Andrea Waldstein Transcript

Alexandra Kiosse: This is Georgia and Alexandra [Kiosse] interviewing Andrea Waldstein. Do you want to start?

Georgia Westbrook: Yes. It's July 14, 2016, and we are at Andrea's home in Boston. Is it okay if we just jump in with our questions?

Andrea Waldstein: Sorry?

GW: Is it okay if we just jump in with our questions?

AW: Yes.

GW: Okay. Do you have any stories about life in the former Soviet Union or about your childhood and your early years?

AW: Well, I didn't live in the former Soviet Union.

GW: So just background. Do you have any stories?

AK: Does your family have any stories?

AW: Did you look at what I sent you?

GW: Yes.

AK: Yes.

AW: Well, very much so. My father was born in (Iziaslav?), Ukraine, western Ukraine, right near the Polish border. His father came to this country in 1914, my grandfather, with the idea that my father and grandmother – and there was another child who died

before they came here – a younger child would follow. But the reason that my grandfather came was to avoid military conscription, which would have been like twenty-five years in military service. So he came to this country with his brother. But World War I broke out, and so they were separated. My father was not able to come until he was twelve, and that was in 1921. So, he came with his mother and sister. His little brother had died in the meantime of an illness. Maybe it was scarlet fever. Not sure. So, unlike a lot of people I knew in my generation, who did not really want to talk about the days in the former Soviet Union because they were so painful, it was times of pogroms and tremendous antisemitism, anarchy. Every day, the Cossacks or who knows what group would be parading through the village with swords and hanging people. It was just pretty terrible. Most people did not want to talk about it. My father didn't talk about those details, but he always was asking the question – now, let's leap from World War I to World War II. He grew up as an immigrant in Haverhill, Massachusetts. His father had started a business. During World War Two, when I was five and six, he would wonder what happened to the rest of the family. My great grandfather died in (Iziaslav?). We knew that. But there was no communication, no way to help. I never heard the Holocaust mentioned at that age. I'm sure he knew something about it, but that was not talked about. But I could feel his pain about that. Just stop me if I'm going on too long, but this is probably a central story to the whole thing. When he turned eighty – and I have a brother – we said to my father, "What would you like for your eightieth birthday?" This was at the time of Gorbachev and just a little opening of the window during Perestroika, so you could go and travel still [as a] tourist. It wasn't easy, but people were going, and people were also visiting refuseniks at that time. So, he said he wanted to go back to the village where he was twelve when he came over. He was essentially, after my grandfather left, the man of the family, who really made sure that there was bread on the table for his mother and sister with his wily ways – a lot of stories about that. So, we said, "Come on, dad. What do you really want?" This is what he wanted. I'm just trying to think of where to go from here. This was a very emotional trip, as you can imagine. I

can tell you more stories about that particular trip. But that's the emotional connection that I have to both the former Soviet Union and to my father, who let us into his emotional life about that. We also – my husband and I – also arranged with Action for Post-Soviet Jewry, both in Boston and in Chicago, to visit refuseniks while we were there, which was a whole experience in itself – sometimes kind of frightening, sometimes very gratifying. So that's the childhood connection to the former Soviet Union.

AK: How would you describe yourself in terms of your Jewish identity? Have your feelings about being Jewish changed over time?

AW: [laughter] Well, did you read about my involvement with Project Kesher?

AK: Yeah. We're just doing the background first, and then we're going to go into specifics.

AW: Why I'm asking is that my involvement with Project Kesher has made a difference in terms of my Jewish identity. I grew up in Haverhill. My parents were both very active in a conservative synagogue in Haverhill. I was just thinking about this this morning. I went four years to Hebrew school because my father, at one point, was president of the Hebrew school, and he thought that girls should go to Hebrew School. But Hebrew was not taught as a language. I just learned how to read it. Girls did not have bat mitzvahs. But our family was very much a part of temple life in Haverhill. We celebrated the major Jewish holidays. But we didn't necessarily practice Shabbat. It was mostly the High Holidays and Passover we had with our family and Hanukkah, but we also, somehow or other, did Christmas. It's all very confusing. I think, as an adult, I kind of moved away from my Judaism. I just somehow couldn't connect with, as a young married adult, who tried to belong to a Sisterhood. I don't know why. I just couldn't really relate, but still identified Jewishly. I think it was my connection with Project Kesher – and we can go into more about Project Kesher, that in trying to bring the traditions and culture and thought behind the Jewish religion to women in the former Soviet Union – and I know I'm not

alone in this – it connected me in a deeper way to my own values. I began to think about Jewish values and how they were very different. Meanwhile, I went to graduate school in social work, and they were not so dissimilar from social work values. So, I got more involved Jewishly and, again, feel very Jewish, although we do not belong to a synagogue. We go here and there on High Holidays. My husband isn't too eager to join a synagogue, but we're very Jewish. [laughter]

AK: How has being a woman, if at all, affected your sense of self as a Jew?

AW: Well, the role of women in the Jewish religion has changed enormously, for example, about the bat mitzvah. Jewish women are now getting bat mitzvahed. I think it's an ongoing process. I mean, I see it even in terms of working with women from the former Soviet Union mostly. I don't know if you experienced any of this. Are you Jewish?

AK: That's an interesting question for me. My parents, I guess, my whole life told me that I was Jewish, but I was also baptized. We didn't celebrate any holidays. It was strange because, in Russia, it was more of a nationality to be Jewish, not a religion.

AW: Absolutely, yes.

AK: I don't know. I'm not sure.

AW: You don't know.

AK: Well, I mean, my grandma found out that she was Jewish only in 2004 because her family hid it to stay safe.

AW: Well, I certainly met many Jewish people in the former Soviet Union. My husband is an actor and was doing [Anton] Chekhov's *The Seagull* in Yalta. It was at the time of Passover when another actor friend of mine found a Jewish family in Yalta who had

never had a Seder. This was their first Seder; we put together one for them with them. Some of the actors came, and the stories that they told – parents did hide Judaism from the kids to protect them because it was a stamp on your passport that affected education. I've heard about how being Jewish denied [you] entrance to universities. One story I was just rereading about how someone was denied a job teaching Hebrew in St. Petersburg because they were told the Hebrew language didn't exist. Just ridiculous. So, I think we're getting a little bit off track here. But in terms of women, it was mostly the Orthodox tradition that came to the former Soviet Union to try to teach Jewish traditions to people there. So, in their tradition, women had a very much more constrictive role. Project Kesher was much more realistic. So just trying to make little connections between those roles and working – I mean, the Orthodox were often the only ones who went and stayed there and rolled up their sleeves in a very difficult situation to do this. So, I think they deserve a lot of credit. But now, things are more open, and women are beginning to question. What about abortion rights? What about domestic violence? What about all the relevant women's issues going on today, even in this community – just getting those issues out on the table? Do Jewish men beat their wives? Is their alcoholism in the Jewish religion? Is there trafficking of Jewish women in this very state? I've seen it. So, I think the issues are definitely more on the table.

AK: Going off of that, in your past, did you anticipate or experience any obstacles or challenges because of your gender? How did you overcome these challenges?

AW: Because of my gender?

AK: Yes.

AW: Well, I probably was not the most questioning child. I was well-behaved and went along with what I was told. So, when it was careers day, say, at Haverhill High School, where I went two years, I said to my mother, "What should I go to?" These were the options. There was airline stewardess – that's what they call them, then – and secretary

– that's what they called it. We don't even use these words anymore – nurse and teacher and social worker. Those were the options given. I remember my mother said, "Well, you like people. Why don't you look at the social work thing?" which was a very wise prescription at that time. Clearly, she knew who I was. Not that I think I would have chosen this, but it never occurred to either me or my father that I might go into his business, never mind be a doctor or a lawyer, or any of that. So, certainly, in that regard, gender affected my choice of profession. Although, I love my profession. So, it wasn't too much of a problem. I'm sure there were a million other ways that gender has dictated the roles that I've played. But I've always lived in an equal opportunity household. This is my second marriage, but in both my marriages, we, as husband and wife, just participated in child-rearing and whatever needed to be done in the home. My father was very – he had to leave. He left high school in the ninth grade. In his freshman year, he had to go and help my grandfather in his business because my grandfather was sick. So, that was the end of his formal education. For both my brother and me, education was just so important. He never asked questions about, "Why are you doing liberal arts?" and "Where's it going to take you?" and any of that. it was just, "Whatever you want to study [inaudible]." I personally haven't felt hugely limited. Let me say, as I'm just thinking again. So, going back, take issues of birth control. Pregnancy was a huge fear growing up as a young girl. There were no options for birth control. So that governed a lot of what you did and what you didn't do. Obviously, the world has changed enormously since that. So, I think that probably put pressure on me to get married earlier than I probably would have. And women were getting – I was twenty-one when I was married. So, women got married pretty young in those days. Anywhere, there was a role in the '50s; you got married, and you became a housewife and mother. Now, fortunately, I had gone right to graduate school after college. So, I always kept my hand in my profession. It was the kind of profession where you could work two days a week, or three days a week, or part-time, so I always was able to blend the two.

GW: You mentioned that you celebrated Christmas. But did you celebrate any secular American holidays? How did you experience these holidays as a Jew with immigrant parents?

AW: By celebrating Christmas, I meant that we got presents. Somehow, we hung up our stockings at the fire. I think my parents just wanted to be a part of that holiday. My mother's family, in particular her sisters, also did the same thing. What other holidays are there? There's Halloween. What other secular holidays are you thinking of? Thanksgiving. We always celebrated Thanksgiving. The Jewish religion didn't seem to interfere with that. I don't know if this directly relates, but after my sophomore year in high school, my family and I both decided that I would go to a private boarding school to get a better education. So, I went to Dana Hall in Wellesley. But when I applied, my father, mother, and I met with the headmistress of the school. She said to my father – my maiden name was Kniznick, which, if it was a good Russian name, it would have been (Kunichnik?) – "You know, Mr. Kniznick, this is a Christian school." My father said, "Sign her up." He just wanted the education. I remember, for my fiftieth high school Dana Hall reunion, I wrote something for the reunion book on being Jewish at Dana Hall. It was difficult because you had to go to church every Sunday. There was something sort of interesting about going to different churches and seeing different religions. But during Christmas time, singing all the carols. I don't think there was anything about Hanukkah at Dana Hall at that time. I could feel the pull of wanting to be like everybody else and getting into it. Somebody once asked me the question, do you remember your first act of political compromise? What comes into my mind about that question is that one year, Yom Kippur fell on a Sunday, and I still went to church. I just don't understand why I didn't have the guts to talk to the headmistress or something and say, "This is a Jewish holiday. Why can't I go to my own synagogue?" So, I wasn't too creative, I guess, at that time. I wasn't the political activist that I became a little bit later in life at that particular time. Tell me if you want more about these questions or not or more examples.

AK: However much you want to talk about. Were you ever encouraged to make aliyah or to spend time in Israel? If so, by whom? How do you think that the founding of Israel affected Soviet Jewry?

AW: I was never encouraged to make Aliyah, but my family was very interested in Israel and very excited in 1948 when Israel became a state. We had Tzedakah boxes in our kitchen where we put money for Israel. I know my parents made a trip to Israel; I did with my children. When they were young, I was in Israel. Arthur, my husband, had been very involved with the New Israel Fund. Do you know the New Israel Fund? It's an organization that promotes democracy in Israel, and it's a partnership organization with Israeli partners and American partners. It's jointly run. He was on the board of that, and we made several trips to Israel. So, Israel has been a very important part of our consciousness, something that we care deeply about. My brother is also very involved in trying to create some kinds of joint programs with Palestinians, Arab Israelis, and Jewish Israelis. There's a hand-to-hand education project. So, anyway, we're just very involved in many aspects of Israel. In terms of how it affected Soviet Jewry, well, for one thing, it was a place that I could go. So, this was really huge. One of the issues – I know people debated [was] when they did get permission to leave, would they go to Israel or would they come to the United States? Those two were the most popular options. Maybe for some people, it was an easier choice, especially if they had family there. But I know that for Russians who have immigrated to Israel, it's not always an easy adjustment, not that immigration ever is. I think that's one of the things I mentioned in my questionnaire. Adjusting to the culture – for one thing, I think, in a good sense, for Israel, it was a brain drain from Russia because the best and the brightest came to Israel and contributed enormously. I know more about women, and Project Kesher has – there's now Project Kesher Israel. I think there's been discrimination toward Russian women, toward difference in culture, toward difference in dress, maybe a tendency to stick together and be somewhat ghettoized and not be part of the community. So Kesher has programs teaching financial literacy and also making connections with Bedouin women. All the

things that are being done in the former Soviet Union have now been transferred to Israel. Arthur and I were part of a Kehillah project in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, with an Orthodox Rabbi [Shmuel] Kaminezki. It was a sister city connection with the Boston Jewish community, where Boston was, through Jewish Community Relations Council, and Nancy Kaufman was very invested in helping the Jewish community Dnepropetrovsk have a better life. So, every aspect of life from the cradle to the grave, birth and old age and death and all the young teenagers – many organizations from Boston were involved. But at one point, this rabbi, of course, was always looking for more money for his community. There were some very rich oligarchs, Jewish oligarchs in Dnepropetrovsk. They wanted to get them juiced up about Israel. So, we went on a trip with them to Israel. I remember on the plane coming back, I happened to be sitting near the rabbi, and he said, "Four men have already come forward to me, saying that they want to be circumcised." He was just so excited about the effect that this trip to Israel had.

GW: How do Jewish cultural and religious values impact your experience and attitudes toward marriage?

AW: Say the first part of the question. How did my what?

GW: Jewish cultural and religious values.

AW: Why am I finding this hard to answer? You don't mean how we conducted our daily life, or do you?

GW: More in personal experience. One of my friends told me a Jew wouldn't want to marry me, a Catholic, because I'm not Jewish. [inaudible]

AW: That kind of thing. Okay. Yes, my parents made it very clear that they wanted me to marry a Jewish man and were not happy when I was dating non-Jewish men. So, that was definitely a big factor. But once I did, nobody seemed to care what I did. So, that was the main thing, was to marry a Jew. Nobody thought it was important that I join a

temple. We, again, celebrated the holidays as we did, or we didn't. So, it certainly affected my choice of a husband. Any other thoughts about that? Any examples?

GW: Obviously, you chose to marry someone within the Jewish religion. But were they of the same ethnicity? Were they Soviet Jews? Was the relationship perceived in a certain way by other people? Were their difficulties particular to your marriage or things that were easier?

AW: Particular difficulties? What?

GW: Particular to your marriage or things that were easier because you were both Jewish?

AW: I think the answer to that is things were easier because we were both Jewish in both marriages. It had a common – and because our families were both Jewish. There was just something that was familiar. The culture of the family was familiar. I think, even today, I would say that even though we're involved in many secular activities, probably our closest friends are Jewish. That's been true right along in my adult life. So, it's a sense of belonging, which is something that both the Jews in the former Soviet Union and the ones who emigrated here, even though they were Jewish, were so cut off because, as you said, (Sasha?), there was no Jewish education. It was just ethnicity. People didn't really feel taken into the Jewish community. They got services. They got help when they first came. But they weren't really taken into the social life.

GW: How did your background, especially with parents from the Soviet Union, influence your involvement in organizations like the International Committee of Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament that you were part of, and also the Action for Post-Soviet Jewry and Project Kesher? How did your identity, I guess, either motivate you or influence your involvement in these organizations?

AW: How did my Jewish identity or my whole identity?

GW: Just your identity.

AW: That's an important question because, at one point, when I was very involved with the anti-nuclear movement, we would meet as a group, Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament. It felt almost like a religion to us. So, the concept of peace and creating harmony in the world, I think, dates back to when I was about four years old. It was the beginning of World War Two, and there were air raid drills. I remember playing outside with my friend, and there was a big siren that went off, and my mother calling over the window telling me to get in the house immediately. I was dawdling. She called again. I came in and – must have been my four-year-old way – wondered what's the big deal here. She said, "We're at war. There are bad Germans and bad Japs that can bomb us." This was very confusing to me because I didn't understand about war. I didn't understand about bad because sometimes I was bad, but I don't know why that had to lead people to kill each other. But I remember puzzling. I thought that war took place in a church. I thought Pearl Harbor was a man because I didn't even know Pearl was a woman's name. It was just always a puzzle as to why people had to kill each other. I think that question carried me into the social work profession and dictated – any kinds of conflict resolution ideas were very interesting to me. Then, when nuclear weapons came on the scene, that seemed horrific to me. This can destroy the entire world. Why wasn't anybody doing anything? Why wasn't my profession doing anything about it? Finally, I think it was in about 1982 when someone on the faculty at Simmons, (Eileen Fryberg?), founded Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament. It was a little squib in a professional newspaper. The disarmament movement at that time seemed to be organized in terms of professions. There was Physicians for Social Responsibility. They were Businessmen for Nuclear Disarmament – lawyers. So, finally, there were social workers. Finally, there was a place where we could begin to do something as a group and become active in our community. We had many programs on August 6th, the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. We would help programs for peace in parks. In Cambridge, we would demonstrate outside of nuclear weapons plants. In Wellesley,

on Boston Common, in front of the statehouse, we were out there with our placards and educational programs. Then became an international program of social workers for peace. I was asked to be on that committee. So that's how I got to be on that committee. So that's how I got to be on that. It was in that context, that very dear friend, who recently died, who was a social worker – there had begun to be demonstrations at the nuclear test site in Mercury, Nevada. She went with her husband and family to trespass on the nuclear test site. She actually, rather than pay the fine for trespassing – they did it with thousands of other people from across the country – she actually went to jail rather than pay the fine. She was in jail with some other women just like her. She started talking to these women who weren't even talking and found out about their families. These women were not in for trespassing. I don't know what they were in for. She made connections with these women. When she got out, she called these women's families. She did her whole social work thing right at the jail cell. But she came to speak to our local group – she was local herself – of Social Workers for Peace about this trespass. Several of us got very interested in doing the next one, which I think was maybe '86 or so. I'm not really sure what year – also in Mercury, Nevada. So, we went, along with many other social workers and many other peace groups in New England and many other groups across the country, to Mercury, Nevada, and did trespass onto the site. We were handcuffed and put in a pen, and men were separated from women. We were kept in a hot pen all day. We were bused to the county jail in the middle of the night, but there were thousands of us, and they weren't really interested in putting us all in jail. So, they let us go. But I remember it [was] an antidote to my going to church on Yom Kipper. I was shaking, going through the barbed wire onto the test site. You could see that – I think they called them the wagon huts, the security people in their camouflage in the distance in the desert with their sunglasses coming toward us as we were climbing through the barbed wire. I was shaking. I was not shaking from fear; I was shaking from excitement, that I was putting my body finally on the line where my mouth had been. It was a very, very powerful thing to do. So, that's going from world

peace to activism. That's that line. Then, Project Kesher came into the picture a little later.

GW: Were you involved in any other social movements?

AW: Social what?

GW: Social movements.

AW: Maybe not in such an active way. Certainly, very aware of the March on Selma, but I wasn't actively participating. I've been involved in organizations that – I don't think you can necessarily call them movements, but that worked for the benefit of women. I still am in something called the Miriam Fund, which Judith probably knows about. It's a granting organization that gives money to secular and Jewish organizations in the greater Boston community to benefit the lives of women and girls. We give grants, and we do site visits. They also do give some grants in Israel, and I visited some of the sites in Israel, one site for women in economic empowerment. We also set up a microenterprise loan committee in Dnepropetrovsk, in Ukraine, where we gave small loans to women at risk. Often the women at risk were women, especially who had children with disabilities, where very often the husband [was] deserting, and they were alone. So, helping them to start cottage industries where they could be economically – so, that program just shut down right now, but it went on for several years. I don't know if there's any – what other movements are there? I can't think of other movements there are out there right now.

GW: In the questionnaire, you mentioned that one of the events that influenced you was *Roe v. Wade* and birth control.

AW: Yes. I think that had a powerful effect on everyone's life. But I can't say that I was actively involved. My mother-in-law was. Arthur's mother was a social worker, also. In her early marriage, she was out handing leaflets for birth control. I think she either was arrested or stopped by the police. It seems to be in the family. [laughter]

GW: How did you originally become interested in social work, conflict resolution, and working towards justice?

AW: Well, I might have told you some of that already in terms of those early memories. It just was all over – just wanting people to get along. My parents' marriage was sometimes contentious – my father's first marriage to my mother. After my mother died – she died very young at the age of fifty-four – he married Rita, who was still alive, and that was a very wonderful marriage. I'm very close to her. It was in my bones. Conflict was just something that seemed like we should be able to do something about. It's funny. In my Dana Hall prophecy, it says, "Kniznick leads the orchestra with glee." Now, it was from Dana Hall that I first went to the Boston Symphony. This is something that I didn't put in that has been a big factor in my life. I think it's a big factor in working cross-culturally, also. It was the first time I had been to the Boston Symphony. I remember the two pieces that I heard – maybe there were three, but I went out and bought the records. I used to, in my dorm room, I would conduct – there was one particular – [Pyotr Ilyich] Tchaikovsky's *Italian Capriccio*. I knew whenever the instrument came in, I would conduct. I still take piano lessons. Actually, our bedroom is upstairs. There's a grand piano in the bedroom. It's not like I was any kind of a great musician with this conducting. I think it was getting the instruments to play together in harmony, to make beautiful music. It was like a metaphor for what I wanted to do. I did a lot of family therapy. I wanted families to be able to communicate to each other. It was just a value that was a part of me.

GW: This is the big question.

AW: Oh, dear. Not that the others have been small.

GW: It's very broad. How were you involved in the Soviet Jewry movement? What compelled you to get involved? And what actions did you take?

AW: What actions?

GW: Did you take?

AW: Yeah. It's a big question, but it's got a logical answer. I don't know how much I – I probably didn't say too much in the questionnaire about it.

GW: I think you just listed your organizations, but not in too much detail.

AW: So, one is I would have my ear open because of my family history to what was going on. It's connected to my nonviolent civil disobedience of the nuclear test site. Because being part of this international group, I was asked to give a workshop at an international conference of women and peace in Urbana, Illinois, on nonviolent civil disobedience. I did it in terms of Gandhi's principles of non-violence. When I was at that workshop, I met Sallie Gratch, a social worker who graduated one year ahead of me from Simmons School of Social Work, who had also trespassed at another time, went to the nuclear test site, and was also giving a workshop. We connected. Sallie Gratch is the founder of Project Kesher. This was 1988. She told me that she was going on the Soviet American Peace Walk, which is both across Russia and the United States, that fall. This was the same year and the same time that I said, "That's so interesting because we're taking my father back to his village." While we were in the former Soviet Union, I would see signs about the Soviet American Peace Walk, and I knew that Sallie was there. So, we did that. I did my father's trip, and she was doing that. When she was doing that, on the peace walk, as they went into many small towns and villages, she would ask, "Where are the synagogues?" Mostly, they were either destroyed, or they were museums. She would also ask if there were any Jewish people, and those who dared to say they were would invite them to the campground to the Sabbath services or say a memorial prayer, a Jewish memorial prayer for the dead. She saw how hungry people were for some content to their Jewishness. So, she started going back for the next five years, bringing Judaica and some rituals to these communities. On the peace walk, she met a woman in

a town in Russia, [inaudible], Svetlana Yakimenko. Svetlana saw that Sallie was wearing a Jewish star. Svetlana was not interested – she was Jewish, but she wasn't really interested in Jewishness. But she was interested in learning English. She knew she was Jewish, so she felt more comfortable going up and starting a conversation with Sallie. They didn't have a lot in common at first, but they kept up their correspondence. When Sallie went back, they met, and they became co-leaders have this endeavor to try to reach out – it became more of a women's thing because it was women who had come to their little meeting places in the village more than men to meet with women in the communities and talk about Jewish identity. She would write to me about doing this. It all sounded interesting, but I didn't really know how to plug in. Then, she, I think in 1993 or '94. Maybe it was in 1993 because the conference was '94. She called me and said, "We're going to have an international conference of Jewish women in Kyiv. I want you to organize in Boston." Well, the culmination of my own history and the fact that we had just come back – Arthur and I – from Yalta where *The Seagull* was done and been to this family who had never had a Jewish Seder and heard their stories. It was a room that was about this big. The table took up all the room with little glass crystal – how I got the food, I don't know. [inaudible], the husband – we brought Haggadahs translated into Russian. But just reading the first "*Baruch atah*" was like a kindergartener starting to learn how to read. There were just so many tears in this room. When he left, he said, send us a Torah. It was so moving. So, we had just come back. So, Sallie must have called me in May. This conference was going to involve over three-hundred women, about a hundred-fifty from the small towns and villages, who all had some kind of leadership role in their small communities and were interested in exploring leadership and Jewish identity. So women from all those communities – their travel would be fully paid for. They would come on the bus. Many of them had never been out of their villages – and women from the United States, all over the United States, some from Israel, some from England, Australia, maybe a couple from Czechoslovakia. We would all live together in one hotel, the Hotel (Tourista?) on seven floors in Kyiv for a week, and

get to know each other. So, here I was left to organize in Boston. I've already told you that I wasn't particularly Jewishly affiliated at that point. So, nobody really knew who I was in the Jewish community, in particular. Nobody knew anything about Project Kesher. So, I really was starting from scratch and often would call Sallie in tears and say, "I'm getting nowhere." I would send information. I had a phone call, and people would say, "Who? What?" She would say, "Don't start with the big organizations because most people in this country at that time, and probably even still, really felt all Jews should get out of the former Soviet Union. Our mission was not to keep them there. Our mission was to give them the information so that they could choose. They would know that they were known. If they chose to stay, there were witnesses and people who knew them and would know what was happening. Finally, I had a little committee, a fellow actress, who was in the play, and a couple of other people who were working with me. One day, one of them brought in a flier from a temple in Wayland, Temple Shir Tikva. Their Sisterhood that year was doing – it was the year of the Roots Trip. Roots was a very big thing, and they were doing a Roots subject for the year. That was their subject. They agreed to have an evening about Project Kesher. Sallie and Svetlana both came. We had four women cantors and three women rabbis talking, and one woman rabbi doing the keynote [speech]. Shula Reinharz, who was the wife of the ex-president of Brandeis – now, they had a Women's Studies Research Center – was the moderator, and over a hundred and fifty people were in that room. The first question that Svetlana asked, and her English was good at this point, was, "How many of you have roots in the former Soviet Union?" Almost everyone in the audience raised their hand. So, long story short, eight people from Boston came, which I thought was pretty successful. So, that was the beginning of how I got involved and have been involved ever since.

AK: How did [Mikhail] Gorbachev's Perestroika affect your working in the Soviet Jewry movement?

AW: Well, we were allowed to – so, that would have been – see, by 1994, [Boris] Yeltsin was already in, in '92. So, Gorbachev was out. So it most affected when we went with my father and just made it possible for us to – you had to get visas not only to Ukraine, but also to each town you wanted to go to, and there were many delays. But it just opened up the possibility of going.

GW: Do you associate any particular Jewish values, such as tzedakah or Tikkun Olam, with the work you did?

AW: Completely. [laughter] That's the point, really. It's interesting because Sallie Gratch, the founder – we've often talked about how she came to found Project Kesher because here she was in the peace movement, just as I was. She said, "You have to tackle a little piece. You can't tackle the whole world in terms of a peace movement. So, if you can find an issue that will contribute to the issue of world peace, like bringing a community of Jewish women into the fold of the wider Jewish community, that's a very big step, and to feel connected to them and know that they are connected to you in Tikkun Olam. The tzedakah was not so much in terms of bringing money or Judaica or clothes or anything like that. It was really teaching organizational skills about how to build a civil society. Part of that was teaching them to reach out to non-Jewish groups and work together in partnership, which already would cut down on antisemitism. You would bond over the common values of both groups. I can tell you more how Kesher evolved. Also, I don't know if I wrote about the Seder, the bicultural Seder in Boston. Did I say something about –?

GW: I think there's something about that.

AW: Yes. Because that's a big thing. That's what some of the pictures were. That's a big part of the story. Actually, Kesher just gave me an award in New York this April just for my work. That's how I met – Judith came to that particular event. So just a word about how the conference evolved, which will then take me to the Seder. Is that okay?

GW: Yes.

AW: The conference was primarily organized – there were some big plenary sessions. I have to tell you about the first one when the whole community came together. The symbol was lighting candles. We each brought candles. Every Kesher meeting, we would have candles. The flames would symbolically unite us. But I had to say a few words with my candle [during] the opening ceremony. I mentioned my father and the village where he came from. I was planning to go back with a friend after the conference to that village because my father had given money to someone, actually, in the Nimoy family related to Leonard Nimoy, who was from that village, to find my great grandfather's grave. He had found it, and it had been restored. I wanted to go back and see it. This woman came running up to me, (Frieda Gerber?), who was an English teacher. She said, "I live in that village. You have to come and stay with me." She didn't know that I was already planning to go, but I had no idea where I was staying, and I didn't know anybody. We went – Connie, my friend, came with me. We stayed. The two of us slept on a little couch about that big in (Frieda's) apartment. The next morning, there was a knock on the door, and about twenty people with beautiful bouquets of flowers were standing at the door, and they all came with me to the grave to say kaddish [inaudible] at my grandfather's grave, after whom I'm named because he died just before I was born. So, that was very moving. That was a big plenary session. Mostly, the conference was organized by what was called druzhina groups. You know that word?

AK: Friendship.

AW: Friendship groups that were both co-led by women from the Soviet Union and by American women but trying to work cross-culturally and get to know each other. It was all about how do you work in your community? How do you get your projects fulfilled in your community? What are the problems that you face? So, the Russian women wanted to sit in rows, and they wanted the American woman to stand up and lecture and tell

them what to do. We had a completely different idea. We wanted everyone to sit in a circle. Everyone would be talking about their projects, what were their successes, [and] look in each other's eyes. I'm always wondering how this is sitting with you, (Sasha?), because you lived there so long. But to look into a woman from the Soviet Union's eyes – when you walk in the former Soviet Union, you usually keep your eyes down, don't you? It's almost considered rude to be looking in someone's eyes and talking. You know what I'm saying. So, this was very contrary to what they knew. Who would dare trust to say that something wasn't working with a project? If you admitted some fault, and there was some problem, it was your fault – there could even be a knock at the door, and someone would send you to the Gulag, or someone would steal your idea. So, that whole week was building trust and finding ways to do that. We had group trips to Babi Yar, and we went to families' homes. I mean, we honestly became – when I looked at these women's faces, when I first saw them, they could have been my aunts or my cousins. They looked like me. They looked like my family. I could see the resemblance. At the end of the conference, what do you do? How do you keep it connected? How do you keep all these people connected? Because the best thing that happened is yes, we got to know them. They got to know us, but they got connected to each other. So they created a kind of web where they would stay in touch with each other, but how would we stay in touch? So they decided that they would have global women's Seders every Passover. This is what got me into the meaning of Passover and all the issues of the Passover service that are so rich for mining in terms of journeys, and freedom, and slavery. It's really quite a holiday when I hadn't really realized. So, each community had their Seder on a day. In Boston, in the first year or so, we had also a small Seder at a synagogue in Cambridge and a couple of women from the former Soviet Union that somebody knew came. We told the stories – this was one I wrote about that. "Among the women who attended were three or four new Americans. For me, it was the voices of these women as they describe their journeys to freedom that remain imprinted in my memory. One woman spoke a sentence," and I'm reading now, "I will never forget.

She said, 'When, as an adult, you have to conduct your life in a language that is not your own, you feel that you can never catch up.' This sentence has haunted me. Here were women, not in the former Soviet Union, but right here, who were struggling to be part of the community." That was that Seder. I'll skip over that for a minute. But then, I was taking Russian, and there was a woman in my Russian class who was working with some of the women who had recently immigrated from the former Soviet Union. I was trying to get her interested in Project Kesher. One day, she said to me, "Andrea, the women that I work with are wondering why you're going all over there to help people when we can use some help here. At first, I felt a little irritated. "Why does it have to be one or the other?" Then, all of a sudden, I thought, "This is a handout stretched." I remember my father's stories of how painful it was to be ten and be put in the first grade for a little while until he learned, and then he would finally catch up, and how lonely he felt, and a special friend who helped him. But it was hard. I thought, "Okay, maybe we couldn't always help the people over there during the war, but here are people right here that are hungering for connection. So, I said to Josie, who said these women feel irritated – no. I guess she said, "Let's have a Seder. Let's have a bicultural Seder." So for nine years, we had a co-led bicultural Seder mostly at Brandeis Women's Faculty Club because Shula Reinharz was so in love with this idea that she let us have the faculty club, and she helped us organize it. It was completely planned and led by the ideas of the themes by women from this country, and what we called new Americans; they're not new Americans anymore. So, I just brought some pictures of just some of the happy faces of people. There were art projects. Just to show you a difference between this – this was the original Project Kesher Haggadah, which was in English and in Hebrew, and it was a women's Seder. This was one that one of the women, one of the Russian women, created. This is in three languages. It's in Russian, Hebrew, and English. This is the one that was used. When Shula Reinharz went around the room at the beginning of each Seder and would say – well, probably mostly in the beginning – said, "How many women have never held a Haggadah or seen a Haggadah?" Almost every woman from

the former Soviet Union raised their hand. It was the first time they had held a Haggadah. This was just a very meaningful event in terms of really connecting with these women, where there was a joint planning committee. Even though the Seders have now stopped, just this spring, we had a little reunion before Passover at somebody's house, where those of us – American and new American – got together and just celebrated. It just has been – all these papers in here are news clips from every Seder that went on. There's the fifth, the sixth. They're all written up in the Jewish papers. There was one that I held out because it was – oh, this one was so powerful, from the *Boston Herald*. This was the mother of one of the women, and it says, "A Long Journey: Women Seders Help Russian Immigrants Reconnect with their Jewish Roots." This is the mother of someone who finally had a Passover written up in the *Boston [Herald*]. It got a lot of publicity, and it was well-known – almost two-hundred people would come; it started with forty. So, this was something that I feel very proud of being a part of helping to organize. Even today, we were just talking about taking one of our friends to go to see the [Auguste] Rodin exhibit in Salem. Anyway, that's the part of the Seder, which has been just – a lot of artists created – you said you were interested in art. There's one picture. The final Seder was dedicated to Israel. This woman, Olga Shmuylovich, is an artist. She created a menorah with everybody's name made out of bricks. The menorah stays here, but the scroll with all the messages that people wrote – and [inaudible] as you know, means peace. Here it is lit – was sent to Israel with all the messages. She's an artist now in Fort Point Channel. She's done some wonderful work, but she just talks about how, by writing your name on the scroll with a message, or even the fact that you write your name is like you take somebody into you – you're giving them a part of yourself just by putting the letters down on a piece of brick. What I forgot to say was that at each Seder, because we all have them on the same day – this is like the most important part. How could I forget it? We would call someone in the former Soviet Union who was having a Seder at the time. These were lists of all the Seders that would take place in Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, Belarus, the name and phone number of the

house where it was at. We would just wish them a happy Passover. This went on for nine years that this happened. It was very exciting for the women who came to our Seders, who were from some of the communities. They all had these lists, where the Seders were taking place for them to know that we were thinking of them. That was these lists.

AK: Do you notice any consequences now caused by the discrimination of Jews in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe? If so, how does antisemitism present itself in the current day in Eastern Europe?

AW: I have some information about that. It's there. I think the fact that Jewish communities, in general, tend to try to make all their communities better, the whole community better, and work with other people – and certainly one of the things that Kesher does helps with that. I think the fact that there are so many connections between people in this country and Jews in the former Soviet Union now that things can't happen so silently without media and social media and all of that. There are witnesses, so it's more obvious. I think it's pretty much still there. Interestingly enough, with the situation in Ukraine, some people are wanting to go with Russia, and some people wanting to go with the West. The women connected with Project Kesher also have those conflicts because there were some in both groups, and it caused some trouble, some conversations, and hostility. But they always came back to Jewish values. That was sort of the glue that kept them together – the importance of ethical behavior, respecting differences. So they were able to stay united even though they thought differently, which is something you have to do with every single person you connect with anyway. [laughter]

GW: What do you wish people would understand about the Soviet Jewry Movement that isn't clear in history books?

AW: I don't think I'm familiar enough with history books to really say what's clear and not clear. I just think it's such a complicated country – or countries with such a complicated history, and not very much experience with democracy and a sense of needing a benign leader but someone with power because I think it's not in the tradition to spread that power around. Also, I think this is in history books – the tremendous suffering that has taken place in Russia – starvation in Leningrad and wars and weather. I don't know. It takes more learning, I think and more listening. I would say listening is a huge factor in trying to understand anything anybody, is to really keep your ears open to where the person actually is and start there. It sort of reminds me a little bit – I said a little something about music. One of the ways that we did more easily connect with a woman from the former Soviet Union is through music and song. We often sang together, and they sang. I think just music is such a connector, such a way to be able to lift your voice and hear the many different voices. Singing together is very powerful. Somebody once said – I think it was Leopold Stokowski – said something about music washes the dust off of everyday life and the human soul. That's played a big factor in our lives and in the work that I've been involved in. Right now, I'm on the board of – and there's an organization called North End Music and Performing Arts Center, which brings music and performing arts to families in the North End, which has been – we've only lived here for four years, and I've never really been that involved in my community where I lived because I was always working. For five years, I was a trustee at Simmons College. That was a lot of work. So, I had a little window, and it's just been a way to get to know this very interesting neighborhood. I can recommend a movie to both of you if you haven't already seen it on the subject. I think it's *The Music [of] Strangers* and is a documentary about Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road [Ensemble]. I think it's playing at the Coolidge [Corner] Theatre and maybe at the Kendall [Square] Cinema and maybe in West Newton. It's a wonderful story and has to do a lot with creating a peaceful world through music.

AK: What compelled you to continue working or being involved in the Jewish community, in Jewish organizations to this day, even though the Soviet Jewry Movement seems as

though it was in the past and it had a concrete end? I'm not sure if I'm making sense.

AW: What was the [inaudible]?

AK: What compels you to keep working in the Jewish community and in Jewish organizations?

AW: Well, I can answer that. But I'm just curious about – what is seen as the concrete end of the Soviet Jewry Movement?

AK: What I meant was that it was in the past. It's not talked about presently.

AW: In the wider community?

AK: Yes.

AW: Maybe because the immigration waves have stopped so much, but life goes on there. Was this question specifically about the Soviet Jewry movement, or what compels me to work?

AK: It's a broad question. What compels you to keep working in the Jewish community?

AW: In the Jewish community, right? Because I am involved with this Miriam Fund. I guess that's the only other – and the (Micro Enterprise?). Well, there's so much to be done. I think a couple of things – and I can say more specifically about Project Kesher because Kesher really addresses, I think, every relevant issue to women today. Those issues are ongoing, like trafficking, like domestic violence, like women's health, like birth control, like political leadership. So those are all very interesting issues to me and economic empowerment with (Micro Enterprise?) – just ways to help women stay on their feet and get on their feet healthily. The other thing, which is as big a factor, are the connections that I have made with women, both of the former Soviet Union – both there and here – and American women who I work with, who share values. For me, it has to

have a lot of fun in it, or I lose interest. I have to lay the people, and I have to be stimulated, and it has to be fun, or I find I burn out or peter around without that. So, all of that is in place. It's very enriching to my life. My husband is very involved in similar kinds of issues. So, we join in that together. That's also fun, as well.

GW: I think that's it. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

AW: [laughter] Well, I'm trying to imagine what you're taking from all of this, both of you. You were saying you're Catholic, and I'm wondering how this conversation is affecting you?

GW: Actually, at Binghamton, we have a Jewish sorority, and I'm in that.

AW: How do you explain that? [laughter]

GW: Well, they obviously can't say, "You're Catholic. You can't be in this."

AW: Right. What attracted you to that sorority?

GW: I just liked the people in it. It's technically Jewish interest, but we have to go to Shabbat dinner together and things like that. That's been an interesting experience. I have my own complicated relationship with Catholicism. I've always been interested in women's issues and religion as a lens to that. So, this conversation has definitely given me things to reflect on.

AW: That's interesting. I think one of the things that I like about the Jewish religion is that questions are important. Dialogue is important. It encourages you to question and to have a dialogue. You don't always get the answers you want, but still. So, I think that's a big factor. So, you're exploring, as well?

GW: Yeah.

AW: That makes sense. Sasha, you came so recently. Did you have language problems?

AK: I came when I was three years old. But my parents didn't speak English with me because they didn't know English. I think I learned English in first grade. I was an ESL [English as a Second Language] for a little while, but I got the hang of it, obviously.

AW: So your parents lived in –? Where were you from?

AK: Transnistria in Moldova.

AW: Moldova, right.

AK: But it's a separate region.

AW: I see.

AK: It's kind of what's happening in Ukraine. The smaller region that I'm from wanted independence from Moldova because when the Soviet Union fell, Moldova wanted to take over and make everyone speak Romanian because that was the official language. The region that I'm from, there was a war after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They wanted to separate with Russia. They consider themselves a country, but nobody else does, except Russia. It's a whole complicated situation.

AW: That's why your parents left?

AK: Partly. It's the poorest country in Europe. It was just a really bad economic situation.

AW: How has it been for your family – I mean, you have basically grown up here – just coming into a new country?

AK: Well, I spoke to my mom about it. She said it was very difficult, obviously. They were on welfare for a while, but they got on their feet. We live in a neighborhood that's predominantly Russian, Russian Jewish, actually.

AW: In Brookline?

AK: No, in New York.

AW: You're from New York. You came to New York. You live in Brookline now.

AK: Yes, for the summer.

AW: For the summer. That's right.

AK: It's definitely confusing because we don't really celebrate any holidays, any religious holidays at all, because they never had a religion because they weren't allowed to, not even just Judaism, just any religion.

AW: Any, yes.

AK: Here, my mom goes to the JCC [Jewish Community Center], but she also goes to church on Easter. She tries to go to synagogues. She does a lot of both just to figure out her identity, I guess.

AW: Yes. The world has become a very complicated place. In some ways, it's nice that there are options. On the other hand, you can sometimes feel a little lost.

AK: She says that's what she likes about America, that nobody will tell you that you can't do that. She's just figuring it out herself.

AW: I was just thinking about your experience with the Sabbath and your enjoyment of that. It's a wonderful holiday. I think to say stop and separate the sacred from the profane kind of thing and just take a breath. Every time I'm someplace where we do that,

I think, why don't we do it more often? Then we don't. But I just think it's a gorgeous concept and well-rooted in the Bible. How do you think it went?

GW: This is really great.

AW: Yeah? Have you done a lot of these?

GW: A few.

AW: Well, you did a good job. Good listening.

AK: Thank you.

AW: Very good listening.

GW: Thank you.

AK: Thank you so much.

AW: You're welcome.

AK: This was very helpful.

AW: You're welcome. I'm so glad to meet you both.

[END OF INTERVIEW]