

Carol Anshien Transcript

Jayne Guberman: Today is Sunday, October 30, 2005. I'm in New York with Carol Anshien. We're at the Barnard Conference, Jewish Women Changing America: Cross-Generational Conversations. So, Carol, can we start with you telling us a little bit about when you were born, where, and a little bit about your life growing up?

Carol Anshien: Sure. I was born in the Bronx, Royal Hospital on the Grand Concourse, which no longer exists, in 1943 and lived most of my formative years in the Bronx, growing up there. I went to elementary school, junior high school. I actually went to an all-girls junior high school and graduated from high school there. My family moved to Queens, and I went to Queens College. I actually dropped out for a couple of years and worked for a while and then went back and decided to start changing my life then and became a theater major, which was unusual. I finished Queens and tried various jobs. Well, that's where things started changing a lot.

JG: [inaudible] go back for a minute and tell me a little bit about your family.

CA: Okay. My mother was born in Connecticut; my father in New York, in the Bronx.

JG: What were their names?

CA: My mother's name is (Adele?); her maiden name was Rubin. My father, Harold Anshien, A-N-S-H-I-E-N – last name. Before I was born, while my father was in the Army, my folks kept thinking that my father was going to get shipped overseas, so my mother joined the WACs [Women's Army Corps]. She was the second, in '42, fall of '42, just after the WACs had been organized.

JG: She was the second what?

CA: The second enlistment group. The first one was in August of that year; the second one was in November or something like that. Unfortunately, she was discharged when she got pregnant with me. It's all my fault. [laughter] Actually, my father was a cab driver for most of his life. When I was very young, I think he drove hacks, and then at some point, he drove cabs. At some point – it was in the '50s – he finally got his own taxicab and did that for the rest of his life until he retired. My mother, at the time that I was about eight, I think – and I had a brother, who's two years younger than me. When we were both in school, she started to work part-time. That was a struggle at that time because she had to struggle with my father over wanting to do it. But she did.

JG: What did she do?

CA: She worked at first as a statistical typist and went from part-time doing that for many years. She did that for a lot of years for a variety of firms. Then she put herself back through various educational processes and got a job at a bank at one point and became a notary and took some real estate courses and mortgage courses. She became the mortgage loan officer of a bank. When she retired, she had been made the secretary of a bank, and she'd never gone to college.

JG: Interesting. What do you think was driving her to make all these changes, especially in the face of your father's not total support, it sounds like.

CA: Well, that was only in the very beginning.

JG: I see. It was fine after that. It was a struggle to get through. I mean, she had to struggle with him over a number of things. What was her motivating –? She always had some kind of ambition and drive to do better, to make things better, to do something better. When I was in high school, the high school I went to had a very bad reputation, and she joined the parents association, and she ended up working as a kind of press release person, writing positive press releases to get them out into the newspaper. I

couldn't say what it was, but she always had a drive to make things better and to not – I think it came from her Judaism, which I think part of it came – where I got it as well, which was you just don't accept things the way they are; they can always be better, and you don't let people walk all over you. You try to do something more.

JG: How did your family express its Judaism when you were growing up?

CA: Both me and my brother were sent to Hebrew school. It was very rare, at that time, on my part, because I was a girl, but I loved it. My brother hated it, but I loved it.

JG: What synagogue?

CA: I went to the Jacob H. Schiff Center Synagogue in the Bronx, Hebrew school and synagogue. It was on Valentine Avenue, near Kingsbridge Road. It was a wonderful synagogue; it had a wonderful principal, a wonderful Hebrew school. My parents were active only in terms of going to some adult ed [education] programs. They were not regular synagogue-goers. Judaism was expressed in Passover Seders and going to the High Holidays and celebrating Hanukkah. At home, we didn't even light Friday night candles.

JG: Really?

CA: Yes. I think I got a lot of my love of it at the time – it's like I had my own community at Hebrew school of other young Jews my age. We also had a junior congregation.

JG: Were you aware, as a child, of differences between opportunities and practice within Judaism for girls as opposed to boys?

CA: Well, the thing that made me aware of it and that hurt at one point was – because I used to also lead services in the junior congregation where there was this one other young man who was invited after his bar mitzvah to lead a service in the adult

congregation. I always felt, well, why couldn't I be invited to do that?

JG: And you think you weren't because you were a girl?

CA: Yes. There was never anyone else invited either after that, as far as I know. So I don't know whether the whole experiment they didn't like, but I was not conscious of the adult politics of the synagogue at the time at all. I kept that to myself. It wasn't something that I expressed. I wasn't yet at a point where I really spoke out and expressed my disappointment and anger in things like that.

JG: How'd you feel about being a girl in general? Were you aware, as a young girl and as a woman, of differences in possibilities for girls and for boys, for men and women?

CA: That's a good question that I'd have to go way back to my childhood to think about. I'd have to think about that for a while. My mother raised both me and my brother as equals. We were two years apart. My brother may have suffered for it. I think I had advantages as a result of it.

JG: How do you mean?

CA: Because I always saw myself, I guess, as equal to men in that sense. Now, in terms of jobs, that probably came later. But just in terms of – I was a very good student. I was better than a lot of the boys in Hebrew school. Actually, the rabbi and the – I don't know who else it was, but I know that the synagogue came to my parents and said they were interested in starting a bat mitzvah program. There were no bat mitzvahs; only boys were bar mitzvaed. They had asked my parents if they would be interested if I would be interested. They didn't come to me first; they went to my parents first – in being the first experiment in being the first bat mitzvah at the synagogue.

JG: So this is the mid-'50s?

CA: This is the mid-'50s. Yes.

JG: Why don't you tell us about that story?

CA: Well, my parents came to me and told me that they had been approached and would I be interested? I said yes. It was very exciting.

JG: Can I ask, what do you think the motivation of the synagogue was at that point? Why were they even thinking about this?

CA: From what I learned later, I know there was a struggle in the synagogue between – it was a Conservative synagogue – between the more Orthodox-oriented and the more liberal-oriented community. I think this was kind of – we want to try this and see if it works. So they had to get someone who really was good at it, who they felt could really do it well. I guess they were – we were never involved in those kinds of discussions. By that time, I was twelve. We were never really involved. I don't remember a lot of those discussions at that point. I'd have to go back and look at the archives, which are at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] – for the synagogue and see if there's anything documenting it.

JG: So your parents came to you?

CA: They asked me if I wanted to do it, and I said yes. It was a very strange thing because my mother said to me, "Well, if you do this, we won't be able to afford giving you a Sweet Sixteen party," which would have been like years later. So, it's your choice. I said, "Well, I'd rather do this." This was now, anyway. Who knew what was going to be four years later? So I said, "This is now. No, I want to do this." The cantor of the synagogue worked with me for almost a year on my haftarah, preparing me for it. He was a wonderful, wonderful man.

JG: How did you do it? What did he actually teach you?

CA: He taught me the trope. He taught me the trope and went over all the tropes with me. There were no tape recorders or anything at the time that you could listen to it and go over it. So he taught me the trope and then went over – I would take sections at a time and learn them and then go over them.

JG: Did you learn the full haftarah?

CA: Yes. Actually, it was the haftarah for Hanukkah that starts with “Rani V’simchi Bat Zion.” Never forget it.

JG: I bet you never forget it.

CA: It’s time for me to redo it, actually; it’s fifty years later.

JG: Oh, it’s a wonderful occasion. So you learned the haftarah with the cantor.

CA: Cantor (Ringel?), yes.

JG: What else were you asked to do? What was the expectation of what this bat mitzvah [inaudible]?

CA: Well, it was Friday night.

JG: As opposed to a Saturday morning?

CA: As opposed to Saturday, there was no Aliyah. I also had to give a speech.

JG: Now, boys in your synagogue, what would they do? What did a bar mitzvah consist of at that point?

CA: They read the haftarah, had Aliyahs, and gave a speech.

JG: Also read from Torah, or not?

CA: No.

JG: [inaudible]

CA: At that time in my synagogue, no, they didn't read from Torah, not that I recall.

JG: So the main thing that you weren't being allowed or asked to do was to have an Aliyah.

CA: Have an Aliyah. Right. It was Friday night.

JG: So you prepared a d'var torah?

CA: Yes. I prepared a d'var torah at the time. My d'var torah was about Hannah and her seven sons. I still have it.

JG: Do you?

CA: I still have it. I saved it. I think so. It's in a box with stuff from way back then. I still have it.

JG: What do you remember about preparing for that? How did you go about it?

CA: I don't remember a lot of how I went about it. I think some of the suggestions at the time came from the rabbi because I was very scared about that and had not been taught how to prepare a d'var Torah. I think that they did not take a lot of time – while they took a lot of time with the haftarah, I don't think they took a lot of time with the d'var Torah in those days. I think a lot of the suggestions for what I did came from the rabbi.

JG: So, what was it like, when you actually had this bat mitzvah?

CA: Oh, it was wonderful. All my family was there. All my friends from the Hebrew school were there and some friends from school. I had one wonderful teacher from junior

high school that I invited, and she came. Actually, her gift to me was a book of sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which I thought was so sweet of her at the time. I mean, there was always. I have to say – and I'll say this later about living in two worlds. But I was always very aware because I went to Hebrew school until I was in high school. No, the end of junior high school, I think it was. I was always aware of living in two worlds.

JG: What do you mean by that?

CA: Of Judaism being a very strong part of my life and also loving my secular life, my regular school. Even though I had released time once a week – in New York City, they had release time to go one day a week because the Catholic students always had this one day a week when they had release time early from school to go to Catholic school. So then the Jewish kids were then included in that for one day a week. And then I went more than that. But the bat mitzvah was – I was so relieved and so happy when I did it. I mean, I just felt so good about it. It just felt like this wonderful accomplishment that I'd done. I sort of felt like, "But I don't feel like a woman." Today, the boys – today, you are a man. I didn't yet feel that sense of what does it mean to be a woman. But I think it gave me a sense of some kind of spiritual independence in a way that I didn't know where I was going to go from here, but it just was this very strong sense of independence.

JG: Did you feel like a pioneer, being the first in your community? It was not common.

CA: Yes, I did. Yes, I think I did. I was so concerned with making sure it was good. [laughter] I was so concerned, making sure I got everything right and it was good, that I don't think I thought about that so much until many years later. With the women's movement getting much more active, fifteen years or so later, I would look back, and I'd say, my God, I was the first bat mitzvah. Well, I felt like a pioneer. I kind of felt like, "I'm doing something here for the first time, and what else is in store? What else can I do? What else will I be able to do?" That's when the disappointment of the Hebrew school

part, of not leading services, came in. I think it came in also at a time when, as you got older, it was kind of like, “There is no God.” There’s a whole death of God period of time in the world. You just go on. I did a lot of testing. I did a lot of testing. I remember once actually eating bread on Passover. I did a lot of testing. It was sort of like, “Well, really, will the world come crashing down on me if I eat bread on Passover?” Of course not. It wasn’t like I was like, “There’s a male god up there [who’s] going to hit me over the head.” I felt bad about doing it, and I never did it again. It was like I had started doing this testing. I just want to think back a second to the bat mitzvah party afterward as well. There was this conservative synagogue; it was a wonderful catered event. It was also the first time the synagogue had had a catered event like that as well. So that was a first for them.

JG: Did other young girls have bat mitzvahs after you?

CA: After that? Yes. So it was the first of many that then followed through.

JG: So did you feel like it gave you a special status in this community as the first?

CA: I don’t think I felt it. I don’t think I felt it. I think I was just so happy to have done it that I didn’t walk around feeling that.

JG: Yet, from what you filled out in your pre-interview questionnaire, you’ve gone on to be a leader and to do things, other things that were really first or early. So I wonder if you want to tell us a little bit about how this led to other developments in your life, from leading morning minyan or being involved in feminist seders, presumably years later, I imagine.

CA: Well, that was a whole transition. I do this very quickly to get to that, which probably will help, starting with – I remember once in college – I didn’t know what I was going to major in when I was in college. I remember one guy saying to me, “Well, women are only here to get married, find a guy, and get married anyway.” I remember being very furious

at the time. So I knew my consciousness was different. Probably gotten it from my mother and gotten it from my Hebrew school success that I wanted to be something. I wanted to have a career of my own. I wanted to be – an image in my mind was I was going to have a job where I would be a full partner supporting a family if I got married. I had that image in my mind. I think I got that from my mother, in terms of the way she ended up working full-time eventually as well in the family. I remember at the time, a lot of young women – it was the end of the world if they didn't have an engagement ring on their hand when they got out of college. To me, that was irrelevant. I didn't go to my high school prom. It was like, "I don't need that." So the stirrings were already in there with me. I was a theater major in college and after I went back to college because it's what I loved most. I didn't know what I was going to do with it. When I finished college, I got involved with doing films in public television. I worked for a number of years as a researcher doing documentaries. I was annoyed at some of the male-oriented hierarchy, as well, there. I didn't feel a sense of – because it was television, it's like there's some things in journalism. There were some things that – can't quite say what I'm wanting to think about right now. So skip that for now. Let's just say that – oh, there was one point – part of what happened there, there was a coalition of women who realized that all the women were getting different kinds of salaries for different kinds of jobs. That was one of the key points then. I was in my early twenties when I was working there as a public – it was at NET [National Educational Television?] at the time.

JG: This is mid-'60s?

CA: No, no. This is already much later. This is the late '60s.

JG: Late '60s.

CA: The later '60s. Right. I finished college in '66, and I started working there in '68, so it was the late '60s. So everyone met and realized what was going on. There was one point where I realized the guy was hired to do the same job I was, and I challenged them

and forced them to have to change my salary as a result. So the women's movement had brought those consciousnesses to all of us at the time. That was the form it started taking then. But for various other reasons, I saw that there was an alternative video movement that was beginning, which, to me, meant a more community-oriented, hands-on, people-oriented, public access ability for the information that was not getting out on television at the time, like women and abortion and daycare and all kinds of things that were happening that were being roused up by the women's movement; you weren't seeing that on television. So when all of this alternative TV stuff started, that's where I thought I needed to be at the time. So I got involved with that. I'll do this as quickly as I can. Later years, that got me into library school. It was a special program, a community media librarian program. When I finally went to work for the library I work at now, it was also unionized. So I also got involved with a group of people who begun – we had a group called the New York City Labor Film Club. We started showing organizing films, which the labor movement wasn't sharing. I was always on the fringe. I always felt like I was on the fringe because I was aware of things going on, on the outside, trying to bring them to the mainstream communities. What happened with my developing – at that time, what I can briefly say is, between leaving college and going to work at the library, which I think would be a period of about twelve, thirteen, fourteen years, I was not Jewishly identified in any way, even though I had been heavily involved. I'd gone to Hillel when I was in college, and I attended it for a year, and then I didn't feel comfortable there. I can't remember exactly why. I didn't feel comfortable. So I just dropped it. There was too much else going on, too many exciting things going on that I wasn't into it anymore. I think that happens with a lot of young people today. And I left it. What brought me back, actually, was being involved in the New Jewish Agenda when Israel invaded Lebanon. I was feeling a lot of the antisemitism on the left. Actually, my involvement in Agenda is what ended up bringing me back to going to synagogue. So I went this whole political activist/feminist activist history back to going to synagogue.

JG: Well, that's an amazing journey.

CA: Yes. I've been connected to that ever since. That's why I say the living in two worlds, which is what Reconstructionism is really, is about philosophically. But I got back to it through Agenda, through the Jewish Renewal movement. There was a P'nai Or group I was a part of in Manhattan for ten years, [laughter] where I led with other women in Rosh Chodesh groups, joined a synagogue, where we started a Rosh Chodesh group. What happened in terms of the morning minyan was that my brother, who had been very ill – he was schizophrenic, and he lived at home, and it was part of what my mother's organizing was all about. Because of his illness, she had been told by the doctors in the early years when he got ill that – they had this theory called the schizophrenogenic mother, where everything was blamed on the mother. She was like, "No way. There's got to be other stuff going on here." My brother, who also had pancreatic cancer, died in 1991. The rabbi at the synagogue encouraged me to go to morning minyan, which I did. I went almost every morning. Part of what happened with that was two things. One was I learned the service all over again, but I learned it in a very different way. It became a part of me in a very different way and became almost like an embodied part of me. Also, after every morning minyan, there was a group of women who would go out and have coffee before they went off to work. That became a part of me. So it was like those two got tied together there for me. There was one morning when one of the guys who usually led the morning minyan – there were other women who led it, but no one was there on time to lead the service –

JB: On this particular day?

CA: On this particular morning. One of the guys said to me, "You do it." I just went up, and I did it. That was almost more amazing to me than my bat mitzvah – almost. Because it was something that I didn't know I really had in me to do. It was like – push to that moment.

JG: Why do you think it has such resonance for you at that moment in time?

CA: It was a part of who I was. It was a part of me. It also showed me that the process – it felt like I accomplished something. It felt like I could give something back. It felt like it was real; it wasn't a performance. It wasn't a performance. I mean, I knew what the performance was. It wasn't a performance. I knew the text. I knew what to do. If I forgot something, I had help from the side to do it. But it felt like I wasn't alone. I was part of this community of people that I was doing it with and for as well. It was something that I could do. So it was again this feeling of – where do I go now? What could I do now?

JG: So if you can just sum up because we really just have a few minutes of this. Where did you go from there?

CA: Well, I thought about the idea of going to rabbinical school and all that stuff, but I didn't follow through on it. Part of the issue at those times were there were other family health issues in my family. So a lot of other things took over. My father died two years later. My mother got ill. I had to become the primary caregiver for her for a while. It wasn't stay at home, but I had to deal with all the issues involved with taking care of her. What I did was, and what kept happening with that was, I continued with the Rosh Chodesh groups. A friend of mine had invited me to a seder. I was still collecting and reading all there was on feminist literature and feminist Judaism. I got more involved in wanting to know more about feminist Judaism. When I was actually in – this was part of it, too. I had done research – this was a few years earlier – on Miriam. I mean, I had never – this is when I was part of a New Jewish Agenda Feminist Task Force. I had researched Miriam. It was something that had never happened when I was in Hebrew school. I researched and learned all these midrash on Miriam. So later, when the Ma'yan seders started, at the same time, my synagogue decided one night to have a group of seders. The rabbi asked me if I would lead a feminist-oriented seder, which I did. I knew how to do it. I also went to an orientation for how to lead seders but had also been to the Ma'yan seders and integrated with the traditional Haggadah, what I'd done at

Ma'yan. Also, a friend of mine invited me to a seder, and when I had read about the first Miriam's Cup ceremony that had been done by Penina [Adelman] – I can't remember her last name right now – in Boston.

JG: Penina Adelman?

CA: Yes. That's where I'd gotten the Miriam's Cup ritual from. A friend of mine invited me to a seder, and I said, "I'd like to bring this ritual to it." I was always trying to keep myself aware of my own growth. There's so many millions of other stories I could tell you. But my own growth in terms of Torah, in terms of women in the Bible, in terms of – and I'd always connected and learned to connect, developing that. So that's kind of the path that I kept on going, I think, rather than just self-learning, self-education because I was continuing to work as a librarian at the time. I was actually working in Central Harlem and did a lot of organizing in Central Harlem. The job that I was doing was an education and career information center, and I had organized a network of agencies working there. So I couldn't stop what I was doing career-wise and automatically shift at the time.

JG: So just to take a minute or two to reflect here at the end, and I know this is frustrating at a certain level because it's hard to encapsulate so much in such a short time, but if you had to think about what you'd like to communicate to the generations that are young today, as you think about these issues and the path that you've been on, is there something you think you'd like to say?

CA: I was thinking about the panel last night. Were you there last night?

JG: Yes, I was.

CA: I was thinking about it this morning. I was thinking what I had and what a lot of us had, which I don't know if it's there today, is that sense of hope and that sense of almost messianic fervor. We can do this. We can make these changes. I can make these

changes. I can make something happen. I've changed myself. I've seen people around me support those changes. I can do it. I think that's one of the messages. The difference today is that they have so much that we didn't have already. So I don't know where that's going to come from, but somehow that sense of, I can do it, I can make it better, I can make it different. Even though you don't know where it's going to go and what's going to finally happen, to follow whatever that dream is, to do it. I think that's part of what I would think about, but not lose your Jewish identity and connection in the process. The Jewish tradition has all of that as part of it.

JG: Well, that's a wonderful image, I think, for young people to hold onto and try and integrate their various identities.

CA: That's right. That's right.

JA: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We really appreciate it.

CA: You're welcome. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it and look forward to other activities, possibilities, and whatever.

JG: Well, thank you.

CA: Thank you. I hope it's useful.

JG: Oh, certainly, it is.

[END OF INTERVIEW]