated the provincialism -- hated Sioux City, hated Merriman, hated Omaha. My parents married in Omaha where my mother had some family. On their honeymoon my mother and dad came to Chicago during the World's Fair, liked it, and decided to come here to live, because my father's brother had moved here from Russia.

My father's family were born in Minsk, in Belarus, and then fled Minsk when he was quite young, to Israel. And the boys, at different points, the young ones, went at one point, and then the older ones at another point. My father's oldest brother was involved with the Communist Party, as many were in Belarus, and he went to Mexico with – Trotsky. The

Jewish communist leader in Russia. But anyway, somehow, my father's brother, Harry, ended up in Sioux City, Iowa, and brought my father over from Israel to Sioux City, where he met my mom. But my father's family lived in Israel. They were chalutzim and lived on a top of a hill -- they were given a house to guard that area, and it was in Jerusalem, not far from the West Bank, right off the West Bank, in Israel. And many of them stayed. The only ones who came to this country were my father, his eldest brother, and his youngest brother.

RH: And what was his last name?

HR: Ratner.

RH: Ratner, okay.

HR: Same as mine. They suffered in Israel because it was in the '20s, you know; it was well before the independence of Israel. My father suffered -- got along fine with the Arabs and he did well in Israel, well enough. It was hard for him because of the language and the poverty. All of them struggled with the language. But they were all involved -- they were all living in this town, and then the Arabs attacked and blew up the house, and all of them kind of scattered to different places. Several started a kibbutz in Israel. One started the public transportation company in Israel, Itchka -- he changed his name from Ratner to Itchka Yahalom -- And then he had two sisters who remained there and lived on kibbutzim, and one who lived in Ramat Gan, and another... most of my father's family is still in Israel, and I've been back to visit several times. So the connection to Israel was enormous, but it was -- it was a family connection, but it was also a political connection. My father was very much of a Socialist, my mother was very much of a Zionist. They used to fight like crazy when they were still young. So they came to Chicago, because the same brother that brought him to Sioux City moved to Chicago. They wanted a big city, they wanted something new and different and exciting. And my father opened up a small little grocery store. In Sioux City, my father worked in a bakery and lived in another

family's home, and my mother lived in another family's home also, and she worked in what was like a little department store there, like a five-and-dime, small department store. They had nothing. So they came to Chicago and started this little grocery store, with a little bit of money that they had saved from nothing -- and loved Chicago and stayed here, even though the brother who was here left and moved to Los Angeles. So that's my family background. I was born after nine years of their marriage. My mother had several miscarriages first, and then I was born, and I'm an only child. And we lived on the South Side of Chicago in a very mixed neighborhood. In Kenwood at 47th and Drexel Boulevard, next to a little shul, Beth Eliezer.-- only a few blocks from their second grocery store, which was at 47th and Prairie, and it was in a Black neighborhood, so most of my friends and companions were Black from my early childhood on. And I went to a small school, which is now one of the oldest schools in the city of Chicago -- it's still functioning -- called Shakespeare. And we lived there in -- it was called Kenwood -- 46th and Drexel, until I was in fourth grade. And then, at that time, my parents wanted to move -- they had a little bit more money and a little bit more security, so they moved to South Shore in Chicago, which was -- when we first moved there, it was predominantly a Gentile neighborhood, but it gradually became, maybe, you know, a third to a half Jewish, by the time I graduated high school. I went to elementary school—Myra Bradwell-- and then to high school, South Shore, and eventually married there at the age of 18! To a boy from the neighborhood.. I married and lived just a few blocks from home, which is what kids did at that time -- would marry, and you'd live near your family, and near your community where you were most comfortable. Let's see, how do I go from there... the family, my parents --

RH: Well, did they agree on any type of Jewish education for you?

HR: I went to a little Orthodox shul called Beth Eliezer, which was right next door to our house at 46th and Drexel. -- I could see the little shul right next to our house. And it was an Orthodox shul, and the Jewish education was in the basement. I had a wonderful,

wonderful teacher, who I still remember. He gave me -- I remember when we moved, he gave me the Book of Esther in a little scroll that I still have. So, yes. My parents were not religious. My grandmother, because all that generation from Europe were kosher, they kept kosher, and -- but my parents did not. They blamed me, they said because I was a picky eater, they couldn't keep kosher. So they did not keep kosher. My father was, as I said, a socialist, not -- he was more... I think my parents were more committed to the political-social-cultural aspects of Judaism versus the spiritual/religious part. We did go to synagogue, but not regularly -- it was always on the high holidays. But I had a very good Jewish education -- I went when I was very small, from kindergarten through third grade, and then later, went to Hebrew school in South Shore. I didn't get bas mitzvahed, because I got into a fight with the rabbi, his name was Prombaum -- I hated him, I accused him of being a liar, which he was, and he kicked me out of Hebrew school, so I didn't get bas mitzvahed until I was sixty. Then I got bas mitzvahed. Yeah, I did have a Jewish education, but not a good one -- I mean, it was, you know, I went to Hebrew school. In Hebrew school you learn to read, but you didn't learn as much about the traditions and the culture and the rituals and the meaning behind them, until I went to camp. My parents sent me to a Jewish camp called Camp Maccabee from the time, I'd say, I was nine, ten and eleven, I think. And it was hard for me to go away because I was an only child, very protected, and at Camp Maccabee which I went to three full summers, I learned much more about the meaning of our traditions, our rituals, the religion, the spirit, and also the joy of Judaism and the connection to people. It was very, very meaningful, profoundly meaningful for me at that time. And I still remember it enormously fondly.

RH: Do you remember anything, a particular event or a particular activity, that you liked to do at camp?

HR: Yeah. It was Friday night services at camp where we'd all get dressed up in white. The older kids would lead the services, and there was one fabulous man by the name of

Ben ARonin , who was part of Camp Maccabee—he led the cultural events and artistic events—plays, concerts, Havdalah services, performances-- but he was also a cantor at Temple -- let's see, I think, was in Anshe Emet -- he was a cantor at Anshe Emet. Maybe it was Temple Shalom, not Anshe Emet, Temple Shalom. But he was at the camp, and he was a composer and a singer, and he would create these dramatic things, and dancing and singing and... So what I associated with Judaism was the art, the culture, the music, the dance, the rituals -- the joy of it. And there was another guy by the name of Peter Scheier who was -- he was a pianist and he would teach us songs in English, Hebrew and Yiddish and music was a part of everything we did. You know, this camp was unusual in that, it wasn't like just a camp with activities, it surrounded the campers with art and music and culture and wonderful Jewish retuals, you know, art and culture this way -- were part of everyday living. So the pianist would come and play piano during lunch, and we would sing, or during dinner, and we'd have Havdalah services on Saturday night. I remember the smells, the Queen Sabbath, and the images that I had that were so meaningful to me as a child that, you know, stayed with me all my life. So that's probably why I have this affection for all that is Jewish. One of my few regrets in life is that I can no longer speak Yiddish but that's my goal this decade. --

RH: Beautiful. (Laughter) Did your parents -- were they activists in Chicago?

HR: No. They were trying to make a living. They both worked at the grocery store until my father sold it, and then he retired for a year and then he bought a little cigar store, and they both worked at the cigar store. My mother went back to college after my dad died -- she'd always wanted to go to college -- and studied Hebrew.

RH: Where'd she go?

HR: City College. I remember when she had to take her first exam, she got scared, and I had to go with her to sit with her while she took the exams. But she was in her 70's then.

RH: Was your mother an important role model for you?

HR: My mother was my role model. My parents were older when I was born; they were forty, I think, forty. So they couldn't do the things that young parents could do -- you know, they only had one day off, which was Sunday. My mother did stay home in the mornings, and I would go off to school. When I was in high school, we had a maid that would make lunch. My father would come home from work, because he had a heart condition, so he had to, but he would pick me up from school, and so he would be home when I would be home. So it was, you know, I had a very warm family environment. My father died very young, when I was twenty-four, twenty-five. But my mother was always my role model, and also we would fight constantly, but she always wanted me to be strong and independent, never dependent upon anyone, and that I had to do something that would make me independent, so I needed to go to college, I needed to have a profession, I needed to have a career. She was unhappy because I married at eighteen. I still don't know why I did that, but I did. I mean, I was a very rebellious kid so I married at eighteen to a lovely, lovely, lovely young man, which lasted three years, but we are still -- my ex-husband and I are still enormously close. But you know, she was just pissed as hell that I got married at eighteen -- oh, my God! Because I dropped out of college and decided I wasn't college material, and she was just livid. Absolutely livid! And then when I decided later to go back to college, she would say, "No. You didn't go when you were supposed to -- you're on your own. You want to do it, fine. But I don't care." So you know, six degrees later -- nine colleges and six degrees, you know, and she was at all the graduations. She was at every graduation. She finally accepted that, you know, "Okay. You didn't go at the right time -- maybe you went at the right time for you," so... But she always encouraged me -- I was a smart kid, so... though they were not intellectuals. I mean, they spoke Yiddish at home. My grandmother lived with us some of the time, they spoke Yiddish at home -- they were not intellectuals, but they were very involved in Israel. That was a big, big thing in our home, just be very involved with Israel. They were members of the Drohitchiner Branch of the Farband Labor Zionist

Order, and would meet monthly with the... they weren't from Drohitchin but they met with the people from Drohitchin, I don't know why. I think there wasn't anybody from Bendin in Poland. (Pause) There are lots and lots of people from Minsk. Interestingly -- the State Department has been sending me around, various places in the world, and one of the places they asked me to go to is Belarus, to Minsk. And three or four years ago I went to Belarus for the State Department to meet with women, to talk about entrepreneurship and women's economic empowerment. And I wanted very much to go, because I had always wanted to see where my parents... what was my family background? And being in Minsk was one of the most depressing, tragic times, because -- in Belarus there were 800,000 Jews killed, and when I went there in 2004 there was no evidence that there were ever any Jews there. There was one small little shul to feed the old Jews., that I got my State Department escorts to take me to. They were very nice, in that they found me a guide, a young woman actually -- was born there, but moved here with her family, and she went back to Belarus to do research -- to Minsk -- on Jews in Belarus. And she was able to show me some of the history. And then my cousin in Israel, which was fascinating -- very intellectual family, very educated -- had a book on the heroes of Minsk. And I brought that with me to my visit there and I said, "Show me these places, tell me where these people are, and what happened to them." Ugh. They had mass burials in the town where, you know, the Jews would dig these trenches and then they'd shoot them all after they dug them, and they'd fall into the trenches. And there's no -- there's one small memorial in the town. You know, Stalin built high-rises and housing and parks and everything, over the bodies of the tens and tens of thousands of Jews who were killed there. But there was one woman who showed me kind of where the Jewish shtetlekh were in Minsk, and some of those little houses, she said, are the same houses that were there. But I had no... Belarus is very -- it's not only poor, it's the only former Soviet Union country that's still pretty much as it had been during Stalin, and it's -- Lukashenko is the leader there, and he's a dictator, you know. There's no economic development, there's nothing going on there. Anyway, so I hated being in

Minsk. I wanted to be there because I wanted to see where they came from. But what was more significant to me was going back to Jerusalem to see where my father had lived, where his family had lived, and talking to family. His generation -- they're all gone, but their children, my generation, are there, and my generation's children are there, all throughout Israel. Two years ago I went back to Israel, and I went to the cemetery where my grandparents are buried. The grandparents who lived in Israel came to Chicago, actually, and lived here for a little while. And then when they were old they wanted to go back to Israel to die, and did, and they're buried in the cemetery on the Arab side. You can still go there, or now -- well, I think you still can go there, because I went last year, though you're not recommended to go there. The Jews are on one side and --

RH: Of -- where is this again?

HR: In Jerusalem. Yeah. The big cemetery. Here are the Jews, and then here are the Arabs and here are the Christians. I mean, it's just fascinating to see...

RH: So is it a cemetery in the Old City?

HR: Mm-hmm.

RH: Oh, OK. Interesting.

HR: It's giant. I mean, it's in a giant valley. Giant, giant valleys -- or the hill and valley. I mean, it's where -- is it still here? I may even have the picture I brought back. It's too far buried somewhere. But I had it up on my wall, up with the -- oh, there it is. I had it up, I don't know where I put it down. This is it! Here's Jerusalem. From here to here, this is all the cemeteries. This is just the notes on it, but it was just absolutely fascinating. (Loud noise, moving objects) On one side are the Jews and the other side are the Christians, and the middle are the Arabs in the cemetery, and I think I found where my grandfather was buried... I can't really tell -- right over here. So I couldn't find the stone, but I found the area.

RH: So, how many times have you been to Israel?

HR: Three times.

RH: Three times.

HR: Yeah. I went right after... I didn't travel before my mother died, because my mother was -- not ill, but she lost her sight, and she was going blind and then was blind for about ten years. And I took care of her, because I'm an only child. And we were very, very, very, very close. And it was, you know, very hard for her. So I never traveled. I even -- I moved to Washington. I was in the Carter administration, as Assistant Commissioner of Education, but I would commute back and forth. I regret doing that, because it really was horrible for my mother when I wasn't around. But I would commute every weekend. So I was there a year and I commuted every weekend, and then I came home. After she died I went to Israel, shortly thereafter.

RH: And so what year was that? Do you remember?

HR: Yeah. You know, I'm so terrible at years. I think my mom's been gone about nine or ten years.

RH: Okay. So really, you've been as an adult to Israel.

HR: Yeah. Only as an adult, yeah. But since she died, I've been traveling all over the world, but I didn't do any traveling before -- I would never stay overnight. I would come back, and if I did go overnight, it would be one night, because she was... we had help at home, I mean, I had twenty-four-hour help for most of the last five years of her life, and I was one of those people. Two nights a week and one day. You don't want to know all that. Okay. So ask me the questions, now, what you wanted -- more about my family, about my history. So when I graduated from college, then I got married and I went to college before I got married, and then got divorced and moved to California. And that's

when I started going to college. Nine colleges.

RH: Nine colleges and six degrees?

HR: Yeah.

RH: And what degrees are you most proud of?

HR: All of them. Education to me is very important. I don't use any of them, but I use all of them, you know.

RH: So can you explain that a little bit?

HR: Yeah. I have a degree in sociology, in education, in educational administration, in... (Laughter) I have to look. In education, in educational administration, in library science, and in sociology, and I almost finished my Masters in folklore, but I didn't quite get there. I run a non-profit organization -- I essentially help women develop and expand their businesses. But (pause) all of it infuses your life; your knowledge infuses all aspects of your life. I became a librarian because I love to read. And I was a school librarian for a little while. I loved school, so I went into education and began to teach. I was good at it, so I became an educational administrator, so I got a degree in educational administration, and I was assistant superintendent of schools in Cook County and then I was assistant commissioner of education in Washington. When I came back, I was sick of Washington and sick of being intimately involved, internally, in politics. But, you know, I was involved in folklore -- I wrote a masters' thesis on Eastern European and Jewish folklore, because I was fascinated by it. I did my research at a Jewish community center in Los Angeles in Yiddish, because I understood a little bit, and then I was able to translate some of it with help. To folklore, education, educational administration, sociology -- because much of what was embedded in my heart and in my brain is social justice issues, and that came from my parents as well as my uncles and aunts. All very --

RH: Can you kind of explain how they transmitted that to you?

HR: Well, as I said, they were involved with organizations that were committed to Israel, and I remember the independence of Israel was a gigantic thing in our home. It was -- I remember sending clothes to Europe, to family and to anyone, everyone. I remember being involved -- you know, we lived in a Black community -- involved in the issues of discrimination. I was never taught that anyone's better than anybody else, that everyone should be treated well and equally, that women and men can do exactly the same thing they want to do, that just because you're a woman doesn't mean you can't be a professional and be successful; just because you're Jewish doesn't mean you can't be successful in business; just because you're Black doesn't mean that you're any less than anyone else. I remember when in the grocery store we had help from -- you know, because it was in the '40s -- who came up from the South, which is where, during that migration, the Black migration, came up from the South -- they were illiterate. I was their teacher. They learned Yiddish from my father and mother, and they learned English and reading and writing from me. And I was just a little kid. And so I used to, from the time I was, I don't know, five years old, used to walk in with my mom and then later by myself into the community, and they used to call me 'Little Joe.' So I didn't know from differences or inequities or discrimination or -- I didn't understand it, I didn't know it, and how it was -- I think it was how they lived. It wasn't said... It was by my uncle, who was very politically active in California. When I went back to California to live, I got very involved politically, very involved politically, in the anti-war movement and in the civil rights movement -- very, very, very active.

RH: What was your involvement?

HR: I was in demonstrations, education -- I was involved in -- it was Civil Rights at that time. I was involved in the Civil Rights marches. I was involved with organizations that were involved in civil rights, and then the antiwar movement, which led me right into the

women's movement. When I came back to live in Chicago, I became very, very active in, what then, was the women's liberation movement.. Women's Graphics Collective; NOW, etc.. And then I was appointed to the board of the YWCA, which was the only social service agency for women in Chicago at the time, and that was in the, I don't know, late '60s, early '70s, I guess. Very, very involved, started the Illinois Women's Political Caucus, which was very powerful at that time. I was involved with the National Organization for Women, Women Employed. We helped start the Midwest Women's Center. So what my commitment to social justice, which I think is something that came out of my Jewish traditions, very much so, became the raison d'etre of my life, always, always, all the way through. And it's the same today, I mean, I'm still involved... I was at a ball the other night, it was the Black Creativity Gala, and my partner and I were one of the few Caucasians in the place, and I was happier there than I was at a Jewish affair! Because, you know, the issues around my life have been women's rights, civil rights, human rights, the gay movement, very important to me, so I just continue that all of my life.

RH: So tell me how you got involved in what you're doing today, this organization, twenty years old...?

HR: (Pause) The women's movement is probably the major passion. I mean, civil rights and women's rights have been my major passion, for the past forty years... forty years, I'd say forty years. And it's always been, I was always involved in something else as a profession -- I was in education or in politics or in, you know, something other than that as my vocation -- rather, it was always the avocation. I realized, when I banged my head against the wall too many times on women's issues and civil rights issues, that the only way that women and minorities would ever be truly empowered (bangs table for emphasis) is for them to be economically empowered. And I started the Women's Business Development Center with Carol Dougal, who's my co-president with me, to say, "Okay, we're going to change the paradigm totally. And instead of just lobbying for rights,

legislation, issues, programs, we are going to establish an organization that will empower women and minorities so that they will be the ones making the decisions, and they will be the ones influencing the decisions that would be made." And I was right. As we see more and more women and minorities empowered, we see more women and minorities elected. We see more emphasis on the affirmative action issues, on social justice issues, (birds sing in background) because they are empowered to make the decisions, to influence the other decision-makers on the impact of women and minorities on society and on the economy. So, that's how I see business ownership. Not that I love business so much: I don't, never have. I see it as a vehicle. I see it as an avenue. I see it as a way to change the world. And, I'm right. I mean, unfortunately, we live in a society that's, you know -- money talks, period. (Laughter) Talks, period!

RH: So as a person who doesn't like business, how have you felt like you've been able to translate your ideas about economic development?

HR: The major issues -- well, because we are not only involved in programs and services that help develop and expand businesses for women and minorities, which we are. One of the major programs of the Women's Business Development Center is advocacy around economic development, community development, and empowerment of women and minorities. That's -- that's a base, that's a foundation from which we can build businesses, and we try to instill those values into the people we are serving as well.

RH: So, is advocacy one of your passions?

HR: It's been my passion all my life.

RH: So is that -- if you were going to say, the greatest part of your work or the part you like the most --

HR: The part that I am most impassioned about is, I believe, is taken out of the Jewish tradition, which is social justice. And so it's been, I think, a life work. And as I said, the

raison d'etre of my life is social justice. And within that, there's a whole lot of stuff to work on. And so at every opportunity -- which has been kind of demanding on my life -- I look at ways that I can impact the role and status of women and minorities in our society, but of alleviating poverty, of expanding opportunities, of eliminating oppression -- and that's what I do. I've been saying it all over the world. They send me to third world developing countries to talk about and promote women's empowerment, and I do. And I hope it has an impact. I know it certainly has here in Chicago. And it has nationally, I was appointed by President Clinton to the National Women's Business Council. I continue to work around the issues of affirmative action, reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay, women's health, as an obsession, from my perspective.

RH: What are the greatest challenges you find in your work?

HR: People stuck in the status quo. Elected officials that are not necessarily functioning from the most ethical principles. A White male power structure that is not realistic about the world in which they live and function.

RH: Can you kind of explain that?

HR: Yeah. What you're seeing is major corporations still run by White males, who do business with other White males, who support other White males in maintaining their position in the power structure and not reflecting the changing society: that the majority of employees are going to be, and are now, women and minorities; that the buying decisions are made predominantly by women; that consumers care about who they buy from. And it's had an impact: that the policies that a company sets should be respectful of its employees, and it's not. It's all, you know, bottom line and stockholders is always the rationale for making very bad policy decisions. Or, you know, how much money can I make? That's not how I view business; I see business in a whole other way. And I think that business leaders are changing -- I mean, you look at what's happening with Costco, and Ben & Jerry's, and Anita Roddick, Eileen Fisher, and the Body Shop, and even

Martha Stewart and Oprah Winfrey... You know, you look at the women and the minorities, and some progressive White males, looking at business in a different way: what impact is it having on our world, and how can we make our world better? And how can we be respectful of the people in our world, the environment in our world?

RH: Have you, as a woman, ever had discrimination against you?

HR: Oh sure, of course. There's sexual harassment, there's -- of course. In fact, as a woman and as a Jew, I experienced discrimination.

RH: Really?

HR: Yeah. I remember, I had one experience -- this was a fascinating experience. The bank is gone -- it's Continental Bank -- I remember my mother saying to me, "You don't want to work in a bank. They don't want Jews." And I said, "No, Mother, you're crazy." That was a time, you had to tell your religion, all ads were gender-split, so here were jobs for men, here are jobs for women. So I remember once -- this was later, after I graduated from college, I think -- I went to Continental Bank for an interview. I don't know what made me think I wanted to work at the bank. And I remember going into a beautiful office, with lovely beige furniture and a nice couch and pretty chairs, and kind of a grayish-beige woman in her forties with a beautiful beige suit and a long skirt -- she was beige, and so was the bank. It was just beige. And I had a wonderful educational background, always. And finally, by the time -- and I'm, you know, my short little skirt, and my aggressive, confident style, you know... She asked me too many questions that she shouldn't have asked, and then at the end she said, "I don't think there's any place in this bank for you." And it was, I think, because I was a Jew, and because I was a woman, and because of my, you know, political background and my feminist background and my civil rights background, which was in my resume, because I was really proud of it. "There's no place in this bank for you." And I'll never forget that experience. Because I remember, early on, when I was still a kid in high school, trying to get a part-time job,

my mother was encouraging me to go to Jewish-owned companies. She said, “You’re best off -- go to House of Vision. Get a job there, be a receptionist part-time.” Jewish-owned, so, easy to get a job. And in my experiences, I think... She never said that, you know, “They won’t hire you because you’re a Jew,” or, you know, “They won’t hire you because you’re a woman” -- it was, “This is better, this is a Jewish -- you’ll be able to find a job, it’ll be nice, the people are nice, I know them,” you know, that kind of stuff. So it wasn’t a sense that I would experience discrimination. But then, later -- just recently, I remember the State Department sent me to Kuwait. I’m going back there in March. This was -- two times this happened. They said, “Do not say that you are Jewish. Do not talk about your family in Israel.” And then when I went to Belarus, which is now being taken over by the same people that, you know, killed all the Jews, which is the Russian Orthodox Church -- has now an enormous amount of power -- they warned me not to say anything about my religion. So, antisemitism is rampant in this world.

RH: You think it’s as strong as ever, huh?

HR: It’s stronger. It’s stronger. Stronger and more organized and more fundamental, in various cultures -- stronger. We have to constantly be aware, wary, and protect ourselves -- and defend ourselves.

RH: Are you involved in any organizations that --

HR: Well, I’m a member of the ADL, and I’m a contributor to the ADL, and I was an award winner of the Women of Achievement Award a couple of years ago. I’m involved with ACLU, I’m involved with... what else?

RH: Well, let me put it another way. What is, for you, the best way to fight antisemitism -- for you personally?

HR: Well, one is to be supportive of Israel. Second, to be involved in supporting education around issues of oppression and discrimination, whether it be Jews or anyone

else. So, (pause) I'm very outspoken about my Jewishness, and as I said, I became bas mitzvahed on my sixtieth birthday -- I felt that I needed that aspect of my life to be developed and expanded, and my connection to be public. And I had the most unbelievable bas mitzvah, because I had the editor of the Tribune and the editor of the Sun Times, who were both women, at my event, so that the Tribune and the Sun Times covered it -- you know, big coverage. And I had a Baptist Minister, a Catholic nun, a Protestant minister -- all feminists -- and a feminist rabbi and cantor, all officiating at my bas mitzvah.

RH: Really?

HR: Yeah. Yeah. And I did it all the way -- I mean, I read from the Torah. I read from the Torah! (Laughter) I didn't cheat, wasn't allowed to cheat. I have very tough rabbis, fabulous women. I chanted, which I can't do, because I can't sing. I carried the Torah around. And it was the strangest bas mitzvah because it was, you know, it was Black and it was Hispanic and it was old and it was young, and it was family and it was friends, and it was all kinds of crazy people. And I walked around with the Torah crying my eyes out, because I remember when I was a kid, I told my mom, I said I wanted to be a rabbi, because I was so connected -- a little kid -- to the synagogue and to being Jewish, and I just felt, "Mom, I want to be a rabbi," and she said, "No, no, no, dear, you want to be a rebbetzin." I said, "No, Mom, I want to be a rabbi." "Oh, no, women can't do that." And I still remember that to this day! (Pounds table emphatically) And I remember being part of synagogues where I would come to sit, when I was sitting shiva, and I wanted to go the shul and be a part of a minyan, and if there weren't enough men then I couldn't, and I was furious, furious, furious. So when I became bas mitzvah, I wanted to do it my way, with the tallis and the whole thing.

RH: Where did you have your bat mitzvah?

HR: It was at a Grace Place-- it's a multi-denominational religious center that was in the South Loop… Grace Place. And it was a very progressive -- I wasn't part of the congregation -- progressive Jewish congregation. There was also a Protestant congregation. There was also American Friends Service Committee group. There was a whole group of people. But, mine was -- I mean, I had a bimah and I had the Torah -- I did everything according to [Hoyle? coil?], as they say.

RH: How did you find your rabbi?

HR: I have a very dear friend who helped me find the right rabbi. And her name's Eleanor Smith, and right now she's in medical school, but she's still a rabbi. She's -- I mean, God's gift to this world would be an example of who she is. But I also had Willie Barrow, Reverend Willie Barrow, who is another of God's gifts to this world, officiating, and Sister Sheila Lyne, who is now head of Mercy Hospital, officiating. And Willie is -- right now she's -- was chairperson of Operation PUSH, but has been a friend for forty years, and I'm so -- I chose the people who meant a great deal to me and who had a spiritual connection, and a feminist connection, and we kind of put it together. That was fun.

RH: What do you feel has been your greatest impact in the world, your legacy?

HR: The empowerment of women and minorities. The sense of pride and possibilities, and potential and reality of our lives. Being a role model for people to realize that they are stronger than they seem and can do more than they think they can, and can have a greater impact than they feel or fear, you know -- that they can overcome their fears, that they can be powerful, and that they can have an effect on the world. And my mother used to say, "You can't change the world." I said, "Mother, I don't believe that. I can." And I believed it then, I believe it today. (Pounds table) It's probably the most important part of my life. I believe I can have an impact in ways to change this world, and will spend my life doing it, until I can't do it anymore.

RH: When you talk about people being God's gift to the world, what traits do they have? You can even talk about --

HR: Passion, commitment, belief, compassion -- compassion, I said compassion. That's big. Compassion is big. Compassion and passion are the biggest parts. And a knowledge that what they decide to touch will be moved in some way.

RH: That's nice. (Laughter)

HR: It's true.

RH: Has your relationship to Judaism changed over time?

HR: You know, no. Yes, no, I don't know how to answer that. I light the candles on Friday nights. I do, you know, the Hanukah candles. I go to the services on the holiday, means a great deal to me. Memorial services are always very important to me. There's a little shul in Florida – My partner, the love of my life and I rent a place in winter, and I go back and forth in Florida, and it's a wonderful shul -- it has a minyan every morning, and women have an equal role, and I'm always invited up to the bimah, and it means a great deal to me. I think it means more to me now -- I wanted it to mean more than it does, but it means more to me now. What I'm more connected to is the issues that are part of Judaism that I respect, that I treasure -- that's more important to me. But you know, I don't know if that's changed that much. I mean, I think there are certain things that are more important to me in certain parts of my life, and then they change, and then they come back, and they ebb and flow. So I think it's always been a very important part of my life, since I was a small child -- since I was five or six. But I've never been, as I said, really religious, not that spiritual, not even that traditional. I have a terrible time dealing with some of the issues of the fundamentalist side of Judaism, just as I have a terrible time and hostility toward fundamentalism in any religion. I don't like it. It upsets me. It seems so narrow and so shortsighted. But it's really funny: I have one Orthodox Jewish

friend who has kind of made me look at things a little more openly. He happens to be Black, but he's Orthodox Jewish. It's Aaron Freeman.

RH: Oh yeah, yeah.

HR: You know Aaron? So Aaron, you know, he's constantly trying to raise my consciousness about aspects of the Orthodox tradition that are not what I believe them to be, but that they are much more deeper and significant, and that I should understand and accept. And I have a hard time with it, but you know, it's amazing to me that the person that has influenced me is Aaron. (Laughter) And I went to his twin daugher's bat mitzvah. Aaron calls his daughters 'the goddesses,' I went to their bas mitzvah, and I was so moved by it. I mean, these fabulous young girls, who are... And he has raised them in an Orthodox tradition, absolutely raised them in an Orthodox tradition. And their mother also converted to Orthodox Judaism. I mean, it's a very progressive Orthodox Judaism, but it's Orthodox it really is. So I have problems with the fundamentalist aspect of it and the narrowness of it, but I also have -- I have a hard time saying it. To see the impact and influence that Jews have had throughout time on art and culture and music and theatre and dance, and politics and science and philosophy and economics and everything that's, you know... and medicine and science and politics... I'm proud to be a part of it. But also, that kind of comes from our tradition. Leadership, vision, is all part of our tradition.

RH: Right. (Laughter) You've talked about your mother as a role model, and -- I don't know if you'd call Aaron Freedman a role model, or --

HR: No, no. No. Willie Barrow is a role model.

RH: Okay. Explain --

HR: Willie Barrow is a Black Baptist minister who is also a feminist, who has been involved with women's rights, civil rights, equal rights, anti-war, human rights, gay rights

-- I mean, she's been everywhere, and she's now eighty-something. What a fabulous, fabulous woman. We call each other sisters and have for many, many years -- I've known her for forty years. She's definitely a role model -- a woman of depth and love, and has lived a life of meaning all of her life. She was a labor organizer... Definitely a role model. And then, you know, my partner, the man I've been with on and off for thirty-five years, has been an enormously important role model? No, supporter. Motivator. Encourager, Nudge! Yeah.

RH: Women Who Dared.

RH: You were talking about your partner and supporter.

HR: Yes. His name is Mort Kaplan, and we've been together on and off for about thirty-six years. And, not married -- don't want to get married. He has always felt that I was capable of anything. And he was so well parented -- his parents made him feel like he was the most important and the most special human being on earth. The most important thing you can do for a child is make your child feel that way. And he is that way, I mean, he's just -- and even though he's seventy-five now from a Jewish family -- he's strong enough to encourage me to be more than I've ever been. And he's done that at every stage of our relationship. And when he says, "No" -- he was a very successful businessman, and very involved in politics. And he says, "You're more political than I am, you know more people than I ever did, you're more involved in these issues, you're more successful in business than I was." And he's proud of it. And he's never felt competitive in any way -- he's always been encouraging and pushing and kvelling, and that's probably the most important influence in my life, more than anyone else. And we have a remarkably loving relationship -- I mean, it's magical, absolutely magical, and has been for many, many, many years. And every day I keep thinking, "How can I deserve this kind of happiness and strength that he's been able to give me and we give each

other?" As long as we can stay healthy, that's all I care about.

RH: Yeah. Where are you going from here? Do you have some things that are undone for you that you want to do, or directions you --

HR: No, not undone. No. I want to continue what I'm doing. I love what I do. I love what I've been able to do. I want to continue doing it. I wish that I didn't have to continue doing it, because the issues that I'm addressing are the same goddamn issues I've been addressing for forty years. You know, why haven't we been able to change our world? And now -- I mean, I'm still furious that there isn't more outrage at this war. I want to demonstrate, I want to protest, I want to do everything that I did in the Sixties, because I was very, very active in the Sixties. And where is the outrage? Where is the outrage? The Inconvenient Truth -- Al Gore and the environment, my God! I mean, all of the sudden -- I was not aware of just what injury we are doing to this world. And I belong to this health club, and I see all these giant SUVs and Hummers, and the big stupid cars-- using gas, and putting all this crap into the environment, and watching people waste our precious resources. It just -- I can never quite understand it, how could we be that narrow, that insular, that isolated, that materialistic,not to see what we're doing? And not to see what we're doing to the rest of the world? And when I go to places like Belarus and Russia and India and the Middle East -- are we totally blind, that we are not conscious at all of anything other than our very small little world? And it's just infuriating. It gets me angrier and angrier and angrier. And our elected officials make me furious because of that. And I want to continue electing the right people, supporting the issues that are important to a better world, being sure that people are not oppressed, that their discrimination (is done?) -- it's still the same goddamn stuff I've been working on for forty years! You know, anti-war -- I mean, I can't believe I'm still saying the same words. No, I don't want to change anything, and I don't want to do anything different. All the transitions in my life have simply been who I'm talking to, and where I'm going, and what are the issues of the moment. It's not -- you know, I want to keep this --

RH: It's still the same direction.

HR: Yeah. Yeah.

RH: How did you get involved with the State Department work?

HR: I have a national reputation for women's economic empowerment issues, and they asked me, would I be interested in representing 'my issues' -- this was very clear – 'my issues,' my politics, my concerns, to other developing countries -- to women in other developing countries? And I said, "Absolutely. And no political influence, nothing?" "No." "Okay." So, yeah, sure. They want to pay my way to --

RH: See the world, and (laughter) --?

HR: Not see the world, but to change the world and to look at ways of proselytizing my issues -- that's fine, I don't care who the money comes from, if I can do it. And it's great, I love doing it. But now, they're inviting me to go, in fact --

RH: I was just about to close up.

HR: That's okay. I'm just looking to see if she's called me. I'm waiting for an e-mail -- they said, "You're either going to Kuwait, or to Kuwait and Abu Dhabi." I'm saying, "Why do I want to Kuwait and Abu Dhabi?" Because when I was there the last time, I was helping those women get the right to vote and stand for election. Now they've got it. And now they want to know what to do with it. So...

RH: Wow. Magnificent. That's exciting.

HR: Yeah! I like that. Yeah. Dangerous, but exciting.

RH: Dangerous?

HR: In the Middle East? Jewish woman with cleavage in the Middle East? (Laughter)

RH: Okay.

HR: All right. Go ahead.

RH: No, I want to just see if there's anything else you want to talk about, that we haven't covered.

HR: Well, we didn't talk about the women's -- well, we talked enough about it. You wanted to know more about me than specifically what I do here, right?

RH: Well, actually, I wouldn't mind. That was the one area that I hadn't filled in, but I knew the time was—

HR: Oh, I can't -- oh, I got to go. I've got to go, I can't talk to you anymore!

RH: Okay. (Laughter)

HR: I have this very important luncheon, oh my God. (What happened to?) the time. Okay. Yes, okay. All right. (Laughter)

[END OF INTERVIEW]