Judith Chalmer Transcript

Sandy Gartner: This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum, meeting with Judith Chalmer to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is November 3, 2005. We are at Judith's office in [Winooski], Vermont. Judith, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

Judith Chalmer: Yes, you do.

SG: Okay, thank you. We have put together some questions from the questionnaire that you sent in. If there's any direction you want to go from where I'm starting to go, just take it there. Okay?

JC: Okay.

SG: These are some basic things that we're going to use and follow. But obviously, if there's somewhere else you want to go, that's fine.

JC: Okay, that's great.

SG: What brought your family to the United States? When and where did they come from?

JC: Well, my mother's family came in this great wave of Eastern European immigration at the turn of the 20th century from someplace near Kyiv. They spoke about it so little that we don't know the name of the town; just it was someplace near Kyiv. They also called it Russia. They didn't call Ukraine, although I understand Ukraine didn't actually incorporate until later anyway. They came because my mother's older brother, who was twenty years older than she – so she wasn't born when they moved; he was born here. But her brother had reached the age that made him subject to the draft for twenty years

in the Czar's army. So that's a really common reason for people to have moved. Then my mother was born here. Her parents never learned English, and she had a truly heroic life. She came of age in the Village in the 1920s.

SG: Greenwich Village?

JC: Yes. Very independent. Moved out. She was put into foster care. Her mother died when my mother was nine. What my mother was told was that she went for an operation, a routine operation on women's parts, and she died. In my contemporary consciousness, I've always wondered if that was an abortion. But it might not have been. It might have been something more routine, and just conditions were such that people might have died more commonly. My mother's father was even older and decided he couldn't do it. He couldn't be a father. He told her, "I'm just too old." So he put her into foster care. But in those days, they weren't really separated. They went into foster care together.

SG: How many were in her family?

JC: Just she and her brother. So when she was sixteen, she moved out, got an apartment, and took care of him until he died. Got him through at least one suicide attempt.

SG: Is this your brother?

JC: No, this is my mother's father.

SG: Oh, your mother's father. I'm sorry.

JC: Yes. [She] married somebody named Leonard Cohn – no relation to the later Leonard Cohen, the songwriter – who came from a family that was lawyers to the Pullman Corporation. She went on sort of fabulous European tours. They lived this wild

life in the Village. She called what they did wife swapping. She was just really, really a free spirit. But decided after a while that she was going to get a divorce. At that time, what she told me – what I remember her telling me – was this: "I would have gotten more support for suicide than divorce at that time." I remember lying in my bed being so proud of her because she lived. So proud of her that she chose divorce. Later, she got herself a social work degree and fell in love with my father, which now takes us to the part of the story of how his family got here. They were German Jews. They were all in Germany at the time of the Reich. Some left early, were in France, then came here. Some were in hiding – a very similar story to the Anne Frank story, except that they lived. By the time my [grand]mother was caught and put in that same concentration camp that Anne Frank was taken – before she went to Auschwitz. By the time my grandmother was there, the entire railroad system in the Netherlands had gone on strike. They were no longer shipping people to the East. So she survived that war after having been betrayed out of hiding in Westerbork concentration camp. Meanwhile, my father and one brother stayed in Germany and were taken to Dachau with the first wave – the day after Kristallnacht. It only lasted a very brief period. So there are very few people that have this tale to tell. There was a brief period where the Reich's goal was not extermination yet; it wasn't the final solution. It was to make Germany judenrein, free of Jews. So if you could get somebody in another country to vouch for your emigration out of Germany, you could leave; you could walk. The story I was told, coming from my family, was he got out on the last train out of Dachau that allowed people to do that. He had a cousin here who said, "I'll vouch for you, but don't you show up on my doorstep." So he came over, reeducated himself – he had received a law degree in Germany but hadn't been allowed to practice because of the Nuremberg laws – and decided that was it for him in law; he'd seen what the law could do. So he became trained as a social worker [and] enlisted in the United States Army because you could get naturalized as a citizen. He could speak German, so you know where they sent him. Right back.

SG: Really?

JC: Really. Of course, by then, it was pretty late in the war. He and my mother met. My mother was in the Red Cross, also a social worker, taking care of shell-shocked soldiers. So, they met at MacDill Field in Florida, got married there, and my mother was pregnant when he left for Germany but didn't know it. By the time he got there, it was very shortly after that the war was over. The US Army gave him compassionate leave, so he could actually find the members of his family who –his mother, who had been in a concentration camp, and his sister and her son, who was a three-year-old when the war started, a six-year-old, who'd been separated from [her] parents, who were my father's sister and her husband. My father found them, and gradually they brought them all back here.

SG: To the United States?

JC: Brought them here. Yes.

Ann Buffum: When you say all, how many?

JC: Well, the ones who were in hiding and still alive were my grandmother, my aunt, her husband, and their child, my cousin.

AB: What are your mother's feelings about the Red Cross?

JC: My mother's not alive.

AB: You never talked to her about that? Before that whole thing kind of came out?

JC: About the Red Cross?

AB: Yes.

JC: No. As a matter of fact, not. She was very – I think it was a really important part of her life. To be a Jewish woman, treating the soldiers, Jewish and non-Jewish, who had

been in that war, she knew what was at stake for the world and the Jews. That was a huge experience for her and one in which she met her husband, even though there was all sorts of family strife. There's this big rift between the Eastern European Jews and the Western European Jews. Usually, you hear about the Germans looking down on the Russians because –

AB: [inaudible]

JC: But this was the other way around. Yes. This was the other way around. My mother's Russian family considered the Germans to be not cultured enough.

AB: That's a switch.

JC: Yes, but they persisted.

SG: So when your father was finished with the war and they married, where did they live?

JC: He got a job as director of Jewish Family Services in Buffalo. He was mostly resettling refugees. There's a woman who recently died. No, wait. It was Anita Landau who died. Who am I thinking of? That folk singer. You should interview her for sure. I'll think of her name later.

AB: Jewish folk singer in Vermont?

JC: She's really old now. Yes. She lives in Plainfield.

AB: I know who you're talking about.

JC: Okay, good. Older woman, real character. Wonderful.

AB: I've met her several times.

JC: I'll think of her name.

AB: [inaudible] her name.

JC: Yes. Well, she worked for my father.

SG: Oh my goodness.

JC: What she told me was that she never knew he was a refugee. I mean, he totally got rid of his German accent, which was very hard to do for somebody in their late thirties. He just divorced himself from that whole experience. Although he was very connected – there was a group of refugees that our families were friendly with. Anyway, that was that.

SG: That was that.

JC: He died when I was a year old.

AB: Really?

JC: Yes. So I actually never had a conversation with him.

AB: Of what?

JC: Heart problems. Yes. But his ghost was enormously important to me, enormously important to me in my life. I was terrified, really. My mother spoke only in the most wonderful terms of him. There was like this triumvirate of qualities that he was brilliant, kind, and honest. The honest part was important because it was in contrast to the first husband. On the one hand, he was very heroic in image. On the other hand, there was this huge weight of the Holocaust. His death was enormous in my life and my mother's life, especially as I was growing up; it was complicated by the death of a stepfather several years later.

SG: Your mother remarried?

JC: Yes. So the combined weight of those deaths in my – when you're a child, you mush all the things together. So that death and the intensity of the family, the refugee family, with the stories of being in hiding and the bare survival melded, so I felt like the weight of all those other deaths in Europe somehow lived in my house with the weight of the death of my father. There were also the ways that I sort of felt like he must have been bad because he got out. It was kind of a weird child version of survivor guilt.

SG: I was going to say it sounds like you had survivor guilt for your dad.

JC: Yes. Like he must have done something bad as a lawyer to get himself out and nobody else, and then he went and died. He probably didn't – these are children's ways of making meaning.

AB: How early in your life did your family tell you about the Holocaust and your father's story?

JC: I don't remember a time that I didn't know. I don't know how old I was. But I was living near my aunt and uncle, who had been in hiding and separated from their child. For a while, they lived in Buffalo, very close to us. It would have just been part of the condition of the family.

SG: What was the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood that you lived in, in Buffalo? Was it a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, or was it a mixed neighborhood?

JC: Almost completely Jewish. In fact, I remember it was sort of a big event when I made friends, very close friends, with an Italian girl. Buffalo was very ethnically segregated, but occasionally the ethnic groups moved around. So there was a group of Italian families moving in, and this was a really big deal.

SG: [inaudible]

JC: They didn't close the schools for Jewish holidays, but almost nobody was there. So it was really a very small-town ethnic upbringing. There was the one commercial street, Hertel Avenue. There was the grocer that my mother knew and the kosher butcher and the tailor, who – we were all so short; we had to have everything shortened. His son gave piano lessons upstairs. It was really one of those ethnic neighborhoods. Of course, I never – there was the hairdresser's down the street who had funny accents, and we had to go to them. We had to go to them. Years later, I realized they were survivors too.

AB: Was this an Orthodox community?

JC: There were Orthodox people in the community, but we weren't of that. My mother, though she was Russian, affiliated with the Reform.

SG: I was going to ask you about that. What was your family's affiliation when you were growing up?

JC: Completely Reform.

SG: Completely?

JC: Yeah.

SG: Did you belong to a synagogue? [inaudible]

JC: Oh, yes.

SG: Or temple.

JC: It was a large – one of those big urban synagogues. My favorite story from it is that in – it would have been 1967 when I was going to be – I wasn't bat mitzvah. I don't think my mother really believed in that. It wasn't that she wasn't – she was a feminist and a

free, liberated woman before I even thought of the term, but I think that she just didn't have much time for it, for a bat mitzvah, [and] didn't really care. But I did go to confirmation classes, which I was irritated about. So I in 1967, and age whatever you are – sixteen, fifteen – refused. So the rabbi at the temple decided that they would give me – that I didn't have to be confirmed. I got to make a speech. They gave me the temple award for excellence. I've never forgotten that. That, more than anything else, made me feel like, "Oh, this is my people who actually reward questioning, who actually make the envelope big enough for even the rebellious kid." That was really huge. I'm tickled about that story to this day.

SG: That's great. What was it like in your family as far as holidays and celebrations? Did you have any traditions they brought over?

JC: We weren't a huge celebrating family. My mother made something called pflaumenkuchen, which I think was plum cake.

SG: I remember (speckkuchen?). That's what we knew it as.

JC: Maybe pflaumenkuchen is something else, and I just don't remember well. My mother was a single mother. She was working. So we didn't do a lot of domestic (putzing?) around. I grew up with a lot of Yiddish phrases. My mother didn't really speak – she completely understood Yiddish because that's what her parents spoke. But was one of those Americanized children. So she understood but didn't speak. But there were lots and lots of Yiddish phrases in the house. So I've tried to pass those on to my kids.

SG: Can you speak some Yiddish?

JC: No. Of course, over the years, over more than thirty years of living in Vermont, so much Yiddish has left my everyday speech. It's just not understood. It's really a shame.

SG: I guess I'm moving ahead a little bit. If you could tell us about the interest in the Holocaust and the resistance movements and the work projects that you've been doing in Vermont – the One-by-One dialogue, the immigration project? If you would take some time to talk about those.

JC: Sure.

SG: I should say, first, what brought you to Vermont? What was your journey here?

JC: A whim. I had, in the late '60s, decided I was going to turn myself into Chinese if I could, or some Daoist or something [and] immersed myself in the East Asian Studies Department along with my then-boyfriend, soon-to-be-husband, I was married at nineteen, at the University of Toronto, where we had gone so that in case he was drafted into the Vietnam War, we would be in Canada. His draft number was high enough that it wasn't an issue. One summer, while we were busy trying to be Daoist and studying Japanese and Chinese very hard, diligently – it was actually a wonderful experience. We didn't have summer jobs and decided to come hiking here, ran into a spot on the Long Trail – they have trail managers up there, and somebody had left their post. We walked down to the headquarters of the Green Mountain Club. They looked at us. We were so dirty; they thought we were very experienced and hired us for the rest of the summer. We just totally fell in love – totally fell in love with being here. At that point, my husband then had – it was a five-year degree program but could actually get a BA at four years. So he took that option. I had one more year to go, but I didn't care – just left, came here, [and] later finished up at Goddard. That was how we got here. That was in 1971 or '72.

AB: At the ripe old age of eighteen.

JC: Nineteen or twenty, yes. Anyway, during that time, I rarely spoke about – rarely spoke about my sense of myself as a Jew.

AB: Did you marry a Jew?

JC: Yes. First of all, I was surprised. I was interested. I didn't have a way, a spiritual way, of connecting with what was an intensely spiritual experience to be immersed in this incredibly beautiful landscape. So, I was interested in that. Meanwhile, I was deeply, deeply ashamed. I was ashamed in really young ways. I was ashamed of my nose. I was ashamed of the way my grandmother looked. I was fearful that my father had been a bad person after all and somehow that I was bad, having inherited that. These are leftover from this childhood.

AB: [inaudible] Holocaust?

JC: Yes, yes. It gets all goofed up with – I thought I must have been a bad kid. That's why my father didn't want to be with me. He was bad, and I'm certainly his kid; I was bad. It has no logic to adults. It just gets in there when you're a kid. Meanwhile, I was ashamed. I was afraid and ashamed. At some point, that changed for me. In part, it changed because I briefly was part of something called Re-Evaluation counseling, and they had this whole Jewish component to it. A couple of the old New Jewish Agenda people were deeply involved in that movement. It was the first time I had been invited to combine politically critical thinking with actual pride in being a Jew. From those glimmers, that was the first time I actually sort of touched my nose in public and said how ugly I thought it was. It's so different now. I'm so proud of being a Jew now.

AB: Was that happening here in Vermont, this counseling?

JC: Yes.

SG: The Jewish Evaluation?

JC: Well, there was a New Jewish Agenda group in Central Vermont. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz was there. Irena Klepfisz was there. It was really –

SG: Can you talk about the New Jewish Agenda and what that was?

JC: It was a lefty political movement. But it again was all about taking positions on the Left, but really opposing the antisemitism that was building there. It was a very exciting time, a very exciting time of affiliation. In those days, Women in Black was not an antisemitic thing. Women in Black was a political statement about a particular situation in the Middle East. It was that time that it was growing. I was by then affiliated with a Montpelier synagogue, which pretty much came into –

AB: Beth Jacob?

JC: Beth Jacob. When my oldest son was born, it became more important for us to be part of that community.

SG: That's the synagogue without a rabbi in it.

JC: Yes, but now it has one.

SG: It has a rabbi now?

JC: Yes, we just hired a great woman. Yes. So after that, I began really – I began some therapy. Then began a time of actually going to find the remaining people who were alive in my family to ask them, what happened there, what really happened. So I went to my aunt, who had been in hiding in the Netherlands, and separated from her son. Their lives were full of turmoil. They came to the U.S. with their son; they had been reunited with him, where he had been encouraged to forget them. He was really little, between the ages of three and six. His new family couldn't tell him to remember. He would talk. At that time, I think the reunion was pretty abrupt. The families that were reunited went to the places, introduced themselves, and the kids went with – he was essentially taken from the people that he had believed were his parents after having had an earlier experience of being taken inexplicably from his parents. In fact, the first time he had been sort of kidnapped. I mean, purposely with his parents' permission, but taken away on the back of the bike of a resistance worker with a blindfold so he couldn't see where

he was going at night, out of his bed. So this happened again. Needless to say, he had a difficult relationship with his parents, who had lived only him, lived through these terrible years. He eventually went back to the Netherlands. In the '60s, they were doing LSD therapy with Holocaust survivors – legal – in the Netherlands. To me, that just is like the most appalling thing in the world. But I actually have his journals of that. It was a good experience for him.

AB: Why is that appalling?

JC: Because it seems to me the psychological protections that people have are wiped away with those kinds of things. Somebody who'd been through an experience like that might need their –

AB: Protections.

JC: – protections. I came at it from the 1960s street drug angle, and that was bad enough. But this was in a controlled setting. They had lots of tranquilizers available.

AB: [inaudible] the Netherlands as being so advanced –

JC: Progressive.

AB: – and progressive.

JC: Oh, yes. I actually went to talk to the doctors who did it in the search when I –I went to talk to the resistance workers. I went to find anybody I could, who could tell me about this. Anyway, my cousin, through that experience, was able to find his own sense of Jewish identity in a way that was positive for him, then moved to Israel, married an American young woman, and said to his parents, "Won't you come live with us?" which was really something because they had had such a difficult struggle. So they picked up after having been in Buffalo for a while, moving out to Los Angeles, she surviving breast

cancer, and moved to Israel. A few months later – my cousin's wife was pregnant. A few months later, he just died.

SG: Your cousin?

JC: Died. Up and died. Everyone in the family was scared it was suicide because he had had such a difficult life. But it was one of those electrical heart failures. He'd been out running, came home, boom, gone in his thirties. His wife moved back to be with her parents in Seattle. There were my aunt and uncle in Israel. Didn't know anybody. Didn't speak Hebrew. So they moved to the place where they were most comfortable in the world, which was the Netherlands. When I got there, my aunt gave me something that nobody in the family knew that she had. Nobody had really asked. It wasn't that it wasn't spoken. As I said, I can't remember a time when I didn't know. But people didn't ask as "tell me the story" ask; it was just either there as part of the conversation or not. So she had kept this yellow star that my grandmother had worn in the concentration camp, in a drawer. She gave it to me. Talk about a ghost. It was both appalling, and I couldn't let it off my person for weeks. I just couldn't bear it. I was conflicted about it because you see these pictures of the stars, and they're raggedy. Well, this was blind and stitched really neatly. This was a German Jewish woman who was not going to look –

AB: Shabby.

SG: Shabby, regardless.

JC: Yes. So it was quite a job for me to put this together with – I can only tell you that truth that I had this combination of anger at her – why did she make that beautiful? And then pride – she made herself beautiful. It was quite the experience to kind of integrate that. Someone here who knows how to preserve cloth in archival ways created a frame for me that will preserve it.

AB: Shadow boxed?

JC: Yes, yes. So I have that. Yes. So along with that, I was trying to meet people in the resistance and eventually met a very remarkable woman, Emma Poldervaart, who had been in the Netherlands. She's the one who took my cousin into hiding and found places for my aunt and uncle; one was head of a whole network of communications in a region of the Netherlands during the war. She was very angry at the Netherlands [and] after the war, didn't want to be associated with the resistance movement there because her experience was that nobody would join the resistance until it was clear that the Allies would win the war … [Technical issues.]

SG: How do you go about getting someone honored at Yad Vashem?

JC: Well, you need testimonials and documents, and so I actually went back to Amsterdam and did my best to find information at the war records office, though I couldn't read most of what I brought back, but they have translators there at Yad Vashem. I could also document that there were members of my family specifically who were saved. There were newspaper articles about her; she'd received metals. She just is very reclusive. She's alive today.

SG: Really?

JC: Yes.

SG: What's her name again, please.

JC: Emma Poldervaart, P-O-L-D-E-R-V-A-A-R-T. A lot of the righteous gentiles had already been identified by then. So to find somebody who could be newly identified is a moment for governments to feel good. So the Israeli ambassador to the Netherlands was on the phone to me. I can't remember who else. They all wanted a ceremony. This makes everybody look good. She was living in Switzerland. So Switzerland wants to be involved. The Netherlands, Israel, the US – everybody wants to be in on a feel-good event. Emma said, "Send it in the mail. I don't want it." So Madeleine Kunin was good

enough to trek over there to another part of Switzerland – that's when she was ambassador – to visit her. Emma, near as I can tell, sacrificed a good deal of her life to that work in the resistance. She never was able to work again afterward. My experience of her is that she speaks in poetry. She doesn't often tell a story from start to finish. But her work was unbelievable. One of the dramatic things –she described how she was – she was actually taken into a prison. She kind of outsmarted the guards by implying that she could lead them to important people in the resistance. Then as she put it, "I became invisible." She went totally underground. But there were terrible, terrible conflicts. Everybody's life was at stake when somebody was betrayed in the resistance, and there were betrayals. You couldn't keep records of who went where. She needed not to have any trails behind her. So, one time, when my aunt and uncle couldn't stay anymore in the place that they were in hiding – they moved around several times. When they couldn't find that place, they went back to Emma's mother's house to the Poldervaart home in Voorburg. When Emma found out about it, she said to her mother, "Make them leave. They have to go." It was too big a risk for too many people. Yes. For me to hear that again, it was a moment of incredible complexity. I thought, "You can't kick them out. They were my aunt – what's the matter with you? You're the one in the resistance who was helping them, aren't you?" And then, of course, recognizing –

SG: She was protecting them.

JC: – she was making an entirely practical decision at a moment of intense danger for her mother and for herself. They were really on her trail at that time. I would hear stories about how the Poldervaarts would – if they had a list, and the police would come in, they'd rip it up and burn the list. Then the police would want to know what that smell was. They would say, "Well, you burn things in the bathroom, so the smells go away." Just incredible, incredible.

SG: Have you written this story to Steven Spielberg?

JC: I think I once wrote to Steven Spielberg's mother.

SG: Collecting all these oral histories.

JC: He was, yes. I actually do have these recorded in various places. I recorded Emma's sister telling us a lot of these stories and my aunt. Some of those records are now in the US Holocaust Museum.

SG: That's wonderful.

JC: Of course, the documents for Emma are at Yad Vashem. Where this took me later – this whole process of living an emotional history myself, led me, first of all, to begin my – it really was a time when I began to discover that I could write when I no longer was holding these things so tightly. As a result of doing some writing, I was invited by Parent, Teachers & Students for Social Responsibility to do a writing workshop. At that time, they had an annual summer institute on Holocaust studies for youth. To my surprise, there were Bosnian young people who attended that.

SG: When was this, Judith?

JC: This would have been – well, when did the Bosnians begin to come to Vermont? It would have been late –

AB: Early '90s.

JC: Early '90s.

AB: Was it late '80, early '90s.

JC: In the '90s, anyway.

AB: Yes, it was the early '90s.

JC: I think what was so stunning to me about that, first of all, was that I would have totally understood, having come from a situation so similar, that the last thing in the world they would want to do is hear about it again. So I was very impressed. Then what really took me by surprise – I wasn't surprised about the similarity, as I got to know them,fo in atrocity. What really surprised me was how the stories of what it was like to begin to live here reminded me of my mother's family, the early immigration, just arriving as a refugee. What I heard was about kids who would need to translate for their parents for the cable company, for the doctor and, in a contemporary way, like no other generation before, in therapy sessions, where people were talking about rapes and other horrible things. Then it was confidential. They couldn't tell anybody. They would drive hours to get to somebody's parent who was in a hospital, brothers, and sisters reading the homework to each other on the way. They'd be running on the track just to be able to have time to think. They had no connection with American high schoolers who thought it was fun to piss off your parents and make them worry about you when their parents were so precious to them, and their family was so important to them. So they were disconnected. Meanwhile, what people in school were saying [was they] were model students; they were fine. It was just invisible. All that work was invisible. What surprised me was that hard, hard work, being now invisible in my community – and I just felt like, in one generation, I was completely at home here – one generation. I know my way around in this country. I thought, "I have to find a context for these stories of arriving immigrants and refugees to be known." I just have to find a context. I owe it to my family. I owe it out of gratitude for the hard work they did. I began a project to – I actually thought to myself, "What can I do?" I'm not a social worker. I'm not even interested in social work. I thought, "Okay, I can do language." That's what I do. I was teaching writing at Vermont College. At first, I got together a little writing group of refugees and immigrants. Then, I realized I needed the stories in more depth. I was doing what you were doing and meeting with people individually.

AB: Can we turn the tape over?

SG: Sure.

AB: I'm sorry to interrupt, but it would be even worse if the tape just ran out.

SG: No, you're absolutely right. [End of Track One.]

AB: Anytime.

SG: Judith, you were talking about the project you were working with [inaudible] Bosnian refugees?

JC: Oh, yes.

SG: Is that the one-to-one dialogue?

JC: No, not One by One.

SG: [inaudible] immigration project.

JC: This is the immigration project. So, yes, I was talking about how I began with a writing group, but then realized I wanted to do interviews like you're doing and eventually found people from eighteen different countries. This was in the late '90s in Central Vermont, and Central Vermont at that time wasn't telling that story about itself. Central Vermont was not saying, "We have people from a lot of different cultures here." It was actually a pretty important thing to make something public out of it. I remember as we were getting ready for the performance – I was actually studying with Liz Lerman from the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, who came here from the [inaudible]. She is my hero completely – community development and arts and story narrative. It's wonderful, wonderful work. Through a grant that the Flynn [Theater] had, actually, from Reader's Digest, Lila Wallace Foundation, and through the local arts council in Central Vermont, the Onion River Arts Council, I was able to get training not only for myself but for the members of this group, who were willing to perform together. We did this live dance

narrative, using excerpts of the oral histories read by professional readers and translated above the stage in three different languages.

SG: This was done where?

JC: At city hall in Montpelier.

SG: At [inaudible] Auditorium?

JC: No, in Montpelier.

SG: Oh, Montpelier. I'm sorry. Excuse me.

JC: It was in 1999.

SG: [inaudible]

JC: Yes. As we got closer, I remember saying to myself – it was totally nerve-racking. I hadn't done a production before. I'd done everything, all the fundraising, all the getting the stage managers, and the tickets, and the posters. It was a wild ride. I remember saying to myself, "If nothing else happens, but the banner over city hall in three different languages, that will be a success," because it was just not part of the way Central Vermont spoke about itself. After that, it was. After that, places like the Onion River Arts Council were able to engage people who had incredible talents and make them part of the art scene there, and in other ways – schools began being much more aware. So it was, for me, a very, very – it was a very important experience. It felt to me like I was acting as the Jewish woman I know that I was and am. That was a direct result of the life that I've been given, the stories that I'd grown up with, and the values that I'd grown up – so much. I've just come to realize so much, just not to take it for granted that real ethic of identifying with outsiders and of making sure that there's contexts for people's voices. You just grow up with it if you're in a Jewish – at least, that's my experience of Jews. It's

my experience of being brought up as a Jew. I'm just realizing that it's not anything to take for granted at all. I'm very grateful for it. But you had asked about the One by One experience. This was more related to that level of the darkness, the sort of shame, and really is related to that other side of the ethic that I grew up with, which was not one of reconciliation, particularly. I don't want to say that, actually. It was probably more me and my childhood than what I was brought up with. For instance, I remember when – my mother was a single mother. There was a point when she could get restitution from the German government for my father's suffering. I remember sitting by her feet, filling out forms, or helping her with something. I was really pissed. I didn't want her to take money from the German government. What kind of a business was that? I mean, my mother was a single mother, trying to make – if I were in her shoes now making that decision, I would make the same decision. But I remember my sort of pure child ethic that I didn't want anything from them. So, at one point when I came to UVM [University of Vermont] to hear a speaker, and it was a woman who had been part of this One by One project, describing being in Germany with a bunch of people who had been somehow affiliated children – it was children. Not the first generation in the Reich, but their children. During this dialog, I was spellbound. I was amazed at this possibility and became involved in that as well, and finally did go to Germany to do that.

SG: What is it? How does that work? [inaudible] Is it Jewish people meeting with people from Germany?

JC: Yes, meeting with Germans. I think their definition of children of the Reich is pretty much not a personal definition relating to anybody's family's history. It's anybody whose parents were adults during the Reich. There was one man who was there who was older and had been a member of the Waffen-SS. He was very controversial. His presence in the group was very controversial. He had pretty much sacrificed his adult connections in order to tell the stories about what he had done. He hadn't actually been involved in a direct massacre, but he was part of the Waffen-SS. Because he was willing to speak

against that, his family had pretty much separated from him. But that was a very important experience for me. I had gone to Germany to visit Dachau. Oddly enough, I didn't go visit the town that my father grew up in, and I had to go right by it.

SG: What was the town again?

JC: Aschaffenburg. It's in Bavaria. I had to go right by it. I can't remember the name of the city. This is so embarrassing.

SG: Munich.

JC: Munich. Thank you. To get from there to Dachau. You have to go through Frankfurt, where my father got his law degree. Aschaffenburg is there on the line. I didn't stop. I don't know why. If I were going there today, I would make a different decision.

SG: Would you?

JC: For some reason, I felt this enormous connection. I had to go to Dachau; it was one of those. I had to go there.

AB: When was that?

JC: It was the late '80s, early '90s. It was very important for me to be there. I was still kind of involved with this guilt; I suppose survivor guilt. I remember I grabbed onto the barbed wire; I needed to feel some pain there. I needed to bleed there. It wasn't very dramatic, the bleeding, a pinprick.

SG: You literally needed to feel that.

JC: I needed to, yes. I don't really entirely know how to make emotional sense out of that to this day. I do know that when I thought about geographic location in the world as

a Jew, I was not particularly identified with Israel because I was so drawn and so focused on what happened there in Europe. Everything in me was drawing identity, Jewish identity, from Germany and Russia. I've never been to Russia, in part because I don't know where to go. In part because it wasn't very easy to go then. Although, it was easy to go to Germany. But interestingly, over the course of being in Germany and learning a little bit more about reconciliation movements, what I began to realize is the Germans have done much more than some of the other European countries in educating their kids now. There was a period of great silence. But actually, now, they have done much more than the Poles or the French, for instance. So that's been an interesting shift for me. The other thing that happened, as a result of that, was that I got a different sense of what it is to be white in America. Because it was in that context that I heard Germans acknowledging responsibility for the history of their country. Well, clearly, these were kids of the people who were alive then; they didn't do anything. They didn't identify with doing anything. They didn't want to. They felt bad about it. These were Germans who wanted the world to be a different place. It was that delineation between, yes, I accept responsibility for my country's history. There was delineation from, "Oh, I'm wracked with guilt, and I need to be absolved and scared of what people will think of me." I was able to translate that in very liberating ways into what it means to be white here, to take responsibility for my country's history. To say, "No, I don't identify with that. But I'm going to acknowledge it." I'm going to acknowledge and try and undermine white privilege. It was out of that and the immigration project – in the course of doing this immigration project, one of the people who was a professional reader in the performance is African American. There was a point at which she just said, "I can't. This is really making me mad. I'm reading all these stories. What I'm hearing about is this country, the US, working for people who've had it hard in another country. Why isn't my country working for me?" It was in part because of that. In part because when my mother was a single mother bringing me up in Buffalo in the 1950s, there was no daycare around there. People hardly used the [term] single mother. The option that was available to her for

childcare was hiring Black women. So I grew up in a Jewish household employing Black domestic workers.

AB: From the Islands?

JC: No, no, not in Buffalo. This was part of the Northern migration for the steel. But there was that really, really, really unclear knot of social history in which my family was a crucible that I needed to work on. I asked this woman who had been in the performance, Makela, “Can we get together? Can we get a group together with Black and white women just to talk about –?” This is the one that I need to work on. So we devised this way, where we would invite all the Black people we know, which was possible at that time. Fortunately, there are more people here now of color, but at that time, we invited all the Black people we knew to bring a white ally so that we could start the group, first of all, in an atmosphere where there were relationships of trust already in existence, and second of all, where it was that the selection was in the hands of Black people. I’ve since then wondered about – I knew that it was in my home and city where I had absorbed racism. That’s the place. I hadn’t absorbed racism against Asians. I hadn’t absorbed racism against Native Americans or gay people. I’d absorbed racism in combination with the situation of my family and the situation in Buffalo at the time against Black people. That’s what I needed to undo in my life. So that’s why I was interested in a Black and white group. Why I envisioned – why I imagined that only Black and white people could help me with that, I don’t know. But for whatever reason, that’s how the group was. That’s how the group is. It’s a very tight, very warm, very important group that still meets once a month.

SG: Still meets?

JC: Yes.

AB: Is she over at the Schoolhouse? Is that (Mikayla?)? Does she work at the Schoolhouse?

JC: No, she lives in Montpellier. She's a storyteller.

AB: Does that project have a name?

JC: Yes, we call ourselves Sojourner.

SG: Okay. So that's the Sojourner [inaudible].

AB: What do you call yourselves?

JC: Sojourner.

AB: Sojourners.

JC: No "S" on the end.

AB: Sojourner Project.

JC: It doesn't have a "project" either. We just call ourselves Sojourner.

AB: [inaudible]

JC: We don't really have a public life particularly. Well, I did a one-woman show that came out of, again, just the release of language. That's what happens when you finally unburden some fear, guilt, whatever it is, for me anyway, you get language. So I was able to do this one-woman show which was in part race consciousness, in part struggle with the Middle East. Sojourner did a talk after one of them. We rarely act as a group in public, but all of us are engaged intensely in diversity work, and the group supports us individually. It's been the kind of group where you can just ask the hardest questions and not shy away from the most difficult.

SG: Are these women and men? Just women?

JC: No, we didn't set out to be an all-women's group. But we are an all-women's group. At some point, we decided we would be when we realized, first of all –

AB: That you were all women.

JC: Well, there had been one or two men who joined us, but I think we quickly realized not only that it's harder to engage men, but also the genders just would have overshadowed everything else.

SG: You're leading into the next questions, but can you talk about your work with writing and dance and poetry and creative arts?

AB: Can I interrupt?

SG: Yeah, I'll stop for a second.

AB: Yes, let's stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Sandy Gartner: This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum meeting with Judy Chalmer to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is December 8, 2005. We are at Judith's office in Williston, Vermont. Judith, do we have your permission to record the second interview with you?

Judith Chalmer: Yes. I don't know if it'll matter for your records, but – on the last one, too – it's not Williston; it's Winooski, actually.

SG: Oops. How about in Judith's office in Winooski, Vermont. I knew it was a W. That's good. Thank you. Winooski. We got it.

Ann Buffum: Your voice is not being picked up on this. [Technical issues.]

SG: The last thing we talked about, Judith, was Sojourner. We're kind of moving on to the creative arts. That was the question we wanted to talk to you about. I wonder if you could talk about your work in writing, dance, and theater. Some of the things we were interested in were Out of [History's] Junk Jar, your directing dance narrative, your one-woman show – along that line. What attracted you to the creative arts, to start?

JG: Well, when I was in my thirties, I was part of a small group of women at Beth Jacob synagogue who began what we thought of as rehydrating Rosh Chodesh. No one around us that we knew of was really doing it at that time. We just had a great time with a bunch of women of the same general developmental stage in adult life. What we were doing essentially was exploring metaphor so that we would invent some activity each time that would connect us somehow with some aspect of our lives for which we felt some kind of spiritual or cultural connection. I don't exactly know how this shifted. What I do know is that I grew away from it. But it wasn't just me alone. I think it was for us as a group of women – partly developmental that we outgrew it. Partly, it came as a shift when more professionalism came in. A rabbi came in, not as a hired rabbi, but moved in, who had grown in her [inaudible], in a place where Rosh Chodesh was an incorporated part. Then she became kind of a self-appointed leader. I think the sort of grassroots homegrown part fell apart. It's going to be hard for me to tell what portion of growing away from Rosh Chodesh was that and what was for me also a kind of discovery of poetry.

SG: Was Rosh Chodesh basically a women's study group?

JC: Well, people can do it, however –

SG: Wherever they want?

JC: But it takes its starting place from a tradition, a sort of folk tradition, that women don't do work on the new moon. When it was reclaimed as part of second-wave feminism, people began using it to create what they were calling rituals for women. So I'm a [inaudible], and I wrote something with a friend about a ceremony that we did, and it got published in Lilith, and then a little while later, it was used as an example of bad rituals by the editor in an editorial. She didn't name us, but it was interesting. It was interesting the stance that she was taking, which was that that was done for young women. It was essentially a bunch of us older women laughing ourselves silly over our experiences of sexuality and first periods in the presence of this young girl who seemed to have a great time and thought we were a stitch, and then we did it a few more times. But the Lilith editor was thinking, "No, if you want to develop rituals for young women, then it's going to be done with them, not for them." So that was an interesting thing. Although, I'll tell you the truth; I still loved our thing. I bet our young woman who's now resident to be a doctor did too. Anyway, that's what Rosh Chodesh has been. And it's still thriving in many places. There was a book, Miriam's Well, that collected a bunch of rituals, and then some Jewish Women's project, a web-based thing collected more. Anyway, I didn't expect to write poetry. At that time, my kids were – I was a stay-at-home mom and had three little kids. My youngest was about two, and I was looking ahead to what I wanted to do to get back into working. I thought I wanted to be a feature article journalist. I did some. In fact, my first interview was with an older Jewish woman in our congregation. But I just was feeling like, pardon me, but I was feeling constipated as a writer. I mean, that's really how I thought of it. I saw this workshop offered at a local women's center. It was for poetry writing. I thought, "Eh, who's interested in poetry. But it will loosen me up." [Telephone rings. Recording paused.] So this workshop was taught by another Jewish woman whom I didn't know – Nadell Fishman. She's a poet, and she's now one of my dearest friends. But I met her through that. What I remember was going home from that workshop and saying to myself, "This is what I've been waiting my whole life for." I mean, it was that dramatic. It was just wonderful. So I kind of threw myself into it.

Nadell was generous enough to keep working with me, way beyond the workshop. Then we formed this poetry performance group. We still get together to critique each other's work. But here's the thing that I just have to watch, in retrospect, and don't really know how to analyze – the more I became involved with poetry, the less interested I was in religious observance. It's still the same impulse for me to connect with the largest part of my consciousness, and I still go to poetry for that. So that just became – it occupied that slot for me. At that same time, I was also just beginning the process that I described last time of finally saying to myself, "I'm going to confront this sort of Holocaust history in the family." That provided an enormous amount of material for writing as well. Any kind of time of big change and discovery is great for the creative process. So that really is what is a large portion of what went into the writing of Out of History's Junk Jar.

SG: About what year was this? How old were you?

JC: Well, it would have been – it was published in 2005. I wrote it probably about 1990, '91. It took a long time to get it published. Since then, I've gotten, partly as a result of doing poetry performance with this group. I've become more and more aware of just the potential uses of spoken language. I became less and less enamored of, at poetry readings, pretending to be a vertical version of the page.

SG: You mean the type of static reading?

JC: Yes. I wanted more – I wanted to acknowledge that what was happening in a room when you're doing a reading is really different than what's happening on the page. What's happening on the page is, first of all, your eyes see – whether or not you are focusing on them, your eyes see many words at once. The relationship between them affects you differently than when you hear them sequentially. So it's a different sensory experience. It's also a social experience when you're in a room. I wanted to really take advantage of that relationship. It was so wonderful. I mean, it's wonderful to write, but then you send your poems out, and unless somebody tells you they've read them, you

don't know. But a live reading, you really get a lot of feedback; you can tell. Of course, the feedback is not always just about the poems; it's about the whole thing, about your presentation of them. But I fell in love with that [and] continued to feel like everything I did, I did as a Jewish woman, that those were the two – if I were going to describe the two main identity factors for me, it would have been Jewish woman. That woman part came out of the time and place that I grew up. I grew up with second-wave feminists. It's been interesting to me, since I've come out, to have a really broadened sense of what the possibilities are for the concept of woman. I'm still very identified that way, but it's shifted for me somehow. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to be articulate about it, except that my understanding of what being a woman is has grown out of where it came from; when I recognized it as okay, this is the person I am. It was always a question of – for me, it was always about identifying with what are the experiences that I grew up with that were related to being a woman. I grew up in a house of women. I didn't have a father except for one year. And one of the things that I began to examine, for instance, was that I grew up in a household where I had a working single mother. I was taken care of by single working Black women who worked for my mother, babysitting me, and I had my sisters. When I began to gain some perspective on race consciousness and realized that actually growing up in Buffalo, which was an experience of Black and white, largely for me – I'm sorry. I'm going to digress, but the school I grew up in was mostly Jewish. The high school I went to had distinct ethnic groups. There were the Italians, the Poles, the Jews, and the Blacks. Somehow or other, in all that mix of 1950s '60s growing up, I think I absorbed racism against Black people, where I didn't absorb it for any other group. It was tearing me up. I was thinking, "Where the hell did that come from?" It didn't come from theory in my house. My mother was certainly anti-racist. It must have come from the collection of forces that gathered around us that made – there was no daycare, for instance, in the 1950s in our neighborhood. There were barely single mothers in my neighborhood. What were the factors that led to that being the employment availability for single Black women in Buffalo? Why was it that those were the women that were

taking care of me? How did I understand the difference in economic stress strata or structure between us through my mother's experience as a professional woman in this sort of nebulous, domestic realm of employment? How did I understand the women who raised me? Not very much, actually, but that led me to actually really, really want to explore how this stuff got into me so I could get it out. One of the first things I did was I put out a call on the internet for Jewish women to write about their experiences growing up in households with Black domestic workers. I thought, "This is not an isolated phenomenon." I began to read the books about how the Jews became white and the books about Black and Jewish relationships, which were largely written by men and largely about the Civil Rights Movement, not much about domesticity, but then I began to read some of the very smart women – most of them that I read [were] Jewish – talking about whiteness, and the development of the concept of whiteness and white privilege, and how to undo it, and was anti-racist work about. The writing that I got in response to that call mostly was disappointing. Mostly, it was either sentimentalized – "I loved the Black women who raised me more than I loved my mother" – and unresolved mother anger or guilt, which I found not helpful. I had learned this model in Germany, listening to the Germans make the distinction between guilt and responsibility and saying, "I'm not guilty for my parents' transgressions, but I have responsibility for my country's history." I had absorbed that model. I knew because I could feel it that the only thing that comes with guilt is the pressing, pressing need to be relieved of it. The thing that you want to do is ask the very people that you think you've hurt, which is just nonsense. It's just inappropriate. You have to somehow make peace with and get rid of guilt so that then you can move to responsibility. You can say, "What has my life been like?" What do I want it to be like? What are the choices that I have ahead of me? And how can I connect?" So I abandoned the [project]. There were some very, very good pieces of writing, but not enough for an anthology. I would have done better with an interview process because then you can actually have a dialogue and ask the questions that will lead people to a much richer response. Anyway, I did get my piece – two of them –

published. One of them is an anthology called Celebrating the Lives of Jewish Women; it was published by Hayworth Press. That was the sort of personal essay largely about all that I could tell that led up to me getting to the point where I was asking the questions. Then I did an academic study of the history of domestic labor. That also was published in an education journal. I felt like those were important for me. That work all fed into this kind of sense I have of living a life as a Jewish woman – very, very attuned to questions of diversity. I mean, it's no surprise to me that I'm working and leapt at the opportunity to work here at this organization that does arts programming with people with disabilities. To me, that all feels part of this consciousness as a Jewish woman of wanting to explore bridges across difference and wanting to take away barriers. I don't know if that answers your question. This one-woman show was very scary for me. It happened at a time when the Intifada was at one of its most frightening points daily. The news was terrifying. I was in touch with a group of Vermont lefties, several of them Jewish, who were just incredibly critical – not just critical; that's not the right word – who really wanted to distance themselves and divorce themselves and correct Israel from doing very bad things. I didn't feel that. I felt totally, totally torn. It was just an impossibility for me that my people were destroying houses and orchards and that my people were getting killed. I was so anxious. I wasn't anxious about performing. I loved performing. I was delighted that audiences really laughed. It was a comedy. I was tickled. But the weeks leading up to it, I revised it practically daily to see if I could just quite get that mix with my relationship with Israel, which was critical. I use the word critical in what I hope is a constructive way, as opposed to distancing and saying, "You can't be," although I came from a –certainly, at least one part of my background, through my mother's Russian history, would have been identified with that political movement in Russia that said, "No, a religious state is not a good idea."

AB: Can you describe the show?

JC: Sure. First of all, I wrote at least the first draft in a day.

SG: That's amazing.

JC. It's never happened to me, before or since. I was so surprised that it was funny. I just hadn't been funny until then. I realized I wanted to perform it. What I did was – I had my mother up my nose. I described to you last time how my nose was a very big deal in terms of Jewish identity. Well, for some reason – and I had this deviated septum; I only breathe through one nostril. It's very common. In fact, when I was a kid, the doctor that my mother took me to suggested that when I got to be sixteen and I stopped growing, they correct that and fix my nose. Well, damned if I was going to have a good nose job. I mean, even at age whatever I was, I knew that I would never do that. Ever since then, I've thought to myself, "What an idiot. You could have breathed normally your whole life." But I still wouldn't want the cosmetic change. I mean, that was just so offensive to me,

SG: Physically, it would have been better for you in terms of how you breathe, but cosmetically, you didn't want it. [inaudible]

JC: I absolutely refused. Anyway, I ended up with my mother in my nose for this performance. It was so much fun because then I got to transform into her, and she became a kind of alter ego. My mother was so sophisticated. This character of my mother certainly was not. So it was a little funny for me to have people come up afterward and say, "Oh, I learned so much about your mother," when they really didn't. But there were things in it about her anxieties that were socially big questions that I got to play with because I had her up my nose, and I had her cane – her real cane. I could enact her the way that she would cross the street if she saw a group of teenage boys in her older age. I mean, she's living in an urban area, and teenage boys in groups are just scary. So I got to play – how does that play out in Vermont? Totally different scene than an urban scene. But here I am, carrying all my Jewish mother stuff with me. Her funny reactions were also mine, like when I hit a moose one time, and thank God, it wasn't a – I could slow down, so I just barely touched the thing, and it walked away. But I was

terrified to get out of the car and see. It was night. I couldn't tell if I had knocked it down; it was going to be out there flailing. So all this stuff became great comedy with my mother up there. And a huge piece of it was about the Middle East. So I really told myself and the world that it was about race consciousness in Central Vermont, and it certainly was. But when the review came out, I had to realize that from the outside perception, the most powerful stuff was about these huge questions I had about what was happening in the Middle East.

SG: Are there any creative writing projects or projects that you're working on currently, personal projects? You probably answered this, but maybe expand a little bit more if you want. How does your Judaism affect your choices of subject and who your audience is?

JC: My level of being out about anything – about being a lesbian, about being a Jew, about being anything – is directly related to my sense of urgency about being out as a Jew, about knowing that it's so important to show up. So there's that. This year, I performed comedy in a few different venues – at the Flynn, actually – in the Flynn space. It was just a five-minute spot; I took a course. But five minutes is all I have time to prepare for now. Even there, it was about sexuality and coming out. Even that took its – there was a starting image of worrying about my cholesterol level. This is just such a Jewish hypochondriacal sort of strain. I mean, it was just right there from the start. There was just no question. I didn't think about it. I think if I were to say what the two biggest factors were in that, it was, first of all, the urgency and willingness to come out. And second of all, the sort of funny relationship with my body and illness.

SG: [inaudible] come out of Judaism and sexuality, or both?

JC: Well, I didn't say anything about being a Jew in that, which is unusual for me. But when I think about how I wrote it, the first gag line out was about hypochondria. To me, that's Jewish.

AB: Did your comic self emerge later in life?

JC: Yes, completely.

SG: Could you talk a little bit about –? Am I interrupting?

AB: No, I'm synthesizing all this together. That was my question.

SG: You had mentioned on the questionnaire about a period of Orthodoxy in your life? I wonder how you came to that and what you still embrace in that? [inaudible]

JC: Well, that's very much tied up with my marriage. I never spoke in joint decision to try and find someplace of comfort in it. Like I think many people do who look to Orthodoxy, though we never said it, we were probably hoping for some structure that would make us feel better. It was very difficult at that time. We were not surrounded by other families doing it. To not turn on the lights or to not have the kids go to whatever activities there were – it was a big deal. Or not turn off the lights, whatever we did. No Nintendo or whatever there was at that time. But it was interesting. I really, really do love the metaphor and the physicality. I mean, I still so love baking challah. I just love the physical – I love the imagery and the feels and the tastes of Jewish life. I was interested to learn. I think systems are really – I don't like certain kinds of systems, organizational systems, or mathematical systems. I'm not talking about that. Cultural systems, cultural practices I find beautiful and fascinating. I'm so grateful that I had a period of learning about it. I'm also really grateful to have finally said to my husband at that time, "Not anymore. I just can't do this anymore."

SG: You were still Orthodox?

JC: Yes, yes. In retrospect, I know that he was far more – he still so loves the actual practice of observance and the actual – he's much more identified with the liturgical piece. If I look back on it, that was a branching-off point. I knew I was going in another

direction totally, though I don't –

SG: [inaudible]

JC: Yes. Though I don't think I articulated it or even knew it verbally. As I think about it, it fits now that I was moving away from that into a different artistic life, different secular life, different – I'm so, so identified as a Jew but not interested particularly liturgically.

SG: Another question I have is what is it like to be a Jew in Vermont today and a woman who's come out? How is it for you? That's a real generic question.

JC: Yes. Well, it's interesting, because I was just thinking about that with a new woman rabbi, who's just arrived and is wondering about that for herself and others.

SG: She's the one at Montpelier?

JC: Yes. Reflecting on that with her, I was remembering the intensity of how – what incredible work it was to create an identity as a Jewish woman in Vermont when I was younger and when I was bringing up little kids for whom I also wanted to create a Jewish identity. Now, it seems like no big deal, partly because I have so many relationships in place, and I've already established myself that way. People know me. It feels very easy. Certainly, coming out is easy. I'm well aware that many, many people paved the way for that. But this time and place is very easy. The Jewish community that I know – the Jewish communities that I know are wonderfully accepting. That's part of being part of a Jewish community. It's one of the things I'm so proud of. It's certainly not difficult.

SG: It's interesting you brought [inaudible] kids. That's another question I have, talking a little bit about your children, what kind of Jewish upbringing, traditions did they have in their life when you were raising them? Do they, to this day, continue seeing themselves connecting with that Jewish part of [inaudible]?

JC: One of my favorite stories is about my oldest son, Micah, who's not particularly observant now – he's twenty-six – and probably was the one who went through the biggest swings in observance because he was old enough to be aware when we decided we were going to be Orthodox, and then decided we weren't. I remember when he got his first apartment. We took him a mezuzah. Later on, we asked him if he had put it up. He said, "Well, I didn't put it up, but I couldn't throw it away." I just said to myself, "Oh, you've done a good job." I think ambivalence is part of the wonderful thing that we're allowed to do. I love that. My middle son is very, very Jewishly identified.

SG: Is Isiah the youngest?

JC: Micah is the oldest. Seth is my middle son. Eli is the youngest.

SG: That's right. Eli.

JC: Seth is very identified. Interestingly, he went off to college in the Bible Belt of Ohio. That's when he got his Jewish identity. I mean, he got it as a kid. But before that, when he was in high school, at Seders, he would tell us we were so ethnocentric and railing against this stuff. Then he went to Ohio and found himself in the Bible Belt, and he became a Jew. So he's a member of a synagogue. He's scholarly involved.

AB: He needs to meet my son [inaudible].

JC: Yeah? Where is your son?

AB: He's in Madison, Wisconsin, but he went to school in the Midwest, and that's where he found his Jewish identity.

JC: Isn't that funny? Yeah. Eli, I think, has a pretty complex relationship with it now. He's young enough that I think it's not clear. Who knows where anybody is going to go? But I'm less able to – or less willing to point to where he is right now. I think it's pretty

complex.

SG: Another question I have is, what is your vision for the role of women in Judaism in the future and particularly in Vermont? Do you have any – if you're looking towards the future or towards any personal goals, do you see any place for Jewish women [inaudible]?

JC: Well, I'm tickled that Hinda Miller's running for mayor. I hope you're going to interview her.

AB: We should.

JC: You definitely should. I'm tickled that Deb Markowitz is Secretary of State. I'm tickled that Madeleine Kunin is still an outspoken ex-Governor or former governor, I should say. I think that Jewish women are well-positioned within – well-positioned and well-supported within Judaism in general, except for, I suppose, the Orthodox. But the Jewish communities that I know are great for Jewish women, in those terms. There was a story I was going to tell you. What was the rest of your question?

SG: It was, what's your vision for the role of women in Judaism in the future, and particularly in Vermont.

JC: I don't remember what I was going to say.

SG: The people that you mentioned have been in a more political arena. But are there other stories that you might be thinking of in terms of women being positioned to do different things in Vermont or as Jewish women [inaudible]?

JC: Well, I'll tell you about another effort that I was part of, that I maybe wish there was more of. Another woman that you might want to interview is Michelle Clark, who's done a lot of thinking about Jews in the multicultural movement. That's where I was going to go

with that other thought about Jewish women in Vermont. Okay. Here's the story for you. This undermines everything I just said. I did a poetry reading the other night in Montpelier. I was reading some poems that were not that old. I didn't read one that was Holocaust-related. It was the only one I took a look at in my hand and decided not to read, and it was because I didn't feel safe. So this is what I am thinking that there is right now, at this time – I think I'm really aware of the upswing of antisemitism in the world. Here I go. I'm going to contradict everything I've said today.

SG: It's all right. It's okay.

JC: Somehow, all of this is somehow true, but okay, I'm going to contradict it. It didn't feel safe for me to come out as a Jew at that moment.

SG: At that reading?

JC: People knew me there. It's not like – but I think that the whole worldwide excoriation of Israel, even though the Intifada is not at the point where it was, is very scary. I heard a really disturbing story about something happening in the youth culture now, where that didn't happen before. Where for instance – there's a recent law passed in Vermont that bans smoking in all bars. It used to be only in some bars, but now you can't smoke at all. I heard that in one group of kids, at least, what was said was, "That's a Jew rule." It's used the way people say, "Oh, that's so gay." "That's a Jew thing." "That's a gay thing" – all bad.

AB: That's negative.

JC: Negative, yes. That was really scary to hear.

SG: Who related that to you?

JC: My son.

SG: It's frightening.

JC: It is. So when I think about it, in terms of Jewish women now, maybe there is more of a call for – maybe a need for thoughtful, proud showing up. The reason I remembered that I was going to say that was that I was going to talk about this thing that Michelle and I had done, which was that we had organized a monthly gathering of Jewish women, academics, and artists. We tried to draw from the general northern New England region. We kept it going for – it could have been a couple of years. We did it at the college where I was teaching, and we were supported in doing that. We got free space. We presented what we were – actually presenting our scholarly and creative work as Jewish women. Both Michelle and I felt so thirsty for it. We had such a tiny group that eventually, we ran out of new energy. I would love to have there be more of that. That was really – I am still thirsty for that. So that would be something I would look for.

SG: Where does Michelle live?

JC: In Plainfield.

SG: Is Hinda [inaudible]?

JC: Hinda is running for mayor in Burlington. She was the inventor of the Jogbra. She was doing a video project on Jewish women in Vermont, so you really need to connect with her. I don't know if she ever completed it.

SG: Just one other thing and that was just – our final question is, are there any other stories you'd like to share with us that we haven't asked you.

JC: Well, I can't think of them. I think I've yakked long enough.

[END OF INTERVIEW]