Judith Wolf Transcript

JULIE JOHNSON: I'd like to just start and talk about your early upbringing a little bit.

JUDITH WOLF: My childhood.

JJ: Yeah. Just some of the very basic questions to begin with, where and when you were born.

JW: I was born in Boston and I grew up in Boston. To give you a picture, we lived in a two-family house in the same house as my grandparents. We lived there because my mother was the only daughter with five brothers. Her parents were observant, so my mother and dad wanted to live near them. They needed to live – well, we all needed to live near kosher butchers, near a shul, et cetera. So we lived in Dorchester as did many other families who were observant, because we were near the facilities we needed. And as I think of it, right now, it was a remarkably stable neighborhood.

JJ: What do you mean, stable?

JW: On the street that I grew up on, everybody knew everybody. You knew the parents. You knew the children. The children were my friends.

JJ: It wasn't transient. People weren't moving around.

JW: Exactly. It was a Jewish neighborhood. People were not necessarily Orthodox, but if they weren't Orthodox, Mishkan Tefillah, which was Conservative, was a distance. I don't know what they did. They may have been secular or humanists. But surely the Orthodox shul, now Beth El, and the Beth El Hebrew School were the prime focus, for observant people.

JJ: What year was this?

JW: I was born in 1932. In 1950 I went to college, and my parents moved either the year before or after. But that was the neighborhood that I grew up in.

JJ: So you were born in Dorchester?

JW: Yes.

JJ: What hospital?

JW: The Richardson House. I was born there and my children were born there, and my cousins and et cetera. But, if anything, that was an exception on a more pertinent note, because it was very much a homogeneous Jewish world. In Boston, public school teachers were not allowed to be married. I would say better than ninety percent of my teachers were probably Catholic, with a couple of Protestants. I went to Girls' Latin School, which began in the seventh grade, the sixth class. So the sixth through the first class. Other people entered in the ninth grade. But you were seated alphabetically. My maiden name was Hirsh, so I sat behind Peggy Hines and in front of Rosie Jingoziam for six years. We were very, very, very close. The great thing about Latin School is people of all religions were very, very close. But basically the world, my parent's world, my grandparent's world, was a very, very, very, very Jewish world. I mean, their friends were Jewish. I must say they were very welcoming of my friends who were both Jewish and classmates who were not Jewish. But on the High Holidays when I was growing up, there was an outpouring of people on the streets. Something you see in Israel or in parts of New York. My grandfather, who was an officer in the shul, wore what the officers wore – he was the president – a top hat and cut-away formal clothes. Very interesting.

JJ: You had siblings?

JW: No. But I was very, very close to my grandparents and I had three bachelor uncles who lived with my grandparents, so the house was full of people.

JJ: OK. And you lived with both of your parents?

JW: Yes.

JJ: And how would you describe your class status or your economic stratus growing up?

JW: Very comfortable. It's an interesting question. In that day and age, money really wasn't discussed, at least the way I was brought up. There were clearly people in the neighborhood or relatives who had less. It just wasn't anything. I'll give you an example which I find very, very, very moving. We lived in a two-story house. And, people used to come to our house who I never saw at anybody else's house. Black hats. Black suits. Sometimes with boxes. We bought thread – we never bought thread in the store or notions or all of that. And when I asked who were these rather formidable-looking people, all I was told, and the only thing I was ever told, was that they were friends of my grandmother's. As an adult, or in college, when I saw Hester Street, I understood that some of the people were peddlers. But I had no way of knowing.

JJ: Right.

JW: And the other people came because my grandmother was known to be a very, very charitable person. So whoever was in need or had a venture that needed help, they would come to her. And yet, the only explanation ever given to me was friends of my grandmother's.

JJ: So in terms of the schools you attended, you attended the Girls' Latin –

JW: Latin School.

JJ: Up until what age did you say?

JW: Oh, seventeen.

JJ: Seventeen. So you graduated from there?

JW: Yes, and went to Wellesley, an all-women's college. And I got my PhD from Boston College.

JJ: When you graduated from college, what were some of the things that you did professionally, work-wise?

JW: I was married.

JJ: Oh, so you were married at what age?

JW: Twenty-one, I think. We moved – we lived near Buffalo and I just got any job that I could get. I believe I worked for the statistics department of the University of Buffalo, with the proviso I could take courses along with it. Then I taught – New York State had a program, kind of an accelerated program, to prepare teachers, so I taught the fourth grade for about a year and a half and then we moved. Then I didn't have a job in Toronto. I don't even think I was allowed to as an American.

JJ: Oh, you moved to Toronto from Buffalo?

JW: Right. As an American citizen. I think it was the McCarthy era – I know it was.

JJ: So it was the 1950s?

JW: Yes. To teach in Ontario, I believe you had to sign allegiance to the Canadian government, which as an American citizen I didn't wish to do because it might have jeopardized my American citizenship.

JJ: Yeah. How long did you live in Toronto?

JW: I don't know. I know we were there in '56, for a year, because we were there during the Hungarian Revolt, and a volunteer program that I was involved in was interviewing and resettling Hungarian refugees who fled the country. Then we moved back to Boston.

JJ: What was the impetus to move to Toronto?

JW: My husband's profession.

JJ: What does he do?

JW: He's a civil engineer, in the construction and development business.

JJ: What were some of the other jobs you had over the years?

JW: Very heavy duty on volunteerism.

JJ: And I know you've been a parent also, so that's a full-time job.

JW: But, for many women of my generation, Jackie Levine calls it “professional volunteers”. I was active in the American Jewish Congress Women's Division, locally and nationally, for years, and I ultimately was the national chairman of their governing counsel, and I've been co-chairman. So I was a national officer of the Women's Division and of the general American Jewish Congress.

JJ: Mm-hmm. And what kinds of things did you do in that position?

JW: Oh, I can tell you very specifically my area of interest. My major was history in college, my area of interest was international affairs, Israel and Jewish communities in distress. So, I was the first woman chairman of the Women's Plea for Soviet Jewry here. I was the first chairman of the Ethiopian Jewry Committee and then the World Jewry Committee of the JCRC, then the Jewish Community Council. For Congress, what we did was mobilize public opinion to help Soviet Jews, and then through Congress and the

JCRC, Syrian Jewry and of course, Israel.

JJ: How long were you involved with the Congress? How many years?

JW: Forty years. Thirty-five years. And the same with the Council.

JJ: Yeah. So that was a big part of what you did outside of parenting.

JW: A very major part.

JJ: So, you went to Wellesley. You went to BC –

JW: When my children went to school, so did I. No, I went to BC. Boston College. My thesis was the development of public educational systems, Arabic and Hebrew, in British Mandatory Palestine, which was from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the period of my study. What I wanted to do was research in writing about Zionism. My husband had a business. I've always gotten a kick out of advertising and marketing, and I think for about ten years I ran the marketing and advertising and research for the real estate development going on in Maine and New Hampshire. But throughout all this time, I remained active in American Jewish organizations.

I have to tell you my running gag was the best preparation for your orals – I had two days of written and a day of orals, and the pre-orals was my training in the American Jewish Congress, because we had to defend positions and ideas. I remember I literally had an American Jewish Congress meeting, a Women's Division meeting, right after one of my written exams. They were all very closely interwoven.

JJ: At some point, you decided to have a family of your own.

JW: I have three children. Sue. Robin, who is an architect. David, who is in the construction business. And Sue with whom, of course, I work with. And we have six grandchildren, whose pictures are over there.

JJ: I know Sue is in the area. Are your other children?

JW: All of them are.

JJ: Oh, that's nice. So it sounds like parenting as well as your volunteer work with Jewish organizations is the primary focus for you for a long time.

JW: Absolutely. My own following a thread was my own interests in history and reading and research and Jewish organizations, or at least the Women's Division and the Congress not only permitted but encouraged – we did research projects, we wrote papers, we tackled issues, we planned all kinds of community activities.

JJ: I want to move into Jewish identity a bit. So, it sounds like your family did identify as Jews.

JW: And they were activists. My grandparents were extremely active in Orthodox circles. My grandfather worked with Rabbi Soloveitchick to establish Maimonides [School] and was active in the shul. My father and mother were very, very active Zionists. My mother was very, very active in the Hebrew College.

JJ: And in what ways were they active as Zionists? You said at Hebrew College, but can you give me any examples?

JW: Sure. My father was active in the Zionist organization. There would be leading Zionists who would come to our house. There would be programs and parades, that kind of thing.

JJ: OK. Did you go to synagogue?

JW: Yes. Orthodox.

JJ: Did you celebrate Jewish holidays?

JW: Oh, yes.

JJ: What did that look like? Which holidays?

JW: Oh, sure.

JJ: Yeah.

JW: All of the major holidays. As a matter of fact, I did not attend school, not only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur but on Sukkot, Shavuot and Pesach, on those days that were special holidays.

JJ: What did your family do at home to recognize those holidays if anything?

JW: Well, you'd go to shul. You'd have holiday dinners. You'd light candles. This was very traditional.

JJ: Did you participate in any particular Jewish activities, such as Jewish camp or youth organizations?

JW: I went to Hebrew School for six or seven years, and that was it.

JJ: Do you have any particular memories from Hebrew School? Anything that you particularly liked or didn't like?

JW: The style of learning hadn't changed over centuries. You read something in Hebrew and translated it into conversational Hebrew. And, I suppose into English. My mother and father spoke Hebrew. I figured, we should either go to Palestine and learn Hebrew, or be Americans. So I did not speak Hebrew. I'm now studying Hebrew, conversational Hebrew at the Hebrew College. But when I was growing up, I said I wouldn't.

JJ: But they spoke at home in Hebrew?

JW: Sure, and English, too. My grandmother spoke Yiddish.

JJ: Did you ever have the desire to learn Yiddish?

JW: Yes, and I did study Yiddish for a time.

JJ: How has your relationship to Judaism changed over time, or has it? Can you talk a little bit about that?

JW: Yes. I think my appreciation of Judaism has deepened and widened. I think that as I've studied it philosophically and historically in depth – Judaism gives the underpinnings of values which can frame one's life. I think that growing up, I took it for granted. Because it was just there. As an adult, both in college and then, we lived in towns, in a couple of small towns, and there were issues of antisemitism. What I saw in Judaism was a strength. I think one of the most profound features in Judaism, and I remember thinking of this even as a child, that on Yom Kippur, you can be forgiven your sins against God, but not against your fellow man. For that, you must get forgiveness from the person who has been hurt, which is really a profound philosophy. So, Judaism at its core set the relationship of one person to another and one's obligations as a human being, which aren't temporal or peripheral or because it's fashionable, which is really quite extraordinary. Reaching out to the stranger, I saw it as a child. I saw it as an adult. On Pesach, Passover, and on the holidays, my grandparents, I think through the shul, made sure that every Jewish family had holiday food at their table.

I remember as a youngster, the women sat in the balcony. In the shul, that my grandfather said if I would stay in shul, he would buy me a seat and I was wildly proud to have my own seat at a very, very young age, eleven, twelve, with my own prayer books. I couldn't sit next to my mother or grandmother because the same people had seats year after year after year. So I sat in different places. And I remember, people were very nice. It was very warm. I never thought sitting in a balcony was second best. It didn't

ever enter my mind. But there was a woman who was clearly, based on her clothing, very, very poor. She brought her child to shul on Yom Kippur and fed that little girl. She was never embarrassed. There was never any to-do about it because it was clear that the only way the woman could come to the synagogue was to bring her little girl, and that little girl needed to be able to eat. And it seemed to me that that was very, very beautiful and compassionate, and gave me a great deal of respect for what I saw.

JJ: It sounds like you see your activism now and over the years connected to Jewish values.

JW: I thought all Jews have responsibilities for other people. I thought it was like brushing one's teeth. That that was just life. Or going to school. I never knew, until I was in college, Jews who weren't committed or activists. I don't think I articulated clearly enough to myself growing up that it was Jewish values, I just thought it was part of being Jewish.

JJ: As a young person growing up in your family, I know your parents identified as Zionist; did you take on those philosophies as a young person?

JW: That's an interesting question. Look, it was during the war and my grandparents brought over members of the family from Europe.

JJ: From where specifically? If you know.

JW: From Eastern Europe, I'm sure. From Poland, I think. And, I would have been happy if we had all decided to move to Palestine. You know, they were Zionists. They had a Zionist choral group. I couldn't quite balance – if we're such Zionists, what are we doing in the United States? But was I committed to Israel then? Oh, sure.

JJ: And you've been to Israel?

JW: Yes. Not only that, there were Israelis who were students at the local colleges who had fought in the war.

JJ: You were in contact with people from Israel?

JW: Yes. Itamar Ben-Avi – whose father, Ben Yehudah, was very active in the Hebrew Language Movement – was at our house; my father knew him. My other grandfather was very, very active in Hebrew education. It was just part of the environment.

JJ: You've already touched on your family's politics.

JW: Liberal Democrats.

JJ: I want to talk a little bit about the project that you've been working on; that's sort of the core of what I'm going to be writing about, and I know that you're being honored for. What you've said so far is really great and really kind of puts a backdrop to it all.

JW: I had always been active in the Soviet Jewish Movement, going back to the Leningrad hijacking. Active with the Council, with Congress, and with the then-National Conference of Soviet Jewry. It seemed to me somewhat of a miracle that the Communists were gone and Jews were permitted to live and pray as Jews, and it was a very, very easy and natural step to continue to be active in the National Conference of Soviet Jewry, which was a protector of the civil rights, an advocate for Jews in the former Soviet Union. I worked with these people for years, we were friends – in the Special Needs Initiative began through the Council, the JCRC and the National Conference.

Nate Geller conceived of the idea of the Kehillah Project. Nate and Betsy Gidwitz and one other person – we went to Dnepropetrovsk on the first Boston visit. Bob and I had been in Kiev for the celebration of Babi Yar and we were there as part of a NCSJ mission that had been in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev. There was a major celebration because the government was permitting a Jewish monument in Babi Yar to be

established. So it was extremely moving. But as part of that celebration, the then-prime minister more or less said to the Jews, “we expect you to be the bridge to the West” and, implicit in that was, “if you are not, this Jewish community is going to have problems.” So another reason to have a relationship with the Jewish community would be so as to never again would they be isolated and separated and squelched, or worse. The Kehillah Project, like a sister city, grew out of that. And it continues today. It’s a magnificent tribute to Nate Geller.

Dnepropetrovsk was the city that we took, and the rabbi there, Shmuel Kamenetsky, was a very young rabbi with his wife, Chany, and clearly an incredible person.
Dnepropetrovsk used to be a closed city because it was a missile center. Nate, Betsy and I celebrated the first Friday night dinner ever celebrated by three couples in Dnepropetrovsk. Nate led the service. And afterward, we did Israeli dancing. I mean, it was a very moving introduction. Shmuel lived up the hill quite a walk from the shul and he is a Chabad rabbi and I thought, “Is this dangerous?” It's scary. When we went, people, non-Jews said to him, “Hi Rabbi.” He was their rabbi. I mention these things because on one of the early trips – and Sue and I have different memories of this – Sue said, “What are you doing for children with special needs?” My oldest granddaughter has disabilities. I said, “Sue, what can I do? You know, it's thousands of miles away and I don't speak the language.” What can I possibly do? And she said, “You’ve got to go and help them.”

JJ: I'm not clear exactly why sort of how you ended up in Dnepropetrovsk, because the special needs initiative hadn't started yet. You were there because of the Kehillah Project?

JW: Nate picked Dnepropetrovsk for Boston, because he said there is a very fine rabbi who wants a relationship with an American city. We went on that first trip –

JJ: And you were just going to make a connection with a sister city.

JW: To see if it was it right for Boston. That was its genesis.

JJ: And when you got there, because you and Sue have a special interest –

JW: Not the very first trip. But I was going say, once or twice a year, to help with various community projects. We'd bring in duffel bags, or we sent huge boxes, boxes and boxes of clothing to help – look, in '90, '91, things were still very, very difficult. People needed everything. We worked with Shmuel, the rabbi, and he had started a day school, so we brought all kinds of art supplies for the children. I remember they were interested in sweaters, so all of the boys had the same sweater and all the little girls. You brought whatever they needed.

JJ: Right. You'd gather things here from various organizations and people.

JW: Right. And medical supplies – we used to hand carry duffel bags full of things. I can remember on the early trips, we went via Amsterdam and Kiev, the KLM Women – because these were hundreds of pounds – saying to me, "No extra charge. You're doing God's work."

JJ: "What are you doing for children with disabilities?" So, what did they say and what happened from there?

JW: Look, it was very, very clear – we met some people, a woman here, who said, "there are no children with disabilities in the former Soviet Union." We showed her various things we had, and she broke down and cried. The field is called defectology in the former Soviet Union, with everything that implies. In Soviet society, they believe in the heroic model. Everything is perfect. And that includes people.

JJ: What do you mean you showed her what you had?

JW: We made – Sue fabricated things, like a drinking glass with a straw. Or, I have some here, it's like a rug liner that helps you grasp things. Or a toy that we put on a knob to make it easier to pick it up. She had just never seen anything like that. It was clear, first of all, that in any population there are children with disabilities. In the former Soviet Union and to this day, the government really enormously encouraged parents to institutionalize any children with disabilities. Those brave people who kept their children at home were doing it with minimal help, except probably from a grandmother. Most were single parents. The children were harassed and teased if they took them outside. There were no community facilities whatsoever. They were a hidden population. Hidden, because if they went to the park, they were ridiculed, not permitted to go to school. By law, there should have been some assistance and some teaching, but the Ukrainian government was in very, very tough shape and very few people ever could access any resources, and the government didn't have money to help them and felt the children should be sent to internots.

JJ: And what is an internot?

JW: It's a state-run institution where, as it has been described to me, the children are happy to have a broken toy. Not because people are bad, but because the government didn't have the resources or the money. And, their level of understanding of disabilities was thirty or forty years behind. I had met someone in Moscow on a previous trip named Shimon Strimkoski who happened to be working in Dnepropetrovsk, and he was kind of a can-do man. I said, “Shimon, the next time I come,” which was going to be in, say, a half year, “You have to have a place for children with disabilities or I am going to haunt you. And we have to have a way of helping them.” And he found someone to direct the program. It was then a social program. Irina Bechook brought together parents and children. We brought them toys and art supplies. It really started here, with Sue and some friends. The secret of success is to have good family, friends, and colleagues to make it happen. This friend of mine, Bea Lewis, is a quilter. Her quilting society, made

up of Jews and non-Jews, made quilts for each of the children. Sue and I brought them in. They were so valuable. We brought them in via Kiev. We wouldn't leave them in a hotel room because people needed blankets, they would have been stolen. We left them in the shul in Kiev while we were busy in Kiev. These were the first presents many of these children had ever received. They had never received anything of beauty. They literally wrapped themselves in the quilts, and as new kids came, each child had a quilt. Well, suddenly we were beginning to change attitudes because if Americans thought these kids were worthy of quilts and art supplies and they should have a place to congregate – Beit Chana is a teacher's college, and I met Karl Bieich who was the head of the teacher college, who had some experience teaching children with disabilities. He and Rabbi Stambler agreed to set up a center at that teacher's college, an educational center for children with disabilities.

JJ: I'm wondering, when you got this idea and started brewing things over, how did you initially find families or children with disabilities? Where did they come –

JW: They came from the community. People knew them.

JJ: So it was sort of word of mouth?

JW: Yes. They came out of the closet so to speak.

JJ: Yeah. And where did you meet with them?

JW: Well, I met with them first in – the Joint had a center, and they were there and we met with them, with translators. We talked to the children – this was a new experience for them.

JJ: So you just asked for families, through word of mouth, to bring their children together?

JW: Shimon did it there.

JJ: So the man that you met in Moscow orchestrated it.

JW: And the first person, Irina Bechook, who had been a doctor, did it. Then Karl, and that went on for a short while, then it was clear that we needed something that was more contemporary. They were loving people. But they believed in kind of folk medicines and folk cures. Someone had bronchitis, so they went to some professor who said, “open the window,” and the little girl in the winter stayed in front of the window with a T-shirt as a cure for and her ailment. Someone, they said, had brain fever and they gave her some grass treatment. Clearly they were using the best of their insights, which were many, many years behind what we would consider contemporary practices. And clearly the children needed to be in an environment where one could bring in the best contemporary practices, an educational environment, where they could begin to learn.

JJ: And that's when the Women's Teaching Program – that's where you started the Center?

JW: That's really the real beginning, the beginning of the special needs initiative and Tamara Olsinitska, who is the director of –

JJ: Of the Center, or –

JW: Well, she's now the head of Beit Chana, but was there when Karl there, was under Karl. They found the teacher, they gave her space, they found the families with children. We came twice a year. We brought things.

JJ: This really started, I would say, in 1995? Is that correct? So you were going twice a year, continuing to bring things.

JW: We were in touch with them and met with the teachers, and on our committee there is Don Wertlieb, who is at Tufts. Don came with Si Friedland. Si and Don came, and we would meet with the teachers and help them stretch their program.

JJ: And do workshops for them?

JW: Yes.

JJ: And some of them came here to –

JW: Absolutely. We brought Tamara to Tufts. It was an intensive two weeks. Sue organized it. Tamara went to Tufts. She saw the Tufts program. She saw camps. She saw other schools. She saw materials. She saw nursery schools. Kind of total immersion.

JJ: Everything that was working with children with disabilities that they figured out how to use in an emerging model.

JW: Yes. And also an inclusive – like in a pre-school.

JJ: Yeah, which is very common now in schools.

JW: Yes, she saw how things were done and materials.

JJ: Yeah. It sounds like it was an enormous learning experience for her.

JW: Absolutely. We brought a doctor, a pediatrician, we were then working with. Also, she went to Tufts and spent two weeks immersed in the program of Tufts.

JJ: What is the program called at Tufts? Do you know? It's a special education program?

JW: Don -- it's Eliot-Pearson. I don't know. Sue may know. At the medical school, Steve Glicken arranged the program at the Tufts – the New England Medical Center.

JJ: Steve Glicken?

JW: Yeah. A doctor.

JJ: And Eliot-Pearson is at Tufts.

JW: Right. We brought Tamara on other trips, and she came with her daughter, Inna, who is now here, at MIT. And it was to exchange ideas, because they were really starting with a tabula rasa.

JJ: From scratch. Yeah.

JW: We brought written materials, some of which were translated. Then, a third component was Gordon College in Haifa, and they come twice a year, teams of three, and model lessons. They're there for a week, and they show the teachers what to do. We financed step-by-step lessons. It was a program to teach teachers and family advocacy. I'll give you an example: in a traditional Soviet setting, if you come to speak and you think it's going to be a discussion group – and this literally happened – everybody stands up and tells you how wonderful the leader is. You say, "Do you have any questions? Do you have any comments?" And, "Julie is a marvelous leader. If it weren't for Julie, our life would be meaningless. Julie," – and this goes around. So, as basic a thing as freeing people to be able to carry on a discussion. I remember one of the icebreakers, and all of this is through translation, I said to the mothers, "well, if I were you, this is what I would ask." You know, just to help. We started a parent advocacy group to help parents – how do you deal with doctors. Evaluation. How do you evaluate a child?

JJ: So it wasn't just a curriculum on how to teach and work with a child, but –

JW: It's the total family advocacy. Very, very comprehensive. The CJP Women's Division provided the funds for a van to bring the children to school – not only to school, but then they could take them to the circus.

JJ: So transportation is a big issue?

JW: Not big. Enormous. Because most of these people lived in buildings without elevators, bringing their child down and taking their child on public transportation was horrendously difficult.

JJ: It wasn't set up for that at all.

JW: Nothing. Not curb cuts. Nothing. Tamara, I remember when she saw the handicapped bathrooms. I believe the special needs – the resource center – is the first and only handicapped bath. I know it's the first. And now because of other projects, it was the first handicapped bathroom in the Ukraine. Wheelchairs were donated. Before that, the children had trouble sitting and learning.

[break in audio]

JW: There are children with serious disabilities, but there are also children with learning disabilities who would be easily absorbed into public school – to give you an idea of the depth of the prejudice, there was a little girl, maybe twelve years old, and her mother said she had cerebral palsy. She had epilepsy. They were ashamed of the epilepsy. And they didn't have the medicine to control the seizures, so she was afraid to come to school. There is a little girl who is very, very bright who communicates through non-verbal means. Si had a system where he said to her, “you can answer by knocks.” She is a very bright little girl, her mother is learning to communicate with her. Some of the mothers are incredibly resourceful themselves. They have found ways to teach their children. We made adaptive toys. We have a member of the committee and a friend who is Russian-speaking. Sue, Misha and I videotaped Sue explaining the adaptive –

this is in the beginning – the adaptive toys. Misha translated it into Russian to send the videotape there. Now, Gordon College comes twice a year and the people have gone to the step-by-step program and the teachers are more sophisticated.

JJ: What's the step-by-step program?

JW: It's run by Soros.

JJ: That's something at the Center?

JW: Yes. We send the teachers there. We connected in Kiev with the head of the UN disabilities program. She is no longer in Kiev. Always looking for materials that are available, or to have them translated. You had mothers say, “I never knew my child could learn.” Children with some disabilities put things in their hand and in their mouth. A grandmother, meaning well, knocked her grandson's hands out. She didn't realize that that was a tactile sensation. In Russia, things should look beautiful. The first center, we brought in – in my normal life, I could not carry duffel bags weighing a couple of hundred pounds each. I would have said to you, “impossible.” I do not know how, but we carried them in. Lifted them, carried them like they were feathers. We brought in a lot of materials. But, Irina Bechook, who is very, very caring, was also a product of the Soviet system. She would lock them in bookcases so you could see them, but the children couldn't play with them and mess them up, except under a very controlled setting. I sneaked some of the paintbrushes to give the parents to take home, because we are changing attitudes from the hierarchical, very, very rigid, very leadership oriented Soviet style, with great love. They had great love.

JJ: Can you go back to what you were saying in the kitchen, about how the work that you've done with this special needs initiative has really impacted the community?

JW: One of our tasks – what we did was wipe away stereotypes. One, stereotypes and biases against children and parents of children with special needs. That these children

are very, very much part of the community. That they have intrinsic worth as human beings. Welcoming them strengthens the community because, I believe, how you treat the most vulnerable member of the community – whether it's in the United States or the former Soviet Union or Dnepropetrovsk or Israel – is a reflection on the democratic strength of that community. Of your compassion and of your humanitarianism. It's the weakest link that tells the story. The second way is by teaching an educational system that was sensitive to child development, to individual needs, as opposed to a traditional, "I'm the teacher, this is the class, everybody does the same thing." And there is rote learning. It opened the door to education for all of the children. The children in the resource center are visited and involved with the students at Beit Chana. Those students at Beit Chana teach in nursery schools and in kindergarten, I think through the first grade, throughout the former Soviet Union. They are bringing the ideals of a child-centered education of individuals all over the former Soviet Union. The ideas have become part of the general philosophy –

JJ: Of education.

JW: – yes, within the Jewish community. Volunteerism was totally absent. Look, in Russia, you depend on the state. These are parents who are participating, giving volunteer efforts in their children's resource center. That's an amazing phenomenon.

JJ: Since you've alluded to some of the challenges and successes so far, could you just state again an example of something that's been very challenging?

JW: Oh, the little boy?

JJ: Yeah, maybe you can just tell that story.

JW: Here's an example. The children live totally isolated lives. Pariahs. Because at first it was difficult to take them outside. Then, if they were taken outside, they were harassed and teased, and they had no place of welcome anywhere in the community. The first

time I met this little boy was at one of the social gatherings, and he huddled against his mother and wept and wept. He was afraid to be with people. We kept meeting each time I went. After a few visits, his mother became a parent-activist and is now the head teacher. You saw the little Misha able to participate away from his mother and with a big, big smile on his face.

JJ: Yeah. But just for him to have that role model of her also being so involved and being a leader and teacher.

JW: Or, I told you about a little girl who was so ashamed of having epilepsy that her mother said she had cerebral palsy, because they didn't have the medicine to prevent the seizures and she was ashamed to go to school. With us, she could flourish as a young girl. No one was going to ridicule her or mock her. We were going to try to get her the medical care to help the epilepsy. There were parents who said, “I never knew my child could learn.” Non-verbal children have talents hidden away and if there is no way of uncovering it, it's lost.

JJ: I want to switch a little bit here and talk about your involvement in this project as a woman. There are a couple of different questions I have around that. One is, first of all, before we get into what you're doing now, do you think that the women's movement had an impact on your activism?

JW: I was born into a family of people who believed in women. I went to all-girls' schools, and was never taught we were second best. At Wellesley, we were never taught we were less than – we were never taught we were second best. We were expected to be the equal of anybody. So, the women's movement was part of my life before it was articulated as a women’s movement. My mother was a feminist without knowing it.

JJ: Oh, was she?

JW: Well, she believed in women. The teachers believed in women. “You are the girls of Girls' Latin School. If you try hard enough, you can do anything you set your mind to.” The American Jewish Congress Women's Division was very involved with the women's movement. In networking. In the friendship of women. In the collective strength of women. In the power of women. So, historically, I've always had very close women friends. I've always had very close women colleagues, volunteers and professionals, and we've always been involved in activism and we think we were in the forefront. The Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress was the first Jewish organization to oppose the war in Vietnam. The Women's Division started the Women's Plea for Soviet Jewry. It was the first major event. I would say the answer to your question is yes. An environment that believed in women and encouraged them and freed them to grow and simultaneously gave them a sense of the responsibility of changing the world, of improving the world.

JJ: So do you see your work now – does it fit into or does it challenge women's traditional roles?

JW: I think that the woman's traditional role is – I want to tell you, I think there’s a myth about what the Jewish woman's typical role is. In fact, Jewish women have always been, traditionally, bread-winners, the person outreaching to the community, while the man was the Talmudic scholar and the student. So the traditional Jewish women's role has always been the problem solver. Dealing with the real world. So, I have a different view of the traditional. It's not Kinder Kirche Küche [children, kitchen, church]. My grandmother was certainly born in Europe and a very traditional woman. She reached out to the community, to people in need. She was an egalitarian. People loved her. She had no prejudices. My grandmother had, I told you, young uncles living there. My grandmother knew baseball, the Boston Red Sox. Is that a traditional woman? I don’t think so. In the stereotypical way. I like to say, at least in my upbringing and family and school, we defined the traditional woman as a woman who cared, who was not intimidated by

challenges, and who believed in the capacity of changing things that needed to be changed.

JJ: You mentioned your mother and your grandmother. Can you talk about role models in your life, if you think you've had them and who are they?

JW: Sure. Well, my mother and my grandmother. My aunt was a writer for Newsweek and Collier's, a professional woman. The American Jewish Congress Women's Division's executive director was Esther Kolatch, who was forever challenging us to do more and accomplish more and help more, and who absolutely made us believe that everything was possible. That there is a theme of Jewish philosophy of values. You may not finish the task, but the responsibility is to begin. Dorothy Rossyn, she was very, very active in Hadassah, absolutely believed in the capacity of women to grow. I used to go to a study group, not through Hadassah but through friends, with her, and she and Esther were living models of women who believed –

[break in audio]

JW: There were many fields that women weren't, at least at that time, encouraged to go into. I have a very close friend who is one of the first woman graduates of Harvard Law. But women, the traditional aspect of it was, we were expected to stay home and raise our children. That was a universal traditional.

JW: Right. But in that environment, that's how the women as professional volunteers developed.

JJ: In terms of the project that you've been involved in, what do you think its impact globally or on the world has been?

JW: I just told you the story about being asked to discuss, in Vienna, volunteerism and this project, to Iranian refugees from Iran.

JJ: How did that start?

JW: Vienna is the point of embarkation for Dnepropetrovsk, and I go to Dnepropetrovsk very often, so I've often been in Vienna. I knew the head of HIAS in Vienna, and I know a lovely, lovely person who is the head of the Joint in Vienna. When I'm there, we go out for dinner, so she's familiar with the project. She asked me if I would come and meet with Iranian Jews, who are in transit from Iran and in Vienna, because the concept of volunteerism isn't a familiar concept to them and she wants me to talk about volunteers and the project. I've been asked by a doctor friend of mine in Atlanta, am I willing to help set up a special needs project in Minsk. We work with a college in Israel, Gordon College. What one of the things that I hope will happen is that the Educational Resource Center will become an international resource, a locus, for other people interested in –

JJ: This type of work.

JW: Yeah.

JJ: How do you say being involved in this particular project has affected your life?

JW: I think it's been a gift. An amazing gift. First of all, on a very practical sense, my father was born in Yekaterinoslav. I didn't know until my first visit to Dnepropetrovsk that Dnepropetrovsk used to be Yekaterinoslav. So I am in fact visiting the city where my father and –

JJ: And where your grandfather was born?

JW: My grandfather was born in Lithuania. My father and my aunt were born there.

JJ: In Dnepropetrovsk.

JW: [My grandparents] were married there. I have pictures of family from Dnepropetrovsk but I don’t know what's happened to them. I'm still trying to see if there

are any that I can – But the more specific answer is it's an extraordinary gift. You see the wonder of Judaism. You see the wonder of the world. Or, if you believe in God, of faith, in which a very, very, very powerful totalitarian state has disappeared, and Jews are coming together and praying. Even as a historian, I think it's incredible that we are given the chance to participate in community building, much as the community building, the nation building that brought Palestine into Israel. This is a different time of community building, but this is kind of a wonderful historical era. I think we're also learning the lesson of the Holocaust that we must never again permit a Jewish community to be isolated. So, I think it's just an amazing and wonderful chance to participate in Jewish history, in the making or the shaping of Jewish history, and a chance to help people.

JJ: I'm wondering if there is anything that we haven't covered that you think might be important to add, if you can think of anything that might be interesting or significant?

JW: After reading some of your websites, I would say encourage people to follow their beliefs. If they believe in something, to give it a chance. And that the secret is to have friends and colleagues and family you can work with or who believe in it too, and just do it. And, to have faith in the goodness of people. There are just an extraordinary number of very, very, very good people.

JJ: You don't always know until you're doing something like this, and then you begin to meet more and more people.

JW: I have seen such examples of graciousness, of warmth, from the people we've met in Dnepropetrovsk. Incredibly good and superb people. One stands in awe of all of – look, their life is a matter of – not everybody, but certainly their mothers – it's a matter of surviving. Their life is very, very, very tough, but they are gracious, warm, and loving.

[END OF INTERVIEW]