Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

MIRIAM SCHNEIR

Interviewed by

KATE WEIGAND

May 21–22, 2004
Pleasantville, NY

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

Narrator

Miriam Schneir (b. 1933) grew up in New York City. A 1955 graduate of Queens College, she worked as an early childhood educator before she became a full-time writer. Schneir co-authored with her husband, Walter Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest* (1965), which exposed the injustices in the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case. Her anthology *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (1972) was a pioneering contribution to the discipline of women's history. *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present* (1994) collected and published important texts from feminism's second wave which document the movement's breadth and diversity.

Interviewer

Kate Weigand (b. 1965) has a Ph.D. in women's history and U.S. history from Ohio State University. She is author *of Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Abstract

In this oral history Miriam Schneir describes her childhood in an upwardly mobile New York Jewish family and her experiences in the leftwing environments of Antioch College and New York City in the conservative 1950s. The interview focuses on her political awakening in the 1950s, her research on the Rosenberg case, her personal and professional connections with a variety of well-known progressive activists and feminists, and the ways she both shaped and was shaped by the feminist movement. Schneir's story details the overlapping personal and political networks that fed the emerging women's movement and illustrates the contributions made by women who were outside the conventional liberal/radical feminist divide.

Restrictions

DVD 4, 11:40 — 20:20 is restricted until publication of the work she discusses there or until her death, whichever comes first.

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Five 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kate Weigand. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Miriam Schneir.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Schneir, Miriam. Interview by Kate Weigand. Video recording, May 21–22, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Miriam Schneir, interview by Kate Weigand, video recording, May 21, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Schneir, Miriam. Interview by Kate Weigand. Transcript of video recording, May 21–22, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Miriam Schneir, interview by Kate Weigand, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted MAY 21–22, 2004, with:

MIRIAM SCHNEIR
Pleasantville, New York

by: KATE WEIGAND

WEIGAND: This is Kate Weigand. I'm here in Pleasantville, New York, with Miriam Schneir. It's May 21st, and –

SCHNEIR: In 2004.

WEIGAND: That's right, May 21st, 2004. I guess I'd like to start out just talking about your childhood and your family background, who your parents were and where they came from.

SCHNEIR: Well, my parents were — it's hard for me to describe them. They were very loving parents and we were a sort of comfortable, middle-class family who lived in Queens, New York City. I was born there and lived there for many years. My mother came from Cleveland and we made frequent trips back to Cleveland several times a year. My mother never really adjusted to the idea of being a New Yorker. She, if someone stopped her on the street and said, "Where's Fifth Avenue?" She'd say, "I don't know. I'm from Cleveland." And that was after she'd lived here 40 years.

But my father was born in New York City. He had a sort of candy, cigarettes and stuff distributorship where he distributed to small, little candy stores in New York. His father had come here from Lithuania. My mother's family had come from Poland, but both of my parents were born in this country.

My grandparents were orthodox Jews but my parents were non-practicing Jews. I had one sister, Charlotte, who was three and a half years younger than me and I think I had a rather protected childhood. My parents were not political and they were not culturally sophisticated. My father subscribed to *Liberty Magazine*, an old rightwing publication, and didn't read any leftwing publications at all. My mother didn't read much at all. Their relationship was — I would say my father worked constantly. He was in a retail business and then later on, during World War II, he had to sell his cigarette business because cigarettes were a commodity that was very [hard] to obtain and you had to be on the black market. My father

wouldn't get involved in that so he sold the business. He was a very ethical person and the whole family went to Florida for a year — and that was very nice — and then we came back and he got a liquor license and opened a little retail liquor store in Queens and he worked there for quite a few years — long hours, the way retail businesses are. And so my relationship with him during all the years I was growing up was really quite peripheral. He was rather peripheral in my life. My mother was this strong figure who really raised us and my father was sort of the threat, you know, If you don't behave, your father will be home and I'm going to tell him. And he had red hair and a terrible temper.

So, the important intellectual thing that happened to me during my childhood was that around the fourth grade, they gave examinations to all the children, and those whose IQ — I think they were kind of an IQ test — but those whose IQ were sufficiently high were offered the opportunity to go to a special school for what was called IGC classes, intellectually gifted children. My mother allowed me to go to this class. It was a big thing because I had to take a subway and a bus and I was only in the fourth grade, so it was a big project. But fortunately, although she was quite overprotective, actually, she did allow me to do this.

And in that class I met the person who has been my lifelong friend, Cynthia Fuchs-Epstein, who is a sociologist, a feminist sociologist, and her family, who were very important to me. Her mother was kind of an eccentric, but a great admirer of Eleanor Roosevelt, and she would have Eleanor Roosevelt's "My Day" column up on her refrigerator every day. She'd clip it and post it and I always read it. I spent a lot of time at their house, and they were very important in my — all through the years. At a certain point, I skipped a grade or something and I got a grade ahead of Cynthia, and so I went to Antioch and then she followed a year later, so we were in college together. I knew her husband, whom she met in Ohio also. There were some periods of time when we kind of fell a little bit out of touch, the way you do with a friend, but then we always came back together, and currently we're very close friends. Walter and I often go out to their house in East Hampton on Long Island. We go out there for long weekends and then we often spend a month or more together in Mexico over the winter.

So, Cynthia — I remember arguments with Cynthia when we were in high school over the whole subject of women's rights. Cynthia was much more advanced than I was, as you can gather from my background.

WEIGAND: So this would have been — I'm trying to think –

SCHNEIR: I graduated from high school –

WEIGAND: In the '50s?

SCHNEIR: In 1950, yeah, in 1950. And Cynthia was already aware of Simone De Beauvoir, probably through her family, and she used to argue with me and

I would insist that I didn't think [DeBeauvoir's approach] was a good idea, and then we would really have arguments on the subject. My experiences really hadn't presented any problems to me.

WEIGAND: So, in school and in your family, you didn't feel like being a girl limited what you could do?

SCHNEIR: No. Remember, I had a very female-oriented family, just my sister, my mother, and myself. In the classes that I went to, I suspect that most of my teachers were old feminists from the first wave of the movement anyway. I remember one in particular who I'm sure was. And so there was never any sense in my mind of being discriminated against, you know? Also, I think that I had a certain non-combative spirit. For instance, although I did choose to go to Antioch, which was an important choice for me, because I chose it because I thought it was a place that was, one, non-racist — there were actually African American students there, which was not the case with many other schools, and there were African American teachers. Beyond that, there were no sororities and fraternities, which I was opposed to. So I already had, you know, certain ideas which were not ideas that were current in my family, certainly.

WEIGAND: And where do you think you picked that up?

SCHNEIR: I don't know. I really don't know. I have early memories, for instance, I remember on one of our many trips to Cleveland during the war, there were people on the train who were — during that time, there were people coming from Europe, we called them DPs — it must have been post-war — displaced persons. They were coming to America and they would — you'd see them all through Grand Central Station. They'd have tags on them telling where they came from and where they were going. And the trains were jammed, so people would be standing, and I remember just suffering, feeling that I was sitting and they were standing and wanting to give one a seat and my mother saying to me, "If you give someone a seat, you will stand for 12 hours." I had this terrible conflict that I experienced as a child as a difficult conflict: should I or shouldn't I?

So I don't know where it came from, but somehow there it was and it didn't translate itself immediately, as I say, into a feeling of women's rights — not at all. But it did translate into a feeling of sympathy toward black people, and feeling sympathetic to poor people, those two things. And I started to say that I had a certain non-combative spirit and I think — what makes me say that is that I accepted the idea that because I was a female, I could be either a teacher or a nurse. I would have a college education, which in my family was something, because I was the first female in my family, in fact, the first person in my family, to go to college, and I'm thinking of all my cousins and aunts and uncles. I shouldn't say to go. I was the first one to graduate from college. A few of

my cousins did go for a year or two, and I have a lot of cousins. Both of my parents came from big families.

So, when I was going to Antioch, I thought, Well, I can be either a teacher or a nurse. Those were the two occupations that were open to me. I really didn't consider anything else, and I thought, Well, I don't want to be a nurse, so I'll be a teacher. When I went to Antioch, I quickly changed my mind and decided I was going to be a writer. And at Antioch, you could major in writing, actually. It was a very, very mind-opening experience.

I only spent two years at Antioch, but they were really important years for me. I made friends there that I've, again, had all my life. I developed a tremendous interest in music. I read tremendously. I read everything I could get my hands on. And I began to feel like a left-winger and to identify with leftist politics. As soon as I came back to New York I subscribed to I.F. Stone's *Weekly*. I became as interested in politics. I became — I was active — I think that was the year Stevenson was running for president and I became active in the Stevenson campaign, the Adlai Stevenson campaign. Even in high school, though, I sort of had, as I told you, sympathies for poor people and working people and I remember collecting petitions against the Taft-Hartley Act and things like that. So I did have — I was willing to be involved and to take action, which in that period became –

WEIGAND: Yeah, it was a risk.

SCHNEIR: It was not a risk, really, for a young person like myself. And I was also active in the Henry Wallace campaign and went to rallies for Wallace and all, where Glen Taylor played his guitar. Cynthia was very involved with Zionist causes which I never was.

So, anyway, I came back to New York and finished up my education at Queens College. What prompted that was that my father wrote to me and said, very nicely but firmly, that he expected I would earn my own living when I got out of college and I decided that I'd better return to my original idea and get a teaching license. So I did.

My first teaching job was, interestingly enough — the way things happened was kind of weird — but I needed to fill in a half year before I could get a license to teach in New York City school system, which was my goal. I went to a nursery school and it turned out, just by chance, that it was being run by Hattie Charney, who was a Communist, along with her husband.

WEIGAND: George Charney?

SCHNEIR: George Charney was her husband. And a number of the teachers in this school were also connected with the [Communist] Party. So, again, I had this sort of serendipitous awakening, hearing them talk, and also became very interested in progressive education ideas through this school. I only

taught a couple of years in the city system. I hated it. And then I got a job teaching at a school for emotionally disturbed children. I liked that quite a bit. It was very interesting. There were good people there and it was a very interesting place to teach. I think it was there that I met another very good friend, Barbara Bank, who was involved in education and has done a lot of work with Head Start and programs like that. A number of people, actually, I met there who have done good work in the educational field.

WEIGAND: Can I, maybe, interrupt here?

SCHNEIR: Sure.

WEIGAND: It struck me that you were born in 1933, so it's sort of at the height of the Depression or almost the height of the Depression, and I wondered if we could back up a little bit here to your childhood again and maybe you could talk something about how that experience or how that event affected your family.

SCHNEIR: Well, you know, my father had this store that his father had started, and we actually did not suffer through the Depression.

WEIGAND: People always need candy and cigarettes.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, I mean, you know, we always had candy in the house (laughter). That was fine, and we all smoked, except my father, he didn't, but all the women, all the girls and women in the family, when they got old enough. I started smoking when I was, like, around 14 or 15, you know. And we didn't really suffer during the Depression. I mean, I don't remember any — you have to remember that by the time I was really old enough to remember, we were kind of out of it, you know. Things were looking up quite a bit, and I knew, when I got older, that my father had lost a lot of money in stocks and things like that, but he still had an income and so the fact that he didn't have excess money didn't affect me particularly. We always had a car and we always had whatever we needed, really. My sister and I went to camp. So we weren't rich. We had this little house in Queens. I was born in Queens, you know, we lived in an apartment there, and then we — my parents — bought a little house, and that's where we lived until I went off to college, or actually, high school.

WEIGAND: Uh-huh. And how about the war? I mean, by then, I guess you were old enough to have some consciousness about what was going on in the world?

SCHNEIR: Yeah, and my uncles all served in the Army. My father had served in World War I. My father was about 40 when I was born, but he had been in World War I and had actually been involved with the Air Force. I have a great set of pictures of these little rinky-dink planes they flew, you know,

bi-wing planes. They'd have, like, toothpicks in them, between the double wings were struts, and they were crashing constantly. He was badly burned during the war.

But, the Second World War — I knew there were hungry children in Europe, you know. You ate everything on your plate, and I knew my uncles were in the war and there were some dramatic things where my uncles would — before they were shipping out, they would come and get me out of school to say goodbye and stuff like that. And I worried about them. One uncle came back and was, I now realize, kind of shell-shocked, traumatized, by whatever experiences he had had. He lived with us for a while, and he used to cry a lot. But it wasn't something that — truthfully, I remember listening on the radio, mostly to soap operas. I don't really remember listening to news very much.

Of course, I do remember Roosevelt's death and that was a very, very moving experience. We were living in Florida at that point, and I do remember being very upset, because he had been the president from the earliest I could remember. He was the leader of our country and, you know, through my entire childhood, it was Roosevelt — that was it. So that was a very upsetting experience. And I remember, you know, during the war, we collected tinfoil, and I remember newspaper drives and things like that. My mother rolled bandages.

WEIGAND: Yeah, the typical stuff, it sounds like.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, you know, we had blackout curtains, but it didn't affect me in any kind of deep way. I actually didn't know very much about the persecution of Jews during the war. It was not something that I was — that was talked about in my family. Nor was it in Cynthia's family, as far as I know. Now, maybe I'm wrong about that. She may have — her father was active in Zionist politics and, of course, I remember the founding of Israel. That was a very important day in our family, and so I remember that well. But I was already a teenager then, so –

WEIGAND: And you said your family weren't practicing Jews, but you must have had — I don't want to put words in your mouth — did you have some sense of yourself, of your Jewish identity?

SCHNEIR: I knew I was Jewish. I knew I was Jewish. But almost everyone I knew was Jewish. That's not really true, but it felt that way. I never — the first time I remember feeling discrimination as a Jew was when I went to a summer camp — it was a music camp in Rhode Island — and my parents asked me to make a reservation at the local inn. I went to make the reservation and when they heard my last name, which was Blumberg, they said they were full. Later I suspected the problem and I called and changed the name slightly and I made the reservation. So that was a very keen memory.

But my father talked about discrimination, religious discrimination, as a boy going to school in New York City. And he actually walked out of school in high school and never went back after about two years in high school. He just felt discriminated against and he just didn't want to stay in that situation.

But myself? I think maybe I have more sense of being Jewish now than I did then. It just — maybe because of Israel. I feel a lot of shame over what's going on in Israel. That must be because I feel Jewish and that I'm somehow implicated in that and I don't want to be. But it was not a big issue in my life. At a certain point in my teen years I think I wished that I could have more experience of Jewishness. My mother sent me to a Sunday school and I went maybe two times. Then the place burned down and I never had any further religious education. At a certain point, as I say, in my teens, I kind of thought maybe I should learn something about it or become more aware of it and I asked my parents to celebrate one of the holidays, maybe it was Passover. So we did. We made the whole Seder plate and everything and sat down to do it, and my father was supposed to read the Haggadah and he got about two pages in and broke down crying and that was the end of it. He said, "It just reminds me too much of my boyhood and my family and my parents, and I can't go on." He didn't want to do it.

We did go to Cleveland very often for Jewish holidays and my mother's parents, as I said, were orthodox. So we sat through these two- and three-hour Seders, and all the prayers, but the kids were mostly playing under the table (laughs). It wasn't something that made a deep impression on me because it was clearly the old folks who were doing this thing and it didn't really pertain to us. I do have a memory of being in my grandmother's kitchen and she had like two sets of silverware. The *fleisch* and the *milch* and I remember taking forks from each drawer and switching them and thinking, OK now, let's see what's going to happen. I remember doing that as a kid.

WEIGAND: Let's see, you were going along very nicely, covering a lot of questions that I have here to ask you.

SCHNEIR: I guess I was about at the point where I was teaching.

WEIGAND: Yeah. And I was really interested. I mean, it's fascinating, really, that you're sort of coming to think of yourself as a leftist in 1950. 22:55

SCHNEIR: Uh-hm, just when nobody else was.

WEIGAND: Yeah, (laughs) and so, can you tell me a little more about what that was like? I mean, Antioch is a friendly sort of place for that.

SCHNEIR: Absolutely. And during the time I was there, the Ohio Un-American Activities Committee was very active. I had an occasion to meet Harvey

Matusow. Do you know who he was? He was testifying before the Ohio Un-American Activities Committee against some of my professors. He showed up several times in what we called "hall parties" at Antioch, and everyone knew he didn't belong because he would come in gray flannels and white bucks, which were the college Joe uniform of the decade, which nobody at Antioch would be seen dead in. So everyone knew he was some kind of alien and avoided him. But later on, of course, we discovered he was gathering information and testified against people and hurt people. He hurt people very, very severely. There were several people that lost their jobs, etc., because of him.

To jump ahead, I had occasion many years later in New York — Walter and I were on a short-lived TV show hosted by the political satirist Mort Sol. Mort Sol was doing a TV show and we were invited to appear on it, and so was Harvey Matusow, or perhaps Matusow was in the audience. And afterwards Harvey Matusow was walking around with a big reel, a film can, and he said, "Let's go out and have a cup of coffee." So we were curious, you know, and we went out and we talked a little. He was working for some newspaper on I think it was West Side, some kind of New York City entertainment sheet, basically. He kept patting this film can and assuring us he had important things in there, and when he went to the bathroom, we peeked in it and it was empty (laughter). It was typical of him.

WEIGAND: Yeah, typical. So self-important.

SCHNEIR: Later on, he wrote a book, *False Witness*, where he admitted that everything he had testified to at Antioch was untrue. And also, he also crossed my path another time. I transferred to Queens College when I came home from Antioch, and he was also involved at Queens College. We had a very, very reactionary president whose name I — Theobold, his name was. Matusow was ratting to Theobold about various people who he decided were no-goodniks and so on. But anyway, when he wrote *False Witness* and said that he had testified falsely, that was when he was indicted for perjury and served some time in prison, which was kind of ironic. (laughs)

Well, anyway, as you guessed, Antioch was certainly a place where there was interracial dating, something that didn't happen in the outside world. Coretta Scott King was there at that time. She was a student. A lot of people on the left were there. I don't know why it attracted leftists. For one thing, the work-study program — it seemed very practical and sort of, like, you could identify with working people, if you were there. They had advanced ideas in education, which interested me. They had no sororities and fraternities, which was extremely important to me. Every place I applied for college — I applied to three colleges — and I chose them because they did not have sororities and fraternities. One was Reed in Oregon and another was Bard here in New York. They were, like, among the few places in the country that didn't have any sororities or fraternities.

I didn't like the fact that [fraternities and sororities] were segregated by race, they were segregated by religion, they were segregated by gender, and by class. The whole thing was just ugly to me and it was the most important criterion that I had. It was kind of dumb, really, because –

WEIGAND: No, it's interesting.

SCHNEIR: I mean, I could have been choosing for, you know, some other, more intellectual reasons (laughs). Anyway, I wasn't. I wasn't at that point. So, um –

WEIGAND: And it had had some well-known radical types on the faculty at the time, didn't it?

SCHNEIR: They did.

WEIGAND: All these people Harvey Matusow was testifying against, probably.

SCHNEIR: That's right, yes, although I didn't know it until I got there. I had a very good background when I came from high school. I went to a high school that was really excellent, Forest Hills High School, which was an excellent high school. And I grew a lot intellectually there. I had wonderful language courses. I took Latin for four years and loved it. It has been useful to me in my research since. I took a course in economics, which I always remember this because I got tremendously interested in monopolies and did a paper at the end of the class on monopolies. I remember the teacher being sort of surprised that I had done this interesting paper. I did a lot of research because it just sort of gripped me, the whole idea that there were monopolies. It was an eye-opening idea to me, how consumers were manipulated, and how products were made to become obsolescent, and things of that nature. I got very involved and interested in it and did a big paper on it. And I remember the teacher writing in my year book, "A late awakening." (laughs) And it was a late awakening. I mean, it was not something that I grew up with. I just sort of came step by step by step.

At Antioch, I took a course in American government and politics, and I found the course dull and I asked the teacher if I could do a special project. I chose to do a project in third parties, because I'd been interested in the Wallace campaign already. And that was, again, a very growing experience for me to understand the history of dissent, political dissent, in the United States.

I worked — my Antioch work jobs — one of them was at the Antioch Nursery School and, as I said, I was very interested in progressive education. It was called progressive education in those days. It was not that firmly established as an idea, and the Antioch Nursery School was an interesting place, and I learned a lot. Again, it wasn't only the educational ideas, but the idea about developing people who would think for

themselves, who would be fair, honest — all the qualities that were nurtured by that kind of educational setting. So that job was important to me.

Next I worked for a literary agent in New York who was a Dutch refugee, Barthold Fles his name was, and that was an interesting experience and again, one that reinforced some of my interest in writing, too. When I came back to New York, though, it was kind of a dull period and, as I said, I subscribed to I.F. Stone and that was my — that was sort of my lifeline. I took education courses, which were so boring that I would — Walter still remembers this, because I met Walter soon after I got back to New York, and he still remembers I'd come home from college and cry. I was so bored. But I wanted that teaching license and I got it after, you know, a couple of years at Queens.

WEIGAND: It's funny. When I interviewed Barbara Winslow the other week — she went to Antioch –

SCHNEIR: Oh, did she?

WEIGAND: It was later. I think she graduated or left there in 1967 and finished her last year somewhere else. But she talked a lot about — and you know, I guess I'm asking if this was true for you — about Antioch being the sort of place that was just horrible for women and she didn't feel that she was taken seriously.

SCHNEIR: No. It wasn't that way for me. I met wonderful women there. I mean, many of my good friends are people that I know from Antioch, and they taught me so much. I learned so much from them, because many of them did come from left homes, from certainly more cultured homes than I did. My roommate there, who was a close friend and remains a good friend, came from a family of intellectuals — left intellectuals — and I loved visiting her family and learned a lot from them, too. They lived in an apartment on the Upper West Side and they used to have musicals there. They knew a lot of musicians and they would have quartets in their living room. It was so much fun.

WEIGAND: So you didn't feel like the faculty took you less seriously than the male students?

SCHNEIR: I didn't. I didn't feel that. No, I really didn't. Maybe I wasn't sensitive to it. You know, a person who was there in the '60s may have been much more sensitive to it. As I said, I was not a combative person and I probably would have accepted things that a person who was ten years younger than me would never have accepted when she went to college, so –

WEIGAND: Yeah, that makes sense. Queens College must have been really different. (laughs)

SCHNEIR: Yeah. Queens College was entirely different. For one thing, I was living at home and I didn't like it. I was unhappy to be returning home. And for another thing, I tried to get an apartment. This might be interesting because it's so much a period piece. At a certain point after I returned to New York, I said, "I cannot" — to myself — "I cannot continue to live in my family's apartment." My family had moved into a rather small apartment and I was sleeping in what was supposedly the dinette (laughs) and so, I thought, I'm going to get my own place. And so I began looking around.

I wanted a place near the school and I found a woman who was renting rooms. I went there and she had so many rules about what you could and couldn't do. You could never, never bring up a male up to your room. I mean, that was absolutely not going to be allowed. And you had to have hours, and, I mean, this was the sort of environment. Antioch wasn't like that. I mean, the halls were open, men could come up, women could come up, you could have friends there. I mean, it was just an open kind of feeling and we never felt like people were sitting on you, whereas the rest of the world was so oppressive. And finally, I just said, "This is worse than being at home. I don't even like this woman and I like my mother." So I did go back to — I did stay in my parent's apartment and I continued living there except for summers for quite a few years, in fact, until I got married.

WEIGAND: So, you said you met Walter shortly after you went back to New York?

SCHNEIR: I met Walter when I was — just before my 20th birthday but we didn't get married for about five years. And during that period, probably the most important thing in my life, aside from my relationship with Walter, was that I went into psychoanalysis. That was sort of *de rigueur* at that point, but I also had problems I wanted to talk about and work at. I did not find it a very good experience in many ways, although I was being psychoanalyzed for five years. It was a long period of time.

WEIGAND: Was it the kind of thing where you went every day?

SCHNEIR: Five days a week.

WEIGAND: Wow.

SCHNEIR: When I started, it was ten dollars an appointment, and I'm trying to think where I got the money for it. I was teaching, that's right. I started when I started teaching. And that was why I continued living at home during that period, because all my money was going to that and to my little Renault 4 CV, which needed constant repairs, but I loved it. My psychoanalyst was a woman. I didn't want a woman. In fact, she was recommended to me by someone else, by a friend's psychoanalyst, and I said, the first thing I said

to her was, "I don't want to go see a woman." So you can see that I already had a lot of sexist ideas myself. A doctor should be a man and I really was not very trusting of the idea of a woman. But we talked about it and I said, "OK, you seem all right." So I did start to go to her.

She was a strict Freudian and she hardly spoke at all. There were very few times. I have only little nuggets of conversation that I recall with her, and I don't think it was a very successful psychoanalysis. But I did solve many of my problems in those years and in the years afterward. One never knows. You never know to what extent the therapy was useful in opening up certain avenues or whether just maturation accomplished it. But I give a lot of credit to maturation (laughs).

WEIGAND: So what made you finally stop?

SCHNEIR: Oh, I ran out of money. I got tired of it, you know? I just got tired of it. I wanted to get on with my life. It was just absorbing too much of my life. She did say to me that I had not completed — she made it clear that she felt that I still had a ways to go. And I said, "Well, I'll travel it on my own."

WEIGAND: You wrote on your biographical sheet that you sent to me something about your political activity during those years. Maybe it was a little bit later?

SCHNEIR: No, it was in 1957, or '56. Walter and I got married in '57 and, at that point, we were both extremely active in the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. Walter was a medical writer in those years and he had done some work on strontium 90, which was a byproduct of the atomic bomb testing that was going on during that period. We were both very concerned with damage to the environment and began — Walter, especially, did some speaking on the subject. I remember that we spoke a lot to PTA groups and — when I say we, I did not speak: he spoke and I would come along.

It was a disturbing thing to see the lack of social consciousness among the people that we spoke to. He made this whole speech about how the environment was being affected and how this would affect generations to come and we needed to stop bomb testing. And the first hand that would shoot up in the air would be the first question: How can I tell if my child's teeth have strontium 90? and, How can I protect my child? It was always my, my, my, and it was never the world, this society, you know. It was an interesting lesson for me, too.

Anyway, there was an ad in the *New York Times* and it said, We are facing a danger unlike — this is just a paraphrase — unlike any danger that we have ever faced before. The ad was about bomb testing and it was the beginning of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. We formed a Queens group, the Queens County group, and we were very active for several years, speaking, organizing. I took a more and more active role. Walter was chairman of the Queens County Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, but I was very active and I did do a little speaking and we held

meetings. It was the center of our lives, really, aside from our jobs through that whole period.

There was going to be a big meeting in Madison Square Garden and before that we had a big Queens meeting, which was exciting because Linus Pauling came and spoke at it. He was great, just wonderful, and it was very successful meeting. It was very exciting for us. We worked tremendously hard on it. And then, as I say, there was a big Madison Square Garden meeting and I remember coming out of the Garden and there was a newspaper saying that there was some committee or other that was investigating the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. In fact, I think we have somewhere upstairs in our bookcases a copy of the hearings that went on. Walter was never called but he was one of the people who was named in the hearing. And gradually the group fell apart.

One of the other things that was interesting in the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy was that we were young, of course, at the time, but there were people from the old left who joined the committee. A number of them would come up to us, and we had this conversation at least twice that I remember, and there may have been times I've forgotten, where the person would say, "Look, I'm very much interested in this issue and I want to be active and I want to help but don't use my name. Don't put me on any list. I'm an old leftist and I can do nothing. My presence will harm the group." It was sad. But it was that time. That was the era.

When I did begin my first job teaching in the New York City school system, I recall I had to swear to the Feinberg Law in New York State [a statute passed by the New York State legislature in 1949 that required the dismissal of any teacher who advocated the violent overthrow of the government; it was upheld by the Supreme Court, and hundreds of New York City school teachers lost their jobs as a result, including a few I had studied with in high school]. You had to sign if you were going to get a job as a teacher. You had to swear: I am not now and have never been a member of the CP. I don't support the overthrow of the government by force and violence. So it was a nasty period.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

SCHNEIR: During the time that Walter and I were together, the Rosenbergs were executed. Neither of us went to the Save the Rosenbergs rally. The –

44:30

WEIGAND: The one on the eve of their execution?

SCHNEIR: That's right. Something we deeply regretted, obviously, in later years. But we knew about the case and were upset by it, but not deeply upset the way people who were red-diaper babies were. We never felt, There but for the grace of God go I, you know, regarding Michael and Robby. But we were upset by it and we were upset by the Smith Act Trials and all these things had an impact. We knew which side we were on. There was no question.

The committees were just digging through rubbish and the Hollywood Ten was upsetting and this whole period was dismal, very dismal.

I remember very well when I went to Europe the first time. My grandfather had left me a couple of thousand dollars, which was money in those days. It was two thousand dollars — he had left each of the grandkids that. And I used it to go to Europe in the summer of 1952. I was young. I shouldn't have gone, probably. But I have a clear memory of feeling how liberating it was. The atmosphere was so different. I remember in France, just feeling you could do anything. You could just be a person here, you know? You could walk along, you could hold hands with a guy, you could go anywhere. You could sit in a café by yourself, go into a bar. You know, I had never done anything like that before. And so that was a very liberating experience. I went with my college roommate. We went on a converted –

END DVD 1

DVD 2

SCHNEIR: We went on a converted Dutch troop ship called the *Groate Beer* and it was a ten-day crossing. I guess I was away from the States for three months and it was great. It was a wonderful trip — although, as I say, I was too young. My roommate, Judy [Ratner, now Judy Pitt], broke down after about two months and went back to New York, so then I continued on my own, and that was pretty tough. It was very hard.

WEIGAND: So, were you traveling all around?

SCHNEIR: We traveled quite a bit. We were in London, Paris, southern France, Rome — it was a regular tour — and Holland because our ship docked in Rotterdam.

WEIGAND: And so, when you say that going there felt liberating, and you gave some various examples, it sounded like you were saying partly that it was easier to be a woman there, less cloistered?

SCHNEIR: It was easier, yes, it was easier. Although as I say, I was bringing my own inhibitions with me, and so after Judy left, I felt very lost and abandoned and frightened. I wasn't used to being on my own. I was 19. I was just uncomfortable with it. But at the same time, it was, in spite of those fears and everything else, I could see that there was a way that you could live without being really afraid and without being protected and without being inhibited from expressing yourself in any way.

WEIGAND: So some of it, too, then is getting away from the conformist repression [of the U.S.] of that time?

SCHNEIR: Exactly, exactly. You know, I wore corsets. I was a little thing, and I wore corsets and white gloves. I mean, I did. I did all those things. I wore crinolines under my skirts. It was just a time when — I'm sure there were women and girls who weren't doing this — but I was, you know, and it didn't occur to me not to. Everyone I knew was doing it.

WEIGAND: Right. But then, going to Europe was a contrast –

SCHNEIR: It was a big contrast. Yes it was. The atmosphere there was less oppressive, definitely less oppressive. The food was better, too.

WEIGAND: So what did that all mean to you when you came back? Did it change the way you did things?

SCHNEIR: It may have. It was not a dramatic change, certainly, but yes, I think it did. I think it did. When I went to Europe, I had had a boyfriend and I had broken up with him and I was quite upset about it. Then, I just was sort of

hanging out, you know, around New York. I had some friends who had apartments. I didn't, because I had no money. But I was at Queens College. Anyway, I hung out in friends' apartments and one of my friends from Antioch was going with a Communist, a guy who was a Communist, and so I used to go to their place all the time. They were living together somewhere down on the West Side in the 40s somewhere, in an old brownstone. I used to go there a lot and hang out with their friends and I dated one or two of their friends, too, so it was just a sort of free-wheeling time, you know.

I had a lot of spare time because I wasn't very engaged in college at Queens at all. I didn't find the work challenging. I didn't have much school work somehow. I don't know why that was. But I was taking education courses, and I went back to studying Latin. I took some more Latin courses there and that was fun, and I took some English courses. They were much better — the English courses I had at Queens — than the ones I'd had at Antioch. I must say that the courses at Antioch were not very good, mostly. The social life, the atmosphere, the ambiance was fabulous (laughs), but the courses were not that good.

I had writing classes and I don't really think I learned anything in them. I liked them. I thought they were fun, but when I went to Queens — in fact, I remember, transferring credits from Antioch to Queens, they wouldn't just take all the credits. I'd say, "Well, I've had two years of English." No. They said, We've found that Antioch credits don't really mean that much and so you have to take tests. And I had to take tests in every subject to see what level I'd be at, because they didn't really trust the Antioch education. I guess they'd had experience, or maybe they were just being snotty, I don't know. But anyway, my English courses at Queens were very good, and helped a lot. I really learned something about literature, and the same with my history courses. They were good, and I really learned things there, which I can't say I did that much at Antioch.

Anyway, whatever it was, I had lots of time, apparently, and spent a lot of it hanging out around the city and doing things and made a lot of big strides during that period.

WEIGAND: Uh-huh. I guess I'm wondering if having had that more liberated experience in Europe, if you felt more –

SCHNEIR: Yeah, I think it gave me some confidence and some feeling of independence, uh-huh. I think it did.

WEIGAND: Did you feel more aware of the stifling environment of the U.S. when you came back?

SCHNEIR: I think I was — yeah, I think so. But I think I was aware of it anyway. I was so interested in politics already and was feeling that we were going through a bad time.

WEIGAND: Right.

SCHNEIR: I did have that sense very strongly.

WEIGAND: You said you were active in the Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg case?

SCHNEIR: Yeah, well that came later. That came later. We had good friends who — I've gotten tremendous amount from friends and people that I know, knew and met over the years. We had very good friends. The woman was someone Walter had worked with, Madelon Burns Bedell. They knew each other from PR. Walter was working in PR at the time — public relations — and Madelon and her husband, Bob, were on the far left. They were radicals. They were very interested in the Rosenberg case, and their brother-in-law was John T. McManus, who was one of the editors of the *National Guardian*. So we knew John McManus and his wife, Jane — his wife was Bob's sister — and spent a lot of time with them. We used to visit them every Christmas, and Madelon's roommate from Smith College had been Betty Friedan. (laughs)

WEIGAND: I'm so interested in these networks.

SCHNEIR: So, Betty Friedan was someone else that I met during that period. And, it was really through Bob Bedell that we slowly became interested in the Rosenberg case. Bob had become aware of a case in upstate New York [in Rochester]: Alfred Dean Slack, who had been accused of stealing some material from Kodak, where he worked at the time [and passing it to a Soviet agent]. Bob said this is a great injustice, this case. Walter had already been doing some writing, as I think — did I mention that to you? He'd been doing some writing on strontium 90 in children's bones and teeth as a result of atomic bomb testing, and questions like that, and had contacts with the *Reporter* magazine and *The Nation*. Bob said, "It's really a grave injustice, this case, and why don't you look into it?" So Walter started to look into it, and he gradually — testifying against Slack had been Harry Gold, who was one of the major witnesses in the Rosenberg case. I know you know this but I'm just saying it here for the tape.

WEIGAND: No, it's good to have it in here.

SCHNEIR: Through the interest in the Slack case, and following the activities of Gold, that led into the Rosenberg case. Walter started working first on the Rosenberg case. I was teaching. At this time, I was teaching at the Child Development Center, which was a Freudian oriented school for emotionally disturbed preschool children. It was a very interesting place. I enjoyed working there very much. We decided to have a child, and I got pregnant and left the job and he said, "Well, as long as you're going to be hanging out doing nothing (laughs), why don't you work with me. I want

to write a book on the Rosenberg case." (pause in tape) You wanted to go back to talking about the preschool?

WEIGAND: Yeah, why don't you talk a little bit about the preschool program?

SCHNEIR: OK. I didn't like teaching in the New York City public school. It was sexist, terribly, which is odd, because almost all the teachers with one or two exceptions were female. But the principal was a man, of course, and he treated us all as though we were his harem. It was just horrible. He had his favorites and there was a lot of competition among the teachers, you know, to get Mr. Charlton to notice you. It was just horrible. The whole setup was horrible.

I was teaching kindergarten and it was what they called a double kindergarten. There were 40 children in the morning and 40 children in the afternoon. So I dealt with 80 children a day. There was a co-teacher whom I hated. I would be observed by Mr. Charlton, because it was my first teaching job in a New York City school. He would observe me several times during the year and he always commented on the way that I kept the room, that the floor was dirty. (laughs) There'd be 40 children, they'd be dropping paper, clay, whatever, you know, and he's always comment the floor was dirty. It was awful. I couldn't wait to leave there.

So someone I knew from Antioch had been teaching at this place, the Child Development Center, and she said, "I think there's an opening. Why don't you apply?" So I came and applied. And of course, they loved it that I was in analysis. That was a big plus. I remember my interview there very well with the head psychiatrist, who was a woman. There was a little boy in one of my [public school kindergarten] classes and he was very disturbed. She asked me what I was going to be doing about it. And I said, frankly, I thought it was above me, that I couldn't really handle it and that he needed professional help. Well, that won the job for me, because the setup was that there were the teachers, and then there were the social workers and then there were psychiatrists. It was a very hierarchical arrangement.

To go from the ridiculous to the sublime, I went from 80 children to eight children with two teachers. We had very close relationships with the children and with their families. And the rest of the staff were — we'd have discussions about the kids at a high level, and discussions about family dynamics, and I think I learned as much from that as I did from my own therapy.

Many of the people there were European refugees, people who had come to the States during the war or before the war. They were very smart, and very humane people, and it was a pleasure being with them and dealing with them. The kids were great, too, because often they really weren't very disturbed. The kids would have little problems. I'm sure they loomed large in the family, but in terms of the basic way the kids were put together, they were strong kids. They had problems. Maybe they were aggressive or maybe were wetting their beds, things like that — not a big

deal, because they would not really take children who were severely disturbed [for example, autistic or obsessive-compulsive]. Frankly, I think many of the children had developmental problems which would have been resolved in the years to come. But it was an era when everyone was seeking professional help. So these parents were educated and well off enough to want to seek professional help, and we were it.

And it was a lot of fun. The school, when I taught there, was on 60th Street, right near Bloomies [Bloomingdale's], just between Second and Third [Avenues], I think it was. I remember we had a rooftop play area and we could see the 59th Street Bridge from there. It was a nice urban-feeling environment and I enjoyed that, too. We did some nice trips around the city, Central Park, picnic on Welfare Island, et cetera, with the children.

One year, I taught with a woman whom I really, really liked, Barbara Bank her name is, and we did wonderful trips. We had a great year together. So, I enjoyed that place very much. But as I said, Walter and I decided in around 1960 that we would start our family, and so I left the Child Development Center after I was pregnant.

WEIGAND: Was that your choice, or something that you had to do?

SCHNEIR: No. It was not a choice. It was not an accident, but it was a — I don't know anyone who ever thought of, in those days, of not having a child.

WEIGAND: Oh! I wasn't even asking about that, but that might be interesting to talk about. I was wondering if you had to leave your job because you were pregnant.

SCHNEIR: Oh, no, no. I was eight months pregnant. It was a very physical job. It was the summer. My son was born September 3rd and I left in August, so, as I say, it was a very physical job and I couldn't see continuing to work with preschool kids while taking care of a young baby. And besides that, we had decided that we were going to take some time and begin to work on this book on the Rosenberg case. Walter, I think, was still working at a full-time job. I think he was still working, but at a certain point, then, he quit his job, too. And we had some savings and we had a little money. I'm trying to remember. I don't remember where we got the money. We had — I think it was savings, basically, because he was doing very well at his job for those days. I mean, he had become the news editor of this publication for doctors, *MD Medical News Magazine*. So we decided we were just going to use what money we had and write this book.

So we were both home with our baby and had babysitters. We lived in Queens at the time in an old house we bought in Elmhurst for $17,000, only two thousand dollars down. We had an office in the attic, which we refinished. We never told our child there that was an office in an attic, because we thought he would just stand at the door and cry, which would be more than I could tolerate. We had babysitters come in. My mother was

our prime babysitter, actually. We had babysitters that we hired and we had so many bad experiences with them. I'm sure you're familiar with this nanny problem, and so finally my mother said, "Look, I would love to take care of him." And so, we only agreed to it only if she would promise that she would keep regular hours and that we could pay her so that it would be a job for her. She said OK. She didn't want to accept money at first, but then she said OK. And so that was what we did through a lot of the time. She was our main babysitter. And we were comfortable with it because we knew she would take good care of the baby.

Anyway, we'd go to our attic, sneak up there, and that was where we worked on the Rosenberg book. We didn't tell anyone what we were working on. We kept it a secret because we were afraid that sources would dry up. We worked on it for five years. Our friends still tease us to this day, you know, that it was the big mystery, what the Schneirs are writing. Walter wrote most of the material in the beginning of the book, which is the scientific material, in the beginning, because that was his field of expertise. The rest of the book we wrote together. Are you interested to know how we did it, or how we collaborated?

WEIGAND: Yeah, yeah.

SCHNEIR: OK. The way we did it was very labor intensive. We both wrote all the chapters. We would plan it together. We laid out the plan of what each chapter were going to be about and the overall plan of the book, and then we both wrote every chapter, except for the beginning, as I say, which Walter wrote. I edited it, but it was his voice. That's him. Of course, it was a tremendously educational and radicalizing experience, writing that book. 9:00

After we had about three quarters of it, maybe a little less than that, we thought, Well, we'll look for a publisher. We were running out of money. We needed an advance. And we started going around, looking for a publisher. Turned out — we thought we'd have no trouble, because we knew we had material no one had ever had before, and there was no mainstream book on the case. There had been several books published by leftwing publishers, but we wanted a mainstream publisher, and we felt it would be important for the success of the book that it should be published by someone who had credibility so that the book would get reviewed. So we started searching for a publisher and it turned out that we were having terrible trouble. We could not get a publisher. We went from one place to another.

One person finally who helped us was Grace Paley. Walter had known Grace — I don't know how, through a friend, mutual friend, maybe? Anyway, we knew her and we told her about the problem we were having and she said that she had a publisher. She had published *The Little Disturbances of Man* and she said that her editor was a wonderful man and he had said that he would publish any book as long as it was a good book. So, with her recommendation, we went to him at Doubleday, and he bought the book.

It was not that easy. One of our editors called from the publishing firm and said, "Um, um, uh, well, uh, you see, we don't really believe in this, but we have to ask, and um —" We finally helped him out. No, we were never Communists. They sent someone to go through our files and we had to come with backup material for every single thing in the book. We spent a lot of useless hours trying to prove that it wasn't a slander to call Steve Nelson a Communist, which can be hard to prove (laughs). I mean, we know it, but it's going to be hard to prove it. So, anyway — and so we had to waste a lot of time on that. But they did buy the book.

Some of the other experiences that we had were at one publishing firm, the guy said that he had known Julius Rosenberg at City College and he always looked like a Communist spy to him. And another firm said that they had to send the book out to an outside reader and they sent it to some assistant New York City prosecutor or someone who said, you know, "It's no good."

Anyway, Doubleday did agree to publish. I remember coming to a party at Grace's — Grace was married at the time to Jess Paley — and I remember coming to a party at her Greenwich Village apartment and we brought what was to us a very expensive bottle of champagne to celebrate. We thought (laughs) Grace was so cute. It wasn't cold; we bought it on the way. I don't remember what it was but I remember it had a — it was probably Mumm's Cordon Rouge. It had a red label across there, and it was warm. There were a lot of people there and she just opened it. And as she opened it, she said, "I guess we should be saving this for Nora's [Grace Paley's daughter] birthday or graduation or wedding. I think we should be saving this for Nora's wedding." But as it was, she opened it and served it all out in paper cups to everyone and we celebrated our publisher that way. But — I mean, she wasn't having the party for us, she was just having a party.

But of course everyone was active in the anti–Vietnam War movement and went to all the parades. All through the 1960s I was having and raising children. My first child was born in 1960, my last in January 1969, so all through that period, I had young children and babies. Walter, for instance, went to Chicago in 1968. I did not go to the convention. And also, when the book came out in 1965 he did a big tour, a speaking tour with Helen Sobell, which I didn't accompany him on. Again, we had young children and I accepted the fact that I was going to stay home and watch the children. Where would you like to go next?

WEIGAND: Can you talk a little bit about the book and how it was received and what the reviews were like? 15:00

SCHNEIR: OK. The book was surprisingly well received. It was published in the summer of 1965. I think the political climate was beginning to clear — it was just beginning to clear. We had a few really excellent reviews in places like *Time* magazine, if you can believe it. It wasn't *Time*, it was *Newsweek*, *Newsweek* magazine. We had a big review in the *New York*

Times Book Review. I think it was by Nathan Glazer, if I recall. It wasn't all friendly but it wasn't all unfriendly, either. It was moderately respectful. It was critical but moderately — he didn't agree with our conclusion that the Rosenbergs were innocent, but it was respectful. Whereas *Newsweek* said, If the Rosenbergs had the Schneirs as lawyers, they would have been acquitted — something which I do not believe, but anyway, it was nice to hear. And the left wing, the left press, of course, was very favorable and very friendly to the book.

We did a lot of speaking, both of us, did a lot of speaking all around. We spoke to small groups and at house meetings and on radio and TV. I used to joke that there's hardly a copy of the book in circulation that isn't autographed because we spoke so many places. A lot of the speaking engagements were being set up by Helen Sobell, who was sort of the guiding spirit of the committee, which at that time was known as the Committee to Secure Justice for Morton Sobell, who was in prison. We spoke for Morty a lot and, as I say, Walter went on a long cross-country tour with Helen. They spoke for Morty.

I did join them in California and we spoke at Berkeley in a meeting arranged by Bettina Aptheker. Already there was the new left that was coming in at Berkeley. There was the DuBois club out there — I think she was the head of the DuBois club — and we had a funny experience with her where she sent us a letter saying something along the lines of, I usually don't have anything to do with people over 30, but in your case, I'll make an exception. So Walter and I wrote back to her and said, Well, we usually don't have anything to do with people whose picture's on the cover of *Time* magazine, but in your case, we'll make an exception. So the new left was becoming big news, you know. She was on the cover of *Time* magazine. If my memory is correct, and I'm pretty sure that was *Time.*

WEIGAND: That sounds familiar.

SCHNEIR: I don't remember why, but it was big doings at Berkeley at that point.

WEIGAND: Berkeley Free Speech.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, that's right, the Free Speech movement. And it was in full swing when we were up there. It must have been either late 1965 or early 1966 and we spoke for the DuBois Club. It was a very active campus and I remember tables everywhere and everyone agitating about something. We spoke in a number of different organizations in the Berkeley and the San Francisco area. At one of the meetings, it was kind of thrilling to me that Tom Mooney was there, the defendant with — god, I can't remember who the codefendant was but — Warren Billings. The Mooney-Billings labor frame-up. Mooney was, or maybe Billings was there. I think it was Billings. And it was an amazing sort of feeling, to connect with a previous period was kind of nice.

At another meeting — it was a meeting in New York and the *National Guardian* was sponsoring it and I was an honored guest. Walter was — I think he was speaking with Helen at that point somewhere — and so I went to this alone and to make a talk. Beforehand, some of the invited guests were having a little reception and a man came up to me and he said, "Well, I read your book and the part about the witch hunt and the investigative committees and all of that is absolutely true and I can tell you from personal experience." And I said, "Oh, well, who are you?" And he said, "Alger Hiss." (laughs) So that was very exciting also. And we did see Alger Hiss a number of times after that. We were not good friends of his by any means, but we'd run into him on other occasions. But that was my first introduction to him.

WEIGAND: How did you — this is slightly a new topic — but you said when you first were in SANE you didn't really speak in public, that Walter did the speaking and you went and just went along. But by this time, you are speaking in public. Was that — how did you–

SCHNEIR: Well, it was a new time, you know. There was a new feeling in the air and I felt ready to do it. For one thing, I felt knowledgeable about the subject and that gave me confidence. And people wanted women to speak, and so that gave me permission to do it, too. I wanted to do it, but other people wanted me to do it. So I was responding to that change in the environment, too, of what was permitted. I was happy to step up and take a place there. But I guess when it wasn't permitted, I wasn't that willing to do it.

20:40

WEIGAND: Uh-huh — back to the non-combative personality.

SCHNEIR: Yes, I think so. I think so. But also, I have to say that I was very busy raising three children and I really didn't know as much on various subjects at that point. I wasn't really prepared to speak about them. And so, when I felt fully informed, then I was ready, you know. So that was a difference, too.

WEIGAND: Right. And so, the book did well and lots of people bought it?

SCHNEIR: Yeah, the book did, I would say, fairly well, you know. It was not a huge seller but it sold. It did nicely and it had a lot of notice and it gave me personally a lot of opportunity to grow and to meet new people and to stretch my wings a bit more. And I was very, very committed to the Rosenberg cause, you know. We spoke in schools, we spoke in synagogues, we spoke in churches, we spoke in house meetings. We just traveled, and when Morty Sobell got out of prison in 1969 it felt like a personal victory. It was a wonderful feeling.

[By the late 1970s, I was quite comfortable about addressing large audiences. At the 25th anniversary of the Rosenberg execution — that would have been June 1978 — the Committee to Secure Justice in the

Rosenberg Case held an outdoor meeting at Union Square in New York. I spoke there before a large crowd. In 1983 a book on the Rosenberg case arguing that Ethel and Julius were guilty appeared. It was coauthored by Ronald Radosh, a former leftist, and Joyce Milton, a writer. *The Nation* and the *New Republic* sponsored a Town Hall debate between Radosh and Milton (plus a third writer who had formerly collaborated with Radosh) and Walter and me. It was titled, Were the Rosenbergs Framed? For some reason, the event caught on and tickets were extremely hot items. People we hadn't seen in years telephoned to ask if we could get them tickets. I think Town Hall could have been filled twice over. It was a lively evening. Each of the participants spoke for half an hour, and there were questions from the audience. Afterward, I appeared with Radosh on a live TV discussion moderated by Ted Koppel. So, you see, I had come a long way since the 1950s, in respect to public speaking, at least.]

Walter and I then wrote on other things together, too, in the years to come. You know, we did a number of different articles. And we were constantly writing on the Rosenberg case. It was a career that went on for many, many years. There were re-issues of the book, there was new information that came out. The Freedom of Information files opened. We spent untold hours reading those.

We got our own [FBI] files and learned things from them. One thing we learned was that we thought we were being so smart in not telling anyone what we were working on all through the five years we wrote this book, and it turned out that within the first few months we had contacted a man — Gibby Needleman, his name was — who had worked for Amtorg [the Russian trade organization], and the FBI was apparently tapping his phone. So, from that very first moment, they knew we were working on this book and they began following us. Apparently they followed us when we went to Philadelphia to pick up material on Harry Gold, and they knew everything we were doing. They went to neighbors. They had a check on our mail. When we were in Philadelphia, we had a feeling that someone was tailing us.

Also, at one point, there was this phone call that came to Walter at work where someone was saying they had a crate of oranges from Florida they wanted to deliver to us and what was our address? He hung up on them, as we had no one sending us a crate of oranges. And later on we told this story to someone, probably the Bedells, and they said, "Oh, everyone we know is getting those calls. They're just doing a check of addresses." So there were things like that going on, too. We weren't totally naïve, but we didn't know the extent of it and we had no idea how early they were onto the trail. I say trail — it wasn't a trail. It was — they knew we were working on this book. They knew when we gave our manuscript to Doubleday and they knew when galleys were ready and they requested galleys from Doubleday. Doubleday, to their credit, refused them.

One of the people we met through the book was Louise Bernikow, who was writing a book on Rudolph Abel, who was a Russian spy. She asked to come to our home and look at our files so we knew her through that.

Then we were friendly with her over the years. She was a very active feminist — I don't know if you know who she is.

WEIGAND: I know that name but I don't know much about her.

SCHNEIR: She went to Barnard and was active with the Barnard Women's Center there, and has written a number of different books. She has a very good collection of women's poetry. I'm trying to think what it's called. I think it may be called *The World Split Open*, if I'm not mistaken, named after a line in the Muriel Rukeyser poem, "The Poem as Mask." And it's a very, very good collection, a historical collection. We were very friendly with Louise for many years.

The Bedells had a fundraising party after the Rosenberg executions. The Rosenbergs' lawyer, Manny Bloch was there, and that was the only time I ever met him. He was at that party. They were raising money for the Rosenberg children. Later on we got to know both Robby and Michael Meeropol. Just before the book was going to come out, we informed the Meeropols, who were the adoptive parents of the Rosenberg sons, about the book, because we didn't want it to suddenly appear and have it interfere with their young lives. We said we'd love to meet the boys if we could. Michael, I think, was away at college but — I can't remember if both Meeropols came, or just Ann with Robby — and we talked. Robby seemed very, very young and vulnerable. We said, Would you like to see where we work, where we wrote the book? And so we took him up to our attic office and we had his parents' letters there. I'll tell you how we got the letters. We had the originals at that time. We just had them out on a table, and told him what they were. He never looked at them or picked them up or anything. And so we could see that he was still very hurt.

But we kept up a friendship with the Rosenberg sons. Friendship is a little too strong a word. We kept contact with them over the years and eventually they did decide to "come out." One of the things that brought it about was that there was this film producer — Alvin Goldstein, his name was — and he wanted to do a documentary on the case. We were very closely involved with working on this documentary, and one of the things he wanted was to film the Rosenberg sons. We approached them on this subject and they finally agreed that they would do it. So they were interviewed at Walter's sister's house. She lives in Westchester, New York, and I remember seeing them sitting under a tree.

It's funny, they always seemed so hurt to me, so vulnerable somehow. But I'm sure they aren't. I mean, Michael seems like a very strong person now and so does Robby. They both have grown into very competent and put-together men. But in those days, they just — they were tentative about it. They were — they had hidden their identity over many years on the advice of their adoptive parents. Years later, though, I met people who knew them like at summer camps and things and they said, "We all knew who they were." But the fiction was that nobody knew. And so, they sort of "came out" and I think it was in this film was the first time.

I liked the film [a documentary called *The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*] very much. We did a lot of work on it. We spent time in Washington, D.C., where it was being put together. I think we contributed a lot to it and I was very satisfied with it at the time. Later on, it was a book.

What did I say I was going to get back to? Do you remember? I forgot now. Oh, I know — the letters, the Rosenberg letters. The letters had been published by a far-left publishing firm and we were suspicious of them and wondered if they had been edited heavily. We thought we should see the originals, and someone told us that Manny Bloch had had them. But Manny had died and the woman that he had been seeing at that time, who was a lawyer, Gloria Josephson, had them. Her name was Gloria Agrin, but she had been married to someone, Barney Josephson, who was the owner of a famous jazz café in the Greenwich Village. So we went there and met her. She was quite friendly and she said the letters were in Bloch's files down in the basement of this place. I think it was called The Cookery, if I'm not mistaken. Anyway, that could be wrong.

But anyway, we went down to the basement. She said we could look at the files and so we went down there. I remember well the meat cutter was there and we spread the letters out. Here were these amazing letters, you know, like from people like the granddaughter of [Alfred] Dreyfus, and the Pope, and god knows who, asking that the death sentence against the Rosenbergs be rescinded. I mean, there were just incredible letters, but mostly the Rosenberg letters [the ones they had written to one another].

And sure enough, we discovered that they had been heavily edited in the version that was published, and kind of foolishly. They were edited in a way that is so typical of the old left. They had taken out little human details, you know, the expressions of love, the longing, and loneliness, and depression. They had to be up all the time — the heroes, you know — and so, the missing the children and the little things that humanize them and made their whole experience more real had been cut, maybe not entirely, but too much. They were cut back on sufficiently so that they didn't really soften the image of the great American heroes. So we decided to do a chapter in the book and did a whole chapter on the letters. It was very emotional, very tough for us.

The thing that is sort of odd to think of now, but when we started working on the Rosenberg case, nobody talked about it. We started working on it, probably around 1960. They were executed in 1953, so it was not that long afterward. It was still very sore. I have a good clear memory of going to Foley Square to try to look at certain documents that they had there and going up to the clerk and saying I wanted to see documents on the Rosenberg case. Thank goodness, we have open court records in this country so one can do that. She looked at me, the clerk, and said, "What do you want to see that for?" — like it was something really dirty. But nobody spoke out against the executions in the U.S., or very few did. People on the far left did. One of the people that we met during that period was [William A.] Bill Reuben, who had written one of the first

books on the case. He had also written a series of articles on the case for the *National Guardian.*

So, anyway, we took the letters. We asked Gloria Agrin if we could take the letters home to work on them, and she said, "Oh, sure." So we took this pile of letters and used them while we were working. And we just could not bring ourselves to put them back in the basement of that restaurant's kitchen. So we put them in a safe-deposit box. She never asked for them again. But then after the Rosenberg sons became adults and stepped into their role as the Rosenberg sons, we gave the letters to them, so they have them. Or else, maybe, they're in the depository wherever the Rosenberg papers are. [The sons have published several collections of their parents letters: *We Are Your Sons* and *The Rosenberg Letters*.]

WEIGAND: I hope they're not molding in their basement.

SCHNEIR: I think they're at NYU. That's where all the Freedom of Information files are, too. The person who had custody of the FOIA files, when they were made public, was not as willing to part with the documents and that imposed great hardships on us [in 1983, when we were preparing for the Town Hall debate and for a new edition of *Invitation to an Inquest*] because we had young children at home during that period. We wanted to read as much as we could of these files. They were in the office of the attorney Marshal Perlin [the attorney for Sobell and for the Meeropols] and he would not allow us to take any of them home, so we had to work in his office. It was not a comfortable place to work and we were — especially at one point, we were preparing for the Town Hall meeting and trying desperately to get through mountains and mountains of documents. But we did.

SCHNEIR: One of the people that we knew during that period was someone who you interviewed for your book, and that was Harriet Magil. Bernie Magil was a colleague of Walter's at one of the — Walter was working, as I told you, in this medical field. A lot of people who had had lots of problems, political problems, in the '50s, and had lost jobs, gravitated toward medical writing. I'm not sure why that was, but maybe there was some kind of receptive atmosphere. The person who was the publisher of *MD Medical News* magazine was a refugee from Spain, from the Spanish Civil War, Felix Ibañez, and maybe Felix was somewhat receptive. But anyway, Bernie — he knew Bernie Magil from there. He also knew Ruth Good from there, who was a writer on that publication. And many, many years later when I went to a memorial meeting for Ruth Good, I discovered that her daughter-in-law was Ann Snitow — kind of a funny connection. But these were wonderful people, you know, and so we became good friends with the Magils, Bernie especially, but Harriet, too. We saw them over the years until — did you know she died about a year ago?

38:00

WEIGAND: I didn't. I figured she probably had, because she was quite old when I talked to her.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, yeah, and Bernie died only recently. He was in his late 90s and had all his marbles through it all. The last time we saw Harriet, I felt she was failing mentally also as well as physically, and was nearly blind. But Bernie was sharp as anything and quite a wonderful person. Harriet was very bitter about her past. I don't know if she was like that when you talked to her?

WEIGAND: I did get that sense from her, some.

SCHNEIR: Their daughter died and that, I think, just finished them. Their daughter had had heart disease and she died very young. I think that was just a blow that neither of them could support. But they talked to us a lot about Mexico. They had lived in Mexico for a while and had been, had known Diego Rivera, and had known Siquieros, someone I do not admire, but they told us old stories. And Frida Kahlo, they had known. In fact, they had always had a little plaque — not a plaque, a little note, really — from Frida Kahlo to their daughter Maggie saying, "Don't forget me, always remember me," in Spanish. And we met a lot of interesting people through the Magils, and through the medical writing field.

Another one we knew then was a close friend of the Magils. He had known them for many, many, many years. His wife was a poet, Martha Millet, and she was something of a feminist and she was one of the early people that — Harriet was too, of course — had had experiences in the old left as a feminist. Martha Millet had had experiences also. Her husband's name was Sender Garlin and they were both writers for the *Daily Worker*, A.B. Magil and also Garlin. And he, Sender, lived well into his 90s, also, and was a great guy. But they were real old left types, you know. We liked them but we always felt separated from them by a generation. They were quite moralistic. They were sexually inhibited and they didn't drink. They were almost ascetic in their ways. Have you experienced that with some of them?

WEIGAND: Well, I'm so much younger than them. But I did feel like that, sort of.

SCHNEIR: It was such a big gap, yeah. But we were close enough to them so that we liked being with them and they had interesting, interesting experiences to talk about. We did talk a lot. We always had wonderful conversations. It was a great loss when they died. We always felt very, very bad. But still, they were secretive in ways that were odd to us. I remember going to a New Year's Eve party once at — I think it was at Sender Garlin's place. They served sarsaparilla and I thought, sarsaparilla? It was like a soda. I had never had it before in my life (laughs) and they didn't have any hard liquor, not even a glass of wine. In those days, of course, we all drank hard liquor. So, it — I just — it was a whole different atmosphere, you know.

But they were smart, very smart, and they liked to talk theory and they liked to tell about their experiences, and we were very, very ready listening ears. We were appreciative of everything they had done, that is their work in the labor movement, against racism and sexism, et cetera, and so they liked telling us about it.

WEIGAND: That's great. I wish I had known a lot of those people. But that was one of the things I hoped to talk to you about, and I don't know if it's the right thing to get into right now, or to talk about it later, but you do sort of occupy this interesting generational position.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, I know it. And I've often felt that I was too old to be part of the new left and I was too young to be part of the old left, and so I often have felt that, and maybe that's part of my interest in history — I've always felt that I was transitional, not here and not there, like the middle child.

WEIGAND: Well, I feel a little bit of that myself. I was born in 1965 and –

SCHNEIR: So you were too young for the –

WEIGAND: I was too young for the new left and I'm too old for whatever's going on now, and yet I was also sort of politicized by, you know, reading *Ms.* magazine in my mother's living room in the '70s.

SCHNEIR: I see, I see. Well, right. That's interesting. These connections are really quite fascinating, and they do shape you and you do see a — I do have very much a sense of continuity, I think it's because of that. It's because of that experience I have a very, very strong sense of continuity, and feeling how great it is to pass things on, you know. And in fact, I just recall that in the feminist anthology, the first one, the historical anthology, I use a quotation from Elizabeth Cady Stanton where she talks about passing things on to the next generation, to the young women who will come after us, and that always makes me choke up.

WEIGAND: Yes, yes. That's really powerful.

SCHNEIR: Yes it is, it's really great. But in those days, I — of course, I didn't know too many people from the new left. They were just beginning to pop up, and mostly my contacts were with old left people because they were the ones who cared about the Rosenberg case. So that was my entrée to that whole collection of wonderful, wonderful people with interesting lives.

WEIGAND: Well, let's see. We're coming up on two hours in like ten minutes or so.

SCHNEIR: OK. Turn it off.

END DVD 2

DVD 3

WEIGAND: So, I wanted to ask you about your history of involvement with feminists and feminism.

SCHNEIR: OK. Well, what happened to me was I knew nothing about women's history. Nothing. I had never been exposed to it, in high school, in college, at no point. I knew nothing about the Suffrage movement. No one had ever talked to me about it. I knew that some old left women had been involved in feminist activities but there was nothing happening that I knew of. And so, I had a sense of my own strength, you know, and I had a sense that I was an equal person. I always told my daughter she could be anything she wanted to be, and I was a person who believed in equality, but I didn't know anything about the history of women.

In the late 60s, I began to get glimmerings of interest in the condition of women and began to reflect on the subject a bit. As time went on, I began to read about it. And the more I read, the more interested I got. I went through a personal consciousness raising. In addition, a local group — by that time, I lived here in Pleasantville — and a local group of women, some of whom I knew, got together and said, Let's have a consciousness-raising group. And I did join that group. I think it affected all of us. It was difficult, it was exciting, it was intimate, all of those things, and not one of us emerged from the experience unchanged. Every single woman in the group made vast changes in their lives. Quite a few were divorced. Quite a few went back to school. Others went to work.

I thought I'd do an anthology. I had been reading women's writings and I had been reading some of the history of the suffrage movement and feminist writing, and I said, "If I'm so excited by this stuff, and it's all so new to me, other people should know about it, too." So, I began thinking about how such a work could be put together and sort of quietly collecting material. After a while, I thought, I'll do a proposal and see if I can get a publisher for such a project. I can't remember just what I had, but I had probably a list of items that I wanted to include and some sample writing, maybe part of the introduction, and began going around. I went first to my publisher — the publisher of the Rosenberg book — and the person there said, "Oh, there already is a book like this." And I said, "Well, what is it? I don't know it." And she couldn't — she just said, "I don't know. I just know I saw one in the book store." So I didn't give that one too much credit. Finally I got a publisher, Random House. My editor was John Simon, who is a person on the left who is very interesting. This must be about 1971, and John was very supportive and encouraging.

I began to read very, very intensively and of course was extremely influenced by Flexner, as everyone was in that generation, by Eleanor Flexner's work [*Century of Struggle*]. Also by some articles of Gerda Lerner's that had appeared at that point. And also Aileen Kraditor's book [*Up From the Pedestal*], which may have been the one that the editor was referring to when she referred to a previous book, although the two books,

my anthology and hers, are very different. And De Beauvoir, whom I went back to and reread. And of course Betty Friedan's book, which I had also read but I went back and reread. So all of those were things that ideologically influenced me, along with the writings from the 18th and 19th century that I was reading.

So I gradually chose readings to include in the anthology. I had an idea: What were the basic writings, the essential writings, the things that everyone should know, every person should know, every American, certainly, should know? So that was the genesis of the book and how I put it together. I worked on it extremely intensively. Walter took over a lot of the care of the house and the children during that period and I managed to complete it in what was, for me, very fast. It was published in January 1972. It had good reviews. It was well reviewed, widely reviewed, and was adopted in many college classes, and that became the book's staple audience. And it's just gone on. I mean, it's continued to be used and people still find it relevant and useful.

I look back on it now and I think of a few things I could have done or should have included. I had a chance to do, not a lot of revision, but a little, in a new edition in 1994, and I added a Mary Beard selection and updated the sources. I believe it was in '94 that I added to this history. Maybe it was a little earlier, like in '92. I think there was like an interim edition when I added Mary Beard, whom I was sorry I hadn't had in the earlier one. They said I could do that. She was someone whom I had read and admired very much, not her writings so much as her whole take on women and the history of women, I admired. Actually, when I came to choose a writing, I had a hard time finding something in her book that I thought was worthy of calling an essential writing but, nevertheless, I just thought that her approach was so valid, and it still seems to me a very valid approach.

When John Simon left Random House I had one or two interim editors and then for a brief time, Toni Morrison was my editor, which was kind of exciting. She wasn't that well known at the time [it was before she won the Nobel Prize], but she was very supportive. And I had a contract with Random House for another book. It was going to be a history of American women from colonial times to the present.

WEIGAND: Just a small project (laughs).

SCHNEIR: I never finished it. I never did it, actually, but at a certain point I had done quite a bit of work on it and I still have it around, but I needed more money. I had run out of funds, and I went to Toni and I asked her if I could get some more advance money. She said, "Well, show us what you have, and we'll see what we can do." And so, I brought her chapter outline and a number of finished chapters, and I still have the note that she sent it along with — to Jason Epstein, I think, the head of Random House at the time — with her approval. But he said no, and in fact, if I didn't finish it, I'd have to pay back what they had already given me. That was a hard

lump. But — and I remember Toni Morrison saying to me that it was very demoralizing that they couldn't get money for this project. And eventually, I just found the project something I couldn't — it wasn't well conceived, and so I dropped it.

And a lot of time went by before I undertook another feminist project. I was working on that book [the history of American women] at one point when I went to McDowell Colony. I can tell you just when it was because I know my little one was two, so it was in about '71. My brave husband stayed home with three children, which was quite an undertaking, and I went and worked there for a month. I was working on this project. I had a whole trunk of books with me. I recall the person who helped carry the trunk to my little studio — you know, at McDowell, everyone gets a little studio — and he said, "Next time, I hope you come back as a poet. They travel much lighter." (laughter) I would have liked that myself. So I worked there for a month on this project. You know, I put a lot, a lot of effort into it but it just never flowered.

And meanwhile, we were still very involved with the Rosenberg case, in all those years. You know, we did constant revisions and new chapters [of *Invitation to an Inquest*]. There was a Penguin edition in 1973 that had new material released by the government, and a Pantheon edition in 1983 with more new material. We also did a lot of public speaking, and it was just very — it was really a very deep involvement. At another point there was a play on the — called *Inquest* [by Donald Fried, based in large part on our book. It opened first in Cleveland, at the Cleveland Playhouse, and then in 1970 on Broadway. The director was Alan Schneider and among the actors was Ann Jackson, who played Ethel.] We were very involved in that and helping the actors [to understand the characters], and that was an interesting experience.

WEIGAND: So, all these years that you were working on writing when your kids were little — can you talk about how you did that? I mean, you talked about it when your first one was a baby and you had your office in the attic. How did that continue? 11:50

SCHNEIR: After that, we moved out here. We had two children and one infant when we moved out here. I always had sitters, and so I worked in the mornings with sitters or when the kids went to school. Other things went by the board. I actually have good discipline. I'm a very disciplined person, and I'm also able to concentrate, and so I could work even when there was a lot of distraction — what could be distraction. So I just would set aside certain hours and either the kids were in school or else had babysitters and I would work during those hours.

WEIGAND: And was Walter working at home?

SCHNEIR: He was working at home, too. We both worked at home all the years, all the years. At various times, we were in difficult financial straits and we

took other jobs. We worked on the census for one year, the 1980 census. That was a full-time job. We were district leaders or something, going from door to door and collating materials. And then in later years I worked a lot at copyediting and proofreading and did a lot of work on that. And then, finally, um, in 1989, I think it was, I needed a lot of dental work and we had no insurance — no medical insurance, and that wasn't such a good thing with three children. But anyway, I needed a lot of dental work and it was going to be very expensive. So I said, "This just can't go on. I've got to get some insurance." And so I went to work, at that point, for the *Reader's Digest*, which is just about 15 minutes down the road here.

WEIGAND: I saw the sign, yeah.

SCHNEIR: And, I worked for the books, the condensed books. It was fun. I was surprised. I didn't mind it, really, you know. I didn't have any commute time, so that part was great. Walter would drive me over there in the morning because he wanted to have the car at his disposal during the day, and we had an arrangement that he would do all the — whatever had to be done around the house and do all the shopping and cooking, and I came home at 4 or 4:30, and I usually would work in the garden or something for a few hours, and then we'd have dinner. Then, in the evening, I would do some reading or writing.

So I didn't mind it. There were nice people there. It was a surprise to me. I thought I'd hate it, but it was a privately owned company when I worked there and it had a culture of kindness. So, it was very patriarchal, you know, the Wallaces [founders and owners of the *Digest*] had set in place a culture, a corporate culture, that was considerate of employees, thoughtful. Wallace had already retired, Dewit Wallace, during the time that I was there, but a lot of the people who were there had worked with him and knew him and there were stories about him all the time.

I became friendly with a woman there who had been involved — you know, the *Reader's Digest* women were among the first to bring an EEOC action, equal employment action for fair, or equal pay. They discovered that they were being paid less than the men who were doing the same work and they were able to document that and won their case. They had one of the first cases that was successful. And so, I knew one of the women who was very active in that group. They were taking their jobs in their hands and they did it anyway and I admired them a lot. And there were great stories about Dewit Wallace where he would give huge bonuses when the company did well. And if one of the employees, like an operator — in those days, they had the keypunch operators for the computers — and if one of the keypunch operators was sick, he'd go to the hospital and visit her. He was really — he was a real benevolent patriarch.

And during the time I was there — I worked there for seven years — during the time I was there, I got my teeth fixed and I observed the process of seeing a company go public, and what it meant to become part of the

corporate world and how the whole place, over a period of about two or three years, just changed entirely. It was a whole new feeling of watching the hours that everyone worked to make sure everyone was giving his or her all to the company, and being concerned about the profit line, and constant change, change, change. Everything was changing, which is typical of a capitalist kind of arrangement. I was glad to leave when I did.

WEIGAND: I was wondering about — well, you became a feminist and you did consciousness raising. Did that change your day-to-day life as a mother? 17:45

SCHNEIR: Well, we had a much more equitable arrangement in the family. I could go off and speak. I could go off to McDowell for a month. I could go to work and not worry about anything in the house. I had other jobs, too, during this period. I had temporary jobs of all sorts where I was working in various publications. And I was doing a lot of writing for *Ms.* over those years. I knew all the people at *Ms.* and made some friends there. I knew Lettie Cottin Pogrebin socially and I met Susan Brownmiller and I knew Gloria Steinhem. And Louise [Bernikow] was writing for *Ms.* also in those days and did some pieces. I met a woman in Pleasantville who was a writer, also writing for *Ms.* and writing children's books, Ann McGovern. And all of those people were interesting and, you know, it was kind of fun.

WEIGAND: So, it sounds like feminist consciousness raising did change you.

SCHNEIR: Well, it liberated me.

WEIGAND: Yeah, it sounds like maybe it made you think more about the structural situation that women were in.

SCHNEIR: Definitely. Yeah, and, you know, I had occasion to re-read the introductions that I wrote to — three different introductions: the one for the historical writings; the English edition of the historical anthology, published in 1994; and then the more recent one. And I see a lot of growth. I mean, I see a lot of growth of my thinking and a lot more sophistication. I actually like the tone of the introduction to the second anthology. I feel it has a nice sense of reaching out and a lot of understanding of the growth of the women's movement over those many years. It's interesting to me to see the changes in my own thinking between the two anthologies.

WEIGAND: And how — what do you attribute that to?

SCHNEIR: I think to deeper thinking and reading. And I benefited tremendously from all the work of younger feminists. I'm an avid reader and I took it all in and then applied it to my own life. I tried to apply it to my own life as much as I could. I was fortunate to be in a relationship that was flexible and I think we both changed and grew and, to use your word, were able to

change the structure of our lives and of our relationship very much. My writing for *Ms.*, as you saw in that résumé that I sent to you, was all over the place. Something would grab my attention and I would write about it. Then something else would and something else would.

A few of the pieces, maybe half of them, are history. But many of them are not. I did a piece on Social Security and women, a long thing which was in the back of the magazine on kind of newsprint paper, I remember. I didn't know anything about Social Security, and I just got interested in it because I heard there was a lot of injustice in it and I thought, What kind of injustice? And so I began looking into it. I was far from Social Security myself at that point, but I wanted to know about it and I just tried to learn everything I could. Then I thought it could be helpful to women to know the problems with Social Security, and the ways in which it's good, how best to set it up, whether it's best to set up joint returns or single returns or whatever.

During that period I also had an opportunity to work on a bicentennial exhibit of women in the era of the American Revolution. That was a great experience. I worked on it over at least a year, maybe more, and I worked closely with a curator and had a lot of opportunity to look at objects, to actually handle and touch quilts and old needlework and old portraits and visit houses. It was just so interesting. It was so real. And I did a lot of archival work, too, during that period, in Philadelphia. Also, I worked in the archives of the New York Historical Society and I was very proud that I was the person who found the Broadside showing a woman with a musket in colonial dress. I found that in the archives in the New York Historical Society and it became the emblem of the exhibit. It was on banners and on the cover of the book and all.

The exhibit catalog became a book — a catalog book, really — with a lot of extra text in it too. The first editor of it was Jackie Onassis. She had just come to Viking. The exhibit was great. I thought it came out really well. It was interesting and innovative, and there was one wall in it which they jokingly referred to Miriam's Wall. It was devoted to women's work in the era of the American Revolution. It was a subject I got very interested in and then I did a paper that I presented at the Organization of American Historians on that subject.

WEIGAND: It's interesting — I mean, one of the things that's striking about both of the anthologies, really, but especially the first one, especially thinking about the context of the period in which you were doing it, is that it's so comprehensive. It brings in these things from all over the place and it sounds like with this exhibit, too, you were really having to go out and find things. 25:15

SCHNEIR: Yeah, yeah — which is the most fun for me. I love that. And you know, with the book, with the first anthology, I recall, there were a lot of decisions to be made. Some of them I didn't make correctly, but some I'm proud of, and one of them is the title. Feminism was sort of a dirty word

then. It's hard to imagine now. It's not that long ago but it was, like, nobody spoke of it. Nobody was a feminist, and just the word itself had bad connotations. And I said, "The hell with it. That's really what it's about. I'm gonna do it, you know, I'm gonna call it Feminism." And I'm so glad I did that.

The other thing was that I decided I would not call women by their first names, I would not call them Ms. or Mrs. Anything but that I would just refer to them as Stanton or Anthony. And that seemed so strange. I mean, it seemed strange, just the way it seemed strange the first time you saw a woman commentator on the news or something, it had the same strangeness to it as when, say, you look at a photograph of fashion from a hundred years ago. I tried to overcome that strangeness because I thought, If it were a man, you wouldn't call him Johnny, you know.

WEIGAND: So how did you get that training? I mean, you weren't — you didn't major in history, right?

SCHNEIR: No, I didn't.

WEIGAND: But you're really good at that method of going out and finding these things and pulling them together and, you know, making sense of them. So I'm wondering where you learned that.

SCHNEIR: It's hard to know. I think I learned it in doing the Rosenberg book. I learned a lot from Walter. He's very smart. He's a very smart person, and very supportive of me always. He was the one who said to me, "Why don't you work on this book with me?" You know? I didn't ask to. He said to me, "Do it," and was always respectful of my work. So, that was important to me. In doing the Rosenberg case, as a leftist, you always feel there's another story than the story that you're being told. And so that is an approach that makes you say, "I'd better look a little underneath here, you know. I'd better see what's really the story here." And in the Rosenberg case, we had to do that, and we did, you know, find a lot of material that no one had ever found before. And so that was training. That was all learning and training.

I've always felt that I don't have the kind of background that many younger historians have. I know I don't have it. I don't have the formal training in research skills and the way of asking certain historical questions. When I said before that there were things in my book that I'm not that proud of, it comes mainly out of a feeling that I don't have the firm underpinnings of training, because I think that many of the young historians, younger historians, have really superb training. They're so well grounded in how –

WEIGAND: You can get that now and you couldn't get that back then.

SCHNEIR: Yeah. Maybe you could have. I mean, if I hadn't gone to Antioch and Queens College, I hadn't majored in education, you know, if I had gone to — and of course, no one in my family had ever gone to graduate school. It didn't even occur to me as an option, you know. I mean, no one had graduated from college, and so obviously they hadn't gone to graduate school. Um, it never even occurred to me as an option, really. My parents said to me, You get out of college, great, you're going to college, but you know, you earn your own living after that. So that was — and we weren't poor. I mean, if I had made a big pitch, I could have gone to graduate school, but I didn't even think to do it. It didn't even occur to me.

WEIGAND: Yeah. But, given that women's history really wasn't a sub-discipline then, I think your work really does sort of help to develop that.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, I think so and I hope so.

WEIGAND: I do. I've really found both your books really useful in my teaching.

SCHNEIR: That's great. I know other teachers have and they're both being used. I find that out when I Google, that they're in many, many different courses, so that's fabulous and makes me feel good, of course.

WEIGAND: When I bought your first book, I was about 17 or 18.

SCHNEIR: Did you really?

WEIGAND: I did, and that's the copy that I still have. It's all yellow and falling apart.

SCHNEIR: But that was — some teachers in high school age have told me it's hard for high school.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

SCHNEIR: It's — the language is a little old-fashioned and it's hard for high school, I think. So you were probably ahead of where most people were at that point.

WEIGAND: Well, I was just about to start college, so –

SCHNEIR: The second anthology was more fun to do in some ways, because it was stuff that I knew already, that I had been reading all through those years and I was able to put it together. I knew pretty much what the various topics had to be and how it was going to go and it kind of flowed more easily.

WEIGAND: But it's also impressive in that it's very inclusive. When I teach courses about the modern women's movement, I want to be attentive to race and

class and sexuality and there are a lot of books that you have to supplement by getting other things together. I mean, that's what I really like about both of those books, is that –

SCHNEIR: Yeah, that they have — in both of them, I had in mind, it had to be something that was basic, essential, and often I had to discard things that I really wanted to use but, you know, things that friends had written. Sometimes they were angry with me that I hadn't put in their work, but I was sort of ruthless. I somehow feel that I am able to identify a lot and able to think what it is that's really important. And somehow, because I've had a more conventional life as a woman than many woman have had, or younger women have had, that I can identify with the great masses out there, you know, and say, This is what we really want. This is what we really need to know. We don't really need to know that one, you know, but this is what we need. I kind of used myself as a guide. I mean, if something moves me and feels important to me, I think it's going to be important to other women, just go with that feeling.

WEIGAND: Yeah. It must work well.

SCHNEIR: Thank you.

WEIGAND: How about in being a mother? Do you feel like feminism and your newly raised consciousness affected the way or changed the way you dealt with your kids? 34:10

SCHNEIR: Well, you know, I had my children over a ten-year period and it was a period of a lot of change for me and a lot of social change also. So I think each of my children represents a different phase of my life. My older son was born in 1960. Nothing was happening politically. In spite of calling it the '60s, the '60s really didn't happen until the very late '60s or early '70s, except for a small group of advanced people. So he's very much a product of that time, you know. He's a rather straight-laced person and he's very smart. He has a Ph.D. in physics. And he's modern in many ways. I mean, his wife has always worked, and they live out in California, and they lead very independent lives. They have no children and they have very separate lives, I would say. It's a very different kind of marriage than mine. Yet, I feel that my son is not sensitive to women's issues at all.

My daughter, the middle child, is a mommy, and she took that from me. She didn't take a lot from me but she took that from me. But she's also a feminist. She has kept her maiden name and, although she's very engaged with raising two sets of twins, as I told you, she still has a good solid feeling about herself.

My younger son is very much a product of a more egalitarian household, and is a leftist himself and very active. I always say that in college, he majored in anti-CIA. He lived in San Francisco for quite a few years, for over a dozen years, and has just recently come back to the New

York area, much to my pleasure, because I have a close relationship with him. Walter and I both do. And we're all three very simpatico, politically and ideologically.

WEIGAND: That's interesting. Partly, I'm asking this because of my own experience. I can remember my own mother coming to feminism probably around the same time you were and really imposing these changes around the house. You know, making my brother take the little brother out on the stroller and telling me that I had to mow the lawn, or something like that.

SCHNEIR: Well, we had that, too. It sort of happened more smoothly than in some houses. I remember that my friend Madelon Bedell — they were far left people — and Madelon became a feminist. Madelon was probably always a feminist — I can't imagine she wasn't always — but she decided she was going to make certain changes in her house. She used to tell this story: she told her husband that he had to do the laundry, and so, like at seven o'clock on Saturday morning, he would wake everyone in the family up and say, you have to get up. I have to wash the sheets. He just made it as miserable as he possibly could, as intrusive as he could, like, I am doing this, you know.

But I never had that feeling in our family. We negotiated things and usually it worked pretty well. I discovered that one of the things that happens is that you have to give up control. And one reason, I think, a lot women don't negotiate changes is the woman has to give up control of the domestic sphere, this little kingdom that's yours. You can't make the decisions alone any longer, you know. The decisions are joint decisions, like what you're going to have for dinner. From that to the more major things, you know, the most major things. And so that, for me, was a little bit hard and, but the rewards were well worthwhile, so I did do it.

WEIGAND: What else? Tell me about Betty Friedan. I mean you said you encountered her early, early in the '60s or late in the '50s? 39:55

SCHNEIR: Her book was published in '63, right? So I probably met her in the early '60s, or maybe the late '50s. I met her at the Bedells. As I said, she had known Madelon at Smith. They were friends from Smith and were radicals together at Smith, although I think Betty was a CP member and Madelon was not. But Madelon was close to people who were in the Party. So Betty was in her circle of friends and Betty was married then to Carl Friedan and they used to come to the Bedells' Christmas parties. Madelon had great Christmas parties every year. They had one of these big apartments on Second Avenue. They don't exist anymore. I guess they're all torn down. But we had these great Christmas parties. They always cooked a goose or, in some years, a roast suckling pig. And they had a tree that had candles on it. It was fun. It was a great party. And Jack McManus gave out the presents to all the children and made wonderful stories and jokes and songs all the way through.

And Betty and Carl and their family used to come to these. She was just a leftist along with the rest of us, you know. Talked politics a lot and literature a lot, and those were the main people I remember being at these parties. I know there were lots and lots more. Bill Price and other — lots of people were there. Mixed ages, mixed religions, races, backgrounds, everything, you know. And it was great mix. The kids were all part of it and it was really fun.

And then, Betty was writing this book, and we knew she was writing this book. Then, I remember, finally she came to a Christmas party and she was telling us — we were working on the Rosenberg book by this time — and she began telling us about it. She had a wonderful publicist and we should get this publicist. She never talked about the book in ideological terms, that is, in terms of its ideas, to me. She always talked about it in terms of a product, you know. Carl was going around getting the book in the bookstores and telling them to put it in the window and stuff like that. And then I stopped seeing her there very much.

Madelon died young and, oddly enough, my friend Cynthia later became friends with Betty and I met her again at Cynthia's house (laughs). It was after the first anthology came out and I'll never forget, Betty looked at me and said, "I hear you're working in my field." (laughs) Women belong to her. So then, I continued seeing Betty in connection with Cynthia over the years and saw her last at Cynthia's son's wedding in East Hampton just last summer. She's not doing that well, you know, physically, she's had a lot of physical problems. But, I know this sounds odd, but we've never discussed women's history or anything about women. Now, Cynthia and she have, and they've been engaged in various projects together, but I don't know why it is she's never engaged me in the topic. I don't think she regards me as someone she cares for. I don't know why. Maybe because of my connection with Madelon, because I think she and Madelon had kind of a falling out at a certain point. And I know I was angry with her because she didn't come to Madelon's funeral.

WEIGAND: But that's interesting that she wasn't somebody who, in the early '60s when she was working on this book, even, wasn't known as someone –

SCHNEIR: She didn't talk about it in my presence. Now, as I say, I feel as though I'm definitely not an intimate of hers and our relationship — she must see thousands of people. I know how she must feel because I was a little bit that way with the Rosenberg committee, where I was in contact with thousands of people who knew me and I didn't know them and so she may just see me peripherally.

WEIGAND: You only knew her in this one context?

SCHNEIR: Exactly, exactly. So, my contacts with her have been almost brush-offs, you know. I've never felt very good about them.

WEIGAND: How about with your friend Cynthia over the years? I mean, it sounds like you've been talking about feminism with her since 1949.

SCHNEIR: I have been, yeah, we have been. We have been talking about it over our whole lives and she does writing in the field of women in law. That has been her, sort of, special field. But she's also been a person — she did go on to graduate school after a time. She went to Antioch and graduated from Antioch, and then she married younger than I did, but also a man who was very supportive of her and her work and her aspirations always, always. He's a lovely person. So it also helped our relationship that we all, that all four of us liked each other. We were very, very close. Cynthia always pointed out to me, you know, my errors, and I took them to heart as much as I could, depending on, you know —

[Cynthia] only had one child and she considered that one of my "errors" was having any (laughs). When I first told her I was pregnant she was furious with me, like it was a betrayal. And I said, "Well, I never told you I wasn't going to have children. I always planned to have children." And she just thought it was pretty dumb. She finally did have one child. Now, I don't think she was that eager to have that child but it was something for her relationship with her husband that had to be done. And as it turned out she's extremely devoted to her child, to her son, but she saw motherhood as a trap. She very much saw it as a trap and understood that it was going to be hard to live your life and have children at the same time.

It was maybe something — an attitude, I mean — that a lot of old feminists felt. In the first wave, they certainly felt that way. They saw marriage as a trap. They saw children as a burden, and something that was going to keep them in a position where they could never realize themselves. And I think Cynthia had that attitude, maybe from her mother, probably from her mother, who was a more thoughtful person and as I said, was a big follower of Eleanor Roosevelt and kind of had a vision of a more engaged life for a woman.

So Cynthia imparted a lot of that to me in terms of her attitudes. She always worked and, at a certain point, she went back to college, she went back to graduate school. She went first to the New School and then to Columbia. Then she began teaching and taught at Queens College for quite a while, and then at the [CUNY] Graduate Center, and now she's a distinguished professor in the Graduate Center. So she's had an excellent career and is very well thought of in the profession. She has published quite a few books and I get a bit kick out of seeing her books on the same shelf in bookstores with my own. You know, we've been friends, as I said, from the fourth grade.

So she's been influential in that respect, and we've talked a lot about — whenever I want an opinion on something, especially on the book I'm working on now, I run a lot of ideas by her to see what her take on them is. In many ways, her take is different than mine, but still I like to argue with

her about it. We both sharpen ourselves a little bit in discussing these things.

WEIGAND: OK. Well, now, we're running up on an hour again.

SCHNEIR: OK. Let's do it. Let's end.

END DVD 3

DVD 4

WEIGAND: OK. Here we are on Saturday, May 22nd, 2004, Kate Weigand and Miriam Schneir.

SCHNEIR: I had a couple of things, Kate, that I didn't get to speak about yesterday that I thought I'd like to raise today. One broad area has to do with the importance of the arts in my life. I haven't really mentioned that at all, and I think that to try to give some kind of picture of who I am, I have to mention that.

In my childhood my mother loved the arts, though she was not a person with much cultural experience in her background. I mean, she didn't have much intellectual awareness but she loved it anyway. She started my sister and me at dancing school when we were very young, and we traveled every week to Manhattan from Queens where we lived. It was big journey in those days. It was before they had a subway and we used to take a trolley car over the 59th Street Bridge to a studio in Carnegie Hall where Ms. Lucretia Craig gave us dancing lessons. There was always beautiful music — Chopin, things like that — that we danced to. My sister took to it very much and continued well into — in fact, she still dances, she still takes dance lessons, but she was quite serious at one point and was taking –

WEIGAND: Was this ballet?

SCHNEIR: It's ballet, yes. She became a semiprofessional dancer for quite a few years. She danced even with the School of American Ballet and all, but she was too short to really be part of a dance line. It would have fallen off at the end, if she was at the end of the line, and she wasn't quite gifted enough to be a soloist. So, it didn't quite work for her. But it was an abiding interest in her life, and in mine, too.

Then we had a piano when I was a very young age. My mother — that was one of the things she really, really wanted to have in the house, was music. I took piano lessons from a very young age and I just remember her — when I was practicing, she would sit in a chair and listen. She just liked it so much. She liked the idea. And I played the piano over the years. When I came home to New York after Antioch that was one of the things that I did, I started piano lessons again. This time I chose my own teacher and he said I had a lot of bad habits and began redirecting me and reinstructing me and I think I improved a lot under his tutelage. And at a certain point, he said, "You know, if you want to be a professional pianist, you can do that. And if you don't, you should quit." And I didn't and so I quit. But I continued to play the piano over the years, although I must say that in about the last 20 or more years, I've hardly played, basically because you have to make some priorities and that was not going to be my main thrust. But I still get much, much pleasure from music.

And at Antioch, I wanted very much to have the experience of playing with an orchestra. I loved the idea of all the different instruments all coming together and making something worthwhile, and so I took up the clarinet there. I never became much of a clarinetist but I did have that experience that I wanted, to play in an orchestra, and I played in the Antioch orchestra and enjoyed that a lot.

When I came back to New York, in addition to piano, I knew I was going to be teaching young children at that point, and that's what I was studying at Queens, and so I decided I should learn the guitar. So I bought an old used guitar from a friend of mine and took guitar lessons. I practiced and learned to play all kinds of wonderful old folk songs, which people used to sing to children in those days. You know, songs of Leadbelly and "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple" and "Jenny Jenkins" and "Clementine" and "Love oh, love oh" something, "Careless Love" — you know, just wonderful old songs and I always used them with my classes when I was teaching and with my own kids and birthday parties of friends' kids and stuff like that and that was a lot of fun.

I loved film. Films are magical to me. I love them. I did a lot of film reviewing for *Ms*.

WEIGAND: I read some of those.

SCHNEIR: And at one point, I wanted to do film reviews for *The Nation*. I was trying to convince Victor Navasky to take me on as a film reviewer but he had someone already that he liked. I personally don't care for those reviews very much, but anyway, I enjoy film reviews — film reviewing, too. Again, it was one of these things that I think I could have — a coulda woulda kind of thing — but I could have become a more serious film reviewer. *Ms.* was kind of interested. At one point, they called me and asked me to go to something-or-other in Chicago. Again, it was a question of priorities and I began to think about it and I said, "This is not where I want to put my main energy." I didn't like the people I was dealing with in the film world. That was one of the things. There were these pushy publicists and I really didn't like them and so that was part of the reason I didn't want to continue in that.

Then, we come to books and literature. I'm a big fiction reader. I read a lot of fiction, and I love fiction. I've been very involved over many years, and I especially noticed it when I looked over my little bio, how many of my activities have centered around writing, women's writings, freedom of speech, open information, freedom of information. All of those issues have always been important to me.

During a certain period, I was quite active with PEN and especially was interested in trying to promote women writers, and also with the Appalachian Women Writers Organization, which was an organization started by a woman named Jacqui Barnard whom I met through Madelon Bedell. Jacqui had a small amount of money that she wished to invest in some project which would help women writers — and I think she had

some personal connection with Appalachia — and so she started this organization. And I met wonderful, wonderful women from Appalachia through this organization.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I wondered how you'd gotten into that.

SCHNEIR: One of them — her name is Joyce Dwyer — I just recently read an anthology of Appalachian women writers that came out a few years ago, about three or four years ago. Joyce was one of the women who was in our group. She was very young then, quite young, and the anthology won awards and everything, so it was nice to kind of see that that developed into something. I don't know what become of most of the other women but I do know that Joyce has gone on to do — I think she has written a couple of books also.

WEIGAND: So it provided grants to Appalachian writers?

SCHNEIR; Right, right, uh-hm. It provided grants and also encouragement and support. We had a wonderful meeting once in western Virginia at a place called Hungry Mothers State Camp. And the women — we all got together. They had problems that we don't even think about here in urban North. Some of them live miles and miles from the nearest bookstore or library, things like that, that never even occur to us as real problems. Let's see. I made a few notes here and I want to see if I've covered it all.

Oh, I've also been interested in the persecution and imprisonment of writers around the world and have donated and been interested in Meredith Tax's work and Women's WORLD. I've co-authored with Walter an article on the right's attack on the press, for *The Nation*, an article that was reprinted quite a bit.

WEIGAND: Well, that sort of makes me think of one of these things that I wanted to ask you about. I mean, on the one hand it seems like you are known, on the one hand, as this writer about the Rosenbergs and as somebody who knows about capital punishment and imprisonment and censorship and that kind of the thing. On the other hand, you've written this feminist stuff. Looking from the outside, it almost seems like you wear these two hats, and I imagine that in your real life, it's not really that separate.

SCHNEIR: No. No it isn't. I mean, you can see the overlap in what I've just been talking about. To me, it's all very consistent and seems to be interrelated, although I do know different sets of people who are connected with those different aspects. I think of myself as a generalist, a person who has a lot of different interests, and it's both a strength and a weakness, you know. I understand that it's a weakness, also. But at the same time, it kind of gives me a certain breadth that is useful in what I've been doing. I try to not engage in projects where highly specialized knowledge is necessary. In the things I work on, I may not have profound knowledge, but I try not to

make mistakes. I'm very, very interested in accuracy and being accurate when I can be. Which takes me, really, logically to the next thing I wanted to talk about which is my current project.

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11:40 — 20:20

Schneir's discussion of her current project is restricted until publication of the book or Schneir's death, whichever comes first.

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WEIGAND: There is one thing that I didn't really talk to you about yesterday at all. You talked about how you were involved in antiwar organizing, and antinuclear stuff, and feminism, and I wondered if you had any involvement at all in civil rights activism.

SCHNEIR: No.

WEIGAND: No?

SCHNEIR: No, I actually did not. You know what my feelings about it were, but it was not something I was involved in. By the time of Mississippi [Freedom] Summer and all of that, I was already very involved with raising children and having babies and it was not something that I could engage in.

WEIGAND: Right. It makes sense. I wanted to talk to about this. We got into it a little bit yesterday, about your interesting generational position, being younger than old leftists and older than new leftists, and I wondered how that fit in with becoming a feminist. I know enough now, I guess, about your consciousness-raising group, to assume, at least, that you probably were not — that that probably wasn't a group of really young women. Am I wrong about that?

SCHNEIR: They varied in age. Some were my own age, but some were young. Actually, the people who were the sort of the inspirers of it, who began it, were younger, quite a bit younger than me. Some of them, they were local people, but some of them had their first children and I had my third already.

WEIGAND: So did it pose any problems to be one of the suspicious over-30 people in those crowds?

SCHNEIR: No, no, I don't think it did. I think I was accepted by them and I accepted them, so we — they're good friends. I know all of them, or all but a couple, actually. A couple of them have kind of slipped out of my grasp, or my sphere, but I still have great affection for many of them and feel close to them. The founders of the group were all least ten years younger than me.

WEIGAND: We were talking yesterday about sisterhood after we turned the tape off. I mean, it sounds like one of those things where the issues of being women and consciousness-raising kind of overcame –

SCHNEIR: Yeah, overcame any age difference. I mean, it wasn't that severe because we were –

WEIGAND: Right. Ten years isn't that much.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, and we were involved in the same general lifestyle. When the group started, I think everyone in the group was married, and everyone had at least one child. So, we were all kind of in the same box, you know, and trying to work out issues in family life and personal life, career, all of those things.

Later, the group kind of changed. Many years later it became a women's work crew. One or two of the people from the consciousness group segued into this work crew, and then a lot of other women came into it, all of whom were younger than me. We went from house to house every week and we did work projects around the house. We tarred the driveway and we built the closet and grouted bathroom tiles and, you know, each woman had an opportunity. They painted my whole house one week. They just came. I think there were eight or ten of us. It was quite a few years ago. I wish I could get some of them to come back. But they painted the whole house, and then the person whose house it was at, had to provide dinner then, for everyone, around ten o'clock.

But what happened after some years was that everyone got involved in various work job responsibilities and it became harder and harder to spare the time and finally people were too tired after a day's work. It became kind of a group where you get together and have dinner and just chat. And they still meet. I have been spending winters in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, for the past seven years. But when I'm here, back in Pleasantville, I usually get invited and try to go a few times and try to have them here at least once.

WEIGAND: That's neat. So the consciousness-raising group, was it like a weekly thing where you all go together?

SCHNEIR: Yeah. Once a week, we met.

WEIGAND: Uh-huh. And talked?

SCHNEIR: Yeah.

WEIGAND: And I was going to ask about feminism in the suburbs. Um, it sounds like this work group is a good example?

SCHNEIR: Yeah, it really was fun because, you know, most of us had had experiences of working with our husbands or other men and, you know, it would be, like, handing them the tools, like the nurse handing the surgeon. And I come from a family — my father's father was a carpenter and my father always built things and I always built things. I always liked working with wood and working with my hands, and I love gardening and I'm pretty active physically. So it was great fun for us to have a chance to do the projects on our own and get that sense of satisfaction. In fact I did write an

article about our work crew. I think — I can't remember — it was for some women's magazine. During a certain period I did a bit of writing for women's magazines and did a little piece about our work crew and how great it was. My kids were very angry about it because I put them in it and they didn't like it.

WEIGAND: Yeah, it makes me think of early *Ms.* issues and how they would have those columns about how a wall is made — some have lathe and some have dry wall — and this fits right into that.

SCHNEIR: Yeah. It was just the sense of taking over certain things, building the fire in the fireplace when the work crew was coming and opening the wine yourself, carving the meat: these were jobs that men always did, and somehow gave you a feeling of self-sufficiency to do it yourself.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I know just what you mean. We have a work group similar to that.

SCHNEIR: Oh, do you?

WEIGAND: It's couples and most of the couples are heterosexual, but the women in those couples, they say things like, Oh, well, I don't know how to drill. And we've sort of discovered, you know, not having a husband at all, that you just sort of do them. And a lot of the time –

SCHNEIR: And sometimes you can do them better.

WEIGAND: Right. And a lot of the time, men don't really know how to do it either.

SCHNEIR: No. It's just their job, their role. And so it's nice if you have a man in your life who can accept the fact that sometimes you're going to do it, so that's pretty good.

WEIGAND: That's great. I wondered how feminism and how becoming a feminist — if it changed your perspective on the Rosenberg case, at all? I read a piece of yours in *Ms.* that sort of touched on some of those issues. 28:10

SCHNEIR: Yeah, I guess I kind of, at various times, identified with Ethel, and saw her as a '50s woman, although she was born quite a bit before me. She was more entrenched in the '50s than I was. Although she and her husband were Communists, and probably subscribed to the idea of women's equality, in their home life and their personal lives, they had definite stereotypical gender roles. So Ethel didn't go to college, although she was a smart person. She was the typist in the spy ring. She was the emotional one. I remember that in some of their prison letters, at one point, there was one point where Julius writes to her and says how important is for him to see her because she is the one who expresses the feelings that he had [the Rosenbergs were able to visit each other in prison occasionally]. So she

was the one who was kind of giving emotional release to him by expressing the feelings that he was holding in himself and couldn't, as a man, express.

And then, her bonding with her prison matron — she must have been a very austere person, probably. Anyone who'd want to be a prison matron in the execution house at Sing Sing! But still, Ethel bonded with this woman and cared for her. And she was her sole daily contact, you know.

Also, Ethel's resort to the professional help of an "expert," you know, the way she had her son in therapy and herself was being visited by a psychiatrist — all of that seemed so typical of that era to me. And then, of course, in recent years, discovering that she was totally really innocent. I mean, I always believed that both of them were innocent, but discovering not only that she was innocent but that they, the government, had proof that she was innocent and had murdered her anyway. It's just a human rights issue as well as a feminist issue, because they were using her as a woman. So in that case, in that way, my view of the Rosenberg case was affected by my feminist views, too.

Actually, in recent years, I've kind of backed away from speaking about the Rosenberg case and deferred to Walter on it. For one reason, because Walter is working on what he describes as a political memoir, which deals with both his and our lives and the Rosenberg case: how we came to it, working on it, his thoughts, including new research about it. So he's very *au courant* on the current literature, the literature of the last ten or fifteen years on the case, which has been voluminous. There's been a tremendous amount of literature, and I have not kept up with all of it, except through what he tells me, you know. But I haven't read the books and done the work personally, and so I've just kind of tried to move away from being involved in that, and focused more on my women's history work.

WEIGAND: Uh-hm. There's been a couple of — at least one book on Ethel Rosenberg that's come out.

SCHNEIR: Yes.

WEIGAND: I can't remember much.

SCHNEIR: Ilene Phillipson's book, yeah. There was another one, too, by another woman whose name I don't recall right now, but also focusing on Ethel. It may be — the one I'm thinking of may be a slightly fictionalized version.

WEIGAND: Oh, yeah, I know which one you mean. I wanted to talk about the ways that your work in women's history has intersected with the context of academia. You did some work at Barnard and the Columbia Center for –

SCHNEIR: Oh, I did, yeah. I had a little grant and asked if I could bring it to the — I'm trying to think of the official title of this group — the Center for the — did I tell you that?

WEIGAND: I think — the Center for Social Sciences Program and Sex Roles and Social Change?

SCHNEIR: That's right, right, right. And I was working on a project on women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlands and the beginning of capitalist development there, and they said I could do it under their auspices, and so I did that and worked there for a while. Then I presented a paper at a kind of roundtable meeting. I got asked some provocative and interesting questions by the people listening who heard the paper, and then they put it out in what they call a preprint. And so I was glad to have it in printed form, and that was the end of my connection with them.

WEIGAND: Ah. And you said you presented a paper at the AHA one year?

SCHNEIR: I did, yeah. That was, I think, in '75, and it was on women in the American Revolution. It wasn't the AHA, it was the OAH. The paper was particularly focused on the work of women in the era of the Revolution.

WEIGAND: Uh-huh. So building on that exhibit that you worked on.

SCHNEIR: Yes, exactly.

WEIGAND: And you worked on the book that was actually was the first women's history book that I ever picked up in the eighth grade: *Remember the Ladies*.

SCHNEIR: Oh, really, you were familiar with that? Well, that was kind of a catalog book, you know, on the exhibit. I did a lot of work on it and the leaders of this group were actually was connected with a lot of women in Washington. It was funny because the first meeting of the committee that was put together to work on the exhibit included Joan Kennedy, who was then Teddy Kennedy's wife, and Kissinger's wife, Nancy Kissinger. And a woman who — I imagine that's not her real name, but we knew her as Muffy Brandon, and Muffy was married to a famous British journalist, Henry Brandon, and she became Nancy Reagan's social secretary in later years. That these establishment women were involved is an indication of the extent to which feminist interests had diffused through the whole population.

But anyway, the academic leader of the exhibit was Linda Grant-Depauw, who was an academic historian. I think she may have worked at George Washington. And the curator was Conover Hunt. I think that Linda Grant-Depauw brought me into the group — I think it was she — and we all worked together. I did a lot of research. I was like the research

person, and it was interesting and a lot of fun, the exhibit. And I put in so much work on the book that they agreed to put my name on it also.

WEIGAND: Yeah, when I looked at it recently, I was trying to figure out what you had done exactly, and it wasn't clear.

SCHNEIR: Uh-huh. I think I was the research historian, essentially. And I remember working with the manuscript and going over it a lot. I did a lot of work on the manuscript. And as I say, because of that, they — originally, my name wasn't in it. And then I did a piece for *Ms.* also on women in the era of the American Revolution. I think Linda Depauw did one also.

WEIGAND: Uh huh. Is that the piece where you had a lot of photographs of artifacts?

SCHNEIR: Yes, yes.

WEIGAND: That was neat.

SCHNEIR: A lot of material from the exhibit was in it.

WEIGAND: In recent years, as women's history has sort of become a more recognized, or legitimate, sub-discipline, have you had any kind of formal or informal contact with –

SCHNEIR: Wom en historians? With women historians.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

SCHNEIR: Just the people I know personally. Other that that, I've done a little bit of speaking — not that much. I spoke last fall at Pace [University] Manhattan to a women's history class that uses my book. I'm speaking in classes somewhat. But I haven't had that much personal contact. I met a few people at the OAH many, many years ago. But in some ways I've sort of avoided it because I've been trying to keep out of that whole thing.

I met the feminist historian Bonnie Anderson, I guess it was two summers ago. We had a mutual friend and she expressed an interest in meeting me, so we did meet at that time. I admire her most recent book, *Joyous Greetings*. Are you familiar with that? It's a nice book. It's about the European women's movement after 1848. *Joyous Greetings* was the greetings from Europe to the United States, and Bonnie said that she had been inspired to write this book by the letter that's in my historical anthology which comes from two French socialist feminists who, when they heard about the 1848 meaning, were just thrilled and directed a letter to the women at Seneca Falls who had been active in the United States at that time. And so she said she had seen this letter and she had said to herself, What is this about? You know, what was going on that these women read this, heard about this meeting and just immediately

responded? There must have been something that was going on then to form a basis for this. And so that was why she wanted to meet me and to sort of say thank you.

WEIGAND: That's nice. Yeah, I just wondered, you know, because it can be sort of an old girls' network, I find, and a little bit closed.

SCHNEIR: You stay away from it?

WEIGAND: Well, I can't really stay away.

SCHNEIR: No, because you're –

WEIGAND: Yeah.

SCHNEIR: I mean, I admire a lot of these women very much and I read them, but I don't have personal contact with them. I hope that when I finish the book that I'm working on now, I can ask some people to read it, to read chapters. I hope the specialists in the particular areas and help me make any adjustments, corrections, whatever that may be required. But I don't want to get too much involved in it. I just feel as though it'll lead me in paths that I don't want to get into. Also, I need to make some broad generalizations and when you're doing that, you're always trampling a little bit on the corners, you know? And that's something I don't want to — I think it'll be inhibiting.

WEIGAND: That makes sense. Yeah, that sounds like it's a really needed book.

SCHNEIR: I hope it'll be effective –

WEIGAND: Yeah I really like synthetic things.

SCHNEIR: Well, it's something you can only do if you're not absorbed in a particular moment.

WEIGAND: Right, yeah. It'll be interesting to see how this new book — is it Cokie Roberts that wrote it?

SCHNEIR: Yeah, *Founding Mothers*, yeah. Actually, Linda Grant-Depauw wrote a book called *Founding Mothers* also. I heard Roberts speaking about it. I met Cokie Roberts years ago. She's a nice person, but the book itself, it's a very popular book. In fact, I noticed it's on the bestseller list, which I thought was fabulous, and I was really excited to see that in the *Times*. She's a wonderful promoter for it. She speaks so well and she tells great stories and is a good speaker. And that, today, is a very important factor with trying to reach a general audience. Her audience is not mine.

WEIGAND: Right, yeah, yeah, but it's amazing it's on the bestseller list.

SCHNEIR: I know it. I know it.

WEIGAND: It could bode well for you.

SCHNEIR: What?

WEIGAND: It could bode well for you, maybe.

SCHNEIR: But as I say, that's not my audience, really. But I know that there are a lot of women out there who are interested in women's history, and they're not reading these monographs, wonderful as they are.

WEIGAND: Right, that's true, because they're too –

SCHNEIR: They're dense. Some of them are quite jargony. Not yours, I'm glad to say.

WEIGAND: Thank you.

SCHNEIR: But some of them are. And you spoke of sort of the internecine arguments and disputes, and some of them are full of that, too.

WEIGAND: Yeah, well the influence of postmodernism on history writing has not been — I mean, it's useful conceptually, I think, but the jargon is –

SCHNEIR: I used to go all the time to the Socialist Scholars' Conference, and at the beginning it was fascinating and interesting. But in later years it became — again, the only word I can think of is internecine, because it became so much talking to one another and not reaching out. There are still some socialist intellectuals who do, and people who view themselves as public intellectuals and want to reach out to a broader public and have a sense of having a message that they wish to impart, not just to others who think the way they do but to others who don't think the way they do. They sort of see themselves as social gadflies, you know, and I like to think of myself more in that group.

WEIGAND: Yeah, yeah. Well, let's see. You wrote for *Ms.* over a long span of time. 44:35

SCHNEIR: Yes.

WEIGAND: And a lot of it was in the '70s, but then you wrote some things in the mid-'80s, and I think the latest thing that I saw was in '92. I wondered if you could talk about both what it was like to work with *Ms.* in general and also how that changed over time, if it did.

SCHNEIR: Yeah. Well, the first piece I did for *Ms.* was for the second issue. The first issue of *Ms.* was what they called a preview issue. It came out — I'm going back, now, of course, to '72, so my memory may be off on this, but my memory is that several months passed between the preview issue and the first issue — what they called Volume I, Number 2. It was during that period. I saw the preview issue and was very, very happy to see that it was going to be a mass-market magazine for women if they got the backing they needed. I contacted someone there, I don't recall who, and asked if I could do a piece for them. My anthology had come out that year, the first anthology, in January of that year, and so it was right at that moment and they said yes I could.

They were going to do a column called "Lost Women." I liked the concept of it very much and I decided to ask to do a piece on Harriet Hanson Robinson, an early Massachusetts mill girl. She was a child. She was what they called a doffer. She changed the spools on the looms on the spinning machines, I think around the mid-1830s sometime. And then she became an active feminist. She was involved in what was the equivalent of strikes, called turnouts in those days, and then became an active feminist and wrote for the Massachusetts Labor Movement, interested in child labor and things of that nature. And so I did a piece on Harriet Robinson.

Nice things happened after that piece. This is a digression, but there was a note I got from Tillie Olsen who saw the piece and wrote me a note saying that she had long admired Harriet Robinson and she was happy to see someone writing about women and work and the labor movement. So that was very nice. And later, Walter met Tillie Olsen at MacDowell and we were invited to a party somewhere, maybe at Grace Paley's, maybe at Lindsay Abrams's. You know Lindsay Abrams? She's a nice person. She taught at — I guess she's still around — a writer who taught at Sarah Lawrence. She was having — I think it was at her house, at her apartment — she was having a party and Tillie Olsen was going to be there so I had an occasion to meet her then.

WEIGAND: That's nice.

SCHNEIR: So we were talking about *Ms.* So I did this piece on Harriet Robinson. It was a nice feeling at *Ms.* in those days. There were a lot of interesting people there and I went up to the offices a number of different times and they used to have parties, too, *Ms.* parties, where they would invite all their writers and editors and others. Gloria had that sense of wanting to create a community, and it was successful. I mean, there was a feeling of community among the people there. I got to know various *Ms.* editors, Robin Morgan, Mary Thom, and Susan McHenry, quite well, and also Lettie Pogrebin. I remember one of the *Ms.* parties was on a boat, going around Manhattan — that cruise ship that goes around Manhattan? They had a great woman's band on there, Sweet Honey. You've heard them? Yeah, and then, they were just so nice, you know? It was really nice. A lot of the writers from *Ms.* I knew either through *Ms.* or else some other ways.

Louise Bernikow worked for *Ms.*, and Ann McGovern, and a guy, Ed Pomerance, was a writer for *Ms.*, and I got to know all these people better through seeing them at these gatherings.

Gloria had a gathering at her own home at one time which kind of surprised me, going to her house, because I didn't know her well at all. But she is a warm person who draws you in. You feel that you matter to her when you're talking to her. And so, her house was lovely — a lovely house in Manhattan. But it surprised me because she had a lot of little doodads. It had a Victorian feeling to it, you know. And then I remember being at a party at Mary Thom's house, also. I think it was a book party. She had published a book on *Ms.* in 1998. I forget what it's called, something about, like, the first decades of *Ms.* or something like that [*Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement*].

Later there was a group of Australian women who took over *Ms.* I don't think I did anything for *Ms.* during that period. But then when Robin Morgan became the editor — I think maybe the last piece I did, I did for Robin. It was around Columbus Day and I had done a lot of research that was going to be part of the book on the history of women in America that never got completed. I had done a lot of research on Columbus and the women, the early Spanish women and the slaves and the indentured women who came to the New World, mostly to Mexico, and to the islands, and so I said I would do a piece. It was a disappointing experience because the piece had to be cut and cut and cut and cut until finally it was like squeezing words out of it, you know, and I don't feel proud of it now. But there's good material in that and I hope to be able to have a chance to use some of it in what I'm working on now.

WEIGAND: And so, as it became a more — I don't know what the right word is, I want to say more mainstream, but it really became a less radical publication.

SCHNEIR: It did, it did, and it became very involved with identity politics and issues that didn't interest me very much. When the second anthology came out, *Feminism in Our Time*, in 1994, there were no reviews of the book, in contrast with the first one, which came out in a milieu of a lot of feminist activity and agitation. Nineteen ninety-four was kind of a quiescent period and I wrote to the people at *Ms.* and said, you know, "I've written for *Ms.* over the years and I'm sure you have readers who would be familiar with my stuff and would you please do a review of this book," but they never did. So I just felt a little unhappy about that, and that was it. I never did any more work for them, and I actually don't see the publication other than from the newsstand, I'll leaf through it.

WEIGAND: You said that when you were working with the National Writers' Union you helped to negotiate the contract between them and *Ms*. Could you talk a little bit about that experience?

SCHNEIR: Right. OK. We made a date to go and see *Ms.* and talk about it. The other person who was a representative, the union representative with me on that, was Andrea Eagan, who has since died, but she was a good friend. Andrea's a lot younger than me, and had been writing a lot on issues around women and childbirth and things like that [e.g., *The Newborn Mother*]. She also had been very, very active in the big Columbia strike. I maybe first met her then. I also knew her through Madelon. She was a good friend of Madelon's. So Andrea and I went up to *Ms.* and asked for an appointment to talk to them about the union and we were trying, at that time, in the National Writer's Union, to make contracts with a number of different publications. I believe there was one with *The Nation* that had been successfully concluded, and I thought *Ms.* would be an easy and natural target. Well, *Ms.*, of course, had their financial problems, as do all struggling radical magazines and *Ms.* was quite radical at the time.

WEIGAND: So do you know what year this was, approximately?

SCHNEIR: That's a hard one. I'd have to go back and look it up. I don't even want to take a stab at it. I just don't know. I really don't know. [Probably the early 1980s.]

WEIGAND: That's fine.

SCHNEIR: But all the original people were there, and I remember Susan — oh, I can't remember her last name [Suzanne Levine] — I'd have to look at the masthead of the old *Ms.* But anyway, we got there and to my surprise, there was a lot of opposition. I remember in particular that I had a kind of what probably seemed to the *Ms.* women a very old-fashioned idea, that if you wrote a longer piece, you should be paid more for it. It came from the era where you got paid by the word, you know. Well, they didn't agree with me at all on this and said it didn't matter how long the piece was. Anyway, we worked it out. We had several meetings and there was some tough negotiating, but we did finally get a contract which was probably not satisfactory to them or us. But we did get a contract and I don't really know whatever happened with it.

I do know that when I did the piece for *Ms.* on the PEN Conference where Normal Mailer proved his sexist self, and I called the piece "Prisoner of Sexism." They liked it very much, and they paid me according to the contract. It wasn't a long piece and, afterward, they sent me more money and said, "We liked it so much, we thought you should get paid more." That happened only twice in my life. Once to me and once to Walter, where he did a piece for some women's magazine on atomic bomb testing and strontium 90 and they liked it so much, they sent him more money. But those pieces — in those days, you see, you got paid by the word. I don't think people do that anymore.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I don't know. It's funny, but it gets to be about quality, or at least perceived quality, and not quantity.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, or else it's just a standard fee. *The Nation* was like that. They had a standard fee, and we used to argue with them because they paid one standard fee for a piece and we used to say, Well, we are two writers, we ought to each get the standard fee, and they would do it.

WEIGAND: Really?

SCHNEIR: They would.

WEIGAND: I'm going to stop this.

END DVD 4

DVD 5

WEIGAND: So, we've talked about a lot of the issues that I have written down here. You were mentioning this conference with Norman Mailer, where he–

SCHNEIR: Oh, yeah.

WEIGAND: Were you actually at that?

SCHNEIR: I was.

WEIGAND: I read a little bit about that.

SCHNEIR: Did you? Yeah.

WEIGAND It was a pretty contentious –

SCHNEIR: It was a really disgusting thing that he did. He was the president of PEN at the time, and he put together this conference at a time when women's literature was just burgeoning. I mean, there were so many wonderful women writers — fiction writers, nonfiction writers, poets. There was just a tremendous outpouring of literary talent. And at that time, he chose to put together a PEN conference, an international PEN conference, with very, very few women on any of the panels. It was a disgraceful thing to have done.

Women at the conference were very angry and Betty Friedan was there. It was one of my first times of seeing Betty Friedan in action. I'm sorry I didn't actually talk about this when we were talking about Betty Friedan. I'm glad you brought it up, because it was inspiring to see the way she worked. She called a gathering of women. Some of the women present said they wouldn't — let's not allow the press into the room because it was mostly male press. And she said, "Oh, no, we want the press." She had such a sense of organizing. She's a fabulous organizer. She made a talk that was just galvanizing. She was wonderful.

And I just don't remember exactly what happened. I haven't reread my own piece on the subject, but I know that there was a public awareness of the problem and a conference-wide awareness there. Women at the conference were given an opportunity to speak about it. I think there was a petition — yes, there was a petition, because I remember that Nadine Gordimer would not sign, that she said, "I am not a woman writer. I am a writer who happens to a woman." She didn't feel a sense of solidarity at all. But almost everyone else did. She was one of the few who were actually on a panel, so (laughs). I'm a great admirer of her writing, but nevertheless, I do recall that kind of off-putting incident. I remember Cynthia Ozick was there and she was very supportive, as I recall.

WEIGAND: How was it working for *World Book Encyclopedia*? It sounds like you did quite a bit of work for them.

SCHNEIR: I did, I did, yes. At first, I just did a few isolated biographies of women. Then, at a certain point, I proposed to them that I would do this survey of the entire work — all the volumes. We got a grant for it, a small grant, and I liked doing it because it was something that Mary Beard had done at one point for *Encyclopedia Britannica* and so I kind of thought, Well, now I'm going to have a chance to do it. And I liked doing it for this particular encyclopedia because it's used a lot by young people. It's not a children's encyclopedia. They call themselves a family encyclopedia. I went through the entire thing, all the volumes, I don't remember how many, and wrote a report pointing out that they didn't have an article on abbesses and they didn't have an article on various American feminists and world feminists, and in the article on farms, they only spoke about the farmer and not the farm family. And labor — they didn't talk about women's labor enough. And talking about careers, all their pictures showed boys, you know.

So, it was just a wonderful opportunity to see how these things could be changed and improved and broadened, and they took my suggestions very much to heart and did a tremendous amount of revision in the encyclopedia. I think if you look at it today you'll find it very inclusive and has a lot of good material. After that, I continued — some of the changes and some of the new biographies of women that they did, I did write for them. It was a chance for me to become acquainted with some biographies that I didn't know much about. I just knew there was such a person as — I remember that I did one, I think, on Mary Anderson.

WEIGAND: The labor –

SCHNEIR: Yeah, the labor woman, and I came to admire her a lot. Some of the early twentieth-century women I didn't know that much about. Crystal Eastman I learned something about.

WEIGAND: That's a good example of really useful feminist writing.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, that's what I really liked about it. Then, part of the deal was that they would send me a copy — a set of the encyclopedia — which they did. I still use it to this day. It's got some good stuff in it.

WEIGAND: The other thing you mentioned, and this isn't necessarily directly related to feminism, but you said you did some work on education reform in Westchester County?

SCHNEIR: Yeah, I've always been interested in education, and when our own kids started school — Pleasantville's become kind of an upscale community, but when we first moved here, it was the poor sister of Chappaqua. It was an old Italian community, Italian stonemasons who had worked on the

dam in Valhalla and had settled here. Our local library had a whole section of Italian-language books.

Their school was an old school — both literally and figuratively, you know. The educational system in the schools was quite backward and Walter and I became very interested in the program of open education, which was actually begun in England under some guy named Featherstone, Joseph Featherstone, but had been brought to the United States, particularly New York, by an educational reformer whose name was Lillian Webber. We became very interested in it and visited several schools that Lillian Webber was involved in, one of which had classes being run by Debra Meier, who became a MacArthur fellow and has been very active in educational reform. But anyway, we hoped to be able to bring open education to our local school and formed a group of parents who were similarly interested. We were successful in bringing it in so that, although our first son by that time was out of the elementary school, our daughter had the advantage of it.

Educational reform is a very frustrating field because, um, everything gets swallowed up and co-opted and changed and destroyed eventually, and that's what happened with this program. I don't think there are open-corridor classrooms that I know of anywhere in New York. Or maybe it made some dent somewhere. I think maybe it did, and I know our local schools have changed a lot here. But I'm not that familiar with what goes on in them.

Some things they've done I'm not happy about. But I know that the principal who took over after our kids were at the school was a woman who had a background in teaching, which was not that typical. I mean, often principals came out of a kind of administrative line rather than a real teaching line. She was a teacher. First she was just the acting principal, but she was doing such a good job they made her the principal. She'd been in the school, I believe, at the time when the open classrooms were formed. They were only in the elementary school, the first few grades, and they brought in — special teachers were hired who were aware of the whole program and sympathetic with it. And it was lovely. It was very nice.

WEIGAND: So, can you tell me a little bit about what an open classroom is?

SCHNEIR: Yeah. It was based on the idea that children mature at very different rates, especially in the early years, and that kindergarten, first, and second grade children show a wide range of maturity and it wasn't a wise idea to group them only by age. So the open classroom had the idea that you would have a cluster of kids between K and 2 and there would be open space, almost like a common in a residential area. Sometimes it was just a corridor — that was the way it worked in the New York City schools. It was the open corridor. But in our school, we did have a space that was like an old lobby or something that the classrooms were arranged around. And kids would then be taught and instructed, not by age but by where they were at as people, as individuals. It was a very individualized program, but there was

also some grouping in terms of what interests and skills the child had at that point. And there was a lot of opportunity. I remember that my daughter was an early reader, unlike my sons, both of whom were late readers, and I recall that she spent a lot of her time reading. They just had a place like a mattress or something, where she could just, you know, take her books and enjoy reading there, getting help when she needed it, but just advancing at her own pace. So it was a lovely program and I thought it was based on very solid educational grounds.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I actually went to a school that worked that way.

SCHNEIR: Did you?

WEIGAND: Yes.

SCHNEIR: In Cleveland?

WEIGAND: In Cleveland. I went there for almost three years and it was a private alternative school.

SCHNEIR: Oh, I see. It wasn't a public school.

WEIGAND: Yeah, but it worked just like that.

SCHNEIR: I see. (laughs) Did you think it was good for you?

WEIGAND: It was good for me, because I was, you know, somebody who was an early reader and writer and was bored to death in kindergarten and first grade.

SCHNEIR: I see.

WEIGAND: And I think it's interesting because there were some things I learned there and then there were a lot of things that I didn't. (laughs) When I went back to public school and at the end of the fourth grade, I had to learn times tables and learn how to write in cursive and so on.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, things that you didn't learn.

WEIGAND: Right.

SCHNEIR: Yeah, it's funny, you say learn to write in cursive, because I well recall that when I got to Antioch, that there were a number of people there who had come out of Fieldston [a private school in New York City] and alternative schools in the New York area and I could always recognize them because they couldn't write in cursive. I always knew who they were.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

SCHNEIR: They hadn't had the training in penmanship that we used to have. We always had charts. I still remember these up across the front of the room. This shouldn't really be on the tape, it's just boring stuff, but we had to practice this (hand motions) you know, and this (hand motions) to learn to write cursive.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I think they still do that.

SCHNEIR: Do they?

WEIGAND: Well, my son just learned cursive this year. He had a little book, *Handwriting Without Tears*. He liked it.

SCHNEIR: That's good.

WEIGAND: So, most of what I have left here is just sort of vague reflective kinds of questions.

SCHNEIR: OK.

WEIGAND: I always feel like they're sort of absurdly grandiose. Not so much this first one, which is, What are you up to these days? I know that you're working on this book because you talked about that, but are you active in other kinds of organizations or political stuff?

SCHNEIR: I keep very active in reading and considering and talking about politics. I will vote for Kerry but I don't like — I won't work for Kerry is what I meant to say. I probably will vote for Kerry. The last election, I voted for Nader. I thought that was OK to do since I was I was in New York and I knew New York would vote for Gore anyway. I've attended rallies of various sorts and marches and demonstrations and things like that. If I'm in New York and there are demonstrations against — when the Republican Convention is here in New York in August, I'll go to that. So I try to be supportive of any kind of progressive political action that comes along, you know. But I'm not a leader and I'm not a joiner particularly.

WEIGAND: Now is when my questions become a little more grandiose.

SCHNEIR: Oh, if I can answer them, I will. Otherwise, I'd just say I don't have too much to say about that.

WEIGAND: Can you talk about the things that you've done that you're the most proud of or that you feel like have made the most important contributions to?

SCHNEIR: Yeah. Well, of course, you know, I see my books as political action. I mean, I think that when you ask me about political action, I do see my work as political action, and to some extent, I try to protect my writing by not becoming identified with any organization or you know, or even too close to any advocacy group. I know I feel supportive of many advocacy groups. I donate when I can, or, you know, Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders — all of those organizations are important to me. Censorship, a censorship group whose name escapes me right now [National Coalition Against Censorship], but I get their newsletter and contribute when I can. I contribute to Women's WORLD and just recently to PEN's action to protest the Patriot Act. So, all of those things are important to me, but I do see my work as my main political contribution and as a place where I can perhaps raise the consciousness of other people and provide a basis for looking at the world in a slightly different way.

WEIGAND: Right. How about in terms of things that aren't necessarily political?

SCHNEIR: Well, I guess, my kids, you know. Having raised three children who I think are good citizens of the world, each in his or her own way. I like my garden, and my friendships are very important to me — very important. They mean a lot to me. I've always had friends as sort of an alternative family, and I don't know what I would do without them. And when I lose them, it's a great loss to me, I always feel very sad.

WEIGAND: Um, what do you think are some of the most important lessons or pointers that you'd like to pass on to younger generations of people?

SCHNEIR: OK. (laughs) To feel a sense of community with other people, no matter who they are or where they are, feel compassion with those who don't have the opportunities and the privileges that maybe some of us have, some others have. To take pleasure in the arts and the wonderful — nature and the wonderful things that are available. To fight for what you believe in and struggle for what you believe in. I remember that Ernestine Rose, I think it was, who once said, freedom doesn't come from the sky, it comes from work, hard work. [The actual quotation is, "Freedom, my friends, does not come from the clouds, it does not come without great efforts and great sacrifices; all who love liberty have to labor for it."] I do believe that and I think it's in times such as what we are experiencing now, or what we experienced in the '50s, it's very important to keep alive the torch, to keep alive the fight, you know. One of the people who I cared for very much was H. H. Wilson, who taught history at Princeton, and Walter and I spoke for his class a number of times and became personal friends of his, and he always signed his letters, "Keep the faith." He was a radical person, a radical professor, a wonderful man, and I think keeping the faith is, you know, very important.

And often, it's a matter of being, um, conservative, really, trying to conserve the advances that have been made, you know, like Sisyphus pushing a rock up a hill and then it kept slipping back but eventually you make a little progress. It's how I view social action, political action. People should not lose heart in bad times but just try to keep the stone from slipping too far back and keep the onward movement.

WEIGAND: Yeah, and your work, really, I mean, the historical nature of your work, especially, I think adds — goes right along with that because it sort of reminds people what's been done and what struggles have been.

SCHNEIR: Yeah. And I do try. I do believe in progress, I guess. Maybe that's old-fashioned, but still, I do believe that human beings have progressed, and especially I see a great change in attitudes towards the third world and I think that's wonderful, you know, the feeling that we have a humanity that's common in Africa, in Asia, and Latin America. So, I think that's a big change that's happened.

WEIGAND: Are there big things you'd do differently if you'd had them to do over again?

SCHNEIR: I think I would have had more formal education. I think I would've gone to — as much as I loved Antioch, and maybe I would be a different person. Walter and I have a difference of opinion about this. I have a certain longing for being closer to an academic life. I guess I look at Cynthia and she took a path, you know, and has had a lot of satisfaction from it, plus a lot of economic security, which we didn't always have, and a lot of recognition as a scholar and a very wide contact with people who were scholars. But I would be a different person if I had done it, so — you know? I once heard Virgil Thompson being interviewed and someone asked him a question like that and he said, "I never think about the road not traveled, because that's not who I am or where I am." And he said, "Who knows what it would have led to. Nobody really knows. I only know the road I took and what it went to." So, I think that's the best answer I could give to that question.

WEIGAND: And, this is the last thing I have, and it's — is there anything that we haven't — that I haven't asked you that you'd like to talk about?

SCHNEIR: No. I honestly can't think of anything. You know, I did think last night and came back with a few comments that I thought I wanted to fill in, but I think we've pretty well covered everything, so, I'll say goodbye.

WEIGAND: Yeah, OK.

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