Ellen Kanner Transcript

NOTE FOR THE RECORD/ JWA ORAL HISTORY

Judith Rosenbaum, Jayne Guberman and I recorded this oral history in 2005, when I was serving as JWA's Director of Development; the three of us collaborated closely on many projects and came to know much about how our personal lives and careers had evolved. Ten years later, at a critical point in my research on the life of Teresa de Lucena (1467-1545), a conversa who faced the Spanish Inquisition twice, I asked Jayne to help me construct an "oral history" about Teresa. It was Jayne who convinced me that Teresa's oral history needed to include me. The thoughtful conversations Jayne and I had provided a wealth of content for *I, Teresa de Lucena: Reflections on the Trial of a Conversa*, the book I published with artist Annie Zeybekoglu in 2022, and for my March 2023 JWA blog: *Esther and Teresa: A Play on Words for Purim*.

Sadly, many of the people and places I mentioned in my 2005 interview no longer exist; in particular, I would like to honor my parents of blessed memory, Ben and Lillian Kipnis, who died after I recorded my JWA oral history.

Ellen Kanner, May 23, 2023

Judith Rosenbaum: It is October 12th, 2005, and Jayne Guberman and Judith Rosenbaum sit here in the Brookline office of the Jewish Women's Archive with Ellen Kanner, Director of Development, doing our first interview in our Barnard Conference pilot interview project. Is there anything else I need to say as an introduction?

Jayne Guberman: No, I think that's good. Do you want me to start?

JR: Yeah, why don't you start?

JG: We'll just do this a little informally. So Ellen, as you know, JWA is interested in the ways that feminism has changed Jewish women's lives, both in their private lives and in their public lives within the Jewish community, within the larger society as well. So we've set up these opportunities to talk to women about their own experiences, and we have about thirty minutes for the interview. So I'm just going to give you a really quick overview. We're going to take a few minutes, maybe five to ten minutes, to do some background questions about your life, and then about twenty minutes or so to have you tell us some key stories about your own experiences that you'd like to share, and then a few minutes at the end to sort of do some reflections and wrap up. After the interview, as we mentioned, we'll ask you to sign the release form. Okay?

Ellen Kanner: Fine.

JG: Okay. So we want to start with some background questions. Why don't we begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about when and where you were born and where you grew up?

EK: I was born in Brooklyn in 1945 and grew up for the first four years of my life in Brooklyn. When I was about four, the family moved to Valley Stream, right over the line on Long Island, into one of those communities that was a potato field and fifteen minutes later had lots of little houses on it.

JG: Who was in your family?

EK: The family consisted of my grandparents, my aunts and uncles and cousins. We all lived on the same block. Well, I take that back. My grandparents, God bless them, lived around the corner. I'm the oldest of three girls. My parents and the three of us lived in one house. One aunt and uncle and their three children lived two doors down, and a little bit further down the block was another aunt and uncle and their three children.

JG: And which side of the family is this?

EK: This is my dad's side. And the link to all of them was the family business, the wholesale costume jewelry business, which actually still exists – although, thank God, my dad's been out of it for twenty years – on the Lower East Side, on Broome Street. In fact, it's two doors down from what is now the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. So I have a strong connection to the Lower East Side.

JG: Can you describe your family a little bit? What was it like growing up in your family, in this large extended family?

EK: Well, it was great. I was the oldest of all of the grandchildren and had lots of expectations put on me. I was also the first kid in the family to go to college. The whole impetus of the family business and the reason that people worked so hard, or at least that's what we all understood, was to make sure that we kids could go to college. So it felt like a blessing of high expectations. Good thing I lived up to most of them. [laughter]

JR: Were any of your family immigrants?

EK: Yeah, absolutely. My grandparents came to the United States in '21 from a shtetl—actually it was a small town—in Ukraine. They came in September, and my dad was born in January, so he was conceived in Russia, born here.

JG: What year was that?

EK: '20. I take it back. They arrived in '20. He was born in '21.

JR: And what was your family's Jewish life like?

EK: Once we moved to Valley Stream, my grandfather and two other wonderful older gentlemen in the community started a Conservative shul since there were no shuls; it had all been potato fields. They started a shul, which still exists, called Tree of Life in Valley Stream.

JG: Interesting. What kind of a shul was it?

EK: It was wonderful. It was Conservative. The family always sat in the second row behind the rabbi's family. So it was very participatory. For a while, my mother kept kosher. Although she's not known for her civic activities, she was the head of the sisterhood for a while. The family was really engaged in the shul.

JG: How would you describe your family's observance?

EK: You mean on a scale of one to ten?

JG: I mean, just more qualitatively. What kinds of things would you celebrate? Observe Shabbat in some ways? Or holidays?

EK: Yeah, we did observe Shabbat because it was the only day that my dad didn't work. This was a six-day-a-week business. So we always had Friday night dinner. There was a time my mother lit candles. She was less observant than my father's side; she came from a totally different background. But, in any case, we were observant but never had a sukkah. That always feels like a dividing line to me, who does and doesn't have a sukkah.

JG: As a child, how did you feel about being Jewish? Do you have strong memories of how you felt?

EK: Oh, absolutely. It felt wonderful to be in that community. And in addition– and this always interests people in the Jewish communal world – was the sense of Jewish community that I got going to Jewish camps.

JG: Oh, interesting.

EK: In fact, the first camp I went to was Camp Betar. My parents were just looking for a nice summer camp; they had no idea it was Zionist. We're talking about in 1957.

JG: And were they Zionist?

EK: Not particularly. They are rather apolitical. So little did we know that there was rifle training.

JG: Oh my goodness.

EK: And then, for many years after that, I went to a more garden variety but still quite observant Conservative Jewish summer camp.

JG: What was the name?

EK: It was called Shangri-La, of all unlikely names. It was wonderful. I got at least as

much of what I know and experienced about Judaism from that camp, and, in particular, from the man who ran it. It was beautiful. Beautiful.

JR: You said that you were the oldest of three daughters and that you were the oldest grandchild. So what was your sense as you were growing up about life as a girl? You said there were great expectations. How did you feel your awareness was of what it was like to be growing up as a girl?

JG: And did you have boy cousins?

EK: I did have boy cousins who were quite a bit younger than I. I've obviously spent some time thinking about what birth order means in this equation. But being the oldest, there was no question that I was going to be the one breaking the barriers. And the extent to which I had the talent and the ambition, I could do whatever I wanted and go to whichever college I wanted and fulfill my own potential.

JG: So as a young person, teenager, early twenties, what were you thinking you wanted to do?

EK: Get married. The joke is that I was the one who didn't want to get married right after college, so we waited six weeks. I had met the man I was going to marry when I was in high school. We dated, although not exclusively, through our college years and we did get married right after I graduated from Smith. That never really seemed to conflict with whatever else I was thinking about for myself in terms of career.

JG: And were you thinking about a career at that point?

EK: Well, here's an interesting thing. I had to make a deal with my parents. They wanted my education to lead me to being a teacher.

JG: High school, you mean [inaudible]?

EK: A teacher. A teacher. So whatever I just said about my expectations for myself, or their expectations, actually, that's all hindsight. In truth, whatever it was, I promised them I would be a teacher. When I got to Smith and realized that majoring in education at Smith was not the way to explore the unbelievable opportunities that were there, I actually had to negotiate with my parents. I said “I'm not going to major in education at Smith. I'll need to get a master's degree to be able to teach but at Smith I want to be able to take art history and I must do junior year abroad in Spain.” None of that would

have been possible if I majored in education. So there was a negotiation. They really wanted me to be a teacher. Ultimately, I wound up getting a Master of Arts in Teaching at Johns Hopkins after I was married.

JG: So, just to place this in time, when did you graduate from college?

EK: I graduated Smith in '67 and got my master's in '68 from Hopkins.

JR: And then, how long did you teach for?

EK: Four years. I taught high school Spanish and Latin in Baltimore. It was an extraordinary time— the late ’60s. The school I taught at was not an inner-city school but it was a brand new experiment in racial and cultural openness in Baltimore. The school still exists; Northwestern High School. Those were great days to be young and willing to work to bring about social change. Many of us thought that it would be possible to change, to open up our society and do it through education.

JG: Well, I think we should actually move to some of the stories that you want to tell us.

You've given us a great segue here. So you've given us a few thoughts for different things that you might want to share. Is there one that you feel like you want to tell us more than others? Or you could tell us – because I'm intrigued with what you were just saying about your involvement in CR [consciousness raising] groups and what that meant to you and your growing awareness of the possibilities.

EK: Yeah. As you both have heard, every time we start talking about feminism, I relate it to my experience being in conscious-raising (CR) groups – and I've been in lots. In fact, I'm actually in a woman's discussion group now. I've been in one every place I've lived. There is no question in my mind that I first experienced feminism in my first CR group. By feminism, what I mean here is – the easiest way to define it is— "the personal is political." CR groups gave me a context for what I was feeling. All of this sounds rather like "What's the big deal?" but back then, I think many women had accepted the isolation that came about in the Eisenhower years. I am personally fascinated by the suburbanization of America and what happened to the strengths of women and the collective strength of women once everybody was put in a private house in the service of buying more washing machines and refrigerators.

JG: Where were you at that point? You had graduated from college; you had graduated from the master's program.

EK: Yeah.

JG: So in the late ’60s and early ’70s, you were getting involved in consciousness-raising groups?

EK: Actually, I got started in a consciousness-raising group when I moved to New York. It was 1970, 1971.

JR: And so what was your entree into that?

EK: A woman who lived across the street, who also had a small child –

JG: By then, you had a small child?

EK: This was in '72. But I don't recall whether I started the CR group before my son was born – or not. Interesting. I'll have to go back and think about that. But it was because I had a friend, a very funny, wise woman, with whom we shared a lot of the being-young-and-cooped-up-with-small-baby thing. She knew a couple of other women and I had just moved to the neighborhood in White Plains. She knew a couple of other women, and she just networked it out, and we created a CR group of maybe seven or eight women

whom I had not known before.

JG: All of whom were more or less your age and had children? Or were there differences among you?

EK: If memory serves, we were all about the same age. Some of us did not have kids, and I'm not sure everybody was married. But there was an age consistency.

JR: And everyone was from your neighborhood? Or the suburbs?

EK: Yes, it was Westchester, probably a radius of five miles.

JG: So, what do you remember most about the CR group?

EK: Well, I remember it for – it was one of the first times I felt safe enough to tell the truth about stuff that was just not okay to talk about, even with one's family. There was a

security about it that was really quite wonderful. The second thing – and I don't mean to gloss over the first point at all - but the second thing was to understand the real shared experience of it. I mean, Betty Friedan had talked about it in – '63. So it was intellectually not new to think that women were isolated and that there was going to be strength in sharing experience. But it was the actual experience of it that was so powerful.

JG: What kinds of things do you remember talking about? And how was it set up? Can you describe it?

EK: It was what I think of as a classic CR group. We sat in a circle. There was always something to nosh on. We observed what I think of as the classic CR rules— we went around the circle and there was no interrupting.

JR: Was there a topic?

EK: In that CR group, there was. We decided on a topic, which is a format I came to prefer. I found the pain of having to ask myself for a whole week "what am I going to say about this?" to be really valuable.

JG: Did you comment on other people's experiences as you were going around?

EK: No. No. Everybody got heard. You could sit back. You could sit back at the end when everybody had spoken. I'm remembering that we made observations in general, not in particular. It more united everything we had been talking about rather than commenting "Well, geez, Ellen, you're saying that because you grew up there… or because your family has a business on the Lower East Side." I mean, the personal did come up, but it was much more of a "Well, of course, this relates to…" It was more political and theoretical.

JG: So, what kinds of topics did your CR group decide to delve into?

EK: Well, probably lots on mothers.

JG: Your mothers.

EK: Our mothers.

JG: And being mothers?

EK: And being mothers. Work was a big one, and the balance between work and having families.

JR: And were you working at that time outside of the house?

EK: I was. I was. When my son was small, I did freelance writing, mostly educational materials, for a big publishing company. Later, as you know, I found my true calling in the Berkshires working in development for nonprofit organizations. In CR groups, we talked a lot about balancing work and family— and about our relationships with our husbands. And that's all I'm going to say about that. [laughter] I just remembered you might want to quote me.

JR: But you can always put restrictions.

EK: Thanks. I'll self-censor anyway.

JG: Okay. Anything else you want to share about the CR groups or the impact it had on your life or this group? How did it change you to be part of this group, would you say, as you look back on it? And even your awareness at the time, what was its import in your life?

EK: Well, the group that I'm describing, which was Westchester in the early ’70s, was the first of probably – I actually haven't counted, but I've probably been in four or five CR groups.

JR: And how long did that first one last?

EK: As long as I was there, which was three or four years. Then I moved to Spain and found another group there. That was really quite interesting, a CR group at a US Air Force base in Spain. Then I joined one when I moved to the Berkshires which was very long-lived, probably lasted close to ten years.

JR: Why was it so important for you to continue to be in these groups? What did they offer to you that felt like a valuable thing to seek out?

EK: It's a great question. Certainly, a way to connect with people. When you're new in a community— and in those days I moved a lot— you could join the welcome wagon but I preferred combining new friends with something else that I hugely valued – let's call it exploring the intellectual or theoretical side of life. It felt like growth— that I could continue to keep my mind and thinking fresh.

JG: Did it change the way you thought?

EK: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. A subject that I would love to pursue at more length is the impact of going to an all-women's college, both in terms of the self-selection and because I really experienced the strength and enjoyment of being in a community of smart women at Smith. In a sense, I was looking for that as a kid going to college and created that going forward. And loved it. So if there's a pattern, it's that I love being in a community of smart and thoughtful women.

JG: And still doing it.

EK: And still doing it after all these years.

JR: I feel like if we're going to transition to another story, I might need to excuse myself. I'm really sorry. I would love to hear the next piece of it and be part of it.

EK: Actually, let me just make one more comment for the record before you go. What pains me about what has happened to the word "feminism" – and you have heard me talk about this – is my sense that the connection among women has been lost, and in a painful way. To me, feminism is not just about breaking through glass ceilings or finding great career opportunities. What's been so valuable to me has been this connection with other women and I think that's been lost. The value of relationships isn't carried by the word feminism anymore.

JR: The sisterhood piece.

EK: Exactly. Sisterhood is a powerful piece. And it's so experiential, or at least in my life, it has been so experiential that just talking about it doesn't do it. It feels like we've created a generation or a couple of generations of women who are back to feeling isolated and unconnected. Career-wise they may have wonderful opportunities but they may have lost the sense of connection and sisterhood with other women. I think that's an incredible loss.

JG: Yeah.

JR: That's interesting. I'd love to talk to you more about that. I have thoughts about that, too …

JG: Okay. Let's stop it for one sec. [Recording paused.] Okay. Ellen, as we're wrapping up our conversation today, we wanted to spend a few minutes reflecting with you about your thinking as you stand at this point in your life and you look back over the last twenty-five, thirty years, forty years-

EK: Forty. [laughter]

JG: Exactly. Bravo to us – about the importance of feminism in your life and the women's movement, the changes you've seen. So we want to just ask you, for instance, at this point, do you say that you consider yourself a feminist? If so, what does that mean to you? And how have your feelings about that word, that definition, evolved over time if you had to try and sum it up? [Recording paused.] We'll just see if we can wrap this up then.

EK: All right, that's a great question.

JG: Go ahead. You say it, then. Go ahead.

EK: All right. So the question, 'what would I want to pass on?' What would I want to tell my children?

JG: And grandchildren.

EK: And grandchildren. It would be a different message for my children. I'd have a message for my daughter, which I hope I give her on a daily basis.

JG: And how old is your daughter now?

EK: She's twenty-eight. To enjoy her own personal strength and not to forget that there are sources of strength that she can get from other women. And to my grandchildren –

[END OF INTERVIEW]