

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA REYNOLDS

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

JULY 11, 2019

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Kathryn Tracy Rizzi: This begins an oral history interview with Rebecca Reynolds, on July 11, 2019, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Kate Rizzi. Thank you so much for coming in to do this interview.

Rebecca Reynolds: Sure.

KR: To begin, where and when were you born?

RR: I was born in Washington, D.C. in 1962. My parents were living there and working there at the time. My grandparents also lived there.

KR: What is your birthday?

RR: It's February 22, 1962.

KR: What do you know about your family history, starting on your mother's side?

RR: My mother's side is--I've looked at some census records--depending on what census records you look at, they're Polish or Lithuanian. I think they're probably Lithuanian and closer to the Belarus section of Russia, which is where my grandfather, on my mother's side, came from. My mother's mother was born in Pittsburgh. Her parents had come from Lithuania, and they were Jewish. My grandmother's family had a really hard time getting on their feet financially. So, her father worked as a peddler and sold things like brushes and houseware from a cart and also, according to the family lore and also stories that I've heard that kind of back this up, was an alcoholic. My grandmother's mother was always very angry at him, and there was a lot of yelling and fighting in the house. Sometimes, when she was very upset, she would faint. The kids would all run and try to get water and pour it over her face. That was kind of a common occurrence in the household. My grandmother had an older brother, an older sister, and three younger sisters, so there were a lot of kids.

They lived in the tenements. They moved around a lot, because they weren't always able to pay rent. There's one story about them moving in the middle of the night. There's also a story about them moving into an apartment and discovering that the people in the apartment next door were prostitutes, which didn't make her mother very happy, [laughter] but I think they stayed there for a while.

My grandmother excelled at school, so school was kind of her safety place. She read a lot, and I think that's probably where I got my love for literature and writing, because my grandmother was always reading. Until she was blind and deaf, she was reading. In fact, she died after she was no longer able to read, because she couldn't hear books on tape and she couldn't see. So, she used school as a way to escape what was happening at home, but at the same time, she felt very responsible for her mother and her younger sisters. She also skipped grades. They skipped her ahead because she was precocious [laughter], and that made her older sister angry because they ended up in the same grade. I'm going into a lot of detail because I did a lot of background research on my grandmother. She continued to do really well in school throughout the family upheavals.

I have a written narrative, that she wrote out, about her early life. She had been talking to my brother about her life. He had asked her questions and wanted to learn about it. Later on, she was afraid that she had made it sound too negative. My grandmother was very hesitant to talk about her childhood. She didn't like to talk about anything negative. [laughter] She didn't want to sound like she was complaining or that she was upset, so the way that she framed things was always in this kind of positive light. She would say, "Well, my childhood was very rich in experiences" and things like that. I think it was, to some extent, because they lived in Pittsburgh. She used the library a lot. She liked the Carnegie Library, and she talks about that.

Well, there's one story that's interesting, where her father got beaten up in the middle of the night, and all his wares were stolen. They think it had something to do with his drinking. They had to go to the hospital in the middle of the night. My grandmother is sitting in the hospital, in the middle of the night, and instead of being upset about her father and this situation, what she does--and this is how she kind of turns things around--she looks at the sunrise and talks about the beauty of nature and how that was the first day that she had a sense of the wonder of nature. That was part of her written narrative of her childhood. That tends to be the way that she'll talk about things.

Then, her father died when she was fifteen. He got pneumonia, which may have been linked to drinking. She had been skipped ahead in school, so I think she graduated when she was sixteen or seventeen. She went to work right away, to give funds back to her mother. She got a job at Carnegie Mellon University, typing in the theater department, and she started to perform in some of the plays. So, she got very interested in theater--reading the plays, I think, is probably what she enjoyed--and kind of became part of that life. In the meantime, she had made friends with somebody whose father was a well-known rabbi in Pittsburgh and lived in a better neighborhood. She would go to her friend's house and her friend's father really recognized her as being very bright and took her under his wing. She also had a couple teachers who took her under their wing. I have a couple of her poetry books from high school that her teachers had given her.

Now, she was born in 1904--and I forget what year she started college--but she was able to get a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin, which I'm guessing was one of the few universities that allowed women, at that time. It would've been about 1922, after she had worked for a couple years. She did her first two years at Wisconsin, and then she transferred to the University of Chicago and did her senior year in the School of--I think it was called--Social [Service] Administration (she graduated college in three years). So, it was towards social work practice. At that time, social work was an acceptable field for women to go into and interesting for her because her family, when she was growing up--and particularly after her father died--had been visited by social workers, who had suggested that the kids get farmed out to foster care. Her mother had said, "Absolutely not" and kept the family together. So, I imagine she would've had some feelings about that.

She stayed in Chicago and got a job at Hull House, and I'm pretty sure she was there in 1925 or so. Jane Addams was not there at the time; I think she was either in England or [somewhere else], but she wasn't at Hull House then. She worked there for a year, and she left, because she felt like she needed to be back in Pittsburgh, taking care of her mother. Between her and her

older brother, they were able to get her mother into a much nicer living situation that was more stable and more middle class. Her mother had a lot of middle-class pretensions and needed to be perceived as middle class. [Editor's Note: Founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, Hull House was a settlement house in Chicago that provided social, educational, and artistic programs to immigrants and working-class residents. Jane Addams (1860-1935) was a social worker, reformer and pacifist who led the settlement house movement in America and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931.]

I have a piece of jewelry; it's a gold watch that hangs from a chain. It's big, and it's rose gold. They had brought this over from Europe. It got pawned over and over again, when my grandmother was growing up. They ended up getting it back. My grandmother wore it all the time, and I now have it. It doesn't work and I don't wear it, but I want to get it fixed. It's pretty elaborate. It's got rose gold and a little diamond in the back and her mother's initials. It's a really beautiful piece, so they brought some nice things over with them.

The family kept trying different business ventures in Pittsburgh. They had a furniture store at one point; one of the brothers ran that into the ground. They had a deli at one point. I think her mother's parents probably did better than her mother had done, but her extended family was kind of in and out of poverty throughout her life, in the Pittsburgh area. Some of the family are still in Pittsburgh. I don't know them. We visited them once, not in Pittsburgh but kind of around that area. But because my grandmother was so reticent about her childhood and didn't really want to talk about it, we didn't have much contact with that part of her family. We did meet her older sister several times. Her older sister married wealthy; that's how she got out of poverty. She married a wealthy dentist. She had moved to New York and was working as a secretary, and then she married up. So, she would visit once in a while, and she would name drop and she would show off her jewelry.

When she died, I had to go with my uncle, my grandmother's brother, to visit the apartment and look at the estate that she had left. Some things were in the apartment and some things were at Christie's, like jewelry. Her husband had collected rare books, so they were also at Christie's. Then, she had a collection of fur coats. My mother's cousin and I and my uncle sat in the top floor of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, watching models come out in my great aunt's fur coats. We were kind of like, "We're never going to take these. We don't want them." Also, I remember her as a large woman, but the coats were all very small. One of the coats was a snakeskin raincoat. It was disgusting. It was absolutely disgusting. But it was all a very strange experience. Then, we went to her apartment, and she had hundreds of shoes and hundreds of purses piled up on these tables. She wore size seven narrow, so no one could take her shoes. She had this huge collection of purses as well. Her purses all looked like something Carmen Miranda would carry around with her. They were straw with flowers, or they were just very elaborate. [Editor's Note: Carmen Miranda was a Portuguese-born Brazilian singer, dancer and actress who was known for wearing outrageous costumes, including fruit hats and platform shoes.]

We didn't take anything from that estate, except for some of the rare books. When we went to Christie's, we got an inventory of the books. My brother selected some and I selected some, so I still have those. My brother made a better selection. [laughter] He selected a lot of the

American writers, so he has a whole collection of first edition Hemingways. So, I have some first editions of Faulkner, but I never want to open them in case they fall apart. [laughter] I need to have them stored in archival boxes.

[My grandmother's] family fortunes really changed, and she took care of her mother her whole life. She had her mother move in with her and her husband in D.C., when her mother was too old to really take care of herself. Her mother's name was Rebecca, and she died before I was born. In the Jewish tradition, you can't name a child after a living relative.

KR: What is your grandmother's name?

RR: My grandmother's name was Pauline, and her family name was Miller. So, the first part of her career, she went by Pauline Miller. Then, eventually, she went by Pauline Miller Shereshefsky, which was my grandfather's last name. My great grandmother was called Becky. My mother told everybody that they could not call me Becky, because her grandmother was a bitch [laughter] and apparently really doted on the son and never expressed any kind of gratitude to my grandmother for taking care of her, which my grandmother just tolerated and continued to feel extremely responsible for taking care of her mother, trying to please her mother her whole life, I think, and never could.

My grandfather was teaching at Howard University by then. They actually lived in different places in D.C. and also right outside of D.C. in the suburbs. So, I think at that point, they were living in--I have an older sister named Leah who was born in '59--my great grandmother was still living then and I think they were in Chevy Chase in Maryland, which is eventually where they settled. So, I was always Rebecca; no one could call me Becky, family rule. [laughter]

My mother's father came from Russia. He had a big family also. They were escaping pogroms, and also in the Jewish family in Russia, I believe the oldest son would be conscripted into the army for a minimum of twenty-five years. That was their policy towards Jews and Jewish families. So, they smuggled themselves out, bit by bit, and my grandfather's father came here first and ended up in Baltimore. My grandfather, Leon or Judah Leon [Shereshefsky], came, I think, after his older brother. In the family, going along with a lot of Jewish tradition, one son was the studious one and the others tended to be businessmen. My grandfather was the studious one. He came to the United States. He lost all his belongings on the trip. A funny story about that is that he had two trunks of books, which never showed up when he got to the Polish border, and so he never saw those books again. Years later--I think he was probably in his seventies--he was shopping in Rochester, New York, where the rest of his family had settled, in a Yiddish bookstore, and he bought a book. He brought it home, and he opened it. It was inscribed to him. It was from his cousin.

KR: Wow.

RR: They were in Pinsk, not in the town proper but in the countryside surrounding. His father had been a tailor. So, I think he had three brothers and two sisters, something like that, and he ended up in Baltimore.

KR: What did he tell you about his journey to America?

RR: He didn't say much. He really didn't talk about it. All I remember is him talking about losing his belongings on the way and then getting to New York and having to get a train to Baltimore. The guy on the track was yelling, "Baltimore," and my grandfather didn't know what he was saying. So, he kept missing the trains and missing the trains, and finally, he figured out it was Baltimore and got to Baltimore and met his father there. What happened is that in between each person coming over, they would raise enough money for the next person to come over. I mean, the way they got here was just by bribing people. I think his brother might have been here already. His father was kind of inconsistent and ended up leaving the family, which I think was somewhat typical at that time.

My grandfather came here when he was about fourteen. Somehow--I know nothing about where he went to high school or what happened with his schooling--he got into Johns Hopkins [University]. I think he kind of talked his way in. He has some story about going to some professors--he was interested in chemistry--and talking to them about it and getting into college, but I have no idea how he paid for it. I know he worked in sweatshops. He took on some of the tailoring. He did work in some clothing manufacturing, and then he also talks about his meals. He ate dinner by going to happy hour at the bars and eating the bar food. Somehow, he supported himself through college. Then, he did some more work. He worked in a canning factory, inspecting cans for salmonella, something like that, or botulism, and then he got into Carnegie Mellon, which is where my grandparents met. I think he did his graduate work at Carnegie Mellon. He got his Ph.D., and then he started looking for jobs. [Editor's Note: Judah Leon Shereshefsky immigrated to the United States from Pinsk, Russia in 1912. He earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Pittsburgh and Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in 1926, after which he served as a research fellow at Johns Hopkins and then at the Mellon Institute of Industrial Research. He became a chemistry professor at Howard University in 1930 and head of the chemistry department in 1936. From 1943-1944, he worked as a research chemist at Columbia University for the Manhattan Project. In 1950, he served as a visiting professor of physical chemistry at the Israel Institute of Technology, the Technion, in Haifa. (From *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 9, p. 504)]

He and my grandmother met--I don't know what year they met--but they were in Pittsburgh, and they had been dating for, I think, six weeks. My grandmother's sister, the older one, put a marriage announcement in the newspaper, and my grandfather had not proposed. They hadn't talked about marriage at all. There's this wedding announcement or marriage announcement, and so they decided to get married and they did. [laughter] Then, my grandmother met his family in Rochester, New York, and she fell in love with them because they were a very warm, inviting family. She had never had that experience of having a big, coherent, warm, welcoming, middle-class family. So, it ended up being a long, happy marriage.

The way that they functioned around each other was really interesting because they both worked their whole [lives]. My grandmother worked her whole life. They only had one child, my mother. My grandfather did half the cooking and my grandmother did the other [half]. My grandfather would do some things. My grandmother would make the meat, and my grandfather would make the salad and the vegetables. So, they had a somewhat even arrangement. I think

they were always really happy with each other. They respected each other, because they both were just highly intellectual people.

My grandmother's reading--after I started graduate school, I came home for a break. My grandmother had befriended somebody--at that point, they were living in an apartment building inside D.C.--and my grandmother had befriended a comparative literature professor from Catholic University, who lived in the building. That woman had her reading Lacan, who she loved, and I was in school suffering, trying to read Lacan. So, I just was kind of like, "Oh, yes, of course she's reading Lacan." [laughter] "Who else would she read?" She kind of drove me nuts, because she'd always send me newspaper articles about people winning the Nobel Prize for writing. It was always just so dispiriting. It was so depressing.

KR: She was waiting for your name to be in there. [laughter]

RR: Oh, my God, her sense of her own achievement--I think she never really understood that she was an overachieving person. My grandfather got a job at Howard, and one of the reasons he worked at Howard was that he was Jewish. A lot of universities weren't hiring Jewish professors at that time. When he went to Howard, he had no conception of racism really, because in Russia, there were just no black people. [laughter] So, he became more aware, and he did take part in some of the sit-ins and things like that that were happening with the other professors at the university.

He team taught a course. They had a course that was like an introduction to the humanities, social sciences and sciences, and it was a course that all the first-year students took. He team taught it with Sterling Brown and I think Franklin Frazier. He was a black social scientist that was well known, and I'm always getting his name confused. So, he had these close colleagues at Howard, and they would come to the house, periodically, as I was growing up. He had different sets of friends. [Editor's Note: Sterling Allen Brown (1901-1989) was a poet and literary critic who taught at Howard University for forty years. E. Franklin Frazier (1894-1962) was a sociologist who taught at Howard from 1934 to 1959.]

My grandmother had friends--and I hope I'm not mixing this all up too much--my grandparents really shared friends and my grandmother had good friends who were in the Communist Party and good friends who were in the Socialist Party. During the McCarthy Era, she was afraid of being called before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and so she planned to plead the fifth. As it happened, she wasn't called. In the house, they had a lot of dinner parties, which I remember, and I remember growing up with a lot of people around and at their house. She couldn't have her Communist friends and her Socialist friends together at the same dinner parties, so she had to separate them. Up until the day she moved out of the house and stopped having dinner parties, she just couldn't have certain people together. [Editor's Note: Senator Joseph McCarthy led the anti-Communist purge in the United States in the early 1950s, partially through investigatory hearings conducted by congressional committees that included the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security. When subpoenaed to testify before these committees, many witnesses invoked their Fifth Amendment rights and refused to testify. In 1954, the Senate censured McCarthy, and he died in 1957 from alcoholism-related health ailments.]

I think her sister, who was also a social worker, was a Socialist. [For] her sister's husband--and they got divorced--I don't know if he taught at Rutgers at some point, but he had some connection here because her sister's daughter went to graduate school at Rutgers. I'm not sure if the father had some connection, but somehow that's in my head. But they divorced, so I never knew my aunt's husband. He was a labor union leader.

My grandfather was at Howard. My grandmother was working in the New Deal Administration, working on the Social Security Act, then was working at something which I think was called Federal Security Agency. It doesn't exist anymore, but it was kind of a catchall for a bunch of agencies. One of the things that she had to do was figure out how to manage the Japanese in the internment camps, how to have social programs in place. My mother remembers people at the house all night long, trying to figure it out. It's the kind of thing that I'm sure my grandmother wasn't proud of it, but it was something that you just had to do and that's something that she did. [Editor's Note: A part of the New Deal administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Federal Security Agency was created by the Reorganization Act of 1939 to oversee food and drug safety, Social Security, education funding and public health programs. It was reorganized into the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1953. In 1942, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the forced relocation of 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps.]

Then, she went back to school for her Master's in Social Work, and she went to the University of Pennsylvania. She traveled back and forth. That was in the '40s, by the time she went back for that degree. She made very close friends with the two women that were running the program, Virginia Robinson and Jessie Taft. (I have copies of letters that Taft sent to my grandmother and it's clear they were close, with Taft acting as her mentor.) If you go on the University of Pennsylvania website, they talk about the history of social work and how social work had a couple different strains. Jessie Taft and Virginia Robinson were kind of the foremothers of one kind of strain of social work belief and practice. She was very close with them. They were companions, and they lived together their whole lives. The interesting thing about my grandmother is that she had a lot of lesbian friends, she had neighbors and Jessie Taft and Virginia Robinson and some of their friends. [Editor's Note: Virginia Pollard Robinson (1883-1977) and Jessie Taft (1882-1960) were social work scholars and administrators at the University of Pennsylvania. They were life partners and adopted two children. Robinson and Taft established what is known as the functional school of social work.]

I remember, as a kid, that my grandmother's friends [were] women who were all professionals. They were all either psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, [or] educators. They would come to the house during the day and eat cake and drink tea. [laughter] I would always sit and listen to them talking, because it was kind of fascinating and then I would go and suck all the lemon that had sugar in it off the teacups. [laughter] I remember that really vividly. My grandmother also was one of the first--she had breast cancer--and so she was one of the first people to receive radiation treatment and she survived. She had one prosthetic breast, which, when I was about three or four years old, I was absolutely obsessed with. [laughter] Whenever I sat on my grandmother's lap, I would start poking at her breast. [laughter] I remember clearly, at

one of those gatherings, that my grandmother just looked at me and just said, "No." [laughter] That got the message across really loud and clear.

I spent a lot of time at their house. We lived inside of D.C., and they lived outside of D.C. At some point, in the '50s--I think late '50s--my grandfather was asked [to go to Israel]. Well, first of all, my grandfather worked on the Manhattan Project. He spent a lot of time at Columbia working on that. Then, he actually became mysteriously ill after that, and they don't know why he was ill. After the bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, he became ill and they didn't know why. They didn't know if it was psychological or if it was because he was exposed to something. Eventually, he was asked by the Technion Institute to go to Israel and work on getting their chemistry department set up. I think they were particularly interested in his field of chemistry, which was called surface chemistry. Someone tried to explain it to me once and I don't completely understand it. He was there for two years, [and] my grandparents lived there. [Editor's Note: The Manhattan Project was the code name for the U.S.-led effort to develop the atomic bomb during World War II. Research occurred at over thirty locations across the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. Founded in 1912, the Technion, or Israel Institute of Technology, is a public research university in Haifa.]

My grandmother practiced social work, when she was there. She supervised a number of people there, and at that point, Israel was young enough that they were dealing with a lot of orphans coming into Israel and so she was helping. She was traveling back and forth from Haifa, where they lived, to Jerusalem, working with people who are working with a lot of the orphan kids and trying to help them. I think, mostly, she was doing supervision, so she was just talking to them. She made a very close friend there, who's still a friend of the family, and he's now in his nineties. I went to Israel for the first time about four years ago. He was about ninety then, and he was still working at the University of Jerusalem.

He also works for--and this is volunteer work--a worldwide institute. It's called the Fourth World. It's called something like ATD Fourth World. What they do is they visit and they talk about community-building for the poorest of poor, so that's why it's called the Fourth World. So, they'll look at communities everywhere, no matter where they are in the world, including the U.S., that are just desperately poor. Their philosophy is based on a strengths-based model, that you work with communities by working on community strengths. He's written about that and he's gone around the world talking about it. He visited us in the U.S. quite a few times and stayed with us. Then, he won a big prize in Israel called the Israel Prize; that's a big deal. [Editor's Note: ATD Fourth World is a nonprofit organization that seeks to end poverty through a human rights-based approach. First awarded in 1953, the Israel Prize is awarded by the government of Israel and is considered the nation's highest cultural honor.]

KR: What is his name?

RR: His name is Jona Rosenfeld. So, he was enamored with my grandmother. He came back to visit my grandmother a lot and made friends with my mother, who's now very close to him and his wife. My grandparents really loved being in Israel, but at the time my grandfather was upset by the treatment of Arabs and signed a letter. I found the letter. I mean, it was written about and published because, I think, hundreds of prominent Israelis signed this letter. Israelis and Jews

signed the letter protesting the treatment of Arabs, who had been in prison. At that time, he was very pro-Israel but very wary about the treatment of the Arabs. He went back and forth on the issue. As he was older, he got more conservative, but I know the Rosenfelds, who we visited in Israel, were just pretty appalled by the politics. [Editor's Note: Jona Rosenfeld, who earned graduate degrees at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, is a pioneering social worker in Israel. He served as a professor of social work at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1998, Rosenfeld became the first social worker to receive the Israel Prize.]

My family, my father was not Jewish. My mother went to the University of Chicago when she was fifteen, not because she was precocious. She actually wasn't. There was a program there to start people off when they were young, and my father was in the same program. My father was from Ohio [and] was a midwestern Methodist. My mother's parents were not happy about their union, and his parents were not happy. [laughter] So, my grandparents kept my mother home for a year. She worked as a DJ [disc jockey] at a classical music station. Music was also really, really big in the family, not for my grandmother. My grandmother was not interested in music.

My grandmother was interested in art, and she had a number of artist friends. She was friends with a woman whose husband was Morris Louis, who is one of the big abstract expressionist painters. He knew Jackson Pollock. He did these big paintings that look like swaths of paint coming down, and you'll see them. They're in the Museum of Modern Art. They had a painting of his hanging in their house, as I was growing up. He died in '62, when I was born, of lung cancer, because he was smoking continuously and perhaps because he was working in a small room with all these paint fumes. She had other artist friends. One of them--I can't remember her name [Ann Truitt]. I feel like she was possibly an artist interviewed through IRW [Institute for Research on Women]. I'll have to remember her name.

At any rate, my grandfather was really interested in music. One of the things my mother remembers is going to hear Marian Anderson sing on the Mall, on the steps of the--was it the steps of the Lincoln Memorial? [Editor's Note: On Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939, Marian Anderson performed on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in front of a crowd of 75,000 spectators. Anderson was an internationally-renowned singer who was prevented from performing in Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution because she was black. As a result, supporters of Anderson, including Eleanor Roosevelt, arranged for the concert at the Lincoln Memorial.]

KR: Yes.

RR: Yes. That was clearly a really important memory for her. My grandfather had hundreds of records and every night after dinner started listening to music. That's what he did.

KR: Can I interrupt you?

RR: Yes, please.

KR: Can I ask you a few follow-up questions?

RR: Sure, I've just been talking, so go ahead.

KR: No, it is great. It is such wonderful detail. Your grandmother, I want to ask about her working at the Hull House. What stories did she tell?

RR: She said nothing, and I think she probably didn't like working at Hull House. What's really interesting is that it would've been so close to her childhood experience, though she wasn't an immigrant. Really, she was first generation, close to being an immigrant, living in poverty, as she was growing up, visited by social workers, all well-meaning. I have a feeling that she probably realized she didn't want to do that kind of work, because she didn't do that kind of work. She ended up working in the Roosevelt administration. So, it's interesting to me that she never talked about being there. She didn't talk about her experiences there, and when my grandmother doesn't talk about things, it's usually because she has bad feelings about them. [laughter] So, there are these sort of gaps in my grandmother's stories and narratives about her life, and that was one, which is really interesting, because you'd think it would be a significant experience for her, but she never talked about it.

KR: You talked about the written narrative that she passed down to your brother. Did she write about it at all?

RR: No, she said she was there, and then she felt like she had to go home to take care of her mother. So, she didn't write about that. She wrote briefly about her education. Interestingly, she starts this piece off addressed to my brother, saying, "I worry that I sounded too negative when I was talking to you earlier," because I think he was doing his school project and he asked her to talk about her life experience, which was significant because she really hadn't. She didn't talk to us about her childhood. We knew little things here and there but not the whole story. In the written narrative, it starts off with her trying to sound upbeat, but it gets darker as she talks about her father and his death. Even this bit about being in the hospital and learning to appreciate nature, I imagine that while that's happening, there's this backdrop of her father having been beaten up and put in the hospital for drunkenness, and all kinds of things must have been going on with her mother at that point. So, the narrative that she writes out isn't terribly upbeat, but it kind of takes a turn when she goes [to school]. She doesn't go into detail about school, because I think she feels like what my brother wants to know is really what her childhood was like. So, she kind of quickly glosses over working at Carnegie Mellon, being taken under the wing of this rabbi and a teacher and getting a scholarship to Wisconsin, then going to Chicago, working at Hull House, and then leaving. That, she does in like a paragraph, all of that. She does not go into detail about that.

There's also a lot of depression in her family. Her sister, her youngest sister, committed suicide when she was probably in her fifties. Her father was an alcoholic, and one of her sister's daughters was an alcoholic. She's in recovery now. So, there is this kind of combination of substance abuse and depression. I think that it probably was depression that was running through the family that my mother picked up and that I picked up on in a lot of ways. That darker side of her family history she doesn't go into in detail. She never talked about her sister. I mean, it

happened and then she didn't talk about it. So, again, she did not dwell on the sadder, more negative aspects of her life.

KR: Your grandfather, working for the Manhattan Project, did he witness the test in New Mexico? [Editor's Note: The Trinity Test, the first successful detonation of an atomic bomb, took place in Alamogordo, New Mexico on July 16, 1945.]

RR: No. The way he talked about it was that they didn't really know what other people were doing. Each person was given a discreet task. His thing was water molecules, and he had discovered something about water molecules. So, I don't know what his discreet task was, but it would've been separate from what other people were doing and he wouldn't have known what other people were doing. That's how the Manhattan Project, I guess, farmed out its work. It was like a puzzle and I guess the masterminds were putting it together, but there were separate scientists working. There were some in New York and some in Chicago, I think, working on these separate pieces, and so they didn't know exactly what the whole was going to look like. He knew what he was working on (a bomb), and at the time, he didn't have qualms about it, because he thought that it was to stop Germany. He didn't know that it was going to be used against Japan. So, that was why he didn't have issues working on the bomb. I had been under the impression that he didn't really know what he was working on, but then he talked about it later and he said, "Oh, no, they knew exactly what it was." They were all in it to stop Germany. They were afraid that Germany would have the bomb before they did, so that was his memory of it.

KR: I think when you left off, you were talking about your mother seeing Marian Anderson.

RR: Yes. That was part of her childhood. My mother says that when she was little, she didn't know whether she was black or Jewish, but she knew that they were both bad. [laughter] I have a lot of feelings about that statement, which I won't go into now. At any rate, her family did take a Jewish boy into their home, a refugee from Germany whose parents were in the camps, and, eventually, he was reunited with his father. I don't know about the mother. She remained friends with him for her whole life. She was ecstatic, because she had a brother for a while. [laughter] She remembers protecting him on the playground from people that were calling him "Jesus killer" and nasty words for Jew. There was a lot of anti-Semitism where she was going to school in Chevy Chase, Maryland, which is a very middle-class, white area. She was also an only child. When my mother recounts her childhood, she talks a lot about feeling lonely and being kind of angry at her mother for working all the time. I had the feeling, from the way my mother talks about growing up, that her mother was just not warm and maternal, which is interesting because as a grandmother she was.

She took a lot of people under her wing and supervised a lot of people and had protégés. She was very interested in the theories, analytic theories, of this analyst named Otto Rank, who had been an associate of Freud's. He had been very close to Freud, and at one point--he was sort of like Freud's son, Freud took him in--at one point, wanted him to marry his daughter, but then Rank broke with Freud's theory of the Oedipal Complex. So, Rank got completely ostracized, and he was a pariah in the psychoanalytic community, which had since moved to New York. He was also Jewish. By the time he was in New York, there was this real backlash against him. Meanwhile, the social workers, the women, at the University of Pennsylvania had taken him on

and adopted his theories. So, either they or some associates of my grandmother's started something called the Otto Rank Association. [Editor's Note: Otto Rank was an Austrian-born psychoanalyst who lived from 1884 to 1939. He worked closely with pioneering psychologist Sigmund Freud for over twenty years. Jessie Taft and Virginia Robinson founded the Otto Rank Association, which existed from 1965 to 1983.]

He was interesting, because one of his patients was [the writer] Anaïs Nin, and it was always rumored that he might've had an affair with her. It was never clear. At any rate, his psychoanalytic methods and theories were kind of absorbed by the social work school at Penn. Then, my grandmother became very involved with this institute, and they put out a journal. So, she wrote little pieces for the journal, which is another way I kind of learned about her and what she was interested in and also about her prodigious reading.

She has an article about a time that I remember, because it would've been like 1980, she had shingles, and she was bedridden or housebound. She was home. Apparently, she couldn't sleep and--I'm not sure how long it lasted--I think the worst part of it was about two weeks. Meanwhile, she talked about being sick and being able to catch up on reading (which was an understatement). What she read [was] *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Bible, the Old and New Testament, William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, some novels, Thomas Mann, because she loved Thomas Mann. Then, in the article, she quotes poetry about aging. She was also reading [Otto Rank], and Otto Rank is really dense. I mean, when I was doing research on her, I was trying to read through Otto Rank and I was like, "I can't." His writing style is just really all over the place and really references anthropology and everything at once, so you just get very lost in his prose. But she loved him. [Editor's Note: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is a set of six novels that was written by English historian Edward Gibbon between 1776 and 1789.]

She took on, as a protégé, a guy who eventually wrote a kind of definitive biography of Rank, James Lieberman, and then he published letters between Rank and Freud, a book he dedicated to my grandmother. So, she had followers and she was very [maternal]. My mother was really jealous. So, that's another experience that I had of my mother talking to me about her jealousy, because [my] grandmother would take these people under her wing. [Editor's Note: E. James Lieberman is a psychiatrist and Professor Emeritus at the George Washington University School of Medicine. He is the author of *Acts of Will: The Life and Work of Otto Rank* and *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Otto Rank*.]

My mother was a psychologist. She went back to school late, because she wanted to be a stay-at-home mom when they first had kids. She went back to school when I was probably fifteen and got her Ph.D. around the time that I finished college. She was always very jealous of the people that my grandmother had taken under her wing, and she was very open about that. I mean, my mother is a very open, demonstrative person who is not hesitant to say these things at all. She talks about being lonely as a kid, and she talks about being very jealous of my grandmother's protégés. She and my grandmother were very close, because they lived close to each other their entire lives. My mother was only away when she was in Chicago. They were bickering all the time, little bickering. My grandmother kept trying to wave it off and my mother would get infuriated with her, and it was sometimes significant. My grandmother would never go to the

doctor [and] my mother would get angry at her. So, it was stuff like that, but it was constant, ongoing bickering between them. Within that, they were very close. I think my mother feels like she missed out on a lot when she was growing up, and I think that she had a lot of anger towards my grandmother that she never really got over. At the same time, they were quite close when I was growing up. It was a complicated relationship. [laughter]

After my grandparents came back from Israel, I think that's when they took my grandmother's mother in. My grandfather's family all lived in Rochester, New York, and so we would visit. We didn't visit a lot; we visited periodically (twice when I was growing up, and they visited us a couple times. My cousins stayed at a beach cottage with us). I met my cousins in Rochester, first. One of my cousins, David, was my age, but he had had some kind of learning disability, so he'd been kept back in school for a year. He went to Vassar when I was at Vassar, so we got to be close. He was interested in writing, so we were in the same writing class and writing workshop. He wrote a book called *Three Cups of Tea*. I think that's what it was called. It was a bestseller, and then there was controversy around it. It was about this guy who was travelling in Pakistan and climbing, his plane crashed or something in the mountains, and he got taken in. [Editor's Note: *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School at a Time* is a bestselling nonfiction work, written by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin and published by Viking in 2006. Relin spoke publicly about how Mortenson should not have been listed as co-author. In 1996, Mortenson founded the Central Asia Institute (CAI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing schools in Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2011, on CBS' *60 Minutes*, author Jon Krakauer questioned major points of the book, and the report alleged that some of the schools Mortenson claimed to have founded were really built by others. Charges also arose that Mortenson misused funds of the CAI, and Mortenson later agreed to a settlement with the Montana Attorney General to pay back funds to the CAI. In 2012, a federal class action lawsuit alleging that the authors and publisher defrauded readers was dismissed.]

KR: Your cousin wrote that?

RR: Yes.

KR: Oh, I have read it.

RR: Oh, you've read it?

KR: Oh, that's amazing, yes.

RR: Yes.

KR: Wow, okay.

RR: Yes, he wrote that book. I forget the name of the man who [told the story]. Do you remember the name of the guy?

KR: We can look it up and add it to the transcript.

RR: Well, he wrote that, but then what happened is that the man who told the story, they eventually said, "Well, he made up a lot of things."

KR: Right, yes.

RR: My cousin was exonerated of having anything to do with the fact that [the stories were fabricated]. He didn't know. First of all, my cousin really wrote the book out of his interviews with this man. He went to Pakistan, he went into the mountain areas, and he went into the villages, he met people and he travelled and he talked to tons of people. At the last minute, they put this guy's name on, as a like "written with," but it was really my cousin who wrote the book.

Then, [my cousin] wrote another book about a doctor from the Himalayas who had figured out a way to operate on cataracts very quickly. In the Himalayas, in the mountain regions and not just in the Himalayas but other areas, it's very common for people, including children, to develop cataracts and to go blind. In that kind of terrain, where everybody has to work to pitch in to the village, it's completely crippling and makes you a burden on your family. So, this doctor and another American doctor together performed this surgery. They basically walk into these villages--they hike in, because there's no other way to get there--with all their equipment, so they have people with them carrying, basically, hospital surgical rooms that they can set up and they do the surgery. I think the book is called *Second Suns*. After that book came out, my cousin committed suicide. [Editor's Note: David Oliver Relin wrote *Second Suns: Two Doctors and Their Amazing Quest to Restore Sight and Save Lives*, which was published in the spring of 2013. *Second Suns* chronicles the work of the work of Dr. Geoff Tabin and Dr. Sanduk Ruit in ending preventable blindness in Nepal. Relin died on November 15, 2012 at the age of forty-nine.]

KR: Oh, I am so sorry.

RR: Yes. That was a really difficult for me. He had come to Rutgers to do a talk on the book, for the Honors Program, because that was their summer reading. I had gone to see him and he said, "Let's get together later for coffee." It was the end of a really hard week. It was like right before school was starting. I'd had a lot of work that week, and I had a migraine. I knew that the faculty were going to keep him a long time at dinner, so I said, "I really can't get together tonight." That was the last time I talked to him. I felt so horrible. I think, again, that not only my grandmother's side of the family but my grandfather's side of the family, there's some depression that kind of seeped its way through the generations. My grandfather's brother started a chain of hardware stores in Rochester called Noah's Ark, and his son embezzled money from him and ended up in prison. His father had to testify against him. So, that was like a family crisis, but that was the Rochester side of the family.

Another interesting story about my grandfather, his brother Noah was married to a woman, Annie. She was older than her husband but didn't want to be. So, she doctored documents that made it look like not only her husband but my grandfather were older than they were. So, I took a second look at my grandfather's death certificate from Ancestry.com; I got on there to do research. Nobody in the family had noticed, but he would've been 106 when he died, if anybody really looked at it, the death certificate, which he wasn't. He didn't know his exact birthday, but

he pretty much knew how old he was. He died when he was about a hundred. He was old when he died, but he was not 106. [laughter] According to his death certificate, he would have been. So, I went back looking at some of the previous documents, and there was a sort of gradual pre-dating of his birthday. [laughter] He got older and older. So, I thought that was just family folklore, but she really did do something because he was not 106 when he died. [laughter] Anyway, so he had a big, interesting family in Rochester, and a lot of them are still there.

KR: In the city?

RR: Yes, yes. Somebody made a film of my cousin's second book, a beautiful documentary. I want to say it's called *Second Suns*, S-U-N-S. I have to look it up now. His name was David Oliver Relin. If you look up his name, you'll see the second book, and it's also beautifully written.

KR: Yes, we can add it to the transcript.

RR: Yes. Then, there's this documentary that a photographer made with him, kind of following him (*Out of the Darkness*, directed by Stefano Levi). At the memorial service, the doctor, not from the Himalayas but the U.S. doctor, Dr. Geoff Tabin, spoke, and they showed the film and brought the filmmaker. My cousin had just kind of befriended this photographer in a café in Europe and said, "Oh, you should come with me." He got this photographer to come, Stefano Levi, and he ended up making a really beautiful film. So, I tried to get the Honors Program to show the film, after my cousin died, but they weren't interested. I feel bad, because the film has kind of disappeared into oblivion now because it really didn't get the publicity that it should have.

At any rate, my mother went back to school when I was in my teens. My mother had three kids. She had my sister; my sister is older than me. I have an older sister, who's an artist, who's actually going back to school now, at the age of sixty, to do an online MSW. So, social work runs in the family--and psychology.

My father was a psychiatrist, and he was not like a typical private practice psychiatrist. He worked at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, which was a federal mental hospital. It was where Ezra Pound was incarcerated. My father was in charge of an outpatient ward, all men. They were completely harmless, but their families had essentially abandoned them. So, they really lived there, and my father was fairly close to them. He worked there for over thirty years. I remember, Saturday mornings, not every Saturday but periodically, he would take us on rounds, and we would meet the patients and shake their hands. They would shake your hand and not let go. [laughter] They were very friendly, and they were very curious about my father's kids. They would say inappropriate things, but it was always kind of delightful to meet them, even though, kind of retroactively, I know their lives were very sad and circumscribed. This was prior to a kind of big movement to deinstitutionalize people. [Editor's Note: St. Elizabeth's Hospital, located in Washington D.C., was run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services until 1987, when the hospital's operations were handed over to the District of Columbia. Ezra Loomis Pound was a poet and expatriate who lived from 1885 to 1972. He was committed to St.

Elizabeth's Hospital for twelve years, after being arrested in Italy in 1945 for denouncing the U.S. government and pled insanity to charges of treason.]

My father left my mother right before I started college. He left her for a younger woman, he quit his job, and he converted to Catholicism, all kind of at once. It was really devastating to the family. I mean, none of us had any idea; my mother didn't even know. My sister was already in college, so she wasn't home. He told my brother and me the same evening that he told my mother that he was leaving and that he was in love with this other woman. So, we were all in shock, I mean, just totally blindsided. It was like the rug just got completely pulled out from under us, and I remember that being my feeling, that everything I had known just suddenly disappeared.

At that point, there was just a lot of financial insecurity. My mother had just started working and it was a research grant that she was working on, so it was not a permanent job. She was really anxious and eventually started a private practice, but she worked on that research grant for a while. My father--I didn't meet his new wife for a couple of years, and I was just absolutely furious with him, just the way that he handled things. I had started Vassar, which was expensive, and he would not pay the bill and I would get notices that I was going to be deregistered and I would freak out. So, my mother was very anxious about money. My grandmother was anxious for her.

By the time I was ready to go to graduate school--at Vassar, I had focused on creative writing. They had a track that you had to apply to get into these creative writing courses. So, it was pretty rigorous. I had done both the fiction and the poetry writing, and then I did a creative thesis my senior year. [I] wanted to go on to an MFA [Master of Fine Arts] program, but I moved to New York for a year and worked in New York for a year. Then, I wanted to apply to graduate school, but New York was so overwhelming. It took so much energy that I felt like I couldn't do GREs and what I had to do. Meanwhile, my grandmother and my mother together were trying to push me to do a Ph.D. program in English, because they were convinced that a Ph.D. in English, I would get a job with that. Little did they know that it's impossible to get jobs. [laughter] I mean, it was really hard for people to get jobs. I really didn't want to be in a Ph.D. program in English.

I came to Rutgers and I was really anxious about coming, because I didn't really want to be here. [laughter] The good thing was that there were all these people who talked about books, which I thought was amazing, and so I loved that. I liked a lot of the classes. I was sort of a halfhearted student, I would say. [laughter] If I really liked the class, I would do really well and if not, not so good. So, I stayed for three years. I got the MA, and then I stayed for an extra year, because I was teaching, and then applied to MFA programs. I had a lot of personal issues going on, because I was kind of coming out of the closet and I wasn't sure what I was doing. I had a girlfriend and then she broke up with me, and then I went back and had a boyfriend. I'm like, "I don't know what I am." When I left Rutgers, I was leaving both the critical writing part of the program, which I didn't want to do, and the personal situation, which was very complicated at that point. So, I kind of ran away. [laughter]

In the summers, I had to earn money, so worked at the IRW. That's how I got to know Ferris and Carol Smith, who was here then, and Arlene, who would show me the ropes. Then, I took over and did a lot of the administrative work during the summer. [Editor's Note: Ferris Olin, a Distinguished Professor Emerita at Rutgers University, served as the Executive Officer of both the Institute for Research on Women (IRW) and the Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies from 1985 to 1994 and went on to co-found what is now called the Center for Women in the Arts and Humanities. Carol H. Smith is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers. Her career at Rutgers spanned 1959 to 2007. Smith directed the Institute for Research on Women from 1986 to 1992. Arlene Nora worked as an administrative assistant at the IRW.]

KR: Before I ask you about the IRW, and we will talk more about Vassar and Rutgers in depth, I was wondering if we could go back and talk about your early childhood a little more.

RR: Sure.

KR: Where did you grow up in Washington, D.C.?

RR: I grew up in the Chevy Chase area inside D.C. I was about ten blocks from the Chevy Chase Circle, which is where Connecticut Avenue kind of turns into Bethesda, or actually it turns into Chevy Chase. I went to public schools in D.C., and they were all within walking distance of our house. We were close to--do you know D.C.?

KR: A little.

RR: I kind of lived off Connecticut Avenue on Kanawha Street. So, they have the three-syllable, alphabetical [system]. They start with Street A, Street B, Street C, and then they go to the two-syllables and the three syllables. I was in the three-syllables, [laughter] near Military Road, which kind of cuts through the city and goes up to 16th Street. At any rate, my parents moved into this house in--it must've been like 1954. They were already married. They had been in the Army. Well, my father had gone to school wanting to be a physicist, and he was very bright. Then, because of the Korean War, he thought, "Well, maybe if I'm a doctor, I won't see combat," because he knew he was going to get drafted. Then, he thought, "Well, if I'm a psychiatrist, I might not get sent overseas." He became a psychiatrist, not because he wanted to, but because he felt that that was the safest option at the time. So, he kind of gave up on his dreams, though he liked being a psychiatrist.

He did a lot of research on schizophrenia. He did really complicated mathematical modeling research. I tried to read an article that he published and there was no way I was going to ever understand this. It was very heavy math. He was studying the cyclical rhythms of patients and when their systems peak. So, he was going once a week to NIH [National Institutes of Health], using a computer--at that time the computers were as big as the room--to do the mathematical equations. He did research, but he also was the director of this ward of so-called outpatients. St. Elizabeth's, being a government institution, didn't pay a lot, and so there was always anxiety about money in the household.

We went to public schools. My mother was difficult to live with, actually. She was mad at my father, I think, because she wanted him to take on private patients and he wouldn't. He didn't want to. She was always, always anxious about money. I mean, that didn't start when he left, although it certainly got a lot worse. There was a lot of fighting; it was her being mad at him and him not responding. My sister in seventh grade started at the junior high school. The elementary school I went to was predominantly white, middle-class, professional kids. Then, the junior high school--a lot of the kids from elementary school just disappeared to private schools, because their parents were afraid of sending them to the junior high school, which was predominantly black and the kids were bussed in. Now, they were bussed in from some pretty tony neighborhoods but also from some poorer areas, so it was pretty diverse.

My sister was there for about a year and then started cutting classes and getting into a lot of [trouble]. Her friends were juvenile delinquents. I mean, they were kind of wandering around the city without their shoes on, planting pot plants wherever they could. There's a vacant lot on the end of our street where I think her friends planted pot, and the police found it. I was terrified that my sister was going to get arrested. There were all these police at the end of our block. Then, she would have parties when my parents were out, and the police would end up coming. My parents were very lax about all of this. They kind of let it happen. I mean, they weren't real strict in that regard. They should've been, but they weren't. So, they ended up having to send her to private school. She went to Sandy Springs Friends School, which is a Quaker school outside of D.C.

She skipped a grade, because she could. [laughter] My sister was always like the smart one, and I was like the okay one. She was also the artist, and I kept trying to make pictures that were really good and they just weren't. It was frustrating, but then I became the musician. I started playing the flute, and I was very good at it. My father and I would play together. He had a chamber music group and I would play with them. That was nice. So, I had my thing. There was something about art in our family--it was like every kid had to have something that they were good at. I think it was because my sister was a natural-born artist. She just was adept; she could draw when she was two. She could draw people.

At any rate, she got sent to a private school, and then I went on and I went to the public school. At that point, because there was so much tension in the family about money and because I wasn't getting in trouble, [I stayed in public schools]. I was doing the same things my sister was doing, but I was just not letting my parents find out. I didn't get in trouble the way she did. I started smoking and drinking and all that very young, like thirteen, and actually ended up stopping drinking and smoking when I was in my late twenties. But I stayed in the public-school system.

My brother, who was four years younger than me, ended up going to a private school as well, because he was not happy in the junior high school. I wasn't happy there either; it's just that I didn't say anything about it. [laughter] I was very much the middle child in terms of being sort of the negotiator and trying to be the peacekeeper and very much like my mother, I think, or my grandmother--this is kind of where I think certain traits got passed down--I was always trying to keep my mother calm, trying to please her, and keep her from being angry. When my father left, that was like a full-time job, because she was just beside herself. So, there was a lot of pressure

on me when I was in college and also going into grad school with family, with my mother and the situation with my father.

I stayed in the public-school system. I don't know how the hell I got into Vassar. I applied early admission, and I also sent my flute tapes because I wanted to keep playing music. When I got there, I didn't really like the flute teacher. So, I played for a year, I studied for a year, and then I stopped. At that point, my freshman writing teacher had discovered that I was a good writer and was really impressed with my writing. She kept encouraging me to do the creative writing coursework and the track in the English Department, so that's how I ended up doing that.

KR: When you first went to Vassar, were you going to be a music major?

RR: I was thinking of it. I had applied to Vassar. I had applied to Oberlin, because they have the conservatory. What else did I apply [to]? I think Maryland. I think I applied to three schools, because I was very lazy about it. I applied to Vassar early decision, because--in fact, I hadn't even visited--an old babysitter came and said she loved it. So, I thought, "Okay." After I applied early decision, I visited and I was a little taken aback because the woman who gave us the tour, the student, was wearing a pearl necklace, a cashmere sweater and a plaid skirt. I was like, "No." [laughter] I was in my combat-boots stage. [laughter] I remember it was a rainy day and I thought, "What the fuck have I gotten myself into?" [laughter] When I got there, people were much more diverse than I thought they would be, so I made friends with, what I considered, the most Bohemian-ish group I could find, so I had some good friends there. But I was really nervous. The first month there was hard, because I was trying to meet people. There were some very wealthy people there, and I was not used to that kind of wealth.

When I was growing up, my mother always bought us polyester clothes, because she didn't want to iron. So, I get to Vassar and it's like everybody's wearing one-hundred-percent cotton. I just remember that was the thing. You had to have one-hundred-percent-cotton everything. Half the people there looked like they were out of the L.L. Bean catalog, and the other half looked like they were out of some goth dream from a New York theater set. I had to find the in-between, which I did, and there were a lot of people that were really interesting. I forget your question.

KR: Before we talk more about Vassar ...

RR: Yes.

KR: ... You mentioned going to Vassar, interested in playing the flute, and then getting geared into writing.

RR: Into writing, yes.

KR: During high school, did you have any interest in writing? What were your interests?

RR: Actually, I started writing poetry when I was about eight. I started keeping a journal, which was a secret. I had a secret journal. I was also writing a novel, when I was eight, which was essentially a rewrite of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. That's what it was. I had been

writing throughout junior high and high school. I always had a notebook, and I was always writing poetry. I never wrote prose or journal form, except when I was writing my novel. [laughter] Poetry was my mode of expression. [Editor's Note: *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is a 1950 novel written by C.S. Lewis. It is the first book of the seven-book series called *The Chronicles of Narnia*.]

When I was in high school, we didn't really have any outlets for that. I went to the public high school, and I remember my first year there. So, the grades split up; it was seventh through ninth grade for junior high and then tenth through twelfth for high school. My first year there, the English teacher was out; she was sick. We had a substitute teacher who was not an English person. He wasn't an English teacher at all. He just kept trying to keep us occupied, and we were horrible to him. This went on for months, because the teacher didn't come back until the last quarter of the year. What I did to survive high school was bring novels and read, so I read in the back of the room throughout high school. I just sat and read, and I read a lot of really good books.

KR: What were you reading?

RR: I was taking books from my parents' library. I was reading John Updike. I was reading Tolstoy. I was reading Somerset Maugham. I was reading *Catch-22*. I was reading Philip Roth. I was reading Saul Bellow and Jane Austen. I think I read *Middlemarch*. I was just reading whatever I could get my hands on. That was really my education; it was kind of a self-education. [Editor's Note: *Catch-22* is a 1961 satirical war novel written by Joseph Heller. *Middlemarch* is an 1871 novel written by English author George Eliot.]

When I started at Vassar, I remember feeling terrified, because all these kids had been to either private schools or better schools than I had been to. They had been in wealthy districts in New Jersey. I was just terrified, because I thought I was just going to fail everything. My first semester, I worked really hard and I made straight "A's." So, then, I relaxed a little bit, but I think one of the reasons I was able to do well was that I had been reading so much. My grasp of English and writing and sentence structure and all of that was just really probably better than a lot of the kids there, not to be arrogant, because I was really so self-taught at that point and was reading things that my parents probably shouldn't have let me read at that point. [laughter] John Updike is how I learned about sex, which is really twisted, which is probably why it took me so long to come out of the closet. [laughter] Who knew? It's funny, because I remember reading Rita Mae Brown and everything, and it never once crossed my mind, like, "Oh, maybe I'm a lesbian." It was just like, "Okay." I had just the things that my parents had, books they had, and then books my sister had and that she was reading. So, I just had done a lot of reading. [Editor's Note: Rita Mae Brown is a writer and lesbian feminist whose first novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* features a lesbian protagonist.]

The only class that was any good was my French class, but then my French teacher was scary. When she was mad at us, she would take her shoe off and bang it on the desks. So, I didn't take "AP French." I've always been a wimp. If I'm scared of failing or anything, I just wimp out immediately. It's like, "No, I'm not going to take 'AP French.'" So, I took "AP English," but because of the school and because of the low expectations, they never even had any of us take

the AP test, which wouldn't have done me much good anyway because I'm very happy that I took the writing course at Vassar. That was a yearlong writing course, which actually focused on literature more than anything else.

KR: When you were in high school and at Vassar, what poets were you reading?

RR: My sister had given me Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck*, and I loved it. I didn't understand a lot of it, but I loved it. So, I was reading Adrienne Rich and I was reading a little Anne Sexton. I was enamored with Wallace Stevens, but only because when I was much younger, I grabbed a children's book or a teen book. It was kind of a fantasy novel, and the epigraph was from *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. I got really interested in that poem and interested in Wallace Stevens, even though I didn't have the capacity to really understand Wallace Stevens. To this day, I love Wallace Stevens, but there's a lot that I read that I'm like, "What the fuck is he talking about?" [laughter] which I think is probably a lot of people's experience with Stevens. I got interested in that, and my father bought me this beautiful edition of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, illustrated by David Hockney.

My father, in some ways, was much more attuned to me and to what I was interested in than my mother, with the music and kind of knowing that I liked Stevens. My father could talk about poetry. In high school, I do remember for "AP English" having to read Keats and having to write a paper on *Ode [on] a Grecian Urn*, which I hated. I would talk to my father about that, and we would get into these philosophical conversations, which I always loved. My father was a dreamer really. He also read a lot--he read a lot of history--but my experience of him growing up is that he was never totally present. He was always slightly removed, but when you could kind of catch him and get him, he was very engaging. He certainly had a sense of what I was interested in. So, he did support that part of me, and my grandmother did as well.

When I was in high school, I used to read *The Washington Post* book review, because that's what we got at home. I would always talk to my grandmother about the books they reviewed, and sometimes I would read them. Or she would read something and I would read something. I remember getting her to read Adrienne Rich. She was interested in feminism, so she was really interested in Rich. That may have been a little bit later. Between my grandmother and my father, I felt like there were people in my family that I could connect with in terms of my intellect. They would kind of feed it. Often I felt like my family wasn't very attuned to me, because I was going through a lot in school and was pretty unhappy, I would say desperately unhappy in high school. I mean, I was bored out of my mind, and my friends and I would cut classes and just not get in trouble for it. I remember going to school every morning and being like, "Ugh, I can't stand this." I was in the band and the orchestra. That was somewhat satisfying, although it wasn't a very good band or orchestra. Yes, I got some support for my interest in music and my interest in literature.

KR: I am always curious about what families talked about in terms of the Holocaust, in the immediate decades after World War II ended. Your grandparents, having lived in Israel, and your grandmother, having worked with orphans and then also taking in a refugee, what did you know about the Holocaust, growing up, based on what was spoken in your family?

RR: Well, interestingly, because my family was very attuned to the Holocaust, clearly, my mother, to this day, really--and she's eighty-seven--will not buy anything made in Germany. They have this very anti-German bias, and that was true all through my growing up. My grandparents had a couple friends who were survivors. Most of their friends though had come over before the Holocaust, had come from Russia, or they had come from Germany beforehand or they'd come from Eastern Europe and they had settled here. What was happening during that period, I think, is that my grandparents were kind of becoming aware of what was happening in Germany, as the rest of Americans were becoming aware of what was happening in Germany. That's when they became involved and took in a refugee and didn't talk about the Holocaust so much, because it wasn't really their experience.

The establishment of the State of Israel was really important to my grandfather especially. I mean, my grandmother got it. My grandmother and grandfather were pretty secular Jews, but Israel meant a lot to my grandfather. My grandfather--something I can't talk about publicly anymore--was a very ardent Zionist. When he was in Russia as a kid, he was part of the Zionist camp, and we have a big picture of him, where he's standing with two hundred other people. It's like one of those really long photographs. My sister studied photography and printmaking at RISD and was able to have it restored. He always had been conscious of the need for a Jewish state. Establishing Israel as a state was something that was important to him, and I think that desire came out of his experience as a Jew in Russia, and later with the Holocaust and also working on the Manhattan Project.

They didn't talk about the German experience so much, because they didn't know it. They were not part of it. It just fueled the desire for a safe place for Jews, and I think that my grandfather, when they were in Israel, briefly considered staying there. I think they had some talk of staying there and then decided not to, because my mother was about to marry my father. It was just not a good time for them to stay, but I think that's how it manifested itself really. They were very aware of what was happening, they took in a refugee, my grandfather became more committed to the establishment of a Jewish state, and that was really what they talked about.

The one thing that was interesting, my grandparents didn't celebrate any of the Jewish holidays until my mother made them. My mother was growing up and was feeling like she needed to affirm her identity. So, when she was a teenager, she insisted to her parents that they start observing the Jewish holidays. So, they started to observe the High Holidays, so it was Rosh Hoshana, Yom Kippur, Passover, Hanukkah a little bit, but Hanukkah was never that important. My Jewish grandparents, once they accepted the fact that they had a non-Jewish son-in-law, went nuts over Christmas. [laughter] We always had a Christmas tree, and they bought us lots of presents. People asked me what religion I was, and I said, "Both." There are only two. There is just Christian and Jewish, that's all that I knew, which is actually not true, because I went to school with kids who were Hindu and Sikh when I was a kid, but clearly they were somewhat marginalized. My grandparents totally gave into the Christmas spirit. [laughter] In my family, it's always been a commodity holiday. My mother still gets a Christmas tree.

She went back to temple when she was older and had her bat mitzvah. That was really important to her, because she hadn't had a chance as a kid, and a lot of women didn't have that chance. In her family especially, because they were so secular, she certainly hadn't gotten it. What I

remember, because by then they were celebrating the holidays, [are] the stories that they told and the conversations that they had around the Haggadah, the stories in the Haggadah over the Passover seder. My grandfather was very instructive. He had studied in a yeshiva before he had come to the U.S., so he was very well schooled in Jewish history and tradition. There were a lot of stories that he told. He was really very connected to his identity. It's just that when he first came to the U.S., he didn't have a real--they didn't really believe in God. So, it was just a very kind of secular connection, but it was a strong connection, particularly on my grandfather's side. I think my grandmother always remained a little bit dubious about religion as a whole but certainly believed in Israel. The Holocaust per se was not something they talked about a lot, but in their acts and what they did, it influenced them a lot in the way they thought. [Editor's Note: A yeshiva is a Jewish educational institution that focuses on the study of traditional religious texts. The Haggadah is the written guide to the Passover seder.]

KR: What about your religious upbringing? What was it like in your household?

RR: My father sometimes said he was an atheist, sometimes he said he was agnostic, and sometimes he said he was a socialist, which I thought was a religion. My mother was very clear about being Jewish, and because my grandparents lived closer to us, I felt more Jewish. I also felt left out of being Jewish in some ways, because I didn't go to Saturday school and I didn't have a bat mitzvah. I had some friends who did. So, I always felt like I was Jewish but not Jewish enough, and I still feel that way. When I'm around other Jews, I feel like I'm one of them. I live in Highland Park, which is a very Jewish area, and so almost all my neighbors are Jewish. I feel very close to that community, and yet a lot of the Jews in Highland Park are really Conservative. I have a lot of issues with the politics of Israel now for obvious reasons. I think that it's hard to be Jewish right now, in some ways. At the same time, I feel like there's a sort of sensitivity and sensibility that come with being Jewish, and I feel like I have that more than anything else. I feel no connection to Christianity, absolutely nothing about Christianity that I ever absorbed, and that was because it was just not in my family.

My father was brought up as a Methodist, but he actually stopped going to church with his parents. By the time he was in college with my mother, he was not really practicing anything. In fact, he started singing in a choir in a synagogue with my mother. So, he was more interested in Judaism, I think, than his own upbringing. Then, he converted to Catholicism, which is--that's another story. [laughter]

I didn't feel religious in any way, but I did feel like my identity was much more tied to a Jewish identity than anything else. There's a sort of Jewish humor, a kind of self-deprecating humor, that kind of goes with a lot of Jewish jokes, and I feel very attuned to that. My partner is, well, very anti-religion. We light Hanukkah candles. If we celebrate the holidays, we go home to my mother's, we go to D.C., and usually that's Passover.

My brother lives near my mother now. My brother's two kids are both transgender, and I'm only saying that [because] his oldest son had a bat mitzvah, was identified as female, had a bat mitzvah, and then started transitioning to male. His oldest child has become very observant as a Jew and wears a yarmulke and goes to temple every week, a very, very, very Reformed temple but is very connected to Judaism. He says it's because when he was transitioning, he had a lot of

mental health issues that were kind of coming out. He was in a couple treatment facilities at different points. He said that the prayers helped get him through. So, now, he's in his first year-- he's not in college. He hated school enough that he's in a community college doing a culinary degree. It's like [an] associate's degree in culinary arts. I have a feeling he'll eventually go to college, but at the moment that's not where he is.

My brother, he associates himself with Judaism. My sister, she's kind of either, whatever. [laughter] I think it's very important to my brother. He has a lot of my grandfather's things, some books that he kept, and feels very attuned to that. My brother's a lawyer, but he also started out as a writer. He, in fact, went to the University of Michigan and overlapped with me for a year, then stayed in Michigan and edited the physics journal for the Physics Department and he got interested in science. I mean, he had majored in English and environmental sciences, so he always had this sort of science bent--that was my grandfather's--that nobody else in the family really took on. I don't know if that answers your question or not, but yes. I'm pretty secular, but I feel that if someone really said, "Well, how do you identify?" I would say, "As Jewish." Actually, they wouldn't have to press me very hard. [laughter]

KR: I have one final question about your upbringing. It has to do with your memories of growing up in Washington, D.C., at the time that you did, because there was so much in terms of protests, activism and events.

RR: A lot going on, yes.

KR: What sticks out in your mind?

RR: A lot was going on, and my parents were very involved. My father, because he had training as a doctor, used to work in Red Cross tents down on the Mall during [the] March on Washington. There was the March on Washington and then there was the Tent City, the March on Poverty. He was down there and he met some students from Berkeley, and they came to stay at our house for a while. We had these Berkeley students at our house. One was American black, one was African black, and one was a white woman that both the guys were in love with. [laughter] They all stayed in our basement. We had the basement with a bed and everything. That was a really fond memory. [Editor's Note: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom occurred on August 28, 1963. During the event, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered the "I Have a Dream Speech." Following the assassination of King on April 4, 1968, thousands of people camped out on the National Mall in tents in May and June, and the six-week protest became known as "Resurrection City." Planning for the protest had begun the year before by King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as a part of the Poor People's Campaign to protest economic inequalities.]

But, at the same time, when I was walking home from school, people would shout, "The riots are coming, the riots are coming." I remember that really clearly and learning from my parents early on what the unrest was about. They were never worried about being in D.C. then, because we weren't in the area that was really being ravaged by the riots. A lot of Washington was really ravaged and didn't recover for many years. It was probably not until the '80s until they really rebuilt the parts of D.C. that got just burned down. [Editor's Note: After King's assassination,

riots erupted in Washington, D.C. that lasted from April 4 to April 8 and resulted in an estimated forty-million dollars in property damage.]

KR: You are talking about the riots in 1968 ...

RR: Yes.

KR: ... After King's assassination.

RR: Yes. My mother started crying after King was assassinated. I knew something really horrible had happened. That was very clear to me. I didn't associate D.C. with politics in a way, because my neighborhood and people we knew were not in politics. They were lawyers and doctors and accountants. The only people that we knew that were politically aligned were journalists. We had, I think, a couple friends who were journalists, but most of our friends were psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers and from that world. Being in D.C., it didn't feel like I was growing up in a political atmosphere, but my parents were very attuned to the kind of social justice issues and racial issues that were going on and very aligned with the black experience there and my mother particularly, because of growing up on the Howard Campus in some ways.

Because I had grown up in a household where my mother was Jewish and my father was just not, but technically Christian, because he had grown up as Christian, I always had this sense that anyone who claimed that they were one thing was wrong, that everybody was more than one thing, and that there was this sort of black and white to everything. Their protest against the Vietnam War, it's not that I saw two sides to those things. I always identified really strongly with an anti-war sentiment, but I was very wary of a politics where, I don't know how this translates, but somehow that experience colored my whole childhood. The issues were complicated, I think is the feeling that I had, and had more than one side to them. I was constantly thinking and thinking about things. I mean, it was clear who I felt sympathy with, but there must have been a strain of politically conservative, Right, Christian thinkers. Then, Nixon was in power when I was in fifth grade, and that always really turned me off of that kind of thinking. [Editor's Note: Richard Nixon, a Republican, served as the U.S. president from 1969 until his resignation in 1974, amidst revelations about his involvement in the Watergate Scandal.]

That experience of having two things in my head at once just colored the way I thought about things, as I was growing up. I do remember thinking about everything really carefully and considering everything. I thought a lot about poverty, because that was an issue. I kept thinking, "Oh, when I grow up, I'm going to give all my money away." [laughter] It's like, "What money?" [laughter] Anyway, so, that was kind of my strange thought process. We learned about prejudice in school, and I remember asking my mother, "What's prejudish?" The way I said it, she didn't understand what I was saying and she kept pressing me. Finally, she got it and she kind of explained it to me, and I thought, "That's so horrible." I couldn't understand how people could be racist.

KR: I am smiling because that is the first word, and there have been so many since then, that I read it before I knew how to say it, and I was very, very young.

RR: Yes.

KR: That is why I am smiling as you say that.

RR: I remember our teacher gave us a lesson in school--and I think it was in first grade, if not kindergarten--and so I didn't pick up on the word completely. I had to say it. I didn't see it in writing. I didn't know how to pronounce it.

KR: I called it "pre-jude-as."

RR: Yes. [laughter]

KR: Then, my mom corrected me.

RR: That's like "horse devers," because I read all these novels, British novels about British kids, and they're always serving "horse devers" [*hors d'oeuvre*]. [laughter]

I had a pretty interesting childhood. Because of my grandparents and their long ties to D.C., they knew a lot of people. We always had a lot of dinner parties and things going on in the house and arguments constantly. My grandmother's sister and my grandfather were arguing all [the time]. I mean, they would argue about the cost of cheese in the supermarket. They argued all the time. My grandmother's sister was much more to the left politically than my grandfather. As I got older, the issues became much more focused on Israel and the Palestinians, and my grandfather was very moderate, at that point. As he aged, he got more conservative and my aunt got more leftist and more radical. Those arguments would start and my grandmother couldn't deal with it, so she would shut them down. But they were always interesting. I mean, I always wanted to know how they would play out, but my grandmother wouldn't allow it because there was too much animosity there. [laughter] I think my grandfather and my grandmother's sister were pretty much arguing over her attention, like that was the subtext, but it was more that they just had these different political kinds of standpoints. Mostly, I grew up in a very kind of left-leaning household, with my father saying he was a Socialist. [laughter] I did not know what that meant, except that he kept quoting Marx and saying, "Religion is the opiate of people." I always thought he was saying, "Religion is the opium of the people." For years, that's what I thought that that was. [laughter] I imagined all these people on heroin. [laughter] Then, it was complicated because the piano player for our chamber music group, an early piano player, before I actually played with them, was a heroin addict. I mean, it kind of came out after a while. That really complicated things for me. [laughter]

My household, there was a lot going on. There was a lot of arguing between my parents. My grandparents' house was sort of a safe haven for me, because it was quieter there, but then they would have these dinner parties with a lot of interesting people. They also had separate groups of friends. There was the group from Howard, and then there was the Jewish Socialist group, and the Jewish Communist group--they were all Jewish. Most of their friends were Jewish.

[There was] lots of conversation and arguing going back and forth and telling jokes in Yiddish. It was a pretty rich upbringing, which is probably why--going to a public school, where I really wasn't learning anything--why I think I was kind of an autodidact in a lot of ways. Part of it was just from absorbing a lot from my grandparents.

What I do now, I work with students all the time, outside of teaching, but I think the work I do with students, I'm able to do it because I also absorbed a lot of the social worker's perspective, the psychologist's perspective, these kind of perspectives about people that were very generous. I have to say that my grandmother and my mother and the people around them just had very generous attitudes towards people and very non-judgmental. Then, that might be why the growing up with the two religions led to a non-judgmental attitude towards people, which doesn't mean I'm not judgmental. [laughter] When it comes to working with students and seeing what they're going through while they're having academic issues, I never hold it against them, because that's what happens sometimes at Rutgers. Advisors get angry at students for not doing what they tell them to do or because they're having academic [issues] or they're academically weak or whatever. I don't like thinking that way. I don't think that way about people. Anyway, I don't know if I've completely talked your ear off. You have it on tape.

KR: Yes, it is wonderful. Well, let us talk about your Vassar years.

RR: Okay.

KR: How do you think Vassar shaped you?

RR: So, Vassar, first of all, I did become aware of wealth in a way that I hadn't been before, but that was offset by the fact that we had small classes and faculty who paid attention to you. I was getting a really good education at Vassar, a very rich education. I was very quiet. I didn't talk in class, because I was still completely paranoid about not being smart enough, even though I was getting good grades. I wrote well, so all of my teachers [gave me attention], I think with the exception of a couple history classes, because history, I have to say, was never my strongpoint. [laughter] That's also because of the history courses I took, which were like medieval history. They just weren't relevant to me. I felt really that Vassar gave me a lot intellectual confidence that I had not had before, not just as a writer. For me, writing and thinking were very intertwined, and so I got attention from teachers for my writing and I didn't have to participate so much in class. I found that that compensated a lot for not being very talkative in class. I wasn't talkative in class, not because I was not thinking but because I was not articulate. I was not good at saying what I was thinking, because I was scared to say it, because I know [that] in situations where I'm very comfortable, I'll talk about anything. In front of a classroom, teaching, I'm very comfortable, I'll talk about anything, but with teachers and classrooms--and this followed me to grad school, which was kind of problematic--I was very hesitant to speak in class, because, in that context, I felt very inarticulate. I would have all these thoughts going on, but I didn't have a way of expressing them. I compensated at Vassar with writing, and it worked there. It didn't work so well in grad school, but it worked as an undergraduate. I am really grateful to Vassar, in a way, for giving me that experience. Also, I had gone to a huge public high school, and so being at Vassar, which was small, set in this beautiful setting, was just such a treat for me. It was like nothing I had experienced before. I felt really lucky to be there. I still felt very

uncomfortable with the wealth of some of the students. Vassar has these legacy students, and it has its students who are very wealthy and New Yorkers, who are really sophisticated. That always made me uncomfortable, but I found my combat-boot friends and we hung out, so it was okay. [laughter]

Becoming friends with my cousin was also really important, because we had known each other a little bit as kids. They came to stay with us at the beach one summer. I went to Rochester a couple times. They had been in D.C., and I remember going around with them and taking them sightseeing. I hadn't really had a chance to get to know them and to feel like I had family around, because both of my parents were only children, which meant that I just didn't have any first cousins or family like that. Getting to know my second cousin was important because we became very close. I had some very close friends there.

My final year there was a little difficult, because for some reason--which was a horrible decision--I opted to live in a house, kind of a townhouse situation, with four guys, and I was the only woman in the house. Thankfully, my friends lived next door, because Vassar has townhouses that it owns. So, it's across the street from the school, and it's sort of like you're independent but you're not really because it's not really your own house. It's the college's house.

I took a course in feminist theory that year and started to talk about it and also got very angry at the guys that I was living with, because they were such slobs. They were really, really slobs. I mean, they smelled. They left their dirty laundry on the floor in the living room. They would never do the dishes. The kitchen was always absolutely disgusting. One guy had a girlfriend who would come over and do the dishes, which infuriated me and made me mad at both of them. I started to talk about feminism, and my best friend from next door would come over and both of us would talk about feminism. Then, they started to get really angry at me. I ended up having a terrible experience with the living situation my last year, because these guys, who I had been friends with when I moved in, ended up really hating me by the time I moved out, because I was like a feminist bitch. [laughter] It's funny, because I've reconnected with them on Facebook, which is enough reconnection. That was really the only point at Vassar that I felt uncomfortable. Being at Vassar, I felt very privileged to be there. I felt like I was getting a really good education there.

It kind of made up for high school and for being really miserable in high school and being in this atmosphere that was always really fraught with--high school was difficult because Washington became a really divided city between whites and blacks. My high school was probably about eighty percent black and about ten percent Hispanic and Asian and ten percent white. So, the black kids used to either tease us or make fun of us. Once, I almost got in a fight with this one girl who punched me in the face. We would make up with each other by lending each other cigarettes--that was kind of our way of being friends--but it was tense. I remember that racial tension there. That was something that kind of hardened me, in a way, because I had all of this desire to not feel that kind of tension and yet I felt a lot of animosity and anger. Then, thankfully, I lived in New York after Vassar and was so surprised at how little tension there was there. I mean, there was, but I didn't see it. I stopped feeling that kind of racial tension when I was in New York, but it was very evident in high school because the black kids were bussed in and the white kids lived in the area and walked to school. The white kids were like the children

of die-hard parents who believed in public school or couldn't afford private school. The black kids were from different parts of the city, but some of them were from what at that time we used to call the "Gold Coast," which was where the sort of upwardly mobile black families lived in these kinds of big houses. I had grown up with a grandfather who taught at Howard and family friends who were black. Then, all of a sudden, because I was white and a minority, I was in a position where I felt like disliked and I think that's what made me so angry.

I remember being the only white person in my gym class one year, except for the Chinese girls, who used to sit on the sidelines reading magazines. They would always be having their periods; that was why they couldn't participate. So, that was like a mystery to me. I remember playing basketball and being horrible at it--I was horrible at sports--and so I always got made fun of. At that point, I had long hair and I wore it in braids. The girls in the class called me Judy Garland, because that was their reference point for a white woman in braids. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Judy Garland was an American actress who lived from 1922 to 1969. She is best remembered for her performance as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.]

KR: There are worse insults. [laughter]

RR: There are. In fact, I didn't feel uncomfortable in that class. It actually wasn't uncomfortable, and I enjoyed that. In fact, I was glad that's what they chose to call me, and they didn't make too much fun of me on the basketball court. Then, one day, I remember I wowed everybody. I had grown up taking dance classes and riding classes, and so I must have somehow developed really strong thighs. So, we were doing broad jumps, and I jumped eight feet and everybody was just like, "Whoa." I remember feeling like I got a little bit of leverage there, so that was also a fun day.

It was interesting how much tension played into that school [Woodrow Wilson High School]. That was one of the only schools that had that kind of situation, because most of the public schools in D.C. are either everybody's bussed in, or they're in neighborhoods that are really diverse. Being in Northwest D.C., which is kind of like the white people part of the city, it was one of the only high schools, I think, that had a sizable white population, but it was still relatively small because as we got up in the grades, parents were just taking their kids out of the public schools. At that time, there just weren't that many white kids left. Those of us who were left were very, we were kind of bad. I had friends who used to make homemade bombs and blow up telephone booths, and then they got into the punk movement.

In fact, my friends in high school started the straight-edge movement. They were in a band that had a cult following. I'm always forgetting what they called themselves, but they had a cult following. I remember teaching a class, twenty years later, and a kid was wearing a t-shirt that had their name on it (Minor Threat). Then, another guy that I knew, Jem Cohen, who's a filmmaker, did a film called *Fugazi [Instrument]* about their band, and he went on to make a lot of other documentary films. He also has a feature film, which is a gorgeous film. So, we were kind of interesting. We were that first wave of punk rockers, whether we dressed the part or not. That was our rebellion. It was definitely a rebellion against everything. We didn't even know what we were rebelling against; it was just rebellion. [Editor's Note: The straight-edge movement is a subculture of the hardcore punk movement. People who identify as straight edge

typically refrain from using alcohol and drugs. *Instrument* is a documentary film made by Jem Cohen about the Washington, D.C.-based punk rock band Fugazi.]

That experience was really offset by being at Vassar, which was so totally different. In some ways, at Vassar, I felt like "Well, I'm kind of tough." I felt like I had this toughness to me that other people didn't have, just from that experience. I remember my friends from high school and I would talk about it. We would get together on vacation. I had a friend at Smith, and we would talk about just feeling different from having that public-school experience, which is not a typical public-school experience. It was a lot. I remember a lot of energy went into just guarding yourself, not looking people in the eye. Going into the building in the morning, we would get pinched on the butt. Guys would ask our phone numbers, you know, "Can I call you?" The guys would kind of stand in line, and not just the white girls but all the women walking into the building were getting pinched. People were saying, "Can I have your number?" You were constantly trying to deflect and figure out how to be in that environment. That was high school.

My father was miserable too, I remember at the time. It's like I felt it; I didn't know it, but I felt it. When he left, looking back, I was thinking, "I'm not that surprised," even though it was very sudden. I think that my senior year of high school is probably one of the hardest that I've had, ever. Again, going to Vassar, at first, it was difficult, but it became something that I was just thankful for.

It's funny, because I didn't feel that way at Rutgers. At Rutgers, it's very large. The way Rutgers was set up when I was here, there was much less going on in the city. When you'd get off at the train station, there were Triple X movie theaters. That's what was in that row where they now have that big parking deck, and a lot of bars. I mean, they have a lot of bars now too, but the drinking age was eighteen. [There were] bars and places where you could get sweatshirts and mugs that said, "Rutgers." I was just like, "Ugh, if I see a Scarlet Knight again, I'm going to scream," which I still feel like. [laughter] You get slightly protected on the Douglass Campus, but otherwise, you can't miss the fucking Scarlet Knight. Anyway, I'm like, "Why a military figure?"

Anyway, Rutgers was not a comfortable place for me. Michigan was, because Ann Arbor is just another really nice setting, and I was writing poetry--and that was great--and being in workshops. I didn't have to do much coursework, because I had done most of my coursework here [at Rutgers]. The atmosphere in Ann Arbor, it's like a village there. Every Saturday, there's a farmer's market, where they sell crafts, and then they have artisan coffees. Every Saturday, I walked down there and I'd buy flowers or something and coffee. There were used bookstores. There was a giant Borders, which I think was like the first Borders, and it had a huge poetry section and you could lose yourself there. There was a theater, it was either a movie theater or concert stage or drama theater, whichever it needed to be, so it was kind of an all-purpose old theater. I saw Laurie Anderson there, and I saw Allen Ginsberg there. Then, there were readings. Gwendolyn Brooks came to read. Adrienne Rich came to read. I've seen her here too. I think it was because there was more focus on the arts, which I didn't feel at Rutgers.

I felt like the atmosphere at Rutgers was just anti-art. There was not the same kind of feeling about being here, at that time. In fact, I haven't had that feeling about Rutgers, that kind of

positive arts-oriented feeling, because I guess that's where I am. I've had it more at home in Highland Park. I've got my own community, but I never really felt that on the Rutgers campus. I feel very positive about the people here, but in terms of the campus and the focus here, it hasn't felt hospitable to me in a lot of ways. My focus has turned more towards women and feminists. Well, I was always reading and interested in feminist theory. One of the things that I took from the graduate program was an interest in critical theory, which really informed my writing a lot.

KR: Who was the professor for that?

RR: I had two professors. I had Derek Attridge, who was here briefly, and then Harriet Davidson. Harriet was wonderful. She was an interim dean at Douglass for a couple of years. I run into her all the time. It's like, "We have to have lunch," and we don't. She's retired now. I think she's retired as of this year, but she's done a lot of different things. She was the director of women's studies for a little while. She did a wonderful job teaching critical theory, and I took a lot of that. Between the two courses I took in theory, I started thinking a lot about language and how I use language and connecting that to feminism. In my poetry, I sort of developed a kind of feminist theory about writing. It's hard to translate into coherent words, but it's something that motivates me as a writer. [Editor's Note: Derek Attridge is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of York. He taught at Rutgers from 1988 to 1998. Harriet Davidson is a Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers. She joined the faculty in 1984 and served as Interim Dean of Douglass Residential College and the Douglass Campus from 2008 to 2010.]

KR: Tell me more about your course of study at Rutgers.

RR: Well, the English Department was very cut-and-dry English course work. So, I had "18th Century Literature." I had "19th Century Literature." I did take a course in women writers my first year with Carol Smith. What else did I take? I had Myra Jehlen, who's an Americanist, who was really good. I had her for two semesters my first year, and I think I got a lot out of her. I think there were certain teachers that I just got a lot more from than others. Then, when I was teaching, I was teaching two, taking two. I'm trying to remember everything I took here; it was like a long time ago. [I took] a course on Milton with Bridget Lyons, who was, I think, about to retire, but she had been in the English Department for years. Since I had already done these courses in critical theory, I was full of it and she just couldn't understand anything I wrote, which [was] probably for good reason. She kept giving me "B+'s" and I kept getting so frustrated with her and I'm just like, "She sucks." [laughter] I remember her telling me, "You should write like you're writing for a reader of *The New Yorker* magazine," and I'm thinking, "I'll never write like I'm writing for a reader of *The New Yorker* magazine." [laughter] Even about poetry, I feel that way now, but it was funny because that was just so not what I wanted to do. Even if I was going to do critical theory or writing literary criticism, which, again, I didn't really want to do, it would not have been for readers of *The New Yorker*. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Myra Jehlen is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers. She taught at Rutgers from 1985 to 2014. Bridget Gellert Lyons joined the Rutgers English Department in 1965 and retired in 2003 as Professor Emerita of English.]

I had a group of friends, I went out drinking a lot. That was like problematic too, because it did interfere with my coursework. I had many days when I would wake up hungover and have to go

teach, and I remember feeling absolutely miserable those days. I had this drinking crowd, and they were the people that I would toss ideas off of and they would talk about poetry. One of them is now teaching in Japan. He's a [Robert] Frost scholar, and he just published a book called *The Wings of Atalanta*, which is about black American authors. He calls it *Notes Along the Color Line*. He's from South Carolina. So, he's writing about Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and I think he gets into James Baldwin. [Editor's Note: Mark Richardson wrote *The Wings of Atalanta: Essays Written along the Color Line*, which was published by Camden House in 2019. Richardson is a Professor of English at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan.]

KR: What is his name?

RR: Mark Richardson. He was my boyfriend the last couple of years I was here, and then I moved in with him when I came back here. Then, that year, I came out of the closet, which he was waiting for. We separated, but we are still close friends.

Then, another guy who left--he couldn't get his dissertation together--he became a photographer, and so he's a friend, Ray Klimik. He's had a couple things in the *Raritan Review*, and his photography is beautiful. I'm hoping to do a collaboration with him on a book that he's going to do. He's been self-publishing some things through Printed Matter in New York, and so he wants to do this book of photography really but involving poetry. So, he's getting his poet friends to give him some poems. Anyway, there's this complicated process he wants us to go through and typing things on carbon paper, but it's interesting. He's somebody else I've really stayed in touch with.

Other people, it's interesting which people ended up in academia and which people didn't. You never could've predicted the people who didn't, who were so involved. I really did cherish the friendships, because it was the first time I really was able to talk about literature with people. I didn't have that at Vassar so much. It was one of the positive benefits to going out and drinking a lot, which wreaked havoc on my system. It meant that we could go out and have crazy conversations about books and authors and poetry and things that I loved, and so that was part of the graduate school experience here that I did enjoy, even though I ended up becoming an alcoholic and had to stop drinking. It was like, "Oh, that was a negative side effect there," but, actually, I think that that runs in my family, so it was not unexpected. That part of being at Rutgers I enjoyed, but I knew, from the very beginning, that it wasn't a place I was going to stay, that I wasn't going to get a Ph.D. I just didn't see myself going in that direction, and also looking at how hard it was for people to get jobs. I also thought, "I don't have enough interest in any one thing to sustain a dissertation." I was looking ahead and thinking, "The coursework is fine. I'm enjoying the coursework to a certain extent," I mean, as much as you can, but thinking down the line, "No, I'm not going to do that." I knew I would be applying for graduate writing programs, so I waited until my third year and I was starting on the coursework towards a Ph.D. At that point, I think, it's where the Ph.D. starts to get really difficult, when you have to put together a committee--at that point, they did oral exams, which they don't do anymore--study for orals, do your dissertation proposal, things like that. I just was like, "I'm not going to do this. I have no interest in doing that." That's when I left.

I came back here because of my friend Mark, but I didn't expect to be back in New Brunswick. I actually felt really uncomfortable being in the English Department, because I was teaching "Creative Writing" when I came back. I had a mailbox in the English Department, and I felt like I was haunting the English Department. It was sort of like, "I'm here, but I'm not here. I'm here, but I'm not here," kind of feeling. I had one teacher, I had Catharine Stimpson, who was an amazing teacher, a wonderful class on Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein, and that has to be one of the high points of being here. She was just an amazing teacher, and I loved both Stein and Stevens. I didn't know as much about Stein before the class, but it was a great class. [Editor's Note: Catharine Stimpson is a feminist scholar who came to Rutgers in 1980 as an English professor and headed the Institute for Research on Women (IRW) from 1981 to 1985. Subsequently, she became the Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost for Graduate Education. She left Rutgers in 1998 for New York University and is Dean Emerita of the Graduate School of Arts and Science at NYU.]

Then, I had--I think the semester before--a course on 20th century poetry with Daniel Harris, a guy who was a real asshole. [laughter] Everybody warned me beforehand. They said, "No, he's really hard and he's kind of a jerk," and I said, "It's okay. I can handle it." I was like, "Oh, God, this is not good." [laughter] I started off the class and we were reading Eliot, and I had to do an oral presentation on Eliot and I did a horrible presentation, I think because I had been out drinking the night before and I hadn't really prepared for it and a lot of reasons. I kept thinking, "You know, I really don't like T.S. Eliot." Then, I ended up writing a paper on Auden, which he really loved and gave me an "A" on. Then, he gave me a "B+" for the course, and I was so pissed. I was very angry at him. I remember that class.

One thing I remember in that class was the posturing of my fellow graduate students, and that was something that I also didn't like about the graduate program. People that I liked outside of class, inside of class, they were just like intolerable. They were just like so competitive in there, raising their hand, as if to say, "Oh oh, call on ME." Again, I was quiet and didn't talk very much. As a friend of mine put it, "If you're a woman and you're quiet, people think you're dumb, and if you're a man and you're quiet, people think you're smart," and that was exactly my experience at Rutgers. That was how I felt here all the time.

The course with Catharine Stimpson made things okay. It wasn't simultaneous, but they were close together and they were in the same room. They were both seminars in the same room. There were classes that I enjoyed and didn't enjoy, and a lot of it did have to do with the material and the feedback from the instructor. I think that I really needed the feedback to get motivated, and so that made a big difference. Everybody loved Catharine Stimpson, and she was the head of graduate studies here for a while and then she went to I think NYU, yes.

KR: She is still there.

RR: She's still there.

KR: Yes.

RR: She must be retired or emeritus.

KR: She is, yes, she is emerita. She was director of the Institute for Research on Women also.

RR: Yes, and I remember seeing her in the papers at IRW. I think she was the first director. At that point, I didn't know much about her, not until I had a class with her. She didn't teach every semester, I don't think. I think I felt lucky that I was able to take a class with her.

KR: Did you ever have Levine?

RR: Oh, wait.

KR: George.

RR: George Levine. I did, and that was a nightmare class for me. I liked him, but that was when I was going through a lot of personal stuff with this woman that I had gotten involved with. She was in the class. I was out drinking with my friends at night and we were supposed to be reading five hundred-page Victorian novels, and I was not [doing it]. It was a nightmare, because I wasn't finishing anything; I was just skimming stuff. So, it was a bad experience. I went to his office once, and I just started to cry. He was taken aback, but he was okay about it. It was funny, because I had a friend who grew up in Highland Park. We were at a party, and I talked about how this really embarrassing thing happened to me. It just so happened that she was really good friends with his son, and his son was standing right there, when I was telling the story. [laughter] I did have a class with Levine, and I had this friend who was kind of friends with him and his family, but mostly with his son, because she had grown up in Highland Park. [Editor's Note: George Levine is Professor Emeritus of English at Rutgers. He served as an English professor at Rutgers from 1968 to 2006.]

KR: Yes, he did an oral history with our project.

RR: Yes.

KR: Yes, he actually started out as a poet and switched to literature.

RR: Oh, I didn't know that he started as a poet, but that's interesting. I know some people, I think, balance--some people are able to really be both, to do both, and I wasn't. One thing I tell students [is], "If you want to go to graduate school, you really have to like what you're doing. You really have to want to study that subject." My mother and grandmother had been so anxious about money, and they pressured me into it. At the time, Ann Kaplan was a woman who taught here. She does film theory, feminist film theory. She's probably retired by now, but she was teaching here. Actually, she was teaching here and she bought a house here with her husband, and then she got a job at, I think, Stony Brook. So, she had been here for a while, and that's why I chose Rutgers. I looked at other schools. I think I applied to Princeton, which I didn't get in to (and should not be surprised), and Hopkins maybe--and I didn't get in--and so Rutgers was it. So, she was here, and I lived in the house that she had bought, I rented with three other people. [Editor's Note: E. Ann Kaplan is Distinguished Professor Emerita of English and Cultural Analysis and Theory at Stony Brook University. Kaplan earned her Ph.D. at Rutgers in 1970]

and served as the acting director of the Women's Studies Institute (now called the Institute for Research on Women) from 1979 to 1981.]

What was I going to say about her? She's pretty well known in the field of feminist film theory, but she was married to my grandmother's nephew, the one whose mother committed suicide (my grandmother's youngest sister). She used to come to our house when I was growing up with her husband, at the time when they were married; they divorced later. My mother had some issues with her, in part because she would never help with the dishes. [laughter] While Ann was a feminist, my mother was very ambivalent about feminism. I think because her mother had worked her whole life and my mother was kind of angry at her, she didn't feel tuned into a feminist consciousness at all. So, she avoided it. She would feel angry at Ann, because Ann would never help with the dishes and would just stay and talk to the men. I also think my mother was a little jealous of Ann because she got along so well with my grandmother, and intellectually, they had a bit more in common. Then, I ended up coming to Rutgers years later and living in her house, so it was kind of ironic. Yes, we had that tie. I think there was someone else in the family that taught at Rutgers, I'm not sure. I'd have to ask my mother if my aunt's or great aunt's husband was at Rutgers for a while. I have that impression, but I'm not sure. I never was competitive about applying to schools; I was like, "Okay." [laughter] I didn't apply to a lot of graduate programs, and partly that had to do with my ambivalence, not being sure what I wanted to do.

When I was in Washington for that year--this year between New York and grad school--I worked at the World Bank, which was interesting. I was sort of a floating secretary and editor. So, I would edit a lot of papers that these foreign language professionals were writing. They were mostly French speaking, and I had studied French in high school. So, I knew enough French so that I could kind of tell what they were trying to say with their really awkward English. So, I was editing a lot there. I was doing more secretarial work at first, and then I moved more into editing papers for people. It was a kind of an interesting job. Then, I applied to grad school.

KR: What was your coming out like?

RR: So, I kind of came out and in and out. I had this affair with this woman that didn't last very long, and she had dumped me in a very mean way. So, that's why when she was in Levine's class, it was like I was constantly conscious of her presence in there, and it was just horrible. Then, I kind of went back to dating men and got involved with Mark. When I was in Michigan, I lived alone and I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what I was, and because I was alone, it's kind of hard to figure it out. [laughter] I went to a therapist, I would talk about it, I was trying to figure it out, and I couldn't really decide, I think, because I liked men a lot. I liked Mark a lot. I felt really close to him, and I had been really hurt by this woman. The first year I was living with Mark, when I moved back to New Jersey, what happened was I just started having dreams about women. Then, I was hanging out a lot with a friend of mine who was bisexual, but, at the time, was kind of having her first relationships with women. We talked about it a lot, and so, finally, I told Mark and we got separate apartments. Then, I was just kind of celibate for a while, and then I started to date.

I came out to everybody here, after I had come back from Michigan. I was much more circumspect around my parents. I did not announce to my parents that I was a lesbian. I waited until I had a girlfriend and then I just kind of said, "Oh, by the way, I have a girlfriend," and that was how I came out to my mother. To my father--I wasn't talking to my father very much. What would happen is I would see him once a year. My sister, brother and I would go out to see my father around Christmas. At that point, he had left St. Elizabeth's. He had very little money. He was kind of ambulance chasing and working, seeing people who were admitted to the local hospital for--most of them were schizophrenic and homeless. Then, he would see them at his house. He really had no money. He wasn't seeing patients that could pay a lot. All the money he had was really based on whatever Medicare he got in return from seeing these clients. He would have us over, and we would have to bring the food. It was really weird. I mean, the last time I saw him, before he died, he and his wife were keeping the house warm by putting trash against the door.

He had done some good things also. He had been active in working in homeless shelters with the mentally ill, so he had volunteered a lot of his time to do that. So, he was attuned to the kind of social justice issues with the poor, but he was very angry at my mother and had [a] hard time talking about her. My father wouldn't talk about anything personal; he would only talk about stuff that he was reading or his cats or something. He and his wife had all these cats. The house smelled so bad. [laughter] I would just bring the woman that I was dating with me to the house and let them think whatever they thought and not really say anything. I mean, I think it became really clear with my wife, before we were married, when we went out there, but before that, I don't think it was ever terribly clear. I never really came out to him and said, "Oh, by the way, I'm a lesbian." I just kind of let it go, partly out of anger, like, "You don't deserve to know."

Then, my mother had a really hard time remembering that I was lesbian. [laughter] After I started dating women, she was like, "Oh, my friend Sandy Stern has a really good friend in New York. He's a proctologist and he's really sweet, and you would get along with him so well." I'm like, "Really? You're trying to set me up with a proctologist?" [laughter] In fact, when she had that conversation with me, that's when I really came out to her and said, "Look, I'm a lesbian. I don't date men." She was not entirely clear, although I hadn't dated men for a few years, at that point. In fact, I had been living with a woman for like four years, and then we broke up and I was living on my own. That's when she tried to set me up with this proctologist. It's like, "Really?" [laughter]

Now, she's got this whole new thing, because she's got the transgender grandchildren. She's totally open to that. She's changed a lot. [laughter] She's grown a lot. Then, even with feminism, it's funny, because she was staying in my house and I was showing a film about women artists. It goes through--I think it's called *Women Artists' Revolution* [*Women Art Revolution*], *WAR*, and it does talk about women's rights. My mother was looking at the film and she was saying, "Where was I at that point?" It was funny because I remember where she was. She was not buying it. She kind of clocked out her own resistance to that movement. The film made it very clear why women needed a feminist movement, and she couldn't really remember what she was doing then or why she never got involved. She had selective memory, but she's much, much more open now. She's still working. She's seeing clients--I mean, part time--but at

eighty-seven. She's getting ready to retire. [Editor's Note: *!Women Art Revolution* is a 2010 documentary directed by Lynn Hershman Leeson.]

KR: I am going to pause.

RR: Yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: Okay, we are going to conclude the interview for today with Rebecca Reynolds, and we are going to continue in the near future with a second session. Thank you so much for coming in to do this oral history.

RR: Oh, you're welcome. It was very fun to just talk about myself.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 9/20/2019  
Reviewed by Zach Batista 5/4/2020  
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 5/12/2020  
Reviewed by Rebecca Reynolds 2/25/2021  
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 4/7/2021