Oral History Interview: Evelyn Torton Beck

Interviewee: Evelyn Torton Beck

Interviewer: Jessica Levine

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Jessica L: Hi. I am Jessica Levine. I usually go by Jess. And I am here to take an oral history. Could you share your name and then spell it for the transcriber?

Evelyn B: I'm glad that you asked me that. My name is Evelyn, E-V-E-L-Y-N. The middle name I took because it was my parents' name, my father's name, actually, T-O-R-T-O-N, because when we came to this country I didn't have a middle name, and every American born person had a middle name, so I took my father's name when I got married to a person named Beck, B-E-C-K. But I am widely known as Evi, E-V-I, and that is my name of preference. And my website is actually EviBeck.com, and that's important to me, so those are my names.

And my Hebrew name is Nechama, N-E-C-H-A-M-A, and even though I'm not, like I don't use it all the time it's important to me because it means comfort, and my mother told me that she had a difficult pregnancy, so it's always been comforting me to have a name like Nechama, which means comfort, and it sounds very much like the word Neshama, which means soul, so I like that name. And my partner, who unfortunately died two years ago, her name was Shoshana, so it all fit together. And when I do a mantra I often used to say Nechama, Neshama, Shoshana.

Jessica L: That's so beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. So let's get started with your origins. And this can be however you want to define it. It can be where your family is from, we can talk about your grandparents and parents, where you were born, and what your earliest memories were, sort of wherever in there you would like to jump in, and we'll let it take us where it takes us.

Evelyn B: Okay. Well, I already alluded to some aspects of my origins. I was born in Vienna, Austria in 1933, and so I was born under the feeling of Hitler in the air, even though he did not come into Vienna until 1938. And I was born into a middle class, maybe even—I'm not sure if it was lower or just middle class.

My father came from Poland. He would serve in the army for the Prussian side, and he was always very proud. He was in the cavalry. He got a war wound. And then he came from a smallish town in Poland and he was supposed to become a rabbi, and he did not—I was going to say of course, but it wasn't of course. He just didn't want to do that, so he ran away from home, or left home and went to Vienna and became a businessman.

And there he met my mother, who was born in Vienna to Jewish parents, quite poor, and her father died when she was quite young, so she was raised by her mother. And she grew up with a lot of antisemitism. And I didn't know any about this until much later, but it feels very important to my origins to be aware of what I was born into. And of course we lived in Vienna until I was five.

I had, I guess, a happy childhood. I've seen pictures of myself going mountain climbing with my parents, going ice skating, just, I guess, an ordinary pretty happy childhood. And then—

Jessica L: Can I ask your parents' names?

Evelyn B: Oh, my parents. Thank you for asking. My father's name was Max, and when the Nazis came he was called Max Moses Torton. His name was Moshe in Hebrew. My mother's name was Irma, I-R-M-A. Her maiden name was Lichtmann, L-I-C-H-T-M-A-N-N, and then of course Torton when she married.

There's a really interesting story that I've never been able to trace down, but remember I said my mother was born at a time of antisemitism. Austria was antisemitic. She was born in 1904, I think it was. When she was going to marry my father, his name was actually a different name. It was a much more Jewish sounding name. And she told me she didn't want to have a name that sounded so Jewish, although I don't know if she actually said "so Jewish" or it was an ugly name, Ochshorn, O-C-H-S-H-O-R-N.

So she got my father somehow to marry his parents, who had been married, of course, in this little town in Poland, and probably only were married by a rabbi, so she got them to be married officially so his name could be Torton. How we got the name Torton I have no idea, because it's definitely neither a Jewish nor a Polish name. In fact there is a town in Italy called Tortona, where I have been. I grew up in New York City in

Brooklyn and we used to eat tortoni was a really delicious little Italian dessert. So anyway, I forgot how I—oh, you asked me my parents' names. See, there's a lot in every name.

Jessica L: Speaking of, you mentioned that your father's parents were married by a rabbi in this little town. Can you tell me what you know about your father's parents?

Evelyn B: Nothing. Almost nothing. It's very interesting to me because I'm in… German was my mother tongue and then for a long time I totally dropped it after we left Vienna, and then I relearned it, and I actually became a professor of German literature. But I'm now in a German conversation group and the next topic we're going to take up is tell us about your forebears. And I'm thinking I don't know anything, practically, about my forebears. I know there are Jews who can trace their history way back, but I can't.

I know that my father's parents, his father died before I was born. His mother came to Vienna to live in Vienna and I knew her when I was one year old, and then she died. On my mother's side, her father died when she was 16. My grandmother on my mother's side I was very close to. Unfortunately, she was killed by the Nazis, and I'll come to that if we ever get past my names.

Jessica L: Well, it seems like you've sort of said what you know about your grandparents, so do you want to move into your young childhood?

Evelyn B: Sure. So the Nazis came to power in Vienna in 1938, Kristallnacht or the Anschluss. They just came and took over. And unfortunately, as many of you probably know, the Austrians welcomed them, very much so, and lined the streets. I was already five, and I definitely have memories of that time, but it's a little hard to—I don't know how to put this—they're memories, but they're not necessarily all in pictures.

But my life changed dramatically. The worst part, of course, was that very shortly—and I'm not sure if it was on Kristallnacht or a little after that—two Nazis came into our home and arrested my father and took him—well, we had no idea where they were taking him, but in front of us, the family was together. My grandmother lived with us. And that was, I guess, one of the major traumas of my life.

After that I didn't see him for an entire year. He actually was sent to Dachau and to Buchenwald. I don't know if you need me to spell those words. No? Okay. And by some miracle, which I'll talk about possibly why, he was actually released after a year and he did return.

Meanwhile, while he was in the camps, we were evicted from our apartment. We were living in a nice apartment in a reasonably nice part of Vienna. His business, of course, was confiscated, and in the last decade or so I've been back to Vienna—well, I was back to Vienna before then—but I went directly to look for papers to find out what really happened, and I found papers that my mother had to fill out about what we actually owned,

the German word, like what was our fortune, which wasn't that much to begin with. But she had to fill out these papers.

And I found a very poignant letter that she wrote to the Gestapo saying my husband is the one who takes care of these things and he is unfortunately in a prison camp, and therefore I have to do this myself, and please give me an extension because I don't really know how to do this. And I found that very, very moving that she had to do it and yet had to ask for an extension.

I should say my mother would have loved to go to university, and she was always very proud that she actually was permitted to go to school till she was 16, which was unusual in those days, and she became a secretary and worked until she married my father. She was pretty old for those days. She was 28 and they were engaged for ten years because my father had two sisters—this is interesting, I think—and because he was the oldest he was not allowed to marry before his sisters. It just wasn't done. And he was also supposed to kind of like be a protector for his nuclear family.

And they were engaged for ten years and I think she finally said to him look, we're going to get married or not, and so they did get married, and so then I was the first one. I have a brother, I should say. He's about two and a half years younger than me. And what's interesting to me, as I said, I was born in '33, my brother was born in '35, my mother told me that she gave us both English names. Edgar is my brother's name. We call him Eddie. And Evelyn because we might have to leave and go to England. So

she already, when I was born, had some sense that things were not going very well in that part of the world. Now where was I in this lineage?

Jessica L: You said that your grandmother was living with you at this time. Was that your maternal or your paternal?

Evelyn B: My maternal. My paternal grandmother died when I was about a year old, so my maternal grandmother. Because my mother was an only child and her mother had been a widow since my mother was 16, and in Europe that was the way I think all families, but particularly Jewish families, she lived with us. She lived with us for the first five years of my life. And I would say that she was really a second mother to me because my mother didn't really love being a stay-at-home mom, and so she went out, she took courses, she took classes. She liked to go to the cafés and talk to her friends.

So I was very, very close to my grandmother, which is why— when we finally were able to leave Austria, I never saw her again, and she was sent off to the concentration camps. And I believe, from what we know and from what records I've been able to get, she died on the way to Auschwitz, so I think she was never actually gassed. She was only like 66. It's hard to believe how young she was. I know I'm not telling this very linearly, but I can't help it, that's the way my mind works.

Jessica L: It doesn't have to be told linearly at all. However you want to tell it.

Evelyn B: So when—well, okay. I think I was last, in a linear fashion I was last we were evicted from our apartment, I was in—

Jessica L: Before we go back into that can I ask your maternal grandmother's name?

Evelyn B: Okay, yes. Her name was Sophie, S-O-P-H-I-E, or maybe they spelled it S-O-F-I-E Lichtmann. And I'm not sure, her Hebrew name may have been Zelda. Either it was her Hebrew name or my mother's. I never quite remembered. But in any case, thank you for asking that. Yeah, she definitely has a name.

Jessica L: So you were evicted from your apartment.

Evelyn B: And we were sent to live in a ghetto in Vienna. They put Jews in a more, I guess, a more difficult or working class part of town. And we were placed in like one room, my mother, my brother, my grandmother and I, with other families in one apartment, lots of families. I think I probably, kind of what they would call in the psychological jargon, dissociated a lot during that time. It was very traumatic. I do have some memories of being—I think the children I played with, some weren't allowed to play with me anymore, so I think that's what I did.

And I wrote about this in "Nice Jewish Girls," one of the memories that is emblazoned in my mind, because I was very blonde-haired, I didn't have a big nose. I was a very, very pretty, not Jewish-looking little girl. And of course food was very rationed for us. And I don't know what happened or why, but they sent me to buy butter in the grocery store where Jews were

not supposed to get butter, and that's somehow…it must be like a paradigm for all the trauma that happened to me because I remember being terrified, and I think I must have gotten it and brought it home, but that memory is emblazoned in my mind.

The only other thing I remember is when we were evicted from the apartment I think whatever few things we were allowed to take with us were out on the street. And to this day whenever I see a moving truck it really upsets me, and if I have to move it totally freaks me out to see my things out on the street.

I've talked a lot to students, to immigrant students nowadays who of course are coming from many different countries, but that even if you yourself have not been arrested or been in a concentration camp the trauma of being persecuted will stay with you the rest of your life in ways that you may not even be aware of. And I think it's really important. Because there are people who might say well, you're not really a survivor, you yourself weren't arrested, you yourself weren't in the camps, and they're very mistaken about what happens to people who are living under such circumstances.

The other memory that's emblazoned in my mind is my mother would go down to the Gestapo, which is the Nazi police, in case people don't know what that is, and she would take me with her. I think she had to pay them money. We were not rich, and we had no more source of income.

My father was in business with a Dutch not Jewish person. He owned—it's hard to say in English—it's like casings, casings for frankfurters, casings for sausages, so he made casings. And I have a letter that my mother or my father wrote to this man saying can you help us. And he did give my mother, I think, some money because I think he must have lost the shop too, even though he wasn't Jewish, because the Nazis confiscated it, but he must have had some more money, or maybe he just felt sorry for us, so we had a little bit of money to live.

And my mother, I think, went down, I don't know how often, but it felt to me like all the time, to the Gestapo to give them money, because I think what they'd said was if you give us money we might let your husband out of jail. I think the truth is things were not as regularized as people like to believe. I think they didn't know what to do with the people that they arrested in the beginning.

My father told me all they ever did was carry stones up these large hills and then they would roll them down like Sisyphus. They didn't know what to do with these people, these Jews, until they began to kill them, of course. I found—again, this is not linear—but I found letters that my father wrote—well, maybe I should say how we got out. Okay, I'll say how we got out of Vienna.

I went with my mother to the Gestapo, and I think she took me along partially—and this is really painful—I was very pretty and very girly, and I think she really wanted me to flirt with the Nazis, thinking maybe that

would persuade them to do something for her if she took me along. That was another trauma, although I don't think I realized it was a trauma. I must have been terrified because I remembered them coming to our house.

When I go to the Holocaust Museum now that's in Washington, D.C.—I live in Washington, D.C. You forgot to ask me where I live now, but I'm telling you. So when I go to that museum I see what was going on in Vienna at the time that I lived there and I said oh my god. Because some of it I remember and some of it I must have seen, these huge swastikas on all the buildings, and Nazis marching down the street. I do have memories of parades and I think I once saw Hitler driving by. I think I was in the apartment, but he may have come down our street near us. But anyway, it was all pretty traumatic. Now I forgot where I was.

Jessica L: You were leaving Vienna?

Evelyn B: Well, we didn't get to leave yet. My mother gave that money to the—am I going into much too much detail about everything?

Jessica L: No, not at all, unless you don't want to talk about it.

Evelyn B: No, it's going to take us a year because I'm still only five years old. [*Laughs.*] But to me this is really important, so I'll just say it. So she took me with her. And I also remember—maybe these stories are interesting for other people to know about—she would tell me, because we never knew what was happening, that whenever a bicycle rode up to our address she was worried because what they would do is if they killed somebody they

would burn them and then they would send home the ashes in an envelope and they would deliver them by messenger to the person.

That never happened to us because one day my father—I don't know if she had any notice about it. I have no idea. I just know one day my father came back. And I do remember that day him sort of bending down opening his arms and wanting us to run into his arms. Of course he looked emaciated, and I do have some pictures of him. His head was completely shaved and his face looked anguished, and I don't remember if we did or didn't run into his arms, truthfully. It's like in my mind that's frozen, that image.

And then—this is again stories I cannot corroborate—but according to my father, he did say that he was supposed—he was released from the camp on the condition that he immediately leave Vienna. And I don't know where he was supposed to go, or how, whether he had permission to leave, but he said he did not leave because he could not bring himself to leave his family, namely my mother, my brother, me and my grandmother, so he stayed.

And he told me that he was re-arrested on the street and taken back to the Gestapo and that he begged them. He said he went down on his bended knees and begged them to let him leave the country and that he would really leave. And that's what he did. He somehow got to Italy. He got to Milan, Milano—Milan, I guess it is in English.

And, I don't know how much later, there were visas or permission for my mother, my brother and me. They could not get permission for my grandmother to leave. And my mother always told the story when my mother begged my grandmother somehow, she felt terrible to leave her mother, and my grandmother apparently said "what will happen to me is what will happen to all other old people." And of course, unfortunately, that is what did happen. But she wanted my parents and us children to leave.

And so we lived in Milano for a year. I think we were taken care of by the HIAS. I don't know how you spell it, but H-I-A-S, the refugee organization that helped refugees. We lived in an attic in Italy with cockroaches. And the landlady, she let us live there, but she was pretty antisemitic, my mother said. Italy both allowed Jews in—because Mussolini was in charge. He was, of course, a fascist. But they both allowed Jews there, and sheltered some of them, and then eventually they actually gave them over to the Nazis, too.

We were very fortunate how we got out of Italy and into the United States. We lived in Italy for a year. I went to school. I spoke fluent Italian. Probably that's where my whole academic passion for learning came in because I was very good in school. I remember I got gold stars. And I was fluent in Italian.

But my father had two sisters, as I mentioned. One was living—no, he had three sisters, but one had already died by the time I was born. And one

sister lived in Vienna, and she got out. She ended up in Africa, in Mauritius, and then she ended up in Israel, and eventually came to the United States. But my father's other sister lived in Prague, where we frequently visited her. And I loved Prague. In fact the plan for me—I was five years old—I was supposed to be going to university in Prague. That was the idea for my life. And I would live with them. And of course that didn't happen. But maybe it's not an accident that my first scholarly work was on Franz Kafka, so we can get to that, if I ever get that far in this interview.

My father's sister in Prague had some knowledge of some distant relatives from Poland who had ended up in the United States and who were rich, and so we had some knowledge. She wrote to them and she got…there was this, what they called, the old mother who was with them. It was her sons who owned a fur factory and she got them to send visas for us. My aunt in Prague didn't have children, and she begged them, because my father had children and could they. And so we got the visas for the four of us.

And so we got out of Italy on the very last boat. It was June 10, 1940. And very shortly thereafter World War II broke out, and it was the last boat to leave from Italy, from Genoa then. So I came to Brooklyn and we were met by distant relatives. We lived with different people and eventually ended up in a poor but very colorful part of Brooklyn, East New York, and that's where I grew up.

And eventually my father, who worked for these two fur brothers—his entire life he worked with his hands and sewed furs. But he liked it. My parents, although they suffered a great deal, and my mother, who I think had a nervous breakdown after she realized that her mother was killed and that my father's sister and her husband were killed. But my father was very—they were both very resilient and lovers of life, so my father never, ever complained about the fact that he lost his business and ended up working as a worker with his hands. And he saved up enough money so we bought, he bought a little house in a nicer part of Brooklyn like Sheepshead Bay, Avenue U, which is a famous. And I went to Brooklyn College.

0:27:06 [*End Part 1.*]

[*Part 2.*]

Evelyn B: Okay, so I wanted to say about—since this is for a religious archive—that my father was…we were Jewish, and he was…it's hard to say he was religious. He certainly belonged to a temple and went to services when we were in Vienna. I think I was too young to be in a Jewish school at the time to get Jewish education, but we definitely were part of a Jewish community, and that was really important to him.

And that will become important because in the United States there had to be a lot of compromising. He wasn't orthodox at all, but he would not have worked on Shabbat if he didn't have to in this country. And I have no idea what happened in Italy, whether we had any…I mean, it was a Jewish

organization that helped us, but I have no idea if they offered anything Jewish in those terms.

Jessica L: How about your mother and grandmother? Did they have some sort of Jewish practice when you were growing up?

Evelyn B: You know, I don't really know. I think that my mother grew up with so much antisemitism that I don't know whether she even went to synagogue before she met my father. I have the feeling they might not have, especially as her mother was widowed. I just never heard anything about that, but maybe she did get some Jewish education, especially when her father was still alive. I really don't know.

Jessica L: What was your young childhood in Brooklyn like?

Evelyn B: Well, in the beginning—I mean, don't forget I didn't speak a word of English when we came. I should say the boat ride over was another trauma. It took us two weeks. I was completely seasick the entire time. It was really not a happy experience. But obviously we must have been relieved to be away from terror and to be in a free place. But we were poor. And I think I felt distanced. I can still remember when they sent me to school the first word that was up on the blackboard that I sounded out was the word "mo-ther." I mean, that's like a… So I was both…

I had friends when we eventually got to one place that was our apartment. But I think I always felt somewhat different from the other children. Most of the people in Brooklyn, perhaps their parents had been immigrants, but

they themselves were born in this country. And I remember I had one friend whose mother was born in this country, she didn't have an accent, and I couldn't believe it that there would be somebody whose parents were born in the United States. And my mother was friends mainly, and my father, with other refugees, so I played a lot with the children of other refugees.

But I went to school. I loved school. I think it was, as I have one interview that I did in German that translates, the title is "I Lived Through It All With Reading." Reading and school was really a haven, as it has been for so many people who have been traumatized. So I was very good in school, although when I got to high school I was a bad girl. I would go out and smoke, and I would cut school, and forge my mother's name on notes, so I got to be a little—as I got teen age I got to be not such a good girl.

But as a young child I think I, you know, there were traumas. My father, I think, was irreparably damaged by the torture that he had. That's what I was going to tell about. I found letters much later on that he had written when we got to Italy about what his experiences were like even on the train from Vienna to the concentration camp. He described how people were beaten and there was blood spurting on the windows of the train, and it was really very horrible. And then of course in the camps themselves they were tortured, aside from not being given very much food, and just humiliated, and I think it totally traumatized him.

I don't know if he had a temper before. I don't remember him being explosive before he was arrested, up until I was five, but I know in the rest of my life he would explode. He just had explosions. And I think that that's…I mean, nobody talked about PTSD. The whole family was traumatized, but no one talked about it.

And I finally went to therapy when I was on my own, but when I grew up only crazy people went to therapy, and we weren't crazy. So I had a childhood which had its traumas. And then I went to Brooklyn College and I lived at home, which is not developmentally something I recommend.

Jessica L: Can I ask what your relationship with your mother and father was like while you were growing up?

Evelyn B: Well, as I said, I think until I hit high school I think I was a good girl. I know that my brother, who's only two years younger than me, acted out a lot, so I think he was the one who acted out the trauma of the family, and I was the good girl. But when I became a teenager in high school I think I wanted to individuate. My parents wanted me to be bourgeois, which I did not want that.

I think I was lesbian at a relatively—I mean, I don't know. I didn't develop sexually very early, but my passion was toward women even though I also went—I mean, I did go out with guys. And I couldn't say—I mean, now, when we think now of gender fluidity, I still identify as lesbian because given the world the way it is, that's where my passion and

emotional, sexual drive is. But I think truthfully I probably am bisexual because I never had trouble having sex with men. The issue was not sexuality, it was the emotionality.

And nowadays we think much more complexly about identity. But in a patriarchal world where women are still oppressed I still identify as lesbian, and I do believe there are such things as lesbians, and I still believe there are such things as women, however we want to… I'm not ready to make a definition, but I do believe there are women. So I think I was lesbian early on, but—

Jessica L: Are there any particular memories that stand out as demonstrating that to you, or realizations that you had?

Evelyn B: First of all, I'm not sure I fully understand. Which are you asking about? What was the "that" referring to?

Jessica L: Realizing that you were lesbian or things that you can look back on that indicate that to you, things that really stand out.

Evelyn B: Well, first of all I had very passionate crushes on my teachers, and they were really important to me—women teachers. And they really saved my life. I mean, many of them guided me, mentored me. There was never any—I don't think I experienced it as a sexual passion, but I think when you're young, in junior high school and high school, you don't think of it necessarily in those ways. But I think that I was drawn very strongly.

My best friend turned out to be lesbian at a very early age. She and I spent a lot of time together, but we were never sexual. We did not explore each other sexually. As I said, it took me a long time to even develop sexual interests. I matured physically late. But we did find out that she was—she had lesbian relationships with older women while we were still in high school, I think.

And my mother would, oh my god, she was rabidly anti-lesbian. The truth is I think my mother could have lesbian tendencies, and I think she might have had some perhaps not good encounters when she was a young girl. She might have had some people who actually took advantage of her. She never specifically said so, but I just have that feeling. But when I finally did come out when I was—I already was married and had kids by the time I really came out through the feminist movement. She would always say to me "oh, I understand everything, everything except the sex" about being with women.

So anyway, so that was some… I think those were the main… It was being drawn to women. And I'm trying to think when I started to look up what it meant to be lesbian. I must have still been in high school. It must have been the emotional passionate draw that I had toward women that made me think that. And probably there were, maybe there were sexual aspects to it that I didn't even recognize as such. We never had any sex education. No one ever talked to you about what was going on in your body, so I think I came to all of this very ignorant and just making it up as

we went along. I had some inklings based on those, quote, facts, but…yeah, so that was it.

And my relationship with my parents worsened as I got older in high school and college, as I said, because I was trying to individuate, to become my own person. What did we call ourselves in those days? Bohemians. We wore leather jackets.

And my mother, although I think my mother was acting out what she believed she ought to be, she would say to me—okay, I forgot one important aspect of my growing up, and it has to do with Jewishness, although not religious Jewishness, although one of the things I want to make clear—and I've talked to the archives about this—Jewish identity is not just religious. It's cultural, it's historic. And so what I'm about to say is not specifically religious, but it has to do with being Jewish.

When I came to this country one of the groups that was—I guess they were proselytizing, the equivalent to the Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts, which, I eventually did join the American Girl Scouts. Was desperate to have a uniform. But Hashomer Hatzair, Zionist Marxist groups were very active in Brooklyn in getting kids to come, and that saved my life in another way because it gave me—as I said, I felt an outsider from the American kids, but in this group I was Jewish like everybody else. It wasn't a religious group, though we did mark Friday evenings with culturally Jewish things. I don't remember if there were candles. But we

danced. And I think my passion for the dancing I'm doing now and then folk dancing came from this early sense of community of belonging.

They also had—I think my feminism absolutely comes from that Zionist movement because Hashomer Hatzair believed that women and men were equal. We had what would be called—I don't know how to say it in English—maka byada. It's like sports events at which girls took part as much as boys. I remember training. I think I did the long jumps. And so that was very different from the typical American way of looking at girls and women. Don't forget that was even before the '50s, that was in the '40s.

And we also, the belief was to share your clothing, and we shared clothing, and when we went to camp we didn't just use our own clothing. We shared money. We even shared cigarettes. I started to smoke because they gave cigarettes to everybody equally so we could—we didn't know we could equally all get sick from it, but… So those values really led, I believe led me. We didn't wear makeup. We used to sing a song, you know, we don't wear makeup, we don't drink. One thing they didn't talk about was not having sex, and I found out afterwards, of course—I was young—that the counselors were all having sex with each other, but we kids felt very pure about whatever, was...

So that was a really deeply, deeply important, and after I left [inaudible] my father…I was ready to make Aliyah, and go to Israel, and live in a kibbutz, and live this kind of life of egalitarianism. But of course I also

wanted to finish college, and I couldn't imagine leaving my parents, so it was like… And my father would never have let me go. I mean, given his history and our family history. But Jewishness—

Jessica L: Can you explain what you mean by that?

Evelyn B: By what?

Jessica L: You said given his history he would never let you go. Can you explain what that meant?

Evelyn B: Well, given the fact that he nearly lost his life, that he lost the whole family, given what he had been through in the Holocaust I think that the idea of—he lived by the motto of family. That was his major value and his major sense of purpose in life. I mean, he did other things. He belonged to the union. He had a fabulous untrained voice. And we have some tapes of his voice. He could have been a cantor or opera singer. He loved opera. But he never had the opportunity to do that. But I was going to say something else about that. What did you ask me about? What I meant by that.

Jessica L: Oh, what you meant by your father wouldn't let you come—

Evelyn B: He would never let me go. Oh, I know what I was going to say. When I finally got divorced from my husband—and we had been living together for many years. We had two children. And my father was very upset. And I remember saying to him, "Papa, I'm really, really happy." And he said to

me, “Happiness, what’s that? Family, family is what matters.” And he really meant that. That was his credo. So that gives you a strong sense.

My mother, I think, would have been a maverick, and I think I lived out her life in many ways, the life of creativity. Because she was incredibly—a good writer when she learned English. And she tried to be independent, too. She tried to go to college to learn Italian. I mean, not college, night school. But my father was not happy with her branching out like that. He was a patriarch. And she, you know, paid. I mean, she had to do what he wanted, to some extent.

She also fought for her own stuff. She went ice skating when she was 60 by herself in the afternoons. Yeah, and she would take public transportation because we never had a car. And he was very angry, especially when she was black and blue if she fell. So that gives you a sense of the kind of person she was. So I think I… I mean, both parents were very determined people, and I think some of my determination comes from them.

Jessica L: Before we move into your time in college you mentioned a lot of values coming from Hashomer Hatzair. You mentioned your father saying family was a value. Are there any other values you feel like came through really strongly in your childhood?

Evelyn B: Well, I think values—yeah, I think they were…I’m trying to think. Giving tzedaka, we’d call it, giving to not just charity, but helping other people who are less fortunate. I think the value of friendship, of other people

being important in your life. I think the value of the joy of life. I think that was one of the deepest things. I remember my mother sitting at the table just enjoying a cup of coffee and a fresh roll. And that's actually, there's a Yiddish story by Yud Lamed Peretz [I.L. Peretz], I think, about a Jewish man who gets to heaven and they tell him he can have anything he wants and he says all he wants is every day a cup of coffee and a hot roll. So it was like really enjoyment of, of life being worth living, of the enjoyment of the day.

My mother would read three or four newspapers every day, and read books. And they were able, somehow, to bring with them—I don't quite understand how—but a lot of books. I don't know. Maybe the Nazis didn't care about the books. But they must have been able to take them with them into the ghetto and then ship them to Italy. It makes no sense to me, but I know we—unless they bought them in—no, some books were from Europe, I remember.

So books, music, culture, all of those things I think were values I got from my family. Curiosity, great curiosity. My father was more, what's the word, dogmatic than my mother, I think. Which is maybe typical for that period. My father was very patriarchal. I wouldn't say she was a doormat, but she had to give in on some things and fought for others. So I think those are values that I see.

Jessica L: Did you have any sort of religious or spiritual life in Brooklyn?

Evelyn B: Oh, yes. We forgot that. My father definitely wanted us to be Jewish and to be religiously Jewish, so first he sent my brother and me—of course my brother was sent to a, what they call Talmud Torah, which is a Jewish day school associated with a synagogue, and he was going to be bar mitzvahed. That's the coming of age for the—but for a girl they did not, in those days, have bat mitzvahs for girls. But I was sent anyway to learn Hebrew and to learn the prayers.

And this particular school he sent us to, I mean, I have no idea, these rabbis were probably not very old, but they were horrible. Everything was rote. It was a terrible experience, and I refused to go after a while. I don't know if my brother had to stick it out or he got—I don't think he got a tutor. We probably couldn't have afforded a tutor. But I quit. I just said I'm not—they were just…everything was ugh, it was just…it had no meaning, and I think they were rigid.

But he did want me to go to learn Jewish things, so he sent me to a Yiddish school, which was much more to my liking. And it was actually life transforming, too, because first of all it was socialist. We went to the Sholem Aleichem Folk Shul. I don't know if you need me to spell out Sholem Aleichem. He's a very well known Yiddish writer, and there was a whole series of schools.

And the teacher was a woman, mostly because Yiddish is, as I talk about in "Nice Jewish Girls," it's a language that was made for women and ignorant men, and so Yiddish was mostly associated with women, and the

teachers were women. And they were much more relational, if we want to use a contemporary word. And they taught us meaningful things. We learned to speak Yiddish, we learned to read Yiddish, which, once you know the Hebrew alphabet is really quite easy because you just transliterate the…you use the little dots to tell you the vowels. And we read stories in Yiddish that were meaningful, and we talked about Israel, but in a way, what it was—Israel did not yet exist, I think—and so what utopian visions we could have for a world.

We used to sing this wonderful song, which I keep wanting to put into an archive. In English it goes like this, "Let us sing of the Yiddish school which is so dear to all of us for a new world, a new life, a new vision." That's what I imbibed, and I loved it. I mean, I wasn't the best pupil. I think I acted out. But I did learn. And not only that, I found an essay that I wrote in Yiddish "Farvus ikh vil geyn tsu eretz yisroel" "Why I Want to Go and Live in Israel." So obviously.

And why I said that changed my life is then I graduated, from…You could go on to high school, but I didn't go on. And again, it was both religious, the religion and the culture came together there, as they did in Hashomer Hatzair, so you kept the religious things, but it wasn't so much *religious*-religious, it was culturally religious. And that's what speaks to me, probably the most, and probably because of my father's, who, we didn't even talk about that, he wanted us to go to shul on Saturdays, but everything he did with religion was so rote and so dictatorial that I

rebelled against it. And he couldn't make it, for whatever set of reasons, he couldn't make it really meaningful. So what I learned in the Yiddish school was much more meaningful to me.

But why it changed my life is that, fast forward to my graduate career, which is many years later, but my first book was about the influence of Yiddish theatre on the work of Franz Kafka. And that came into being because I knew Yiddish, because Isaac Bashevis Singer, the very well known Yiddish writer, was at the University of Wisconsin teaching as a visitor, and someone knew I was working with Yiddish and introduced me to him. So all of those things.

So I translated with and for Isaac Bashevis Singer. He and I became quite good friends, even though he was not…to call him un-feminist is an understatement. He was actually very sexist. But I got to know him before feminism, so it didn't strike me as so terrible. And there's a very interesting movie called "The Muses of Isaac Bashevis Singer" in which I'm interviewed, and unfortunately I have to talk about his sexism, and many other women. He had almost entirely women translators. But that's another story. Anyway, so Yiddish really launched me in my academic career, so you would have to say it was a turning point.

Jessica L: Speaking of your academic career, you talked about going to Brooklyn College. What did you study there?

Evelyn B: Well, I studied literature. And they didn't have comparative literature as such, but I studied German. And that was where, even though German was

my mother tongue, then I learned Italian, then I learned English. And the Italian really went into the background. I can understand it a little bit, but I cannot speak it really. I learned French in junior high school. And then in college I was passionate about literature, and I loved German literature, so I started to study German—I relearned it as a language. I must have remembered some of it, but we did not speak German at home.

My parents probably spoke some German to each other, some Pidgin English to each other, a whole variety. My mother, by the way, never knew Yiddish because my parents were actually almost, you could call it, an intermarriage. My father from Poland grew up with Yiddish as his main language, and I think he probably knew some Polish, and then he learned German when he came to Vienna.

My mother was brought up in Vienna and knew no Yiddish. And not only didn't she know Yiddish, I don't know if you know about this, but there's a split in Jewish, particularly in Jewish European life where the Jews from Poland were considered lower class, and so the people who spoke German considered themselves better, even if they were not educated. So my mother didn't know any Yiddish. But she said she learned some Yiddish in the United States because she met other people who knew it. So they spoke a mixture of languages. But my brother and I spoke only English.

But then I did decide I wanted to relearn German, and I think I probably spent the rest of my life coming to terms with my history as a refugee, as somebody to whom German was the first language, but also the language

that nearly killed me, if you want to look at it that way. Anyway, so at Brooklyn College I majored in literature.

Jessica L: I do want to ask, you mentioned writing an essay in Yiddish at your Yiddish shul. When did you learn Yiddish yourself?

Evelyn B: When did I what?

Jessica L: When did you learn Yiddish?

Evelyn B: Oh, at the Sholem Aleichem Folk Shul. That's when I learned Yiddish. And then when I used it in graduate school I really had to relearn it, although it stayed in my head, was there in my head. Oh, Brooklyn College. I majored in literature. I was not an especially good student, actually. I think living at home, not getting along with my parents because I would go out and stay out all hours of the night, and they were very angry and upset about that, not only because they worried about me—we didn't have a car, I had to take the subway and the bus—but because the houses in Brooklyn are very close to each other and we lived right next door to a very traditional Italian family, several generations, and my mother always said it would look very bad to them if the Italian family saw me coming home so late at night. I mean, it was a lot of interesting…

But yeah, I think I forgot to say that my mother, in those days, she wanted, 'if only I wore makeup I would be beautiful,' 'if only I would be more bourgeois I would fit in better,' so she had a… But I don't know that she

truly believed it herself, if you want to know the truth, but I think she felt she had to.

So at Brooklyn College there was a Hillel, but I was not a member because don't forget I was a Bohemian, and the Hillel was very bougie, we used to call it in those days, very bourgeois. And they were very traditional. And that was the values that I was rejecting. I was a rebel. So I did not do anything with Hillel in those days.

And I wouldn't even say that I was very Jewish conscious. I mean, I knew I was Jewish. Most, 99% of students at Brooklyn College were Jewish, with some Italian and some African American, but it was a very heavily Jewish school at the time. I even was in a German play, the Christmas play. I would take a role because that's what we did in German. My consciousness about being Jewish was in a more dormant phase until I had children. And then I went to Israel and then especially when I came out as a lesbian, so it was a slow reawakening in different phases.

But the bourgeois part of being Jewish and the kind of Jewishness that was in temples in the years that I was even—well, I didn't even get to being married yet. I should say I met my—he became my ex-husband, but we were married for 20 years—in college. And he was the best friend of my best friend who got married secretly when she was 18 or 19 in college, and I hung out with them, and so I ended up with him. He was from a completely different Jewish background. He came from a communist background. My parents viewed that as an intermarriage, especially my

father, who considered himself socialist, but hated the communists. And by the ‘50s, of course, Russia was our archenemy, so it was very complicated.

So I married very early. We got married on the only day in the Jewish calendar in the spring that you could get married, and it was after Passover there’s one…for some reason there are a lot of days you can’t get married in the spring, so we got married. But I remained living at home until I graduated in June. I guess we couldn’t afford a June wedding because that was very expensive. I don’t think we even had—we had a wedding in the temple, yeah, downstairs in the temple, and then in the basement.

Oh, god, this is…my history was very, very problematic because my husband-to-be found out that my father was going to hire non-union waiters, and he was coming—even though my father was in the fur union, his father had been a union organizer, actually.

Jessica L: Your ex-husband’s father had been a union organizer?

Evelyn B: Yeah, right. And he had died very young. But he had…so my husband was adamant he wouldn’t come to the wedding if we didn’t have union waiters. I mean, you can imagine the kind of life traumas that could happen. So I got married and then moved—my ex-husband, who was three years older than I was, which doesn’t sound like much, but in those years it was like he was mature and knew the world. And I had lived with my parents my whole life. Nobody from Brooklyn College ever went to out of

town school for graduate school, or if someone left it was like they fell off the face of the earth. It was like a shtetl almost.

So my ex-husband, he was already a mathematics student getting a doctorate at Yale University, which was a big deal, and he was a rebel himself and didn't fit into Yale. I don't know if you can even imagine. Yale hasn't changed that much. So having a Jewish boy from the Bronx—he was from the Bronx. And his parents lived in what was called the Coops, which was a cooperative building built by these people who believed in a transformed world, which was unusual in those early years. The Coops were wonderful and they really gave working class people wonderful places to live. They were like housing projects except that they were really nice. Small apartments, but with lots of greenery and open space, and it was really very forward-looking.

Jessica L: May I ask either what year it was or about how old you were when you and your ex-husband got married?

Evelyn B: It was in 1954. So I was born in '33. How old was I? I was only 21. Oh, my god. It's creepy to think how young I really was and how little I knew what I was doing. Amazing my life came out so good. Yeah, so that's how old I was. It was in '54 that I graduated from college.

And so my husband was at Yale, and he… I mean, of course I would have to move to live with him. Actually, even though we were going together, I think we might not have gotten married so quickly if it didn't mean my—it was unthinkable. If I had gone to… I couldn't live with him and I

couldn't live on my own. I mean, first of all I didn't have any source of income, and secondly it just…my father would have had a fit. I don't know what he would have done.

So I got married and we lived together. And he found for me this special kind of a master's in teaching, actually, where they were giving out scholarships. And even though I was by far not a straight A student—I got A in all the classes I liked, I got Cs in all the ones I didn't study for, and I even got one D in, I think it was, in hygiene. I don't know what we had to learn about, but whatever it was, I didn't do it.

And I remember when I went for my interview—I had to go for an interview to Yale—they asked me what that D was about and I just said that it was a stupid course and I didn't study for it, and they let me… I said I was immature. Anyway, so that's what I did. I got a scholarship to go to Yale and get this master's. It was the first of its kind, a master of arts in teaching, so I learned both advanced courses in literature and also learning how to teach. And it was a very good program.

I also have to say I didn't know what I was doing. Even though Brooklyn College you could get as good an education as you applied for, but I don't think I really applied myself fully, so I had no idea how to really write a graduate paper. You know, I mean, I just…I don't know. I think I was traumatized. And of course living at home, trying to do homework with the television blaring in one room. And there was a lot of fighting in my house growing up. I said my father exploded. My parents fought a lot.

They also fought with my brother. So it was not a conducive place to get a college degree.

So I got through graduate school. I mean, I think I partially didn't know what I was doing, but I obviously did something right because I got my master's. But on the way to getting my master's I also got pregnant, because in those years the way you celebrated getting married was not using contraceptives, because then it wouldn't be shameful. But of course we also believed that we were protected. God only knows why. So anyway, I got pregnant while I was finishing my masters.

And it was very traumatic for my husband and me because he hadn't finished his doctorate yet and he was convinced that he would never, ever finish his doctorate because he now had to go out—in those years. I mean, I had a master's. I could have become a teacher and we could have figured out a way for somebody to help raise the baby, because abortion was… I knew people who had abortions, but I had no idea where or how. It just wasn't even in our radar. And it was very dangerous and scary and so we just felt that's what we had to do, is have this child.

So he had to look for a job. And he got a job at—oh, God—Williams College. If you ever can imagine a boy from the Bronx and a girl from Brooklyn with a new baby going to a racist, antisemitic, sexist, all male school, that was it. It was a job. Williams College was this—it's a gorgeous town. The year before we had actually just gotten a car and

learned to drive, and gone up to New England, and had passed through Williamstown and said oh my god, what a place to live.

Well, it was pretty traumatic for us. So we were there for a year. And it was hard being—my parents came to visit very often. My mother came up when the baby was to be born. But it was, I mean, coming from the city, it was in the country. I mean, you can't even imagine all the ways. We would sit and say this is how quiet it's going to be the whole time. [*Laughs.*] Because, you know, I mean, it was like… And we played a lot of Scrabble.

But I was not a happy stay-at-home mom. I probably had some postpartum depression. But they let me take classes. I took a class in constitutional law in the evening so I could keep my mind going. I mean, that, to me, has been a theme in my life. I think, you know, I used to say when my different best friend in college who's the reason I got married to my husband, she would say I want to have four children, because she was an only child, and I would always say, well of course I someday want to have children, but I don't know if that someday would ever have come. You know, in those days if you were a woman you had to want to have children, and so there wasn't really any sense of choice. But I had it much younger than was good for me or for any of us.

But we got through it, and I was a loving mother. I was also a mother who needed to find herself. And the marriage, I would say, and just interestingly enough, just yesterday—he had many different wives or

women after we separated, but he did marry one of them. Her name was also Eve, actually, Eve Lynn, if you can imagine. He married. But she found a letter in which he said that we were not right for each other and it was good to divorce, even though he was very upset because it was my idea to divorce. But I've always said I would not have become who I am today without him.

He was incredibly—we had a lot in common, first of all. Among other things dancing. We both loved to dance. And we met dancing, waltzing. And I'm still dancing today at my great age, so obviously that… But we also shared a lot of common interests. The place where we were not well suited was emotionally. So he had had his traumas, I had had mine, and they just didn't…that was sad.

But we did have a lot of good times together, and we did have a wonderful aspect to our marriage, so I have to say that. As I said, the problem was not about sexuality, it was really about emotionality. And I do think for—and maybe that's true for a lot of women—that's the most important thing for me, the emotional connection, and being known and understood.

Jessica L: So hopping back a little bit, in 1955 your first child was born. Can I ask their name?

Evelyn B: Oh, yeah. Her name is Nina, Nina Rachel Beck. And then she had...well, what shall I say…well, we only stayed—I mean, I was a mother. I got through having a baby. I do remember that when she began to smile and interact with us it felt like oh, thank god, because when a baby is just a

baby it's like you have all this responsibility but very little, at least to me, feedback. But I did nurse her and, you know, I got through that part of being there. A lot of family came through.

I made friends there, but it was really a hard place to be. It was a huge amount of drinking. Oh, my god. The fraternities would invite you for dinner and then you would come and they would start filling your glass. We did not drink in Brooklyn. My father, we never drank. Maybe my father had a glass of Schnapps at the end of the day. But it just wasn't a drinking community, and so I didn't know about drinking. And so we would end up totally zonked out because they really got you drunk.

Now maybe that was also the way of being, of a non-Jewish WASP-y way of life. But I don't want to say to all WASPs, but that was there, definitely. And the fraternities, it was all fraternities. We had…oh, it was just awful. I don't want to talk anymore about that.

Jessica L: So when and where did you move after Williams?

Evelyn B: So after one year, it was really not a—they were pressuring my husband to give better grades to someone who was failing because he was the child of an alumna. I mean, it was really not a good place. But he got a year at New Orleans, at Tulane, as some kind of a visiting something, as a mathematician. He did finish his doctorate. It was traumatic, but he did finish. And so he was much relieved.

So we went to New Orleans for a year and lived there for a year. And that was its own interesting trauma because it's a checkerboard city, so African American and white didn't live that far from each other. And again, I needed to be finding myself, so I got a job through the university sociologists going around interviewing people of color, African American. And the trauma of it was we had to give them, in order to write whatever—I don't remember even what we had to ask them, but I remember we had to have—we had like, you know, on nail polish they have color things? We had to code what color they were according to this thing and write it on their response. I mean, it's hard to believe that those were…

And of course there were still restrictions. I mean, I don't truly remember seeing fountains that said "blacks only," but I'm sure they were there. And they must have reminded me of my time in the Nazis when there were places where Jews couldn't sit. And we did have someone who was African American who helped with the child, baby Nina. But we only stayed there one year.

And we had a good, you know, New Orleans is a fabulous place. We went to the Mardi Gras. I dressed up as a butterfly. My mother came along and helped take care of the baby. And so, you know, it's a wonderful—a lot of jazz. It was both a wonderful and a difficult year.

And then my husband got a fellowship through someone in the family who believed in him and wanted him to have a European tour. But of course

being academics, both of us—I mean, I wasn't working, but he… So we took it. He went to visit universities all over Europe. He went to visit and have talks with mathematicians in different places. At the same time, of course, we did have a European tour in between. And I spent a lot of time in museums with the baby and her carriage. But we traveled around in a VW bus and our parents thought we were… And we had a little crib that we would take up to the hotels at night. We traveled all around Europe.

And that was, again, amazing. Amazing opportunity. I had some lonely times because I was by myself. But we also met people and went to many different countries. Then we lived in England for a couple of weeks or months. Or maybe that was later on. We did a lot of traveling. Mathematicians had access to a lot of funding in those years. But this first trip was funded by someone in the family who was very rich and wanted to have us become more worldly. And it was very good intellectually for my husband. And of course I went to museums and learned a great deal in all the places.

I also went back—I had gone back to Vienna when I was 18, when I was in college, and I went back by myself. There were still two close friends of my mother's who were alive who had spent the war in Vienna. They were both married to non-Jews. One of them had spent the time of war in hiding in the countryside and the other one I think was hiding in her home. And so I went back there. And I've been back to Vienna many times, and in that first trip with my husband then, with my baby, we did go, and she was

one year at the time that we started this trip. And we were gone for a whole year.

And then my husband of course needed a job, and so he applied and got a job at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and that's how I landed up in Madison, and where he remained for the rest… Well, he was a professor there with some stints in England in the last decades of his life, but that's really where he was a professor.

And that's where I ended up doing my graduate work because when I moved to Wisconsin, when we came back from Europe, I was already pregnant with my second child. I think again it was probably not planned. On the other hand, in those days if you had one child the belief was you had to have two. I mean, it's like what we lived by. Unbelievable. So I was pregnant with, it turned out to be, my son Micah, M-I-C-A-H, or Micah, Micah Daniel.

And I came to Wisconsin like eight or nine months pregnant. And oh, it was traumatic. I guess I have had a lot of these changes, of traumas. You can imagine, okay, New Haven was bad enough. A small city, an hour and a half away from New York. We used to go home on weekends or go stay with my parents or his parents. And my brother was still in New York. We had friends in New York. My measure of a place to live was New York. Okay, Brooklyn was a little out of the way, but all you did was take a subway. I used to take the subway by myself as a 12-year-old into the city. It was safe enough.

So we end up in Madison, Wisconsin. Oh my god, I thought I was really on the moon. I had never been in a real university town, because New Haven still had some real parts to it. I was very depressed, even more depressed, I think, having a second child, not knowing anyone, being a thousand, at least, miles away from the city. And the years that I lived there truthfully, we would drive 18 hours nonstop back to New York City twice a year to get, like I would say, an infusion of energy because this town was really sleepy. I mean, it was like there was the capital and there was the university and not much else at that time. Of course it has since become a booming cultural center, but in those days, that was 1958.

So I got there and I had the baby and I got depressed. And then I figured out—I mean, that's one thing about me, I think, I have—and I think I did get this from my parents—not just a love for life, but a sense of being a survivor. You just, you keep on. You keep on keeping on. So within a year of having this child I decided—first of all I immediately found a way of keeping myself mentally active by grading papers. You could grade papers for people in prison. And I would develop relationships with them. They were learning English.

And then a year later—I think it was my husband again who found out this new program that they had for…yeah, how come they had a program as early as the '50s? Wait a minute. Yeah. Well, no, I guess I went back to graduate school. First I tried to audit some classes, and then I applied to

become a graduate student. And so they let me in, so I became a graduate student in comparative literature.

And we had to have someone take care of my—Nina was in nursery school and my son was in…I guess he was home. And we hired a sitter. My husband was not happy about that because he believed if I was going to go out from the home I should be earning money. But I just insisted. I knew I needed to further my own self to become whatever I was going to become. I think I always had wanted to be a teacher, but I think once I had a taste of graduate school I wanted to go further than that, than being a high school teacher. That was my first goal when I was getting my master's.

And so I went back to graduate school. I became a graduate teaching assistant, so I did earn some money and could contribute some toward the babysitting. And then eventually, it was several years later, it must have been in the '60s, because it took me ten years to finish this doctorate, which was very unusual because mostly they expected… I wasn't that old when I started, but they expected you to come out a B.A. or B.S., get a graduate degree in four years and then move on.

And since I was a mother and a wife, I… And it was against the grain. We were living in university housing. The women who were—even the ones who had some professions previously talked about me and told my husband my baby was crying when I was in graduate school. I did not have support of that community. But I did it anyway. People used to say

how can you do it? And I said how could I not do it? I really felt like I was saving my own sanity by this further training.

So eventually my husband, I believe it was, discovered that there was this fellowship—it must have been in the ‘60s, yeah, because I graduate in ’69, so it must have been in the ‘60s when they were beginning to pay attention to women and women’s situations. So there was this fellowship for—I think initially it was for women whose education had been interrupted because of their being wives and mothers. And I applied for it and I got money enough so I really could go full-time and get enough credit so I could then work on my dissertation, and that really helped me.

So as I said, my husband really—and he was incredibly supportive. He would say it’s fine if we have scrambled eggs for supper. He was okay until I actually got a doctorate and became a professional in my own right, until I wanted to really be out there and not just do it in between times. So, I mean, he was a man of his age and of his time even though, so it felt sad. But in any case he was very supportive of me and stayed with the kids when I needed to work.

But we also had a lot of interruptions because he traveled. Every summer he would go to California and we would have these wonderful trips. We spent a year in Israel because he was a professor at the University of Jerusalem, Hebrew University. And I schlepped along. I tried to do what I could. But of course it kept me from finishing sooner because I had to map

myself to his career. But still I kept on keeping on and eventually I did finish.

Jessica L: Can I ask about when that year in Israel was?

Evelyn B: Let me try to think. Our year in Israel. Yes, I can figure it out because my son was six, and he was born in ’58. So it must have been ’64. It was before the war, before the Seven Day War, so it must have been ’64. Because he was having his first year—we got someone to tutor him the year before in English because we knew when he got to Israel—we lived in Jerusalem—he would be going to school there and he would have to learn.

We had not sent the children to Hebrew school. My daughter actually wanted to go, but the synagogues in Madison, Wisconsin were so bourgeois and they were so expensive to join. And you could, of course, ask like, you know, to get a reduction, but it felt very humiliating to do that, so we did not go. And I’m still not really a synagogue goer, even though I belong to a synagogue. But as I said, very enmeshed in the Jewish cultural religious life, so we always did Chanukah. They knew about the holidays, and we educated them ourselves, but they were not in a religious school.

So they went to Israel. They both went to Hebrew school. They learned Hebrew fluently. By the end of the year they were chattering with each other in Hebrew. And we went back to Europe and traveled in that same VW bus. I did not go to ulpan, which I regret, at the time because I was

trying to do my graduate work, so whatever time I could take off when they were in school I did my work on literature. I did not yet have my dissertation topic at that time, but I had to study for my prelims and whatever else you do for a graduate degree. And they…my daughter has kept the Hebrew better than my son because he was younger. But anyway, I forgot what context I was telling you about that.

Jessica L: You mentioned much earlier that your Jewish identity came back around when you started a family. Was that in raising your children? Was that from your year in Israel? Was that from your academic study? Can I ask how your Jewishness came back to you in those years?

Evelyn B: Yeah, and of course it was never really gone, it just wasn't…it was something in the years in college, I just took it for granted I was Jewish, you know, and like whatever, you know, it… I don't know how else to put it. But it wasn't like…it wasn't an issue or it wasn't something I thought about what it meant. It just was. And of course when I was living at home we had Passover, and we did Chanukah, so we did the holidays, the major holidays, I would say.

And I was always interested, I think, in Jewish literature, but you don't—like I was always interested in women's art. Way before feminism I would go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and sit in front of Kätte Kollwitz' paintings, and loved them, and have no idea that she was a woman and she painted things that spoke to me.

It was like that with Jewish things. I always loved Israeli music and Yiddish music. Because I don't want to say it went away, but it became more forefront when we had the children, of course. First of all, how do we celebrate the holidays, how do we carry on our culture. So it became a little more thoughtful. And we always did the Chanukah candles. Although living in Madison, because we…I don't know. My husband used to joke and say—I think it was he who said that we did Hanukkah instead because Christmas was so pervasive that you had to…if you wanted to have your own Jewish life you had to sort of insert it. And so that was…

And then of course came the—well, I think we went to Israel. I think before we went to Israel it was an issue about Jewish school because—although my daughter was already…they're about two years apart, three years, so he was six, she was eight or nine. Then when we came back that probably became more of an issue. And I believe she really did want to go to Hebrew school, and I think my husband was more against the bourgeois-ness of the Jewish community where money was such a big issue. Maybe it wasn't accurate, but we never really investigated it.

But we did spend time, we became very close to the rabbi at Hillel. He was a wonderful man, very progressive, and so he was the one who was like our Jewish guide, and the children were close to him. But I think we decided…we didn't have a traditional bar mitzvah for my son at all. He didn't study in the traditional way. But we did acknowledge his coming of age. And through that rabbi. Now what was his name? He was very close

to us. It'll float up. I haven't thought about him in a long time. And he died many years ago much too young.

But in Madison I was very close to the Hillel there. I gave many talks there and we did go to services there sometimes, so it felt like more of a Jewish place that felt comfortable for me. And in some of the years—I don't think there was a Chavurah yet in Madison, but I was interested in the Chavurah movement, where people met in their own homes. And Madison eventually reclaimed the first Jewish synagogue in Madison, a sweet little synagogue that the reopened, and there were women rabbis who went there. And that was really important to me.

But back to reclaiming or becoming more conscious of Jewishness. So through the children is one way it became a question, what do we do, how do we…? And as I said, both my children, even though they would say they were not raised religiously, they were raised with a deep, abiding sense of what it means to be Jewish. And my daughter actually—that's another whole story—but she has been teaching Hebrew school for years now. She reclaimed her own Hebrew, and she lives in Burlington, Vermont, and so that's another whole chapter, my daughter and her son, who did have a big bar mitzvah. He's now 21. But in any case.

So I'm in graduate school and I'm going to this Madison Hillel, being close to it. Dick was his name. Dick…oh, god, the second name will float back up. And so I'm doing my graduate work, looking for a dissertation topic. And I have to say because I was a wife, because I was a mother,

because I was an older student, right, I was like, what was I, in my early 30s, maybe, but I was considered an older student. I got straight As and one B plus in graduate school, but they never really trained me. It was a little bit like my college where I didn't get all As because I didn't do the homework. Here at least I really did do all the homework.

But nobody ever really showed me how to write a paper. I just like…I really and truly, I just had to figure it out by myself, which will become important because my advisor, who wasn't Jewish, but who put me in touch with Isaac Bashevis Singer, she created my academic life really by red penciling my first draft of my dissertation, but that comes later.

So I'm looking for a dissertation topic. I was a graduate teaching assistant. And this wonderful—there were not too many women in the department of comparative literature. It was a hotbed of sexism. There was at least one professor—ach, there's so many…you know, this is going to take forever if I tell all these stories. Because there was one professor when I was hired, I was told don't ever go in the office with him and don't ever let him close the door if you go into his office. He was an older professor. And, you know, you just knew that that was what you were told.

But actually, I should tell, for the record, how I got my first job, because we came back from Israel—oh, wait, no. That comes later. Okay, yeah, no, I was back and getting my dissertation. People were not paying attention to me too much, but I got all As. And then this woman, Cyrena Pondrom is her name, was brought to the department, and I don't know

that she—she was aware of the situation of women and she took an interest in me. I became her graduate teaching assistant and I began to teach Kafka through her. And I'm not even sure, maybe we taught some…no, I don't think we taught Isaac Bashevis Singer. But it was she who actually—yes, while I was working with her, that's what it is. I was her teaching assistant. We were teaching Kafka. I had never even read much of Kafka as a graduate student, if you can believe. Even though I took world literature and German literature. And so I had to read Kafka.

And then somehow she knew that I knew Yiddish. I don't know, I guess I talked to her about my background. And she said, one day she said you know, Evi, Franz Kafka wrote in his journals about going to the Yiddish theatre. This was before he had his breakthrough. I don't know if you know any Kafka, so if I'm telling you something new, but Kafka tried to write…until he was 30 he really didn't have much success. He was not an especially interesting writer. And then he had this breakthrough when he wrote this one short story called "The Judgment" in one night. And it turns out he had been at the Yiddish theatre just before that. And she said why don't you look into these Yiddish plays? Maybe there's some influence.

So I decided to look into it, and I read his diaries. I found out the names. Because he wrote very carefully what plays he saw, how he responded to them, what actors played in the plays, and so I got those plays from a place called YIVO, a Jewish institute in New York City. I actually went there, but I also was able, I think, to get some by interlibrary loan. I read

the plays and I had a revelation. It was like the world opened up. That in fact those plays found their way into his work in a totally transformed way.

And I'll just tell you in a nutshell what he did was take the themes of these Yiddish plays, which had to do with the relationship of humans, and it was mostly man and God, man and king, man and father, father and son, and he took away all the specificity of those plays and he created these works of art which carry forward those themes, but which did not have the specificity, which is why there are so many, many, many different interpretations of his work. That was my breakthrough.

And once I discovered that, I said okay, and we were very—I'm still very excited by that work because it was really…it was a breakthrough moment in Kafka literature. There were a few people who had noticed the Yiddish plays, but nobody had ever done…my first book is "The Influence and Impact of Yiddish Theatre on the Work of Franz Kafka." And it was a big deal, and it was reviewed widely. Of course there were many people who misread it, who said I said that was the only influence, which I never, ever said. But it's still a very good book and I'm really sad it never got into paperback because I was so ignorant about how to do anything with publishing.

I'm a good example of what somebody who isn't trained and taken seriously by the academic world. I mean, I'm very lucky because I've gotten very far. But this book would have probably—I mean, it still, most

Kafka scholars have read it. But it should have been in paperback, but it never was because I had no idea how to go to a publisher. So one of my advisors, a man who really believed in me, Jost Hermand, he said go to the University of Wisconsin. So I went there and they said fine, we'll take it. And that was it. I never looked into it would they make a paperback, would they really sell it. I just didn't know from nothing. So in any case.

But obviously I had to immerse myself in not just Yiddish, but in the Jewish world of the shtetl. And that brought me into sort of a Jewish consciousness, on one level. Then—oh, god. Move me along. I graduated.

Jessica L: So in 1969 you finished your PhD.

Evelyn B: And to give you a sense, I was living in London when I finished, because my husband by that time had made a connection with University of London, and so we spent a whole year in London. I was doing the last drafts of my dissertation. And we had to have a British typist type it for me because I wasn't that good a typist. And in order to do my defense I flew to the United States. My husband didn't really want me to fly. He thought why didn't I just do it on the telephone. And I insisted. I mean, it was like I had spent ten years of my life working on this damn thing. So I flew.

We had a lot of fights and I won a lot of them because I just insisted. And I was, as I wrote in one of my essays on being a pre-feminist feminist. I mean, when we first got married I said I'm not just going to be a housewife, you know that. And he agreed to it, within… I don't think

either of us understood the limitations of what that would be like, but he basically did support me in being more than just a housewife because that was my image of what a woman would be, like my mother, who should have been a lot more than that. Anyway.

So I finished my dissertation. I can't get a job. First of all, I looked in a radius of commuting distance to Madison. Secondly, I'm older. I'm already by this time, by 1969 I'm already—how old was I, thirty something—

Jessica L: 36.

Evelyn B: Yeah, see, I still count—I never did arithmetic very well. I still count on my fingers. So that was very old for a starting professor. My topic had Jewish or Yiddish in the title. And I only applied to schools—oh, that's what I…yeah, I'm not up to that next story yet. I only applied to schools within a radius of commuting, and I couldn't get anything. Nobody was the slightest bit interested. So I was deeply depressed. I mean, it was really…probably maybe even more depressed than when I was a postpartum depression.

And so but I have to give my husband credit, and myself. He said okay, he's going to go as a visiting professor to the University of Maryland in College Park. As a mathematician he could do that. And I had some connections with somebody, I don't remember, through the Modern Language Association. I made a connection with someone in the comparative literature department at the University of Maryland, and I got

a visiting professorship. My daughter didn't come with us because she was already finishing high school, I guess, but my son came with us and we moved to Maryland for a year.

And I got my start in life. It was like a dream. I mean, I loved it. And I taught things like Yiddish literature in translation, because by this time I had already met Isaac Bashevis Singer, because he was on campus in the years that I was already doing my Kafka work. That's what it was. And he had just finished a short story called "A Friend of Kafka." And that friend of Kafka was a major figure in my research on the influence of Yiddish theatre on Kafka because he was an actor in the plays that Kafka saw that influenced his work. Kafka's work became very dramatic. That was the breakthrough.

And so I started teaching Yiddish literature in translation, Isaac Bashevis Singer. It was a wonderful year. And then my husband had to go back to Madison to teach there, and I was able to get a second year of being a visiting professor. He was not enthusiastic, but I just said I have to do this. It was my one opportunity to continue my professional life. And so he went back to Madison with my son and my daughter came back. She'd been living with some other friends or family.

And I got my own apartment for the first time in my life. I had never lived alone. I went from my father's house to my husband's house. It was like amazing to be a person without having to hold the hands of children and being really on my own. But I commuted every week. In fact I just

Googled myself before we got on. There is a picture. You can find it if you Google my name, Evelyn Torton Beck, there's a picture of me in a leather coat in front of an airplane with my husband because I was written up in the Madison—I forget the name of the Madison newspapers—*Cap Times*—because I was commuting by airplane back and forth every week.

We had a housekeeper who helped because my husband wasn't doing the housekeeping. He would shop, I think, and she would then—or maybe she shopped. She cooked. And I had a Tuesday, Thursday teaching schedule. I would go up on Monday night, I would teach Tuesday, have Wednesday office hours, Thursday teach, and then drive like a maniac to the airport to catch the last plane back to Madison. And oh, I remember driving on the—because the Beltway at that time was like rush hour. I would drive illegally on the shoulder to catch my plane. I did that for a whole year.

Jessica L: That would have been '72?

Evelyn B: No, that was… Oh, that was…

Jessica L: You got your dissertation in '69 and then you did a year—

Evelyn B: So in '70… from '69 to '70… I started teaching in Madison in '72, so this must have been '69, '70. My book came out in Seventy—

Jessica L: So probably '71.

Evelyn B: Yeah, '71, like that. And so I did that. I believe I only did it for one year. Maybe I did it for two years. I don't remember now. But it was fantastic for me. And, you know, it probably was hard on the family, but I ran that

house in Madison from commuting back and forth. And by this time feminism was coming to a greater fore. And my advisor, who by this time was doing something—she was a very excellent scholar, but she also was working about something in the administration of women, seeing that women got a fair share. And she told me about a job that was opening in the department of comparative literature, where I had been, and it was in my area, modern literature, German, European modern literature, so applied for it, and I never, ever, ever even got an interview.

And so she looked at that and she found out that they were going to hire a young man who was still a graduate student who hadn't even…I don't even know if he'd started his dissertation, or he certainly hadn't finished it, and they were going to hire him. And so she suggested that I press charges. Now this was the time when people were doing that. Now I was not going to hire a lawyer or anything like that. But she told me I could press charges within the university because at that time, in the early '70s, there were avenues by which you could say I'm being treated unfairly. So I did that. She helped me do that.

And they created a panel of all men, of course, and they listened to my case, and they decided that that was wrong that they should hire a graduate student who hadn't even finished his Kafka work when I already had a book that was being widely reviewed and touted. I was a big deal at that moment. And so I got interviewed by them then and as a compromise they

put me half in the German department, half in the comparative literature department.

And what was interesting is I never told my women's studies students this story until I think I wrote about it in "On Being a Pre-Feminist Feminist," but I never told students about it. I don't think I was ashamed of it, but somehow I think I just…maybe I suppressed it. But I began talking about it when I began getting ready to leave university teaching, and my women's studies students said you have to tell this story, it's so important for people to know. But that's how I made my way into the university.

And it actually served me well because that department, where [there] was that same man that I should never go into a closed door room with him, they had a sense that I wouldn't sit down and take crap from them, which I had to do when it was my time for tenure and when it was my time to be a full professor. I had to help them learn how to evaluate me. Anyway, to go back to where was I now?

Jessica L: In the interest of time, I know this is shortly before you start coming out as a lesbian. Would you want to talk a little bit about what that process was like?

Evelyn B: Well, actually I came—yes, okay. Yeah, I was still married. Okay, so I got my job, came back to Madison in the full flowering of the feminist movement in Madison. And this is like another whole chapter, but my daughter, as it turns out, was lesbian, and I did not know about it at the time, although within that first year that I was back I think I began to

suspect, when she told me she went to protest at Hillel that there were no Jewish lesbians on their panels of women. But it never occurred to me.

And as I have said in the past, I was a very good liberal. I freaked out when I found out she was lesbian. I really did. Nearly called the police. That was a whole other story. But eventually, through therapy, the therapist said, you know, she's fine, what about you and your husband?

And that was when… So through feminism, and because feminism made, as I said, the right wing used to attack us and say that feminism made lesbians. Well, they didn't make lesbians, but they made it possible for somebody who felt lesbian to say that that's what they were. So through the feminist movement I began to be in touch with those old feelings that I had had. My passion for women and my closeness to women was always there. And maybe in my later married years I began to have sexual feelings, but I suppressed them, or I talked myself out of them because it just wasn't…

I went to several therapists and I remember saying to one male, very nice, kindly Jewish man, could I be lesbian? And he said to me do you have orgasms with your husband? And I said yes. And he said well then you can't be lesbian. I mean, that was… And my mother actually said to my rabbi, when I was finally out, you know, I think Evi is a lesbian, and he said oh, that's impossible. So, I mean, that was the world of those years.

So I became more and more involved with feminism. I recognized myself as a pre-feminist feminist. And through the women's movement and

through that validation, and through—I always say my daughter was my role model. I began to accept her as a lesbian, that she was fine. I talked myself out of all the homophobic crap that was in my head, probably, and I came out.

I'm trying to remember. I lived one year in Madison with my husband and my two children, and at the end of that year my husband said—we clearly were not doing well together. I mean, as I said, he was very supportive but he did once say if a man and a woman are equal, it feels to me like the woman is on top. That was his limitation. He was very liberal, but… So he went to England to teach there at the university in London, and I stayed. And I knew the minute he left—and he took my son with him. He wanted to and my son wanted to go with him.

And I was ready to try living on my own as a professor in Madison. So as soon as he left I knew that our marriage was over. And I think that allowed me to fall in love with a woman. It just gave me that space to figure out who I was. And it was of course a very wonderful, inviting environment. I mean, lesbian feminism was at its height, Madison was the most…it was like giving birth to people who were just waiting for you to come out, so it was a wonderful time and place to come out.

And I came out to more and more people in my family. I remember it was very scary telling relatives. I remember saying it felt like jumping over a cliff and you might end up dropping down in the middle into this chasm. But I have to say my mother was very unhappy about it. By this time my

father had died. Or no, he was still alive, but she never told him and I never told him because there was no way he would have accepted it. But my mother, for all of her being phobic and sending me articles in the newspapers saying you can always—this is how you can change back—she really did accept, and she loved my first partner, whose name is Sue Lanser, who's a professor, a very well known professor of comparative literature, who's written a very famous book about sexuality and literature and other books as well.

I've forgotten now where this—oh, so coming out. So I came out and became more and more active in the lesbian movement, in the lesbian feminist movement. And then it was also the time that we began to be aware of difference within the movement. You know, as I said in the early years we thought "I am woman, hear me roar," that was enough. But we began understanding that not all women's lives were the same, that different factors, issues of race, and economics, and ethnicity, and geography, and all the things that make us different.

So I began becoming aware of the fact that there were, within the lesbian feminist community in Madison people would say things like "I Jewed her down" and making remarks that were negative about Jews, and it was very shocking. And then people, I was not the first to notice this. As I said, nothing ever comes out of nothing. So there were other people who had begun noticing this and writing about it in different feminist lesbian newspapers, journals and so I became even more aware of it.

And then I went to one National Women's Studies Association meeting where there was a publisher—oh, I gave a talk on it, that's right, I began talking about it at the National Women's Studies Association. I had been part of creating the Jewish caucus, of creating the lesbian caucus, and so I gave a…it was a panel about this. And the publisher, Persephone, a lesbian press, asked did I want to write a book about this or put together an anthology, and I said yes. So that's how the "Nice Jewish Girls" came together.

But it was through working and coming out as a lesbian and really feeling I was taking incredible risks by being out as a lesbian that it became unthinkable that people would A, still speak in stereotypes about Jews, and B, the Jewish community was still being incredibly homophobic, so this felt like both of my identities were at risk by the other community.

And I do want to say this for the record, that "Nice Jewish Girls," along with probably "This Bridge Called My Back" was one of the first books to talk about intersectionality. We didn't call it that, but it was talking about identities that were intersecting and that made us different in both communities. And there was a lot of publicity. I was surprised at how many people reviewed "Nice Jewish Girls." Even Jewish newspapers reviewed it. And I got letters from people who were neither Jewish nor lesbian who said this book helped them understand their own situation.

1:31:24 [*End Part 2*.]

[*Part 3*.]

Jessica L: So we were talking about "Nice Jewish Girls.' Can you tell me a little bit more about what that book is and what it's about?

Evelyn B: Absolutely. So it's called "Nice Jewish Girls: a Lesbian Anthology." It doesn't sound like such a shocking title now, but at the time the idea that there were Jewish lesbians was really unthinkable. It was like putting together the word mother and lesbian. I mean, people—in fact as I say in the book, when I would tell people what I'm working on, an anthology by and about Jewish women who identity as lesbian, they said oh, are there many? Not even are there any, but are there many. And some people thought that there weren't any. It's hard to get back to that time when the thinking was such that there weren't any.

Because lesbian, it's even hard now. I talked recently to a Maryland group of lesbians, trying to get them to understand what life was like in those days, and how unthinkable it was to be of a certain traditional whatever and also be lesbian. It was such a…just the word, as I said to my students when I would start, even before I was out, teaching women's studies, one assignment I gave to students was to say the word lesbian out in the world three times, because it couldn't cross people's lips, it was that unsayable. At least as bad as abortion and cancer. Those were the three words you couldn't say in the early years, in the '50s. People would whisper if someone had cancer. And abortion wasn't a word—

So anyway, when I was offered this—so this book brought together, in many different genres—I put out a call in the lesbian and the feminist

newspapers. There were lesbian newspapers, there were feminist newspapers, and there were lesbian feminist newspapers, and journals, and in book stores. We had dozens and dozens and dozens of feminist bookstores. Put out the word that I'm interested in getting manuscripts from people to talk about their lives as Jews and as lesbians. So people wrote personal essays, people wrote historical essays, people sent poetry, people sent whatever genres there are. There were no plays in there.

But there's photographs. Joan Biren, JEB, who is now world famous, at the time she was just, you know, she was the first photographer in our time to photograph lesbians, and there were no pictures of two women kissing, so she made a picture of herself and someone else. But that was prior to "Nice Jewish Girls." She had an essay called "That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Jewish Lesbian," which documented all the different ways in which Jewish women were lesbian.

So this anthology really was a breakthrough, and it was addressed to people in the Jewish community, helping them to understand what it was like to be living as a lesbian but also to be Jewish, to want them to know, but to get rid of, of course, their stereotypes about what it is to be a lesbian. We wanted to talk to the lesbian community to make them realize that okay, the Jewish community was homophobic, the lesbian community, some of it, was antisemitic.

Some of it was through ignorance. This was in Madison, Wisconsin, so we had lesbians there who had grown up in tiny little towns in Wisconsin, had

never met a Jew. Some of them, we used to have these little, in the early years, meetings between Jews and non-Jews, and that was really hard because they would tell us the terrible things they had learned about Jews. I think one woman even thought Jews had horns. I mean, as ridiculous as that sounds. So we wanted to make people alert to what antisemitism is, what forms it takes. antisemitism takes both the forms of active, negative stereotypes, but also omission. That was one of the big points, is that omission, either of lesbians is a form of homophobia, or omission of Jews is a form of antisemitism, not being aware of what these lives are like.

So we had this anthology. It was published. It was very widely read. We had readings. We had big cultural events. And we had people like—I mean, many of the people in the book were unknown, relatively speaking, but we also had, quote, "famous" people like Adrienne Rich, whose work was already well known. I asked her to write because by that time she was coming out as a Jew. She was already out as a lesbian and she had written some things about being Jewish, but she wasn't very much out as a Jew. And she first told me no, that she didn't have anything to say. And then about a year and a half later, because of course it always takes much longer to do anything than you think, especially a book, she wrote me back and said is there still room in the anthology. And yes, there was, and so she published "Split at the Root," which was her coming to terms with being both Jewish and lesbian.

And the book was widely sold and then widely read. We had these big cultural events, filled whole auditoriums. And then this very Orthodox group of Jewish men came and actually gave us [pieces of paper] essentially saying we were thrown out of Judaism. And I don't right now have the piece of paper, but it definitely, it's in some lesbian, maybe it's in the Lesbian Herstory Archives, because it's really important that we have that piece of paper that says get out of our Judaism.

And unfortunately the wonderful publisher Persephone Press, which also published the book, what's it called now? It fell out of my head. "This Bridge Called My Back." They published that either the year before or perhaps the same year. Went out of business a year later. They got into financial difficulty. And so the book was just there. But a feminist publisher picked it up and it was reissued in a second edition which was exactly the same as the first, but with a new, short introduction. And that was in print for many years.

This was unfortunately at a time women's studies was not really seriously including—I mean, I was doing Jewish studies and we were doing lesbian studies, but what lesbian studies or gay studies there were did not yet include Jews, and Jewish studies definitely, in those early years, did not include lesbians, so while there was a wide market for the book outside of the university, it was not used as a textbook. And now it's been out of print for quite a—no, then there was a third edition. It was picked up by Beacon

Press, which was a very establishment, excellent press, and they put a third edition out.

And the third edition is quite different in many ways from—well, not quite, but it's different. We took out some things, particularly the whole…there was a chapter by Gloria Greenfield, who was the original publisher, but by that time she had become kind of right wing, and so her essay was kind of a bit histrionic, and didn't feel like it fit with the thinking that I was having about the anthology, so I took out her essay and substituted.

There was also, I think we changed the essay on Israel because…well, we had do—yeah, because by that time… This was also the time that there was a lot of anti Israel statements that ended up being antisemitic. There was a lot of confusion between what Israel was doing and what was Jewish, because there's often that elision that anything Israeli is also Jewish. So there were actually attacks within the lesbian feminist movement against not just Israel, but against Jewish women, so it was very… We had to do some clarification. The attacks on Sabra and Chatila by Israel had to be addressed, so we changed some of those chapters.

Then there were some new chapters. By this time my daughter and I had done an interview. As I said my daughter came out years before I did. And we did an interview for an anthology on mothers and daughters. How can I forget the name of the anthology? So it was a really good conversation and I decided to include that. I also decided to include a piece about myself

and my own mother. And then—okay, so I have to stop a minute about "Nice Jewish Girls."

My first partner and I, Susan Lanser, who was a professor at Georgetown University, who I met at the University of Wisconsin, who then became a professor at Brandeis University, and was there for many, many, many years, and just recently retired, and she's still a very close friend, she got a job at Georgetown University, and then we split up.

And I eventually met at the University of Maryland the person who became my partner for 30 some odd years, Lorraine Lee Knefelkamp, K-N-E-F-E-L-K-A-M-P, who was the founder of the Department of Counseling & Personnel Services at the University of Maryland. And she did a lot of work against homophobia and pro Jewish awareness. She was a convert to Judaism, and I felt that was really important to include in the anthology because there were actually a lot of lesbians who were Jews by choice.

And so she wrote a piece under the name of Chaya Shoshana, which were her Hebrew names. She didn't do it to hide. I think she really wanted to foreground her Jewishness. I think her name is in the anthology, and there's a picture of her that Joan JEB took of her. And now why did I mention her?

Jessica L: You were talking about "Nice Jewish Girls" and all of the entries into it, and what the different essays were.

Evelyn B: What's new in the new anthology, right. So those are some things that were not in the first or second edition but were in the third. We tried to use the same cover, the cover of "Nice Jewish Girls." We even asked the rabbi if it was okay. We had a Jewish star with a labrys. I don't know if anyone knows what a labrys is, but in the heyday of lesbian feminism we used the labrys, a symbol that Greeks used, and it was said to be a symbol of the Amazons because early lesbian feminists identified with Amazons and what they could do, and how powerful they were—not about the myth that they cut off one breast. That myth wasn't part of it. But there are lots and lots of labryses in Greek tombs and in many different places, so that was our symbol, a labrys within this double headed axe inside a Jewish star.

And we asked the rabbi and he said the Jewish star is not a sacred symbol, it's a secular symbol of Jewishness. So we had that as the cover. And that's on all three covers. But I don't like the second cover. But the first cover is my favorite and the third cover tries to be as close to the first cover as possible.

And Beacon Press had it in press for many years in paperback and it sold well. But then after a time, as I said, it wasn't used as a textbook yet, so they kind of…the numbers must have dwindled and they decided to not publish it anymore. I got the rights back, so if there's anyone out there who wants to republish it—I did go to the feminist press and they would have been interested if I had written a whole new introduction, bringing it up to date.

And by that time I was doing too many other things because—well, this is a whole other story—but after I retired as a professor I was studying to become a psychologist where I did a lot of work about the need for Jewish and lesbian and Jewish lesbian identity within the field of psychology, so I didn't want to do that. And to date I have not found someone else to republish it. I was thinking of making it into an e-book. I don't quite know how you do that. But at least it would be available.

And there are many—the problem with getting used copies on eBay or on AB Books or on Amazon is you never know which edition you're getting, and there are these three editions floating around, and if it were to be used as a textbook you would want all people to use the same textbook. Although actually it's an interesting project to look at the two different editions and see what's different about them. That would be a good paper for somebody to write a paper about.

Jessica L: I wanted to ask you some more about some of the stuff that came up in what "Nice Jewish Girls" deals with. You mentioned antisemitism in the women's movement and in the lesbian feminist movement. Were there things that were happening or that stood out to you, or that happened to you throughout the '70s and '80s that come to mind when thinking about antisemitism and the women's movement?

Evelyn B: Yes, definitely. Well, some of the things were institutional, actually. I've already alluded to the kind of language and ways of thinking. And I also should say that there were issues. Many of the lesbian feminists who wrote

for “Nice Jewish Girls” also talked about the Holocaust, and either their own experiences, like Irena Klepfisz. She became very well known, but “Nice Jewish Girls” was a place she was in. But there were institutional things.

So, for instance, there’s no question that nobody would ever create any kind of a cultural event on Christmas Eve, but nobody ever paid any attention to the Jewish holidays. And to this day I find other groups that I work with just have no idea of Erev Rosh Hashanah, or Erev Yom Kippur, or on the day itself. And when we would mention that either it was already a done deal or they resented having to think about changing it, taking it seriously. It should be even if there were not, but there were so many lesbian feminists active. So that was one thing. I’m trying to remember other instances. Well, some of them were not institutional, but in literature there were many remarks made. There was fiction in which a character, there would be one Jewish character in the book and then that character would carry very negative stereotypes along with them. It was on a whole variety of levels. There was omission, there was ignorance, there was stereotypes, so it came from many different directions. There were also conversations about being partners with a Jewish woman, what that was like, so there were negative things that were coming forward without any constraints about that.

Jessica L: And you mentioned that Israel played a role in all of this. Was that true in the women’s movement as well?

Evelyn B: Absolutely. I mean, it was not limited to—I want to make clear that everything that happened in the lesbian feminist movement was happening in the women's movement, and what was happening in the women's movement was happening in the world, so it's not like these are places where it's worse. But I think it felt worse because when you're part of a movement that's already transgressing the norms of the dominant culture, then it feels worse to have what you feel like are your own people turn on you or not be cognizant of who you are. So yes. But Israel.

And, you know, Israel continues to be a thorn in the thinking and the feeling of… I mean, people in the world, but Jews in particular because there is the necessity of having had a Jewish homeland for particularly the survivors of the Holocaust, and then people brought, actually, from other African countries who were Jewish, and from Iraq when there were all kinds of airlifts because of antisemitism elsewhere. At the same time there is what the Israeli government has done and what it has become, and it's getting worse day by day.

At that time it wasn't as bad as it is now, but there were definitely critiques to be made, and Israel held to different standards, different things pointed out. It's like Israel was the football of everything that was wrong. And maybe because it had such—there were such high hopes for it was a utopian world. But it definitely… And of course at this time now it's still, it may be worse now because it's both from the right and the—well, the right has become Israel loving, for very wrong reasons, and the left has

become Israel phobic for not the right reasons either, so it's very…Israel is really a very painful place for most thinking Jews because it was a hope not just for Jews, but it's now… I mean, it's unbelievable what has happened there, so I feel very sad about that. But I think it's really, really, really important to distinguish between Jews and Israel as a country, as a government, and Israelis themselves are all torn up about what to do.

Jessica L: Jumping back into where we were, in 1982 "Nice Jewish Girls" comes out, the first edition. And I know soon after that your time at University of Wisconsin comes to a close. Do you want to talk about what's next for you after that?

Evelyn B: Oh, you're right. Yes, okay. Well, I had been doing all of this work. You know, I'm a city girl. I mean, I was born in Vienna and raised in Brooklyn, which you might not consider a city, but it is a city, and New York City was our city. So living in Madison, even though it changed very much from being the shtetl it was when I came there in 1958, it became a cultural center, still it was not very diverse. And my work was more and more taking me not into only Jewish and lesbian diversity, but into working about multiculturalism and different aspects, so I was ready to leave that part of the world.

And when this opportunity came up at the University of Maryland for a director of women's studies, someone from there contacted me and said why don't you apply. And I had been at the University of Maryland, so it was kind of a funny coming back, but it was by that time already quite a

different university. I was there many years before then, 13 years before then. And so what I came to was a department that really wasn't a department, it was composed of one person and me. And it was an amazingly wonderful—it was wonderful…

Those whole years of creating women's studies at the University of Wisconsin, I haven't said how wonderful it was. It was like you were creating your own utopia, you were changing the world, you were making a difference, and you were learning. I mean, we knew nothing about women. We taught ourselves everything we knew. We were changing what was available to know, how we knew it, how we did research. The world was really turning on its axis in very exciting ways. And I was then able—but Wisconsin never became a department, but it had many, many…it was a very large group of women in other departments who were part-time in women's studies.

Here at the University of Maryland we started out with two, as, again just like a unit, and over the—I was [for] 18 years chair of this department. What's interesting to me is when I first came to Maryland, of course "Nice Jewish Girls" has the title "Lesbian Anthology," but I'm not sure that when they put me forward to the deans that they necessarily put the subtitle in because Maryland was not a very safe place. The University of Maryland was not the University of Wisconsin or Madison, Wisconsin, so I had to be very careful. And everybody believed that women's studies was for—whether I was lesbian or not, we were all lesbians.

But over time we built the department. I think there are now 11 people who are actually—it became a department. We created a major, a minor, a doctoral degree, so it's like a whole different place. I was chair. Then Claire Moses became chair after me. And what's interesting about the Jewish thing, I have to say, I taught many classes on Jewish women, including lesbians, of course, and all the diversity, Jewish women of color, Jewish women of different economic backgrounds.

But there are three—we worked very hard to make our women's studies department diverse, and did hire people for many different diversities and ethnicities—Asian, African American, Indian, which is Asian, and Korean. But now that three of us who were Jewish—Deborah Rosenfelt was another one—that I've left the department to finish my doctorate in psychology because I became interested in working with women—well, I actually ended up working with women and men, but still mostly with women who were outside of the university.

You could only work with people…you could only raise consciousness up to a point through academic work. When we started out we believed the academic was personal and the personal was political. Now I don't think they really have any Jewish courses. There's one person in Jewish studies who teaches earlier Jewish history, so it's very interesting how politics plays a role. I wrote an essay early on called "The Politics of Jewish Invisibility Within Women's Studies," and I feel like I ought to republish

it again because women's studies is, I think, not paying as much attention again to Jewish things.

I'm wondering if I said enough about "Nice Jewish Girls." It's painful to me that it has not been in print all this time. It's been a lot of years since it's out of print. And there have been a lot of other Jewish—both lesbian and gay, and you've pointed out to me trans books by and about Jews. But I feel like "Nice Jewish Girls" is like a classic. It was the first that brought together all of that work. And as I've said elsewhere, it brought together, but it also created new communities, lesbians organized around these consciousness raising—around being Jewish and lesbian.

For a very short time we had a newsletter that was called Shehecheyatnu, which is a Hebrew meaning essentially we are here, because shehecheyanu is the prayer that Jews say for thanking the powers that be for bringing us to this day. So shehecheyatnu was a feminine, a female version of that. And it was a very short-lived newsletter, but it was very powerful, and I hope it's somewhere in some Jewish archive. I have been remiss. I have not yet given my things, my papers to any Jewish archive. I have to do that yet.

But there has been material after "Nice Jewish Girls," and some of it is very different, issues. Some issues are the same and some issues are different. So what haven't I talked about? Well, I wanted to say that within psychology I almost had to start all over again. I would say that I went to this wonderful university called the Fielding Graduate University, which is

the only place I could have gotten a doctorate in because I wasn't going to go to a traditional university. This was a very student centered university that was created in the '60s, and it has become, of course, more and more traditional as time has gone by, but it's still…you can work on themes that are of interest to you so long as you keep showing that you're learning everything in a particular…all the different fields.

But when I came in they were already somewhat focusing on lesbians and gays, but Jewish themes were not part of their multicultural. My other big issue has been that multiculturalism has often actively told Jewish students that they can't…that's not to be included in multiculturalism, that it's not really an ethnicity or that it doesn't really belong there. So that's why I'm so big on having people recognize that to be Jewish is not just a religion, that it is much larger than that.

And so in psychology I had to do a lot of educating all over again. And now that I finished I'm not sure that the people I educated are still there, but it's an ongoing process. And then what happened is I—just to finish off where I am now—I did work as a psychologist and a therapist, and because my training, it took me ten years to become a doctorate in comparative literature, it took me 13 years to finish my doctorate in clinical psychology because I had to work full-time, because it was very expensive to go to graduate school, and I kept thinking I'll have to keep working so I can afford to go to graduate school, but the longer I kept

working full-time the less time I had to do my doctorate, which I wrote on the healing power of art.

They did allow me to bring together my passion for literature and art and psychology, so my dissertation was on "Physical Illness, Psychological Woundedness and the Healing Power of Art in the Life and Work of Franz Kafka and Frida Kahlo." And at the time—this is very interesting, I think—Frida Kahlo, it was believed widely that she was Jewish and that her father, at least, was Jewish. And that was very important to my—it was a comparative study of how Kafka and Kahlo shared wounding and how they used their art to heal, and there were many themes that were in both of their work, like hybridism.

They themselves were both hybrid because Kafka was a Jew, a German speaking Jew living in Czechoslovakia, which is a Czech speaking country, and his father even spoke Yiddish, so it was a multicultural thing. Frida Kahlo's mother was Catholic and Spanish, her father was Hungarian, German speaking, and it was believed he was Jewish. But in recent years there's been some question as to whether he was really Jewish, so it's very complicated. But anyway, I never published that as a book because of different reasons, having partially to do with the difficulty of getting permission for Kahlo's images.

But from there…so I stopped being a psychologist because I had been a psychologist while in training, so it felt like I had been already doing that work. And when I came upon both—I learned about the uses of poetry in

therapy and this dance practice that I do, which is called sacred circle dance, which started only in the actually early ‘70s at Findhorn, which is a community in Scotland which is now an ecological psychospiritual place, but in those early years it started to do a form of dance that was based on folk dancing, but ended up being also choreographies with a spiritual dimension, nondenominational, but many, many Hebrew dances, many klezmer dances are part of it. We do a lot of the Israeli dances, are part of it. It’s a very eclectic kind of body of music and dances. It’s the way we do them.

And so in a way I have brought this form of dance to many different places, including the synagogue. For a time I belonged to Bet Mishpachah, which is a gay-lesbian synagogue. But somehow it just didn’t quite meet my spiritual needs, and so for a while I was without one. But then I began teaching dance at the synagogue and also becoming, because I am now an elder, becoming involved in the Wise Aging movement, which is a movement that was started by a rabbi and a psychologist, both of whom were Jewish. The book itself, “Wise Aging,” has some Jewish things in it, but it reaches out to the whole question of what it means to age. And the rabbi who was part of it is Rachel Cowan, who unfortunately—she was a convert early on, but became very deeply involved in Jewish life, and a woman named Thal who is also a psychologist.

I do belong to a synagogue, and so I’m both immersed in Jewish life and at the same time I would say my spiritual practice is most deep and maybe

even most Jewish when I'm doing my dancing, and dancing from all different cultures. Because I think spiritual life is not specific to a religion. I really think spiritual life transcends any specificity. And so for me Jewish spiritual life is really having to do also with the culture and the history of what it means to be a Jew. And I think it's very important to maintain it. But I do it now through my dance.

Jessica L: Thank you so much. I really only have one last question for you, which is sort of like looking at all of this together are there any big values or lessons or meanings or something that stand out to you from throughout your life that you would like to share?

Evelyn B: Yeah, I would, but I also remembered what I want to say about my daughter, that she became an activist. She was the first—when she and her partner moved to Vermont, there were three couples who sued the state for civil union. There was an older couple, they were two older women, two men, and then it was my daughter and her partner were the little babies. And she was…they were part of that suit. And then I think she was among the first to be married, and she had a baby. Unfortunately her first child died, but she had a second child. He's now 21 and in college.

And he's been very active in the gay youth movement. He's not gay himself, but he's been very involved in the children of gays and lesbians, goes to family retreats on Cape Cod that they have every year. And so I would say what I have to leave—and both my children I think are very…my son is heterosexual, but he's very supportive of his sister and of

me, and he himself, I would say, exemplifies a multicultural. His first wife, whom he divorced, was southern, from Mississippi, but an activist from an activist family for African American rights. His second wife was from Mali, and he spent a lot of time there. Unfortunately she died. And his third wife, who he is married happily to, is from Kenya, and they do a lot of work for orphans in Kenya, and he actually adopted a child from Kenya who is my granddaughter, his daughter. He has also a son, and I have great-granddaughters through his son.

So I would say the legacy—and I think all my family has been activists, fighters for, believers in justice, hoping—I think we all have a sense of optimism that we can make a difference in the world, that we will never leave this life, to quote Mary Oliver, saying that we have only visited here, but that we actually have done something, and that for all of the flaws—my motto during the COVID has been we are all imperfect human beings. Zoom is very imperfect. Everything we do is imperfect. There's a poem I quote all the time saying I'm falling in love with my imperfections. That's the first line. But that in spite of all the flaws and in spite of the warnings and the dangers, we love life, we celebrate it, and we do our best to make it good for ourselves and those around us. How's that for…?

Jessica L: That was wonderful. Thank you so much. So I'll just say it because I didn't at the beginning, that today is November 18, 2020, and I want to thank you so much for documenting your history here.

0:39:29 [*End of Part 3, End of recordings.*]