Jean Trounstine Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: Okay. It is July 21, 2000. I am sitting here in Lowell, Massachusetts, with Jean Trounstine, and this interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. Basically, the way I've been doing the interviews is to focus on the activist experiences of the participants in this project but to begin with information about family background and Jewish identity as a kind of context. So maybe the best place to begin is to tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you were born.

Jean Trounstine: I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. German-Jewish background. My father's family came to Cincinnati very early, around 1840-1850, and my mother's family also came here early. My mother was descended from Isaac Mayer Wise, and my father's – there was a Trounstine family, and my grandfather's sister was a real social activist in terms of working for child welfare in the city. My grandmother – both grandmothers actually were very active on my mother's side and my father's side. There was a real strong tradition in my family of doing things with the community. I didn't really know that as a child, and I don't think I really appreciated it. In fact, one of the things that's interesting is that I've just finished this book called Shakespeare Behind Bars, but another book I'm going to write, my next book is going to be more about growing up with German-Jewish and a lot of antisemitism, looking to understand the history and understand why certain choices were made and certain choices weren't made. I didn't really get interested in all of that until I was much older.

JR: Were your parents active in the community as well?

JT: They were in certain ways. The answer is yes, but not in the same way, say, as I am. My father did a lot of shows, theatrical shows, to raise money for the arts and music that way. My mother would do sort of behind-the-scenes kind of stuff. Their direct work

wasn't that way. His work wasn't that way. My mother didn't work. She really raised a family, and that was her choice. As I look at the different members of my family, I see that I sort of fit in with what you were supposed to do to be "a good person."

JR: And those kinds of values were communicated to you in what kinds of ways?

JT: My father's family was very well-to-do. My mother's family was not, yet, we were definitely – at least as I was growing up – an upper-middle-class family. But there was always a sense, even in the social activities of the people my parents knew, the women all worked – charity worked. They all worked for the theater or art museum. They all did something, even if they had the money not to do it. It was just sort of something they did. My father really instilled in me a love for work. Both my parents were really very active people who were physically active and did a lot of sports. My mother was the tennis champion of the Ohio Valley. They were just very much doers and out there. They raised us to think that way. I think, as I look back on it – because I thought about this a lot with the women I worked with in prison – my parents very much believed in me. They believed I could do anything I wanted to do, and they very much instilled in me that anything's possible, and I believed that. I didn't feel held back. For a long time, I wanted to be a professional actress, which is – and they were supportive of that. They weren't critical of that. They thought that was fine. They were supportive when I went to Hollywood and did all those things. I would say that's one thing that was really communicated by the way they were, the sense of activity all the time in the household. My grandmother gave me a tour [of] one of the synagogues. She took me to temple. I had very – even though my family was very Reform and the most Reformed it could possibly be which – and somewhat prejudiced against some Jews for being so shlumpy and poor and not having made it in the same way, there was still a sense that all these German Jews banded together and there was a sense of community. I was very much encouraged to be in a community. There was something else I was going to tell you, but I forgot what it was.

JR: Did you have siblings?

JT: Yes, my brother and sister. My sister's ten years younger. My brother is a few years younger. I grew up predominantly with my brother most of my young life, and he's very active also, and he's really active politically. My brother and I were very much products of the sixties, and something that I always think shaped me in the political sense is we had maids growing up. In Cincinnati, this was right around the time before the riots, and I remember my brother and I were very upset about the fact that there were Black people working in our house, and it was disturbing to us. There were a couple of things that happened that were really pivotal. One is, during the riots – and I guess I was a teenager – we went on to the top of the rooftop of this one building to watch what was going on in Avondale. We were very upset by the fact that these people who – that there was something as though we had – Cincinnati is a very southern city. We had known Black people, and here they were rioting. What did that mean and how could that be? I felt so much that I didn't want to be one of those white people who were the oppressor. I felt that so strongly. Another thing that instilled that in me was that this one Black maid we had who I loved, Ernestine – I think I was twelve or eleven. She was eighteen; the age difference was nothing. She was staying home – maybe I was ten, I can't quite remember – she was taking care of me one night, and I remember – I guess I was twelve – because I remember we lived in this house that I moved into after I was ten. I was a young twelve. I asked her if she would "sleepover," and she would spend the night in my room, just like my girlfriends. I had this amazing closet that had a little door in it – a wonderful sit-in closet. You could sit in the closet. All the clothes were hanging, and you were around the shoes, and there was this door, and I was sure the door had connected to the Underground Railroad. Even if it wasn't true, I was positive that was what was in my closet because there were a lot of places like that in Cincinnati that really were. It sounds funny, but because of that, I never went in there and saw if the place had been walled up, but it's very possible that in that house, there could have been. So I held that idea that I had the Underground Railroad in my house and somehow wanted to be part of

that. Anyway, Ernestine and I were sitting in the closet, and we read from Peyton Place, which was like the "dirty book" of that era, and we talked, and that night she slept in the bed next to me, and we talked about boyfriends and girlfriends in our lives. The next morning my mother said to me, “You may never ever do that again. She is the maid.” So, I think those two experiences really led in some way to me being extremely conscious of not wanting to be a white person who ignored what went on with minorities, with Black people particularly. I didn't know at the time anything about Latinos. There was no other major minority group in Cincinnati. We were lucky to have a Chinese restaurant. [laughter] So, I think those things determined something for me. That, coupled with my grandmother taking me to synagogue, made me feel very connected to being Jewish, but I never connected social activism to Judaism as a young person.

JR: Do you now connect those values?

JT: Yes, very much, and that's why I think I got interested in my own family history in that as both my parents died, one thing that happened was I found the autobiography of Isaac Mayer Wise and my mother – in our family, we took our father's – the Trounstines were very prominent in Cincinnati. They gave money. They founded hospitals. My grandmother, the Rollman family, her side was very prominently connected to the city – I don't if you've heard the Lazaruses? There was a whole connection of department stores, and they probably all had little wagons until they first came to the country, but they had made it. They all had made it in America. We belonged to Rockdale Temple, and Rockdale Temple didn’t even have – hardly even had any bar mitzvahs. It was the most Reform you could possibly imagine. Yet I still went to temple with my grandmother. I still loved going there. I still associated something about God. I've written about that, actually, being there with my grandmother. I love that and I thought – I think that religion and theater in some ways were for me in many ways not that far apart. There was something very gigantic and dramatic about the temple. I wanted as a child to be a rabbi. There wasn’t any way to be a female rabbi, but I loved all of that, all the religiousness

and the ritual and the beauty of that. Anyway, we didn't really honor my mother's family, and so I didn't even really know I was descended – I mean, I knew I was descended from Isaac Mayer Wise, but I didn't know who he was. I didn't know anything. We had gone to Wise Temple, which he had founded in Cincinnati. So, they had kind of claimed my father's family, which was less Jewish than my mother's family, which I think – this is my assumption, I'm not sure – were, in some ways, more Jewish. So, I'm really interested in that, and I'm really interested in how that occurs. She kind of gave it up. There was a sense that she didn't really want to be Jewish. She had felt poor. She wanted the security, the marriage. She married my dad when she was eighteen, and he went to war. He had gone to Stanford. He couldn't get into Yale because of the quota system. He originally wanted to be a lawyer, and then he went into business in Cincinnati. My father was a Republican Marine and Jewish. It was a very odd sort of background in that way, very conservative. I think that in terms of activism, it took me a long time to realize that I had descended from someone who founded Judaism, I mean modern Reform Judaism. What's that about? Then Helen Trounstine – a sister of my grandfather, who died in '28, who had done work in child welfare. All of this history in my family, which I feel a part of, but it wasn't really tied together for me or communicated for me, is coming more together now as an adult. I put it together that way now. There's still questions for me, still things I feel I need to really understand about my family. Why? When I think [inaudible] understanding about my family, I understand more about the history of German Judaism and what happened. I got really fascinated with this. So my journey has taken me to that, but that's not complete yet.

JR: What was your family's Jewish life like as you were growing up?

JT: Well, they tried Chanukah with me. That was the end. [laughter] I loved Sunday school. In Cincinnati, we had Hebrew Union College, so I wanted to be confirmed. I of course wasn't bat mitzvahed, but I went back and we had – there was this wonderful – I don't know if you've heard of Bill Cutter, who my rabbi now here knows, and he's big

somebody in LA [Los Angeles] and had done a lot of work in HUC [Hebrew Union College] in, I think LA. He was a teacher of mine, and people would come from different places in the city when I was in high school to go take a class by him. He would ask these good questions like, is there God? What's going on? As a high school student, nobody was asking those kinds of questions, so to me, it was a wonderful place to be, those classes, and I met really intellectual people, and I had a boyfriend out of that class whose father was a Rabbi at HUC. I got to know sort of the different world than my family had led me to – "led me" – I use the quotation marks because, in some sense, my parents were happy with me dating non-Jewish people. They were happy with me assimilating. Being, as they were, they wanted to be and were. They did belong to a Jewish country club, but it was a Reform Jewish country club. They had a lot of non-Jewish friends, and they really didn't do much for – when we had Passover, and we did, it was sort of a funny Passover, a Passover with as little Hebrew as possible. Yet, the thing that was so ironic [was] we still had – my grandmother had – she didn't call it Shabbos, but we had Friday nights. Every Friday night my whole family got together and we called it family night. There was this imparting of values, but it was like not saying the word Jewish, and yet here it was. My father always did parodies of Jews for shows, yet he was sort of the epitome of giving in some sense. So again it was a really interesting yes/no mix. That's kind of how I look at it.

JR: Was your brother bar mitzvahed?

JT: No. My brother first married a non-Jewish woman, and they're divorced. He's married to someone also non-Jewish, but she converted. My sister married somebody from a religious background [and] I married somebody who was Orthodox, came from an Orthodox background, actually was my second marriage. The first person I married was closer to my background, but not quite. It was interesting that I still gravitated towards somebody who was more Jewish in some ways or had that more than I, and he gravitated toward me is kind of interesting.

JR: Did your family have any relationship to Israel?

JT: Not much. I don't think we were against Israel [laughter], but I think that's about it. It was like, yeah. I mean, my dad voted for Roosevelt, I think, and that was the end. I remember sitting up with my brother watching TV and rooting for Eisenhower because my parents voted for Eisenhower. He was Republican. My mom voted for Kennedy; I don't think my dad did.

JR: How has your relationship to Judaism changed over time? What is it like now?

JT: We're members of a synagogue. It's interesting because we don't have children – I mean, I have nieces and nephews I'm connected to, but, you don't have quite the same Jewish life, necessarily, if you don't have children, I think. We belong to a Havurah in our synagogue, which is very important to me, and other families in the Havurah have kids. We get together on holidays, and we get together – my husband calls it a social eating club – we'd get together, and everybody cooks. I'm very close to my rabbi at the synagogue.

JR: What kind of synagogue do you go to?

JT: It's Reform. It's in Andover. I have the same feeling going to synagogue there that I did going with my grandmother. I love the feeling – and I don't go often enough. I certainly don't go predictably. I've gone through different periods of my life that I have gone more predictably. When I first came to Boston, I taught at Ohabei Shalom, and I taught at Temple Emunah. I taught drama in religious school and other things for years. I did that, actually, in California. I've always felt very culturally Jewish, and I like Judaism, but I don't feel particularly in need of more than what I have right now. I certainly consider myself more Jewish than probably even my parents did, more connected to it.

JR: Just to go back, I know you said before about – you were trying to remember who your parents voted for in that election. I was wondering how much politics was discussed in your house.

JT: To some degree, we would get into arguments all the time, politically, particularly as my brother and I got older. My sister was a little too young really at that time. My brother because he was the political editor of the San Jose Mercury, and now he's communications director for Gray Davis. My brother was always the most outspoken, and he could argue the best with my father. I wasn't quite as good at arguing, and I think I've gotten better now, but I could never really win an argument with my father. We weren't exactly discussers at my house. Everyone took their positions, and everyone sort of got their points across, but it was hard. It was tough. You were on the line. You had to struggle to survive intellectually. That's how I felt. My father was so good at that and so good at sort of logically pinning you down, and that was never my forte. I was the theatrical one. I was the artistic one. I'd get frustrated, and I'd give up until I got to know things about prison, and then I could argue [with] anyone because I knew much more than anybody.

JR: How did you get involved in that, in prison work?

JT: A fluke, really. It was a fluke. I had most of my life – I think I said I had been an actress. I had been in theater. I had gone to Hollywood. I went to Brandeis and majored – and that was interesting – I went to Brandeis in theater, got an MFA in theater. It was interesting. I went to Brandeis, and it was also nice to be in that world. Anyway, my first marriage broke up, and I came to Boston, and I was teaching in a school for emotionally disturbed kids. I had done that in California, and this was just with girls, and I had always sort of been interested in girls, particularly teaching girls. I was taking a poetry workshop with a woman, Barbara Helfgott Hyett, and she was offered a job teaching at Framingham. She couldn't do it because she had too many commitments at the time.

So she knew what my job was and said maybe you might want to do this. I think I was teaching at Duxbury High School at the time, and I needed extra money. I thought, "Well I have never done this before." I was interested in that. I thought it would be an interesting thing to do, work with women in prison. The community college, at that time, had college classes which no longer exist for the most part because of the crime bill that was signed by [Bill] Clinton taking away Pell Grants from prisoners, and those were funds that funded college classes. So mostly, there are not many college classes unless they are privately funded. Anyway, 1986 was the first time I taught in prison.

JR: What was your experience like?

JT: It was wonderful. People always say, "Weren't you scared?" Not particularly. I kind of had an image of what the women would be like, but they weren't. I had some gigantic nine-foot-tall women who would attack me. I had some really stupid idea of big women in prison or something, but it wasn't at all like that. It was so dramatic; I think it satisfied all my needs for drama. You go in, you're searched, [and] you're put through all of this just to get into prison. So right from the moment you go, you know this is like this gigantic thing if they have to put you through all this stuff. That was one thing. It's very politicizing in that guards are searching you and that there are people who have to go through this every day and understand that. It was very strange to me, that experience. But the women were fantastic. They were smart. They were funny. It was more like walking into a community of women than any other experience. That's really how I identify it. I became attached to the community of women and to what I could give them, and that's what happened. Gradually, from teaching writing classes and literature classes, one of the women suggested that we do a play, and they like plays. First, I thought that it would be way too hard to do a play in prison, but I thought that it would be fun. I was young and didn't have any understanding of what was going to go on. The first play was – well, it came out of a couple of things. One is I had decided to apply – and I can't remember exactly why I decided to do this – but I decided to apply to an NEH

[National Endowment for the Humanities] seminar to study Shakespeare in England. Somebody, maybe at Duxbury, had mentioned these seminars. They had gone the year before and said it was so fabulous, or she was going to apply, or it was this wonderful experience. So she had got this thing, and I looked at it, and there was this seminar where you could study Shakespeare in England by being part of a performance, go to twenty plays. That sounded so fantastic to me. I was single at the time. So I decided to apply. I remember I was talking to my brother, and he said, what could distinguish me? He said, "You have to think of something that could get you into this." So I was teaching in prison, and what can I do? So, he actually helped me come up with the idea that I would do the same play – I'd come back, and do a play in prison, [the] same play in prison that I would study with the kids in high school. I thought that was a good idea. So I took that and ran with it and kind of developed a proposal based on that. Then it turned out – I mean, it was a good proposal. It was really good, but it also turned out that the woman who was running the seminar, who I did not know, was the sister of someone I had grown up with in Cincinnati. She had also recognized my name from the application. I don't think I got it because of that. I think the proposal was good, but she was like, oh – at the time, I was going by Jeannie, Jeannie Trounstine. So, when I went to England, one of the plays they were doing that summer was Merchant of Venice. I studied the Merchant of Venice, and I really hated – I didn't hate it, but I didn't like the production of Merchant of Venice. It was very disturbing to me, and I loved Sir Lawrence Olivier's version of Merchant of Venice, which was much more of a sympathetic Shylock, a German-Jewish Shylock and one who felt betrayed by – we didn't do it like that in the prison, but I was touched by that, I think, because of that. He was such an assimilated person and yet still not despised, but still kept out. That was so interesting to me. Here he was in all these gorgeous clothes. He wasn't spit on like the production I saw in England, but he was rejected, and it was a much subtler rejection. It was much more truthful, obviously, closer to my own personal experience. It was very interesting to me. That intrigued me, and the notion that Shylock, of course, could be seen so many

different ways was fascinating to me. I had really – it's interesting now that we're talking – I have never put that together until this minute. I never really at all put that together since you asked me about my German-Jewish background until this very minute. That's funny because I've been doing this for a long time, giving a lot of interviews, and I never put that together. Of course, now, as I say it, it would make sense that that would touch me. I knew when I studied with the kids it would be different, so I came up with this idea, some grandiose idea, of course, that wouldn't work, that I'd bring the kids into prison, and they'd see the production – I didn't know enough about prison – and that there would be some marvelous exchange. Anyway, I contacted Gail, who then was working at the Mass Foundation for Humanities. Well, actually, I contacted Steven at MFH first. He thought it was an interesting idea for me to study a play in prison and do it with the kids and so on. I had no idea how to write a grant. I had never done anything like this. But I had gotten copies of other people's, and I did it. We got a grant from the Mass Foundation and got permission to do the play in the prison, and that's kind of how it began. Now that I'm thinking about that Shylock interpretation, I showed them Sir Lawrence Olivier. I showed them another version. I showed them Patrick Stewart's version of Shylock, and we read it. But we did borrow from Sir Lawrence Olivier. We borrowed two things. In the film version, the “Hath not a Jew eyes” monologue is done right before the trial scene and really sets up a little more sympathy for Shylock, and I wanted to set up some more sympathy for Shylock. However, in our production, we also set up about as much tension towards Shylock as possible because, in the prison, the women did not identify with Shylock. They identified with Antonio, who we made into a Mafioso kind of character – because we put it in the 1920s, just at the turn of the century kind of thing when there were Jewish immigrants. Our Shylock had “peyes.” He was much more of a foreign-looking character. It was like New York City – 1920. So the three – Antonio and his "henchmen" – were like Mafioso. So, the women identified with those characters. So, on some level, until we got to the end of the scene – and they loved Portia. We had Portia undisguised, so she was the only woman in the court, and

they loved Portia. There was all this bravado for her and bravado for their talking. It was like the whole prison was a courtroom, and they were all on the side of Antonio. Yet, as soon as we got to the taking away of the religion, it was like a turnaround, and the women all went, “You can't take away a man's religion. You can't take away a man's faith. Even if he is a Jew, you can't take … I don't care what a person is.” That was really remarkable, a remarkable experience. I didn't realize I had stacked the deck so totally against Shylock, and yet, it worked. That's because of Shakespeare. That's because the play does have that turnaround. You can't help but feel sympathy which taught me to be honest to the play. I think you have to have a sympathetic Shylock. Anyway, that's kind of a long way of answering the question, but that's how I got into it.

JR: Tell me how the work you were doing worked. You would study the play – just tell me, I'm not going to guess that.

JT: I worked in the prison teaching a lot of different things, but the play projects the first few years were really funded by grants. After that – I worked in prison for eight years – we were funded by grants for three years. When we did the grant funding, it was a little different because we had to work through a different office, and there wasn't credit for the classes. Later on, when we weren’t grant-funded, there was credit given as a class. [inaudible]

JR: How many did you have?

JT: Again, that would vary. Plus, also, people would leave. I'd have six or eight people, and then two would go, and one would come, and somebody would be gone one day before the dress rehearsal – all these kinds of things would happen. It was a prison. I'd say things like, “No visits,” so they would look at me like I was – [laughter] no visits during rehearsals. Of course, they would think, “Oh, yeah. Right, Jean.” I was trying to make it a theatrical professional experience. The way it worked for the first play is that we studied the play for a few months, and then we rehearsed the play for a few months. So

there was a period of five or six months of being involved in it. At first, I think it was once a week and then it was twice a week. We worked under every condition possible in the prison. One night there'd be a unit locked down because somebody had tried to commit suicide, so I'd be in the prison waiting for them to come down from the cottages – they called them cottages – and they would get there an hour a late or somebody would have to go early because they had a phone call from their lawyer, etc. But it was still worth doing. The studying involved reading it out loud, having them read it alone, talking it through, changing the language, doing acting exercises, actual rehearsing of the text.

JR: What was your relationship like with the women?

JT: Read my book. [laughter] February 2001, Shakespeare Behind Bars – it's coming out. I think my relationship was really good with the women. I think they thought I was tough. They thought I was funny. They would say things to me like, “I had a dress like that.” They wanted to know more about my personal life than I would tell them. However, there was a community. They were very giving in a funny way, very loving. They were temperamental. I remember I yelled at them at a dress rehearsal. Theatrical. I got furious that they hadn't memorized lines, or I said, “What do you think they're doing?” So they all had them quickly memorized the next day. In some ways, they were like children – not children – but they were like kids with mom. I was learning so much the first year. I learned how much they thought no one cared about them in the outside world. Prison was a place they were locked up, and that was the end of that. In many cases, that was true. Through them, I became very fascinated by how many poor people get sent to prison who don't necessarily get the kind of lawyers rich people do, so about class and then again about Black-white issues. There was a mix of students in the class. There were Latinas and Blacks and whites and people of different reading levels. Some people had gone to college or taken college classes, and some people were trying to get their GED.

JR: Were they a diverse range of ages as well?

JT: There was one woman, I think, that was eighteen during my period of time. The older women were fifty. I had one woman who was seventy, a pretty famous person, who was in my classes. A lot of people would come to classes because they had nothing else to do that was very meaningful, so they enrolled in school. It wasn't just because it was education. They were trying to "kill time."

JR: Was the teaching experience with them very different than other kinds of teaching you had done?

JT: Yes and no. In some ways, they're more open than in the "regular world," where you have to worry about grades. They don't worry about grades. This is really – it's different not having to worry socially. People weren't worried about what other people thought in the classroom in the same way you might feel in a college. Sometimes, there was more tension. Women were hostile to each other for different reasons. There could be really a lot of tension in the classroom. I was sometimes told, “Don't use a story that's going to bring up racial issues or some kind of – don't do this and don't do that,” particularly as the years progressed. You would be told there's a little more censorship sometimes in prison.

JR: Did you follow those kinds of guidelines?

JT: Yes and no. Sometimes, sometimes not – depends on how risky it was. I was pretty much left to myself. The officer would come in to check to make sure that the people were in the right place at the right time. There were sometimes when there were some intrusions. It got worse as it went, but mostly it wasn't – I was left to do what I wanted to do. Unless there was a problem, and I'd hear about it the next day. Then something would happen to me, like I'd get keys taken away or I'd get sent to retraining. Anytime time I did anything – I remember there was an assignment I gave, and it was a disaster

where I had in an acting class – I would do this normally in my regular classes – go observe somebody and don't let you know you're observing them, like, sit in a bus station and watch a person and write about them to be able to create in class this acting exercise. In prison, it turned out somebody observed somebody who didn't want to be observed. It was a terrible experience, and other things happened like that. Then somebody would find out, and I'd get called, and – "Why'd you do that?" Quite truthfully, I felt – and it still amazes me that I actually stayed there, in prison, ten years – because the truth is that many people don't last that long. I was always feeling that I could be kicked out at any minute. I was living with that – oh, did I cross this line? Did I do that? – always. Are they going to like this play? Is it going to be this or –? One year, I did Waiting for Lefty. Do you know that play? Because there's a taxicab driver strike at the end of that play, the women are all going – they're like this. On the stage, they broke into song. If it had been a men's prison, God knows what could have happened. The women are less – they don't kind of go to the next step – yet there was a sense of – you know, they're all yelling, "Strike, strike, strike." It was kind of profound, in a way. In the beginning, I wasn't censored. I just did the plays. I don't think anybody cared enough, and I also think a lot of people don't understand the power of getting characters inside you. So, I don't think anybody at first really understood how powerful that is to do. Later on, I think they got clearer that I could be doing things that they thought were bad. Like when I was doing this play, Madwomen of Chaillot I changed the title to Madwomen of the Modular. But they didn't want me to put up signs in the prison that said Madwomen of the Modular. They thought that would be too problematic.

JR: What was most challenging for you about this kind of work?

JT: The most challenging thing to me was to always focus on the women and to not focus on whether it was going to be a good play or get caught up in the artistic sort of sensibility of – a sense that, oh, I want this to be brilliant. There was always a sense that I had to continually focus on who they were and what was important to them, and when I

did that, everything went fine. When I got lost in, is this going to be good, everything went terrible. So, it's constantly focusing on them. That's the strongest learning experience for me and taught me the most. I'd say the other thing is literally dealing with corrections and managing myself. I'm not an easy, relaxed – I'm an intense person with strong opinions who can't – I'm impatient. I can't stand idiot rules that seem to have no reason. Keeping my cool in the midst of a lot of that was very, very challenging, difficult, but because I really didn't want to get kicked out of prison because I really wanted so strongly to be there, I did. I did actually get "kicked out of prison." That is, in a sense, the story, but I got back in. It's very funny. There had been this sort of confusion. They said they had told me that I was not supposed to send videotapes to the families, and yet they'd let me videotape – for instance, this was my last year doing Arsenic and Old Lace. I ended up sending videotapes to the families, and they found out about it, and they got very angry and basically told me I could never come back to Framingham again. I was so incensed about that. It seemed so crazy after ten years of work that me doing something, sending videotapes of the play to the families – what is that? I went to the president of my college. I went to different people, and they overturned it. They had a commissioner at the time because it really made no sense to get rid of me because of that. They basically called the prison and told them they had to let me back in. The prison had a meeting with me and told me, "We don't want you here, but we're letting you back in." But the sad thing is that by that time, the Pell Grants had been eliminated. So, I was working with Boston University, and since Boston University is a four-year school, in order to have enough people to be in the feeder – I was teaching English class in order to get my feeder class for the play. Each fall, I would teach the same thing, an English class. In the spring, I'd have people who knew me from that class who would then enroll to be in an acting class to be in the play. I taught for Boston University in English – I don't remember if I taught an English class for Boston University. No, I don't think I did. Maybe it was an Acting I class or something – but anyway, there weren't enough people in the spring to take the class to be in the play because in order to be in Boston

University, you had to have fifteen credits. So without the community college program, they couldn't be in Boston University. There just weren't enough people.

JR: What were the most rewarding parts of this work?

JT: I don't know how to answer that. It became my life's work. It changed me. It gave me a passion. It gave me a direction. Since I started working in prison, I became interested in working with those women, and I do it in other situations. I run a program called Changing Lives Through Literature, and it's a program where women are "sentenced" to literature instead of going to prison. A judge and probation officer – the judge who sentences the women – sits in a reading room, and we discuss a text. Everybody is equal in the room; it's like alternative sentencing. It got me interested in prisons and what we're doing with prisons. It gave me sort of a – it sounds kind of corny, but it really feels like my purpose. My purpose is to do that kind of work. I think, in some ways, it's changing a little bit. What I meant is people change because of this program. I did that for ten years. I don't really feel like I want to go back inside the prison, but I do these things outside, and I've kind of become a writer now. I told you about that next book project after I finish this, that may be, but with this book, I'm hoping to reach a lot of people and tell them about why there should be education in prisons and why there should be art programs in prisons. I actually think, in a way, what happens to people – you do the hands-on experience, and you do it long enough that you have something to say about it. When you have something to say about it, then you really want other people to know about it. You want them to understand how important that is. So that was the phase of writing a book for me, and now, as the book comes out, the phase will be of hopefully reaching people and having it affect them. I don't know what will come of that because that hasn't happened yet. But that's the – I'll see what will come of that, whether – I have one woman who's out of prison who I have contact with. It's really interesting because we provide for each other a connection to those days, and we provide for each other a connection to that life. She's the only person that I really feel

understands that life to the same degree that I understand that life. It was a real privilege to be able to learn about something I would never have learned about if I hadn't undertaken this work. I don't think people have any idea about that world. Certainly, coming from my background, I would never have found that out if I hadn't done something like this.

JR: How do you think that the work you did affected the women that you worked with?

JT: That's a hard question, too, because the women who I worked with – just being in a classroom in prison, I think, is a marvelous thing and coming over and over again and sticking to something. Having that happen where you actually learn that you complete something is already fantastic. Getting to read things, getting to be in a play, getting to say those words – the language, I think, affected people. It's not that I would ever make the claim [that] you're sexually abused, and you get to be in a play, and now you don't feel sexually abused anymore. It's nothing like that, but it's something to do with the spirit, and it's something to do with the transformation that, in some way, gives you some sort of – at least for that moment, at least for that time, it's uplifting. It's building something deep inside you. The prison works very hard to break that down. Every day you go back, and there you are in prison, and every day, you go back, and there you are being yelled at, and so on. It's not an easy thing to say that you are changed. I don't believe that. The world is too harsh, but I do think that there's some lasting – that the arts and humanities have the power to affect you in a lasting way about the way you think and about the way you see the world and about how you believe in yourself even if it's just some piece that you don't even necessarily know is inside you.

JR: Have you had any role models?

JT: Well, a couple. Atticus Finch. I always wanted to be Atticus Finch in To Kill a Mockingbird. In some ways, my grandmother, who died when I was ten – my mother's mother. I adored her, and I don't know that I intended to emulate her – she was a social

worker. My other grandmother was certainly a role model. A person at temple – it's interesting. Her name was Hilda Rothschild, who I loved – she let me light the candles and sing sometimes occasionally. I loved her. She died too young too. Those are the people I can think of that I'd say most. But interesting. I very much loved the characters that I met. I didn't have women characters that I would meet in books, so they had to be men. I think that's why I love Atticus Finch. I love her, too – I love the girl in To Kill a Mockingbird. But I really think he was much more – particularly in the movie; the way he was portrayed completed that for me.

JR: Were you involved in the Women's Movement at all?

JT: Yes and no. I didn't change my name. I had to go to a lawyer to get my name kept the same the first time I got married. In those days, I remember I had to pay fifty bucks so I could have a credit card in my name, Trounstine. [laughter]

JR: That's strange.

JT: I lived in this commune in California. It was certainly pro-feminist. I think I went through all these things everyone went through. I didn't shave. I did all these things that were sort of the superficial things of being in the Women's Movement. I don't think until I worked in the prison – I think really working in a prison got me to be – I mean, you can't not be involved in the Women's Movement if you're working in a prison in some way. But I didn't do – I would say my husband is more of a pro-feminist in more of a conscious way than I was. Yeah, I think I'm just sort of by my nature like that. That's just who I am. I didn't have to be involved in the Women's Movement particularly. I never went to a women's group per se when it was the '60s. But yes, there's no way I couldn't have been.

JR: How did it work in prison to bring that out?

JT: The Women's Movement? Building confidence, I think, with women and sort of constantly being the voice of – you can do it, you're good enough, you don't need a man to do it. All of that reinforces a sense of you're okay by yourself.

JR: Do you think of yourself as a political person?

JT: Yes and no. I think that the work that I did was very political in bringing awareness, giving people something they didn't have – access to literature and access to a kind of cultural world they might have felt they didn't belong to in some way. I think that's political. I'm not a political person in the sense that I don't really gravitate toward groups and meetings and all that stuff. I'm not political that way at all. I'm sort of anti-political in that way. [laughter] I'm more of a writer that way and more of a loner that way. I hope my book will be political in a sense of – I guess I want to say that I don't think you can not be political when you advocate for women in prison because they're such a forgotten minority. But I don't do the political things like getting out there and signing petitions and doing that kind of stuff.

JR: That's about the end of my questions. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?

JT: Well, it was interesting when I went to the thing – Women Who Dared – because I never thought of myself as anyone who ever dared anything.

JR: Almost everyone I have interviewed has said that. It's very interesting.

JT: Yeah. For me, it gave me a lot to work in the prison. It didn't take courage in the way that, say, it takes courage to go to another country and be – at least in my imagination – what's the woman who did the thing with Bosnians who did Passover – to

me, that's courage. That's scary. Going into a prison is really being able to deal with poor, sad, and lonely women. I think courage is only in having the courage to deal with your feelings to understand what kind of people we have in the world and how we keep them. I think that perhaps might be courage in that sense, but it's not daring. It's much more that I would cry every night I would go home. On the way home, in the car, all the way home, as I thought about the women and that to go back in, I had to be willing to know that I was entering that kind of world that was so sad and locked up and so lonely. But I think my personality is suited for that. I'm an upbeat person, so I feel like I wanted to do that. So, I never felt I dared anything.

JR: Great. Well, thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]