Pamela Goldman Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, October 30, 2005. I'm with Pamela Goldman in New York at the Barnard Conference, Jewish Women Changing America: Cross-Generational Conversations. We're going to record a brief interview about Pam's life. Pam, I wonder if you can just start by telling us a little bit about when and where you were born and something about your family when you were growing up.

Pamela Goldman: I was born July 30, 1965, and I am the middle child of two brothers, an older brother, two years older, Robert, and the younger brother, five years younger, Billy. So I was the only daughter in the family. I was bat mitzvahed Reform. We were all bar and bat mitzvahed. We led a Reform life and [were] really very unrestricted in many ways. I mean, it was not a great focus. The focus in our family was on education and working hard to get into a good college so we could go get on with our lives and be educated. Education and medicine were the most important things in our family.

JG: What did your parents do?

PG: My father is a businessman. He took on the business of his grandfather, three generations. My younger brother's taking it on now. It's leather outerwear, and my grandfather made leather jackets for the Army. I mean, well, for the government in World War II.

JG: In this country?

PG: In this country, yes. My grandfather was an immigrant from Poland. Both my father's parents came from Poland. My mother's parents were born in this country, but they descended from Russia. So we are Ashkenazi Jewish, but we were not – I mean, we ate bacon and ham and clams oreganata, and what have you, and lobster. Food was

not one of the criteria of our religiosity at all. It didn't become important to me until I had been out of college for a number of years. I met a few inspirational people in college who gave me some books to read, but I began to search not only – I began to try to define who I am.

JG: I just want to go back to your childhood for a little bit to just see if we can get a base for our conversation. So when you were growing up, can you just describe your Jewish life a little bit more in the ways in which your family –?

PG: Well, we grew up, and all of my parents –

JG: Where was this?

PG: – most of my parents' friends were Jewish and are Jewish. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood, upper middle class.

JG: Where was this?

PG: This was in Maplewood, New Jersey, in sort of an area that was designated as a Jewish area. My parents had looked into other towns to move to, but they really wanted us to be surrounded by a Jewish neighborhood. That was important to them. They didn't want us to feel uncomfortable in restricted neighborhoods or areas that were going to be a problem, and us facing being – it was at that time in the late '60s where there were certain neighborhoods, whether it be in Westchester or New Jersey or anywhere where there were certain designated areas that Jews had not yet been really accepted in. Today, all that's changed in a lot of areas.

JG: The neighborhood that you were growing up in?

PG: The part of Maplewood that we lived in, there were a lot of Jewish families. There had been a Jewish family living in the house that we had moved into. Our neighbors

were Jewish. They didn't want us to be – we understood from the conversation in the house that being Jewish was not necessarily going to be always that easy to be in this life we were leading. It wasn't like the Upper West Side of New York. It was just more – we had to be aware of that. I went to a private school called Pingry, the Pingry Day School.

JG: Pingry?

PG: Pingry, P-I-N-G-R-Y, which accepted Jews, but there was a little bit of teasing about being Jewish and whatever. So I was made aware of my Jewishness in both a positive way and the negative way, and regarding the way other people saw me.

JG: What do you remember at the time feeling about being Jewish as a child?

PG: Well, it was an ironic situation because I wanted, on the one hand, to feel proud of who I am and what I am, but yet, I had reached the point in my life in my early twenties where I was – actually in my mid to late twenties, where I was like, "Well, what does it really mean to be Jewish? What does it mean? Why are we looked upon as either great or negative or whatever? What is it all about?" I went, and I studied. I took Torah classes through several different organizations. I studied Torah, and I studied what leading a life of mitzvahs meant, whether it be – I had it all laid out in front of me, of the act of kindness, that that's what Abraham stood for, the founding father of the belief in one God, that the acts of kindness. My mother had always said that it's the deeds you do, but she didn't really Jewish-ize it, so to speak. But it was really the basic tenets of Judaism that were acts of kindness. Then there were a lot of laws and stuff, which I –

JG: I'm going to ask you not to do that because it's going to make noise.

PG: Okay. There were a lot of tenets and laws and stuff that all add on to that. But I decided to – I finally arrived at the middle road with a man that I ended up marrying, Gerald Feldman, where we both – basically, we try to light candles most Friday nights,

but we're not into no phone calls, no turning on and off lights. I mean, we haven't taken it to that extent, but we do try to light candles because I had learned that that is really the cornerstone of Judaism, and it is a big part of who I am in my heart. I believe very much in God, and I am very, very much a friend to the Jewish people.

JG: Let me ask you how you felt as a child, and then as you grew older about being a Jewish girl, about the female part of it and how that evolved over time for you. I'm also wondering, if I can just throw this in, how, once you left your home and you went to Barnard College – what class were you at Barnard?

PG: '87.

JG: '87. So how being in that environment also impacted you when you were first leaving home? But first, if you would, go back to when you were younger and talk a little bit about how you felt as a girl.

PG: Well, I had a very early, early experience when I was, I guess, six or seven years old, and it was just a simple recognition of God. I think I was on the beach in Fire Island, and I was by myself. I looked into the sun, and I said, "This is God. This must be God." But I didn't think of it as Jewish or not Jewish or anything like that. I was very much in touch with this thing that I perceived to be God as light and goodness. As I matured in my family, I was the only daughter, and there were two sons, and there was a lot of bonding between my brothers and my father; they all went to boarding schools, and they all had a comradery with the sports teams, the Yankees, and this and that. I was left out of a lot of the family – it was more of a male – there was a lot of that.

JG: What about your relationship with your mother?

PG: My mother tried to raise me on her own. My father basically was in charge of raising the sons, and my mother was in charge of raising the daughters. I don't know if that's unique in Jewish families, but my mother was really responsible for me – dressing

me, clothing me, making sure I took care of myself, making sure that I studied hard, and whatever. My mother was a graduate of Vassar, so she had very high expectations of me. She went on to do a lot of things with her life. So women's role in our family was very important, but I didn't have a sibling to bond with. I had my mother, and we became so close at some point that it became almost like an ingrown relationship where it was just too much, and we had to break away. The breaking away was painful when I had to find my own voice and find who I was, not so much connected with her, but me as an independent person. So that was a pretty painful process. Then, I had to reconnect with my father years later and earn his respect because he basically taught my brothers how to survive in this world, but he didn't really give me some of those raw lessons and how to survive in the world and how to take [responsibility] because my mother was the one in charge of raising me. My mother had always depended on my father, although my mother, in her own way, struck out in the world and became – she works for the Whitney Museum. She works for the Neue Galerie. She's on the board of her building. She's quite a determined woman in her own right, but in terms of financial independence and independence, it was an area that I wasn't really formed well in.

JG: Did going to college start to sort of launch you on a [inaudible] religious quest?

PG: I worked very hard my freshman year, but I knew I didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer.

JG: Was that the expectation?

PG: No, there were no expectations [of] me. That's the whole thing. Really, for as little as they did in helping me figure out my life, it's sort of – at this point in time, I can say maybe it worked for the best because I really did find myself in my own way. Although it may have been – I wish I had done this ten years ago. But ultimately, I became somebody who really loves what I do, which is create art and sculpt and draw. I love my work, and my work is my satisfaction. It's a great pleasure for me. I express some of my

deeper thoughts about life. Creativity is so spiritual in its own way that I don't need to turn to religion so much, although I do like to read the very first part of Genesis, and I read that quite frequently up to the point of the fall of Adam and Eve. My husband and I have an apple almost every night. [laughter]

JG: [laughter] That's great. You said that you really have been on this quest to understand who you are as a Jewish woman. Can you talk about that a little bit [and] where that's taken you? You've started to say some of that.

PG: I think part of it, as a Jewish woman, is to help to find common ground with all people in the sense that remaining Jewish and keeping your Jewish heritage and culture – and I've married a Jewish man. That's not why I married him, but that was a big part of our connection. One of the greatest moments for me was signing the –

JG: Ketubah?

PG: No. Well, the ketubah, but also to be put on the Wall of Tolerance down in Alabama, which is related to Rosa Parks, and it has to do with tolerating all religions, all people, that intolerance is not acceptable. I had studied Voltaire. Although he was, at times, antisemitic, he did say that there is something to be learned from the Jews, and that is tolerance, and that was what Voltaire stood for. If you study Voltaire, he led a brilliant life where he transformed a good deal of France and Europe, as a matter of fact, into being countries that are tolerant, rather than executing people for their religious beliefs, even if they weren't in the norm. So it went from Voltaire to becoming part of the Rosa Parks Wall of Tolerance because I think tolerance is what we need in this world, especially in the days that we're living in today with Al-Qaeda and all these very strict religious believers who won't tolerate people from other religions other and other races.

JG: Can you describe what the Wall of Tolerance is and how you got involved with that?

PG: They found me. They wrote me. I got a letter in the mail, and it seemed to me to be perfect because it was something that – I think it had to do with being part of the – I'm not sure, but my name may be on the wall is Pamela S. Goldman because my "J" looked like an "S." So there's a chance it may be written down as Pamela S. Goldman instead of Pamela J. Goldman, unless they corrected that. I tried to have them correct that. That, to me, was a huge monument to being Jewish, but being part of a body of people who just believe in accepting people and not prejudice and not anti – and it reflects my feelings about antisemitism, but it also reflects my feelings about anti-Black, anti-everything, anti-Arab, anti-everything. It just was a connection while maintaining my Judaism to be a part of something that was really something I really believed in, truly believed in. I think Rosa Parks is one of my heroes.

JG: Rosa Parks just died a few days ago. When was this wall erected?

PG: It's in the process right now.

JG: I see.

PG: It was something they were working on, gathering names and donations over the past year. She was part of that whole thing. I think it may have had an opening celebration right around now.

JG: Who is putting the wall together? Do you know?

PG: It's [the] Southern Poverty Center – I forgot the –

JG: Southern Poverty Law Center?

PG: Yeah, I think that's what it is. Yes. That's the group that's doing this.

JG: Who were they looking for? How did they get your name? How do you think you came –?

PG: I have been part of the American Civil Liberties Union. I've been part of the Jewish Congress. I've been part of a whole bunch of organizations. I don't know how they got my name. I honestly don't. But I was so pleased to be a part of it.

JG: Sure. What did they want from you when they approached you?

PG: They just wanted me to understand what the wall was being put up for, the architectural design of it, what it meant, and if I wanted to be a part of it.

JG: And being a part of it –?

PG: Just means that my name will be on the wall.

JG: Do you know how many names they're looking for?

PG: I'm sure it's going to be huge. I'm sure it's going to be huge. The fact that I was asked to be a part of it was just mind-blowing. It was right where I wanted it to be.

JG: Does it reflect something about the kind of work that you do as an artist and as a sculptor? I can imagine that it would be very moving to you to be part of some physical edifice that would be on the landscape in the public space.

PG: Right. My art – there's no religious – I mean, I have done some drawings. I have a drawing of Solomon. But King Solomon is a figure to not just Jews. He's in the Old Testament. A lot of people other than Jews know who King Solomon was. Being Jewish is in my heart. Believing in God is in my heart. Being able to understand that it's the deeds you do in life. It's the mitzvahs. It's how you treat other people.

JG: Has your idea of what role women should play within Judaism changed over time, matured over time, as you've done this exploration? Has it changed in terms of the kinds of rituals that you engage in or your thinking about what women's roles should be vis-à-vis men's roles?

PG: Well, the fact that I was the first woman in my family to be bat mitzvahed was significant. I had to fight my way through my own feeling like a second-class citizen in my own mind about who I am, and it's still an ongoing fight because I want to be equal. I don't want to be looked at as a woman all the time. I want my art to be looked at as an artist's work, a person's work. The fact that I'm a woman I know is significant because there haven't been that many women artists up until the last century that has been renowned in any way. But I always looked at figures like Queen Elizabeth I – I mean, there have been some pretty great women there, but we just have to keep – and then, even in the Supreme Court, there is a Jewish woman. So I feel like, yes – and Golda Meir. I mean, there's been some great women out there. I think these are women that just got by this whole process and said, “I am a human being, and I will say and do what I need to do to get my mission in life accomplished. I'm going to try to do it in the most respectful – all in the ideals of tolerance and all in the ideals of a greater sort of vision of humanity.” Then, one of my best friends is Greek, and one of her sayings is, “Reach for the stars, and you'll end up with the moon.” I have friends from different backgrounds who have their notions and stuff. She went to Wellesley, so she came from a very educated family, too. But I think to cut yourself off from people of different backgrounds and to live a narrow life, only with Jewish people – I mean, there's a whole sharing. New York City is, as they say, a melting pot, and there are fabulous people, and the streets really are paved with gold in this city.

JG: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

PG: I always keep it in mind in whatever I do.

JG: What do you mean by that?

PG: When I go out into the world, and I'm perceived either in a store or wherever it is, I keep in mind that I'm a woman. Whenever I'm treated either positively or negatively, that always comes to mind. Well, I'm a woman. Where did that come into the picture? For

me, I believe that women are very, very important. I have artwork that actually has – it's artwork which represents women, from measuring cups in the kitchen of flour and sugar to an actual mallet on a judge's bench. So it's an antique piece I found, which looks like a mallet, but it's actually a measuring cup for sugar, salt, and flour. I made a sculpture with it. I said, "Just in this century, we've come so far." That piece is very important to me because it does represent we've come very far.

JG: What materials do you use for your art?

PG: I use a lot of glass, crystal, and seashells.

JG: And what's the scale? How large are these pieces?

PG: Foot and a half. Foot tall. They're maybe a foot wide. In that range. Maybe two feet tall. It depends.

JG: Do you think that a lot of your works have somewhat women-centered themes?

PG: Not very many of them. Just the fact that I can do them, that I can actively take on the role of building something, was a big, monumental change in me that I can actually use my hands to build something and have it stand on its own as something to be admired, respected, whatever – enjoyed, laughed at, doesn't matter. The day that I was able to build a work of art was the day that I felt like I'm in control of my destiny. I'm in more control of my destiny than I ever realized, and then I could build, construct.

JG: Right. Well, it sounds wonderful. I'm wondering if there's anything, as you sort of stand here in 2005, when you look back on the last several decades, that you feel you aspire to personally, or for other young women of your generation and younger generations, too? What would you tell the children and the young people who are sort of coming after you about what is important about being a Jewish woman?

PG: To find out who you really are, and if a big part of that is being Jewish, you should be able to discover that soon enough. I hope you discover it sooner than I did because I would have loved to have met my husband years earlier and had children and grandchildren and all of that. I just wish that your exploring of this comes years before it happened for me.

JG: Do you feel like you can still take on lots of growth in your own personal exploration?

PG: Yes, I can.

JG: What is it that you're [inaudible]?

PG: I can still grow. I can still grow a lot. I take each day one day at a time, so hopefully, I can grow a little bit every day in some way and be patient when I feel like I'm in a mulling process where something – and I want the pride of my father. I want my father to be proud of me – and my mother as well. I don't know if that's a Jewish thing. I think all kids want their parents to be proud of them. But I think my parents because they really let me find my own way, and they didn't map out anything for me that I was aware of at all.

JG: Was that different from your brothers?

PG: They were a little more predetermined in what they were going to do. But I think it was just an understanding. I was sort of set free in this big pond of New York and the world, really. I traveled for eight months through Europe by myself on my own, and I really found out a lot about myself. There's some things I wish my parents had protected me from, and there are some things that I am glad that they didn't, that they let me sort of find my own way. That built character, I feel.

JG: Right. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the story? It's a wonderful story of change and growth.

PG: Thank you. Well, I hope, I hope my art somehow ends up in places where people can see them, in addition to people's homes where people can eventually see the body of work. Meryl Streep is starting a museum in Washington, DC, for women, a History of Women's Museum. So I hope a piece or two end up in there. That would be a great dream come true.

JG: That would be wonderful, something worth working for.

PG: Right, right.

JG: Well, good luck. We really thank you very much for sharing your story with us today.

PG: Thank you.

JG: It's been wonderful. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]