Rita Arditti Transcript

JULIE JOHNSON: This is an interview with Rita Arditti on March 14, 2005, with Julie Johnson for the Woman Who Dared project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Let's start just a little bit about your background, where you were born, when, who did you grow up with, and who was in your family.

RITA ARDITTI: Okay. I was born in Argentina in 1934. I'm seventy years old. I grew up there with a family who's a Jewish Sephardic family. My parents were immigrants from Turkey. They actually met in Argentina, but they married there, and I grew up there. There were three sisters, and I am the middle one.

JJ: What did your parents do professionally? What was your class background?

RA: My mother was a housewife. My father was a businessman. He worked in the import-export textile business, which is something which is rather common in Sephardic Jews in Argentina. It was a middle-class family. Though middle class in Argentina is different from middle class here.

JJ: Were they political at all or involved in any way?

RA: No.

JJ: No, they weren't. Where did you go to school growing up?

RA: I went to a public school in Buenos Aires. Then for high school, I went to boarding school. It was a school that was in Spanish but was run by – it was part of an American school, but this was in Spanish, and all the kids were from Argentina; it wasn't in English or anything like that. They had a parallel school in English. We knew we were the Argentine branch of the school. I think the people who ran or organized the school had a

Methodist background. But it wasn't a religious school. It wasn't. It was just that these people – I think they were very progressive Methodists. Because that school was really wonderful and I loved being there.

JJ: What did you like about it?

RA: Well, one reason I went there was that my family situation was difficult because my parents didn't get along. It was very tense. It was really tense in my house, and there were lots of ugly things between my parents. I concocted this idea of going to boarding school to get away, and it worked very well. Because I had heard about the school during a summer vacation. I had heard a boy, a boy that I liked – it was coed, which in Argentina was totally – the high schools were – I think now it's different, but then they were very gender-segregated. I liked the idea that it was coed. I liked this boy, but he was too old for me to think of anything, and I liked the idea of getting away from my house.

JJ: Were your parents or family religious at all? Did they celebrate anything?

RA: My parents at home – the only religious thing I can think of is my mother going to synagogue once in a while and taking oil in honor of the deaths.

JJ: Oil?

RA: Oil. To burn. And she would put candles in front of the dead members of the family. But we were always celebrating the Jewish holidays with extended family – uncles, aunts. We would all get together and celebrate the Passover and Rosh Hashanah. But not in our house. It was a strange thing. All of a sudden, we would be religious in the holidays in somebody else's house.

JJ: But you, I guess, also had a sense of your Jewish identity growing up?

RA: Oh, yes.

JJ: Because you did celebrate.

RA: Yes, because for one thing, my parents – my grandmother, my mother's mother spoke Ladino, the 15th –

JJ: What is that?

RA: It's 15th-century Spanish. The Jews that were expelled from Spain in the 15th century, when they were expelled, and went to other countries like Holland or Turkey, Italy, or North Africa, kept the language to this day. And so Ladino, the construction of the language is like 15th century Spanish mixed with some words in Hebrew or local words in Turkey, words from Turkey and Greece, or Greek words. My grandmother spoke Ladino [and] so did some of my aunts. It was very clear that that was our cultural heritage.

JJ: And that had Hebrew words in it?

RA: A few. But it's mainly Spanish.

JJ: Mostly Spanish. How do you spell that?

RA: Ladino? L-A-D-I-N-O.

JJ: So we're going to jump a little bit to when – was there a time or an incident or values or something that inspired your activism?

RA: As a child?

JJ: Yeah, as a young person. Yeah.

RA: Well, I think what contributed to my becoming an activist was the fact that being a Sephardic Jew in Argentina is a very special experience because Argentina – I don't know if you know this – is a country which is ninety-five percent Catholic. The Catholic presence is very strong in the government, in the schools, in everyday life. Though now less. But not when I grew up. Even now, it's very strong. To be a Jew in Argentina is to be a minority, an extreme minority. But to be a Sephardic Jew is to be a minority within a minority. Plus, because Sephardic Jews usually have names that sound Greek, Italian, like my name, Spanish, Turkish, are not recognized as Jews in Argentina by the rest of the population because the majority of the Jews in Argentina are Ashkenazi like eighty percent of the Jews are Ashkenazi Jews. The Sephardic are a minority. When you are a minority within a minority, you have certain experiences of being marginalized or not recognized. I think that was a big factor in my becoming a socially aware person. I experienced antisemitism as a child because people would make antisemitic comments in front of me because they didn't realize I was a Jew, like, “Those dirty Jews who are thieves,” because nobody thought I was a Jew. I remember that at about nine or ten years old, I was at a friend's house, and I heard the aunt of this girl speak on the phone badly about the Jews. I was totally shaken. I realized they didn't realize I was a Jew. On the way, walking back to my house, I thought about this a lot.

JJ: You were nine?

RA: Nine or ten because I was still in elementary school. I don't know how much – I never told this to my family, to my parents, or to anybody. But inside me, I decided from then on that I would – it's incredible, these things come up. I decided as a child that I would always say I was a Jew. First thing when I meet a person.

JJ: Yeah, that's great, yeah.

RA: I think that experience – because to be a Sephardic Jew is to be invisible, is to be not recognized because – like, you didn't know what Ladino was.

JJ: Right, yeah.

RA: And that's a big part of – in the Holocaust, nobody talks about the Holocaust and the Sephardic Jews. In 2003 – I think it was 2003 – for the first time in Auschwitz, they put a plaque in Ladino. It's really a lot of – I don't want to call it racism – ignorance within the Ashkenazi community, which is the most numerous. So, I think those experiences.

JJ: Were very important growing up.

RA: Yeah, as a child. Also, I had an aunt who was taken to Auschwitz. I never met her because I was in Argentina. So, we knew about the Holocaust. The idea of injustice against the Jews was very clear. Apart from daily small acts of discrimination, I knew that I had an aunt that my mother was always looking for. When I did the book about the grandmothers [Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina], I found out about this aunt, exactly when they took her and where she ended up, etc. So, I was aware of a big social justice issue.

JJ: I guess we'll talk a little bit about that then. It'd be nice to include not just that work but a line or two about some of the other things that have been important to you in your life that are political in some way. So, maybe you can talk about those briefly, and then we'll go into the work that you did in Argentina.

RA: Okay. Like what other things I –?

JJ: Yeah, just a little chronology, maybe.

RA: Chronology. Well, I lived in Italy for ten years before I came to the United States.

JJ: How old were you when you left Argentina?

RA: Twenty.

JJ: Twenty, okay. And then you went to –

RA: Italy. Italy is a very political country. I studied there. I was exposed to a lot of thinking about science and society while I was a science student. When I came to the United States in 1965, it was during the Vietnam War. I was doing research first at Brandeis University and then at Harvard Medical School and was beginning to realize that really what I was getting more and more interested in was not so much what I call bench research, laboratory research, but issues of the relationship of science and society. Because it was the Vietnam War, because we were in this area where there was a lot of research regarding the war, like at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], they had the programs for following the Vietnam peasants from planes and all kinds of things. I became part of a group called Science for the People, which was an activist group of scientists, people who were interested in science and who wanted to talk about the science that will be a science for destruction and to educate people about the fact that science is an incredibly powerful tool, but it's in the hands of people without ethics and morals usually. So the stuff about defense – scientists working on projects that are against life. We did a lot of work for many years in Science for the People. We had a magazine, gave workshops, and developed courses on trying to raise consciousness about [the] importance of science and the importance that people who are not scientists become involved in the politics of science. You can't leave the scientists to run the show. Science for the People was very important for me. And there I started to look at issues of women in science, which we are still talking about, as you know – hear Lawrence Summers still once a month. We were talking about those things about why there are so few women in science and how come scientists have so many theories that have sexist connotations. One thing led to the other, and eventually, I got very interested in the whole issue of science and human rights because that was the direction in which becoming a feminist led me. To think about – and that was one of the reasons that I started working on The Grandmothers, the whole following all the work that they did to engage scientists to develop genetic testing that they needed for their work. There were

a lot of connections, yes.

JJ: You were in Italy for ten years and then came here. Why did you come here?

RA: Because as a scientist doing research in the kind of field that I was in, it was considered a must to do some postgraduate work in the United States. It was like a rite of passage. You do your degree, you start working, and at a certain point, you come to the United States. Even today, you always have – now less, but some foreign scientists come to spend a few years here. But what happened to me is I came to spend a few years, and then I stayed, and I stayed, and I stayed, and I changed my focus. After a while, it didn't make any sense to go back because I had changed.

JJ: And what school did you attend here? You were at Harvard or MIT?

RA: I came first at Brandeis University. Then I was at Harvard Medical School and then at Boston University.

JJ: And did you get a PhD?

RA: In Italy. In Italy. But they don't call it Ph.D. there. They call it doctorato, doctorate.

JJ: And so this you're saying was postdoc work.

RA: Yes, postdoc. Right.

JJ: Any other things that happened when you were here before the project in Argentina that were –?

RA: Well, as I became more and more of a feminist and working in Science for the People, I realized that I wanted to do more interdisciplinary work, not just science. You think about science, but you have to think about history and philosophy of science and all those things. As I got more involved in the feminist movement, this idea came up to open

a women's bookstore, and we did so in 1974. It was named New Words, and it just closed two years ago. Now we have a thing called the Center for New Words. That was a great project because it was a way to educate myself. Having a feminist bookstore, you have to know what you're selling, and that was a very good experience in activism because it wasn't just a bookstore; it was a center for women. And then when I got cancer, breast cancer, in 1974 – in those days, there was nothing about women with breast cancer. It was the Dark Ages. But eventually, in 1989, myself, with other women – it wasn't my idea, it was a whole group – started this Women's Community Cancer Project, which is an activist group. I'll give you something from it afterward if you want so you can have an idea. That was also easy for me because it connected with my biology background; to be an activist for cancer, you have to know a little bit about biology. It helps.

JJ: So, were you active – this was during the 1970s? The Women's Movement was going on in this country and around the world. Did you consider yourself active in that movement?

RA: Oh, I was. Oh, yeah.

JJ: Well, the cancer group obviously is a part of that.

RA: Oh, yes, and Science for the People also. We had a feminist caucus. We wrote the Declaration for the Rights of Women in Science, which was in our magazine. We published a book. I'll show you. You want to see?

JJ: We'll wait. Yeah, I can wait. So yeah, you definitely –

RA: Yeah, I was part of a group that put together a booklet called How Harvard Rules Women in 1977.

JJ: You could put that out now. Yeah, yeah. So can you say a little bit about how being a woman has impacted your activism?

RA: Well, it has forced me to become an activist because there is just too much injustice and too much violence. I don't know. I think that, for me, when I started realizing, looking in my own life, examples of discrimination, patronizing attitudes from men in science, lots of patronizing attitudes, and the lack of respect and the lack of support or the lack of recognition, it all felt very familiar. It felt like being a Sephardic Jew as a child again. As a woman in science, really once I started thinking about it, I realized I wanted to do something that would be broader than just the research because I couldn't just care about women in science. I understood that the situation of women overall resulted in women in science getting a raw deal, but the problem was much larger. The more I read, the more I analyzed my own experiences. I had to become an activist. There was no way out for me.

JJ: Yeah. We're, I guess, in the mid-1970s now. The cancer group started in – did you say the late '80s?

RA: '89.

JJ: Okay. When did you get involved in the project in Argentina?

RA: In the '80s. When I started meeting the – see, I was here because of a series of circumstances. When the Mothers and the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo would travel to the United States, I became a sort of person that they would see when they came to the Boston area.

JJ: And how did that happen?

RA: Well, because – you want the details?

JJ: Yeah.

RA: I had sent money to a group in New York that was collecting money to buy a computer for a human rights group in Argentina because they needed a computer to start building a database.

JJ: This was their group. Or no, this was a human rights group?

RA: No, this was a bunch of Argentines living in New York. I don't remember if they had any special name. One day I got a letter saying – they knew that I was an Argentine – fundraiser to buy a computer [for] one of the human rights groups in Argentina because they were starting to gather all this data about the disappeared in Argentina. It was a huge amount of information. They wanted to build a database in Argentina. I get this letter. I sent fifty dollars – or I don't know how much. Well, end of the story – after a few months, they called me, and they say, "Amnesty International sponsored a tour of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and they're coming to Boston. They don't know English, and they don't know anybody. Will you take care of them?" Yes. So, I acted as a translator. I took care of this woman [with] whom I became very good friends, a mother of the Plaza de Mayo who is dead now but who was an incredible person. [Her name is Renée Epelbaum. She was Jewish also.] After a few months, they called me again. "Now the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo are coming to the United States. Will you do the same thing? Translate for them? Take them around?" Yes. So, I became a person that when these people would come to the Boston area, I would take care of them. That's how it all started.

JJ: I see. Okay. Can you talk a little bit about then your involvement in their project and what you did?

RA: Yeah. Well, with the Mothers, what I did was I helped them with their money – fundraising. Because as I got to know them better and understood what they were doing,

they were trying to raise money for a series of projects. So together with some people in New York, we wrote a grant to several organizations, and finally, we did get money from one. I was the contact person, like the people from the foundation [who] came and interviewed me. So, I was the person who –

JJ: Contact here.

RA: Contact here, etc. That was mostly with the Mothers. With the Grandmothers, which is a different organization, I became real friends because every year that I would go to Argentina to see my family, I would visit them. I started to realize the importance of their work and learn about their contribution to science and human rights by asking scientists to develop a genetic test for grandparenthood. I started to realize that there were many dimensions to the project that seemed important and worth learning about. So eventually, I came up with the idea of – I started to write articles. I published a few articles here and there. Then some people started to say, "Well, you should do more because the article doesn't tell enough." I came up with the idea of doing a book. I asked them about it, and they agreed. I had a sabbatical. I went to Argentina. I started interviewing the women. I got a little money for a grant [for] doing the book and learning more about them. I became here the contact person with them. I organized tours for them. They would come to New York, Connecticut, Boston, Dartmouth, whatever, and I will arrange all that and –

JJ: They would go on a speaking tour?

RA: Speaking tour, right? I worked here so that the University of Massachusetts in Boston gave them an honorary degree for their doctorate for their work on human rights. I would say I was their support person in this area to this day. Last year, we did the same thing in April and –

JJ: They did a speaking tour.

RA: Yes, yes, they came to the States. They were in Washington, New York. They came here; they spoke at Wellesley, at Simmons, at UMass. I would go with them and translate for them.

JJ: Were you a professor at this time?

RA: Yes, I am.

JJ: You were then when it started?

RA: Oh, yes, yes.

JJ: And what are you teaching now?

RA: It's mostly women's studies with a focus on women and human rights.

JJ: Can you talk about some of the challenges when you got involved in this work and writing the book and also some of the successes and things that you learned?

RA: Well, one of the challenges was for me to catch up. Though I've always kept quite involved with Argentine stuff, not having lived there, I had to really learn a lot both by reading and hearing – catch up with all the years to understand how all this happened, how the dictatorship came to power, what was – so I started. I had to do a lot of catching up with that. The other was that these stories were so painful to hear, and so moving that I had to really talk myself sometimes about continuing. Because when you hear such stories one after the other of such cruelty and such horrible things, I was sometimes thinking, “This is too much. I don't know if I can go on listening to these things.” Then I think, “Well, if they can live with this, I can have the strength to listen to it.” Also, because I don't believe in dispassionate research, I am not a quote-unquote – I don't buy the idea of objectivity in research. I think there's always – we bring to whatever we do our values and our views. As I learned more and more about what had happened and what they

were doing, I felt a commitment to help them. But what help could I give them? What they would always say is what you can do for us is to let our stories known. I thought I can do that. Because I realized how little people knew here about them. That was a big challenge but also a big responsibility and a big honor at the same time.

JJ: Can you talk about some of the successes? Some things that came out of it?

RA: Well, I think what came out of it is the book, which is now also published in Spanish, so it's available in Argentina. What came out was, for me, a very great satisfaction. This almost all the book reviews said. The ones who loved the book and the ones who didn't like it so much say this is the first in-depth study of a group of women who have done incredible things because they haven't been acknowledged before. I think I helped put them on the radar of many people – people in politics, people in Latin American studies. I think that's a big accomplishment because, years ago, they always used to speak sometimes about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Now, in this country, they always say the Mothers and the Grandmothers because their work is different. The Grandmothers are looking for – that's why the title of my book is Searching for Life. They're looking for living beings which are living under false identity: their grandchildren. The Mothers are looking for justice and memory. But they're not searching for anybody who's living because all their sons and daughters are dead, are disappeared, are dead. Their work is different. I feel that my book helped to put them in the public eye, on the radar. In fact, they were nominated two or three years ago – well, many people get nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. But they were. And the woman who –

JJ: Oh, they were, the Grandmothers?

RA: Yes, yeah, and the woman who nominated them had read my book. So I feel that that was –

JJ: For the Nobel Peace Prize. Yeah, yeah, that's amazing. I was going to ask, and you started to talk a little bit about this, but how your work around that has affected the community in Argentina that you've been working with, and then also, what you think some of the global effects of your work have been internationally.

RA: Well, I think people who never thought about issues like the importance of identity and the right to identity, which is one of the big contributions of the Grandmothers is that they introduced this idea of the right to identity, which is now part of international law, is part of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and so I made that known for the English-speaking public here. Because in this country, the United States has not even ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, so people don't know anything about it. So when I talk – and I still give many talks about the topic – and I explain things like that, people really open their eyes about [how] there are human rights we don't even think about in this country. Because human rights is always an evolving concept, it's not set in stone. The fact that new work can conceptualize new human rights that's a very important contribution.

JJ: The U.S. hasn't signed a lot of things. How would you say that work has affected you on a more personal level?

RA: Oh, it's affected me tremendously because having contact with these women who are now in their sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties for so many years, what I learn is that you don't give up. That persistence is the key to anything, and that it doesn't matter if you are young, if you are old, if you are super intelligent. Once you are convinced to the core of the importance of something, you just keep doing it, and it's such an empowering feeling. I learned that firsthand seeing them year after year because when I started to interview them, they were still in a very precarious position; they were still receiving threats, etc. Now, they celebrated twenty-seven years of the organization with such big accomplishments in so many areas. It has given me a sense of

empowerment that I can – as I get older and older, I can do things. I just won't give up. I learn a lot from them, and I apply it to me.

JJ: That's amazing. What is the significance of the Plaza de Mayo?

RA: The Plaza de Mayo in Argentina is the place where all the important civic events take place. It's in front of the presidential palace, la Casa Rosada, the Pink House, where the presidents come out on the balcony and speak to the crowds. The place where [Juan] Peron would speak to hundreds of thousands of people. It's historically when there was the Declaration of Independence from Spain – it all happens there in that area because that's where the cabildo, the house of government during the colonial era, was. It's a plaza that is surrounded by all the public buildings that have to do with national identity and also with the cathedral. Anything that is important for the history of the country takes place in the Plaza de Mayo. It's the civic center.

JJ: And they took on that name? They did demonstrations there, right?

RA: Yeah, yeah, for years and years.

JJ: I think we've covered – I was thinking about how the community here has responded to your work, and you've said a little bit about that. Is there anything else?

RA: Which community?

JJ: Well, I guess English-speaking people that have read your work and that you've talked to. I know you talk to colleges and stuff. I'm curious how they've responded.

RA: Very well. They responded with great interest because when the book came out, which was in 1999, there was already more awareness of the importance of multiculturalism. So people started to realize that, “Oh, maybe we have something to learn from other parts of the world.” So women's studies programs, Latin American

studies programs, and even people who are not in academia but who are interested in adoption issues, for instance, because of the issues of the children having false identities and false adoptions, etc. So, yeah.

JJ: We're going to switch a little bit here. Have you had role models in your life? And if so, who would you say have been role models?

RA: Well, I think I've had many role models, not one.

JJ: Can you think of any particular person or people that you could mention?

RA: Well, for different things. Different role models. I had some teachers in elementary school that I admired greatly. I thought they seemed so respected by others, and I liked that. Well, as I got older, I had an aunt, which was a role model in a way, because she was eccentric and made me feel that you could do anything. She was a little bit unreal, but she was a role model in that situation. And then, of course, when I became a feminist and started to read about the early feminists, the suffrage movement, that was so inspiring that women would take up such big projects. That was. I don't know if I have to think today. Today, I am an old woman, but I think of who have helped me understand things and inspire me [are] people like Adrienne Rich or Gerda Lerner. Gerda Lerner. So a lot of great feminists.

JJ: Both familial and outside of that, yeah. Would you see your work, speaking of feminism, fit in –? And I guess you could talk about your work with the Grandmothers – fit into traditional women's roles? Or against it?

RA: Well, it's very interesting because the Grandmothers and also the Mothers access the public sphere on the basis of their traditional roles. Mothers and grandmothers. But in doing so, they transform the role completely because they became so public, and they challenged the separation between the traditional and the public role of women. Showing that what is called traditional it's also a public issue. Looking and caring for your children

is something that they were doing, but that's something that everybody should be doing. So what is considered public was deficient in not incorporating that dimension of caring that they brought. So they started themselves [as] very traditional mothers and housewives. But in the process of fighting for the recognition of their traditional role, they transcended them and challenged that separation between the private and the public.

JJ: And also challenges of the Latino culture as well. And expectations, I guess, of women. Okay. Let me just check. Is there anything else that you would like to add or think about along the lines of, I guess, being a woman, being political, being Jewish? I don't know if there's anything else.

RA: Well, not really. What is clear to me is that it's impossible to separate all these components. And the moment you think you've got it in one, it's –

JJ: Right, it's all connected.

RA: It's all connected. And so what results is how does one put it together, and I'm still putting it together. What I think is a challenge, I'll just mention, is being an immigrant in this country and trying to be here but with an awareness of there, of Argentina in this case. How to put that together? I think that's a challenge because of the stereotypes and also because the culture here, in general, is very ethnocentric.

JJ: How has that manifested? Can you give me an example?

RA: Well, I think Latin America, if you look at the news, I am very well informed because I go there every year and I read every day on the Internet. I read a couple of Argentine newspapers, so I know what's happening in Argentina and in the rest of Latin America. But if you don't do that, you can go here [for] months without hearing anything about Latin America, except that Fidel Castro is a dictator, and now maybe Venezuela is going the bad way also. That's it. I am aware of the difference in my perspective. I have always here double vision. I'm always seeing the reality here with the eyes from living

here for so many years, but also as an Argentine. And so that makes [for] difficult communication sometimes because people are not informed, and Latin America is considered – it's not news in this country unless something dramatic happens. Because it's like the backyard of the United States. It's again very marginal. It's a special difficulty because it's not like Europe. People know about it. They travel. They recognize. So Latin America is not taken seriously unless, as I said, something earthshaking happens. So that's an additional problem.

JJ: I think that's it unless there's anything else.

RA: No.

JJ: Okay. Good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Reviewed by JWA Oral History Archivist 6/3/2023