Judith Kates Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: Today is October 20, 2005. Judith Rosenbaum and Jayne Guberman are with Judith Kates in her home in Brookline, Massachusetts, to do a practice interview. What do we want to call this?

Jayne Guberman: Pilot interview.

JR: A pilot interview for the Jewish Women Changing America: Barnard Conference Oral History Project.

JG: So, Judy, we've told you a little bit about how this is going to work. I'll just give you a real quick overview of how we're envisioning the next half hour, which is that we want to take a few minutes, five to ten minutes or so, to just talk about some brief background questions, so we know who you are, which is interesting since we do know you. But I think we're going to learn some new things too. And then, we'll take another twenty minutes or so for you to tell some of these stories that you've indicated on your pre-interview questionnaire. And then, we'll take another five minutes at the end to just wrap up and reflect on some questions. Can you just start out by telling us when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Judith Kates: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 5, 1941. I grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia.

JG: Which one?

JK: Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, just over the city line from North Philadelphia. I went to public schools all the way through.

JG: Can you tell us about your family? What was your family like?

JK: Actually, my father was born in Europe. They were sort of older parents. My mother was thirty-nine when I was born.

JR: Do you have siblings?

JK: I had, growing up, two siblings. I'm the middle child. I have two brothers. That was definitely a significant piece of our family constellation.

JG: How do you see that?

JK: As the only girl? Well, my father, I think, had sweet feelings for me as his girl, his *ein und eintaike;* he used to call me “the one and only” in Yiddish. But mostly, what I remember is that there were all kinds of things that were permitted for the boys that weren't permitted for me.

JR: Can you give us an example?

JK: Well, they were allowed to – as we started to grow up, they were allowed to go out and about without telling anybody where they were. I had to always account for myself. I had more rules about what I was permitted to do in terms of going places or staying out. I was expected to help out in the kitchen while my brothers were lolling about and waiting for dinner to be served. My father really enforced that. My mother was a big participant in that also. She used to feel that it wasn't fair that she was doing all the work in the kitchen; she wanted help. Nobody ever questioned if my mother needed help; I was the one who was supposed to help.

JG: Did you, as a child?

JK: Well, I remember being resentful and feeling it wasn't fair that my father – we would be having a conversation about some interesting subject, and my father would say, "Oh, you've got to go help your mother." So there was that sense of being sort of exiled from

where the exciting things were happening. We belonged to an Orthodox synagogue. So I sat in the *Ezrat Nashim* with my mother. For a long time – at least my memory of this is, already – before I was a teenager even, [I] felt the exclusion of it and being distant from where the action was. Since I was the really good Hebrew student and the one who seemed to be more involved, in fact, with Jewish studies than my brothers, it really rankled [me] to the point that when my younger brother, who really had to be dragged, kicking and screaming to his bar mitzvah training and his bar mitzvah [and] had this bar mitzvah with the whole shebang, I really made a fuss. My parents talked to the rabbi. My younger brother was about a year and a half younger than I was, so I wasn't that much past the age. My parents apparently took this seriously enough to talk to the rabbi, and he, in this Orthodox synagogue, of course, was not going to do anything that was not kosher, according to him. But he did say that there was something available called consecration. *Chas v'shalom* [God forbid], not confirmation like Reform Jews, but consecration – and there was one other girl my age. So when we were sixteen, we had a period of studying with the rabbi. The rabbi's idea of proper preparation for sixteen-year-old girls was that we should study biblical grammar from his grammar book that he had from Oxford University, where he had gone to college. So we studied with him biblical grammar, and then he created a little ceremony for us where we read some psalms and said some pious things that he had written for us.

JG: At a service?

JK: It was a Sunday afternoon. But we were on the main floor of the synagogue. We actually stood on the bimah to read our psalms. So this was a big deal.

JR: Did this happen again, or was this a one-time thing?

JK: Well, I don't think it happened at least as long as – I mean, I went away to college the next year. So I don't know. I don't have any sense of it as becoming a big part of the synagogue, but it actually made a big difference to me. I invited my teachers, and I took

it seriously.

JG: Did you feel like you had your parents' support in doing this?

JK: My sense was that it happened because my parents took seriously my upsetment at not having any kind of life cycle marker of coming of age as a Jewish person. I think that I experienced it as some recognition of the fact that I was a good Hebrew student and I had gone farther than anybody else in my family. I mean, my brothers stopped at bar mitzvah, and I kept going. I went to the high school part of Gratz College for a couple of years. So, yes, I think I did experience that as some kind of affirmation. But I also very much felt it to be a kind of second-class thing. It was clear that it was cobbled together, and Sunday afternoon – I had an awareness of that even at the time. I'm trying not to infuse my experience as a sixteen-year-old with what I now think about it, which is obviously very much influenced by my articulation of what it meant to be a Jewish girl in the ’50s. I had both an awareness of it as a second-best, and at the same time, I really wanted it, and it felt like some kind of affirmation.

JG: Do you think your mother –? Did you share any feelings around second-class citizenship for women with your mother?

JK: It was never articulated out loud. I think of my mother as a closet feminist. I always thought of her in that way.

JG: How so?

JK: Well, when my parents got married in 1928, they didn't have children until 1937. In between, they left New York. My father got a job in Philadelphia at Gimbels in 1930. This was a big deal to have a job. He paid for her to go to the University of Pennsylvania. She had come from an immigrant family where there was no money for college education, except for the oldest son. She was tremendously invested in education, and she really had a passion for it. The fact that instead of having children

right away, she went to college – she got a Master's degree even.

JG: What did she study?

JK: French, Romance languages. She even had some courses toward a Ph.D. before my brother was born. She never put it in these terms, but I said this actually in the eulogy that I spoke at her funeral – to me, I'm sure that there were real feminist issues there, that she wanted the education, and that my father, at least for a certain amount of time, was ready to support her in it.

JG: Do you feel like she and he really supported you in your educational aspirations? What did you think, as you were graduating high school and going off to college, that you were going to do?

JK: There was a sense that this was absolutely to be expected, that you would be a super student, that you would go as far as you possibly could. It was just as much expected of me as it was of my brothers. But the idea that I was then going to do something in the world with all this education was never discussed. But when I did want to go to graduate school and train for some kind of profession, there was a sense that I was pushing things beyond what was normal. But my family was not a family where things were discussed openly. So I'm talking about the murmurs and the mumbles and what got enthusiastic responses and what didn't get enthusiastic responses, and I'm translating that.

JG: How old were you when you met Bill and then married him?

JK: I was a junior in college. We got married at the end of – when I had just finished my junior year in college. I was just three weeks past my twentieth birthday when we got married.

JR: Wow.

JK: Yeah. I know, nobody does this anymore.

JG: What do you think, as you look back on it, your expectations and his were, at that point, about what you were going to do with your life and how roles would be allocated in your marriage?

JK: Well, we seem to have agreed between us that I was going to work out in the world and have professional training and do something professionally. It was a little bit tricky because we had no money. My original plan was I was going to become a high school French teacher.

JG: I didn't know that.

JK: Right. I actually enrolled in the Harvard School of Education in a program that existed at the time – I don't think it exists anymore – where you would, in one year, get a master's degree in a subject and a teaching certificate and do practice teaching. It involved starting [with] teaching in a high school setting in the summer before you had done anything.

JG: Sounds extremely intense.

JK: It was very intense. And actually, during that summer, I realized that this was a terrible mistake. Being a language teacher was not what I was going to be able to be at all happy doing. Bill was totally supportive of me, although the plan was that I was going to do this, and after a year, I would be earning money as a teacher in the public schools, which would be a big help. He was still in medical school. He said, “Not going to continue. Let's think about what else you might want to do." I went to talk to some of my teachers, undergraduate teachers, about enrolling in the Ph.D. program, and they accepted me sort of late and last minute. It was very complicated because it was too late to apply for scholarships, but we worked it out. Bill definitely was tremendously important for me in being able to make that kind of decision. It was all about not being good

enough. Like so many women – these are women's stories. I was always sure that I was going to fail, that my work was not even good, let alone excellent. But then I graduated from college summa cum laude, and that persuaded me that I was capable of actually going for a Ph.D. So at that point, I took that in my metaphorical hand and went to some of the professors who had given me those honors and asked them about admitting me to the Ph.D. program. It was a lot of struggle, inner struggle, about being ready to feel competent. I subsequently have had these conversations with many, many women. And unfortunately, it's not only my generation. I hear from –

JR: No, I was about to say this is absolutely alive and well.

JK: Still alive and well. "I'm a fraud." "I may have gotten straight A's year after year, but the next time they're going to find out."

JR: Yep. What was your official discovery of the women's movement?

JK: It was sometime in the mid-'60s, I think. I can't remember which came first, whether there were some conversations with people, fellow graduate students, and people that I knew who were in the same situation as I, or from reading things like Betty Friedan and magazine articles and what have you. I'm not sure which was first, whether I started looking for the books because other people talked about them or whether somehow I read the books and started talking about these things with other people. But these things were floating around a lot – "Women's libbers." I remember going to a dinner party and making some comments, and some guy saying, "Are you one of those 'women's libbers?'" Total contempt. You can't imagine how much hostility there was floating around in the mid to late '60s about this. I remember having a conversation at some exercise class that I was in with some of the other women, and one woman saying to me, "Women aren't oppressed. The people who are oppressed are young men being drafted into the army." This must've been '67, '68. Something like that.

JG: Vietnam was very present in people's minds.

JK: Yeah. Actually, it must've been ’69 because between ’67 and ’69, we were away. I remember this happening in Lexington. When we moved back here, we moved to Lexington. So, here's my assumption that other women were going to be sympathetic. I was constantly running into a lot of shocks that other women were not sympathetic. I mean, my neighbors in this little suburban neighborhood that I lived in were mostly hostile because I had got a babysitter, and I was working on my Ph.D. dissertation. Then I got a job and was teaching, and I had a lot of hostile comments from the other mothers.

JG: What was sustaining you through that, do you think?

JK: I just have to say that at the same time as this was going on, they were sending their kids to play with my kids while the babysitter was there so they could go shopping.

JR: Right.

JG: Right.

JK: But what was sustaining me? I really had a passion for the work. I really wanted to do it. I loved it. And I think I also – I have to say this honestly: I really did not want to become my mother. I felt that my mother was a very frustrated and angry person whose talents and abilities were stunted. And when I was a teenager, she made me aware of how frustrated and somehow unappreciated she felt. She went through her own transformations later in life and found her ways of making peace with it, which were a little bit painful for me to see. So there was the positive piece of really wanting to be a professor of literature. I loved teaching, and I found myself – although it's always made me anxious, I've been good at it. So I cared about it a lot, but also, I think that there was a lot of a sense of not wanting to turn into such a frustrated and stunted person as I felt my mother to be. It was very harmful to her relationship with her children, and I think to her relationship[s] all around. I felt that very strongly.

JG: The pain there.

JK: Yeah.

JG: Judy, you said in your pre-interview questionnaire that your awareness of feminist language for experiences of discrimination and exclusion became really important for you. When was that happening? Can you describe what was going on then?

JK: What I'm thinking about is that when we came back from – when Bill was in the army – '69 – I got involved with a group of women who, some of whom had been in my class at Radcliffe and others who were sort of the same ilk. And this was the founding [of] the Boston chapter of NOW [National Organization for Women]. The first project that we decided we were going to take on was Harvard.

JR: Might as well.

JK: Well, the reality is that – I think it was 1970 – the Department of Health, Education, and Labor – is that what it was called? HEW? Health, Education, and Welfare, right?

JG: Welfare.

JK: [HEW] had a policy that universities which received federal money were going to be required to adhere to certain affirmative action guidelines. Harvard had, at that point, zero tenured women on the faculty of Arts and Sciences.

JG: Amazing.

JK: There was a suit. I'm not exactly sure now about what the details were, but there was a suit against Harvard with HEW. Within a year, they had appointed six women as tenured faculty members. So that's an increase of six hundred percent, some of whom had been lecturers for years and suddenly were qualified to be full professors, and others they brought on to the [faculty].

JG: I remember that action.

JK: I remember us going to a meeting with a Harvard dean, John Dunlop, and having – as alumnae, I guess. We were presenting ourselves as alumnae. But we had had all these discussions in our NOW chapter meetings about what we were going to do and with whom we needed to speak, and what the issue – should it be faculty? Should it be about student life, etc.? The people who weren't Harvard alumnae who were in this group, I think, got annoyed that we had decided that this is what our focus was going to be. But for us who were alumnae, it was a way of all of a sudden understanding something about what had been wrong with our own education. So my quintessential story, which I really didn't formulate until that point, was actually from my freshman year. I was taking one of those big lecture courses where you had section meetings, and you were supposed to do certain kinds of reading for your section meeting. I was a freshman, so I thought, "There's class tomorrow, and I have to do the reading." I learned afterward. I went to the Radcliffe library, and it was a huge lecture course [with] hundreds of people in the class. There were maybe two copies of the reading in the Radcliffe library. But of course, Lamont, which was the men's library, had zillions of copies. I was in this big panic. I had to do this reading, but women weren't allowed into Lamont. I mean, we weren't allowed in the building. So the experience was that my roommate's boyfriend went into Lamont. I stood outside. The library has these huge, enormous plate glass windows. I was literally there with my nose pressed against the glass, watching him go to get the reading for me to do and bring it out to me so that I could prepare for my class. This is in '69 when we started talking about discrimination and exclusions. All of a sudden, I had a language to understand what that was, and it became an epitome of all the exclusion and real discrimination that existed in my education. I mean, everything about our education was really second-class in comparison to the men. I knew it, at some level, but I never had a language for it. I came back to finish my graduate work and was going around asking my professors for recommendations to have in a portfolio so I could apply for jobs. My most beloved

professor, whom I felt I had most learned from and who I always felt was very supportive of women, seemed to respect his women's students – when we were teaching fellows in his course, he would say, "Well, you're writing your dissertation on Milton. Why don't you create the lesson for when we're doing Milton in this introductory literature course," or whatever. He treated us with much more respect than most professors treated their graduate student assistants. I learned in the late '60s to think of him, therefore, as a friend of women. When I went to ask him for a recommendation, he said, "Oh, of course, I'll write your recommendation; I think highly of you. But you don't really need a job. You're not a man with a family." That's one of those light bulb moments that people used to talk about in the beginning of the women's movement. It was devastating on the one hand. On the other hand, it really made me aware of how pervasive all these assumptions were that we just had to talk about.

JG: Would you say that the NOW chapter you were involved in had some qualities of a CR group, a consciousness-raising group?

JK: I think a little bit. We did spend a certain amount of time talking about the kinds of experiences that I just described and other things that were even more horrendous, [such as] section men that expected you to go to bed with them and stuff like that. But it wasn't as personal as real consciousness-raising groups, right? That's sort of typical Radcliffe; we were sort of focused on –

JR: Very heady?

JK: Yeah, very heady.

JG: Interesting.

JR: So you also talked about your experience as a gabbai, and I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about your path towards your involvement as a Jewish feminist and what some of those experiences were.

JK: So, the ’70s for me was mostly the feminist piece, and I got very involved in women's studies. I taught the first-ever course on women writers at Harvard. The chair of my department – by this time, I'm an assistant professor. Whole long story, which I won't take up time –

JG: If we were doing the full interview, that's what we'd do.

JK: Right. Well, he said, "Oh, well, why don't you teach about images of women in literature? You can do *Madame Bovary*." I said, "No, no, you don't understand. This is about distinctive writing by women." Luckily, they were authors that he considered to be significant, like Jane Austen and George Eliot, but otherwise, who knows what kind of a fight I would have had? Anyway, he let me do it. That was a wonderful experience. But also, there was this sudden outpouring from all kinds of women's scholarship, starting in the early/mid-’70s. But for me, it was really focused on literature, literary studies. But in the late ’70s, I, for family and personal reasons, ended up in an independent, egalitarian minyan, which was part of the Hillel at Harvard. I had not [had] anything to do with organized Jewish life for quite a long time. I was able to formulate my sense of disaffection, also in the late ’60s and early ’70s, in feminist language, recalling sitting in the *Ezrat Nashim*, and how far away I was from the Torah and that sense of all my interest and ability being ignored and dismissed as irrelevant. I had never really formulated it or articulated it until that period in the late ‘60s, when lots of people were beginning to talk about their growing up and their education in those terms. I did put that language to my own growing up as a young Jewish woman. It was really, however, not because of my own needs. I was driven by the need to find a way of educating my children. I had originally planned to educate them myself. I'll do it and arrange a private bar mitzvah, except that our older son, who is a very complicated and difficult person and always has been, was not about to be taught by his mother. So I needed to find someplace. I did find this – the Worship and Study congregation is what it came to be called. At that point, I think your mother probably actually can tell stories about how that

happened because I think she was involved in it when Rabbi [Ben-Zion] Gold was pushed into an egalitarian position.

JR: She hasn't told me that story, but I will ask her.

JK: I think, I think she was involved. I may be wrong, but I have some memory of her talking about that. His version of it is that he came to this great insight. But my sense of it is that, in fact, various women –

JG: Helped him [inaudible].

JK: By the time I came along, it was egalitarian. I experienced that as incredibly liberating, and it roused up this dormant need that had been sitting really sort of below the level of my awareness. The only way I was aware of it was that I just felt it was absolutely essential to find a way to educate the kids. We were not particularly observant at that point. I had my own eccentric things that I was doing about my Judaism, but it was really not – there was no big personal push, at least that I was aware of. But as soon as I discovered this setting, all of a sudden, I was just tremendously excited and involved. Lo and behold – I have to give Rabbi Gold great credit for this. He used to go around when new people would come into the group, and he'd sit next to you, and he'd discover whether or not you could read Hebrew, whether you knew the service. So he discovered this and started asking me to lead services. Terror. I mean absolute terror. The first time I was ever invited to have an Aliyah L'Torah, I was sure that my father was going to rise up – my father was dead at this point – that he was going to rise up and forbid it. It's completely actually not fair to my father because I think he probably would have liked it. But it was the projected – the Lacanian father that really was just so vivid. Meanwhile, when I did these things, I found it incredibly, incredibly moving and important to me. It was very hard to articulate why it seemed so important, but I was ready to spend all kinds of time learning how to chant this and that or learning how to do – I never knew any of these things - haftarah, Torah, any of it. I spent a tremendous amount of

time on it. In fact, gradually, I was starting to feel as though that's really where I wanted to go. It was really Jewish texts I wanted to study. That's what led me to what I'm doing now. But after I'd been involved in this congregation for a year or so –

JG: When was this?

JK: This is the late ’70s. I was going on a regular basis because my older son was going to be bar mitzvah. At the end of a year or so, they invited me to be the gabbai. I cannot tell you what kind of affirmation that felt like to me. It felt more important than getting a Ph.D. It was as though some whole universe that was really crucial to me was--now suddenly welcomed me in. I really wanted to be in. So okay, I said, “Yes.” It meant learning all kinds of things that I had absolutely no experience with, overcoming a lot of performance anxiety.

JG: How did you learn, though? Who taught you?

JK: The previous gabbai was Bob Goldfarb. There was a woman involved in the congregation at the time whose name was Jane Myers.

JR: I think I know her.

JK: She’s lived in Providence for quite a few years now.

JR: Yeah, I think she lived in New Haven for a little while before that.

JK: That's very possible. Yeah.

JR: She has a very beautiful voice.

JK: Beautiful voice. Actually, she's a composer.

JG: Wonderful composer.

JK: She was very important in that congregation at the time, and she was teaching a lot of kids. She taught my kids for a while. She taught me a lot. I mean, a lot of the skills that I have, I learned directly from her. But, that sort of standing up there and doing it and being the authority, I was filled with trepidation, but I really wanted to do it. The climax of it was these high holiday services, which the congregation organizes, which at that time had as many as fifteen hundred people coming for Kol Nidre, or a thousand there all the time during Rosh Hashanah. It meant that I was standing up there, calling people to the Torah, doing things, organizing, visibly being in charge, and in front of all those people. Most people had never seen a woman doing those things before. So people would stop me in the street, especially women would stop me in the street and say, "This is so wonderful. I'm so impressed. It's so important to me to see a woman up there doing these things." It was incredibly – it became a kind of life mission. Men, especially older men, would stop me and say, "Where did you learn? Where'd you learn to do that? How can a girl learn how to do that?" But even that had a kind of excitement and vitality to it, as though I had an opportunity to really do something crucial for the Jewish people. So that's the story that I had in mind.

JG: That's a wonderful story, really moving. It's interesting, having watched you all these years, even back to then, I'm sure, but not really understanding how important and moving this whole thing was for you at the time. Judy, since this is a short interview, we want to just spend the last little piece of it giving you an opportunity to just reflect a little bit about your feelings as a woman, as a feminist. Do you consider yourself a feminist in the use of the word? Does that feel like a label that you connect with, an identity that you connect with?

JK: Yeah, absolutely.

JG: Has it changed, would you say, over time, how you feel about it?

JR: Or what it means to you?

JK: Well, I think that I was very much an equality feminist when I started out. It was extremely important to me to find ways to have doors open that had been closed because of gender. To demonstrate, but also not to have to demonstrate, to try to push people to give opportunities to women that would be the same as the opportunities that were available for men. I still am an equality feminist in many ways, but I think that over the years, as all kinds of feminist writing and thinking has developed over these decades, I've learned a lot from difference feminists. I think that there are very important ways in which I've been very influenced more by difference feminism. I'm very leery about the kind of essentialist language that has floated around and that I hear floating around all the time. Actually, I hear essentialist language all over the place from people that I consider to be unreconstructed sexists, as well as from, sometimes, quite radical women. But still, I think that the idea of – Carol Gilligan's idea of a different voice has come to be quite important to me, meaningful to me. I'm less optimistic than I used to be. Because in the ’70s, I, along with lots of people like me, thought that we were going to help to make work different, not just for women, [but] for all of us. Women being involved in the workplace was going to, at least – I think really I was thinking about professional life. I have to acknowledge that I'm very limited in terms of my experience in terms of class. But in professional life, women's involvement was going to change things. Instead, what's happened is that women have become now burdened by the expectations of what seems to me to be an inhumane and anti-family system of work and professional life in this country. It’s hard to imagine that changing. It feels as though younger women often just accept that and don't feel as though there's any point in trying to fight about it.

JG: So, final thoughts. Anything? I know Tom and Kathy just got married. Hopefully, there'll be some more generations coming soon.

JK: Right. Well, in the Jewish world, though, I feel much more upbeat. I think that feminism has been the great revitalizing force, certainly in American Judaism. In fact, it's

had a big effect in Israel as well, but certainly in American Judaism. Yes, the havurah movement has been very important. But in terms of the real energy that has made a difference in Jewish life generally, I think it's really been Jewish feminism. Everyone talks about the renaissance in Jewish learning. The people who are doing all the learning are women. All these programs of adult learning, which I've been very involved with, are populated by women, and they're impetuses because women are eager. They're the ones who have this tremendous sense of hunger and excitement about it. It spilled over to men, no question about it, but I really attribute the driving force of it and the energy of it to women. Many of them probably don't consider themselves to be feminists, but I think it's Jewish feminism that really provided the catalyst and the spark for all of this. So, there, I feel very positive about the impact of feminism. I think we've made a big difference to the Jewish community.

JR: Well, thank you. This was wonderful.

JG: Judy, thank you so much. This was really, really wonderful

[END OF INTERVIEW]