

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **EVA KOLLISCH**

Interviewed by

KATE WEIGAND

February 16–17, 2004  
New York, New York

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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### Narrator

Eva Kollisch (b. 1925) was born in Vienna. She and her siblings escaped from Nazi-led Austria via the *Kindertransport* in 1939 and settled with their parents in New York City in 1940. From 1942–46 Kollisch was a member of the Trotskyist organization the Workers Party, and in that role worked in factories in New York and Detroit. A 1951 graduate of Brooklyn College, Kollisch later did graduate work in German at Columbia University and joined the faculty at Sarah Lawrence College, where she co-founded the women's studies program with Gerda Lerner and Joan Kelly. In 2000 Kollisch published *Girl in Movement*, an autobiographical account of her years in the Workers Party. She has also written extensively about her experiences as an Austrian Jewish refugee in the U.S. Her political work includes participation in the peace and antiwar movements, the women's movement, and the movement for gay and lesbian rights.

### 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 Eva Kollisch describes her childhood in an upper-class Austrian Jewish family and her experiences as a young adult refugee in World War II-era New York City. The interview focuses on her socialist activism in the 1940s, her life as a bohemian wife and mother during the 1950s, her political reawakening in the 1960s, her personal and professional experiences as a feminist and lesbian professor at Sarah Lawrence College, and her participation in the peace movement, the feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian movement. Kollisch's story illustrates the complex relationships among identity, political activism, and the larger political context, and the activities that radical activists undertake in both periods of political upheaval and political downturn.

### Restrictions

None

### 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 Eva Kollisch.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Kollisch, Eva. Interview by Kate Weigand. Video recording, February 16–17, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Eva Kollisch interview by Kate Weigand, video recording, February 16, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 1.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Kollisch, Eva. Interview by Kate Weigand. Transcript of video recording, February 16–17, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Eva Kollisch, interview by Kate Weigand, transcript of video recording, February 17, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 64–67.

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Transcript of interview conducted FEBRUARY 16–17, 2004, with:

EVA KOLLISCH  
New York, NY

by: KATE WEIGAND

WEIGAND: This is Kate Weigand here, interviewing Eva Kollisch in her apartment on February 16th at almost three o'clock, and this is for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project. So, I wanted to start out talking about your politicization and how you became an activist, beginning with your childhood and your family life. I thought maybe we could start out talking a little bit about your parents — what they did and who they were and what their backgrounds and values and political ideas were.

KOLLISCH: Well, I come from a rather typical bourgeois Jewish Austrian home. But nothing is typical. In broad terms, I guess you fit a category. My father was an architect and a builder, and he built several apartment houses in Vienna. And under the Social Democrats he built some what you call workers' housing. He was not particularly radical, but he took pride in these buildings — and I don't know if you are aware that Vienna was in a sense very advanced in the late 1920s — building what you might call now housing projects, real homes for workers, with a bathroom and a balcony, not so different from this house. And now, when my brother and I revisited Austria and we went to see these houses and, it was an emotional moment to see my father's buildings still there.

1:30

My mother was very well educated. She, in her youth as a girl, went to the most progressive school in Vienna, a little bit like Sarah Lawrence or maybe Smith, but at the high school level, the *gymnasium* level. Then the university — she had a degree, something between M.A. and Ph.D., I would say, in English, and she taught English and French in that very progressive school. Then she was a nurse during World War I, a volunteer nurse. Then she became a translator, French and English. But the important thing to say about her is that she was a poet, a writer and a poet from very young on to the end of her life, and she wrote poetry and also some stories. She has been published, and she was a very creative woman.

That's the background. Politically, I would say my parents were both moderate social democrats. My father did not have a special interest in politics but he was a bit of a Zionist. We were not religious Jews but he felt a connection to what was then called Palestine. And my mother was

definitely a social democrat, but more than that, she was a pacifist and an idealist.

I hardly ever heard a political discussion in my home. But with my mother, we would sometimes talk about these things. But mostly — I'm figuring this out much later — in my home, there was a strict division. The parents were here [gesturing up], the children were here [gesturing toward the middle], and the maids were here [gesturing toward the floor]. And my first personal awareness of class and class difference came from the fact that we had a maid, which most middle-class people did, and we had a governess or nursemaid or whatever you want to call her, and they lived in very poor quarters, and they were not paid much. In fact, my mother told me they were treated better in our home than in most others.

WEIGAND: They lived in your house, or —

KOLLISCH: They lived in our house. There was a maid's room and there was a room for the governess. They had to work six days a week, and my mother was very kind to them, but my father sometimes had temper tantrums — sometimes directed against the children, sometimes directed against the maids. And it was always over his notion that they were exploiting my mother, that my mother was too kind.

So this was maybe my first class consciousness. And then I learned through our governess and her boyfriends that there was unemployment. I lived in a small town and because we were sheltered, I didn't even know about that, you know. I didn't know it was happening in Vienna and that there had been shooting of workers in the 1930s. But I did know that there were communists and unemployed, and poor people, and that bothered me a lot.

WEIGAND: So even as a child, that bothered you?

KOLLISCH: As a child, it bothered me a lot that there was this injustice of poor and rich and that servants — who were not always that nice themselves, but still — that they had to work for so little money. There was this definite class division. It bothered me and it puzzled me, you know, because it sort of went against some of my beliefs. We were not religious but somewhere in this ethos was the idea of humanity — that we're all one, you know? And I saw we were not all one. So, that's how I felt, and I'm speaking here of childhood, of ages five, six, seven.

And then, I think when it came to role models, I just didn't see myself in most of the female roles. I thought I might be a journalist traveling all over the world and studying people. And I thought I might be a hero, and what I meant by that was someone like Joan of Arc, a revolutionary. I didn't know anything about Lenin or Trotsky. But I knew that Joan of Arc was really a rebel, a revolutionary, St. Joan of Arc, and I loved that total mix of the masculine-feminine in the story. So, what you now call

activism was then heroism, but then became a much more modest idea — a little bit of activism and actually trying to make a difference in some specific ways in the world. And that happened to me later.

WEIGAND: So, it sounds like you feel like this was just sort of part of your temperament, to notice inequality and be bothered by it and to feel that you wanted to do something in the world.

KOLLISCH: Well, yes. I'm really convinced most children have the sense of injustice. When my grandson first came to New York and saw homeless people it was very painful to him. And the idea of unhappiness is painful and this inequity just sort of hits you in the eye. But you were asking more specifically –

WEIGAND: Oh, I'm just looking for clarification, I guess.

KOLLISCH: About –

WEIGAND: Just about, sort of, what led you to your awareness of injustice?

KOLLISCH: I think temperament. I mean, I have energy and I have passion, but also, I think I had a pretty strong sense of justice from very early on. And I didn't like hypocrisy and I saw a lot of hypocrisy around me in Austria, in immediate circles of kowtowing to the powerful and being, you know, exploitive or cruel to the helpless. Of course, as a child — and you've read it in my book, or maybe it's not so much in my book — of course, it was a very anti-Semitic country and I was the victim of anti-Semitism since I went to school, from age six or seven, in various ways. Overt yelling, calling me dirty Jew, you Jew, beating me up sometimes, being discriminated against by teachers. I mean, all of this mixed in my mind the idea of injustice and lack of humanity, really. How could they? You know, I would look at myself in the mirror and say, "There's nothing wrong with me. I look nice." "I like myself." And I did. There's nothing wrong with me. I don't even look very different from them. What is it they see that I don't see, you know?

WEIGAND: How about in terms of gender roles or sort of what your parents modeled to you or taught to you about what it meant to be a girl or a woman?

KOLLISCH: Well, I tell you. I have two brothers. I'm a middle child. And we were very close in age and I think I always wanted to be both a boy and a girl. I liked to climb trees. In order to climb a tree, you had to wear shorts. They didn't have shorts when I was a girl, only dresses. So I always borrowed my brother's short pants and I climbed. I was very athletic and I liked to take chances and I skied and I was physically a very lively child. But I also think I was in some ways romantic or I liked the idea of something

romantic or romantic love. I played with dolls. I know that a lot of lesbians say they never did. But I liked dolls and I liked the idea of being a mother, you know, of these little dolls and protecting them and all that.

So, my parents didn't give me a specific message about roles. But this is one grief I have about my mother. My mother was very beautiful and, you know, I was a nice looking girl, too, and I was bright but not a very good student because the schools were so bad. My mother, who privately favored me very much and loved intimate conversations and talking about plays and poetry and telling me plots of operas. I was a wonderful, receptive audience, and she also loved telling me about her life and her previous love stories.

But my mother somehow didn't picture me in the universities in the future with a profession. She said, you will maybe wish to study and — this had just come up as a new profession for women, what they called hotelier. That means a hotel manager, to work in a hotel, you know? And then she said — or even running a beauty parlor. Well, that was really not me, and she must have known better because she knew I was a fairly intellectual child and we had fairly sophisticated conversations, and that makes me believe that my mother, though she had a profession and was quite ambitious, somehow didn't really think it was feminine enough to be serious professionally for a woman. And, you know, we've seen that often with that generation which was — took great strides toward personal liberty and self-expression, but sent mixed signals to the daughters.

WEIGAND: Yeah, yeah. But they didn't mind that you climbed trees and —

KOLLISCH: Oh, no. It was a liberal household and we felt accepted. We children felt accepted in our home and we were each complex in a different way and we also each were quite oddly isolated and lonely, and that's just how it often is.

WEIGAND: Yeah. So, um, you mentioned that when you were a little child, you thought about wanting to be a hero and wanting to be somebody like Joan of Arc and wanting to change the world. Did that persist throughout your adolescence and your —

KOLLISCH: I think so. In my hometown, in Baden, I never knew anything about revolution or revolutionary actions. But the first news came to me that there had been a revolution somewhere in Russia for the people, you know, for the poor people, for the oppressed peasants to rise and to be part of humanity and be acknowledged. I just thought it was so wonderful. And when I was thirteen and a half, after Hitler came to Austria and invaded Austria — the Austrians loved to be invaded by Hitler, you know?

But after that, I could no longer go to my school in Baden and I was in a boarding school in Vienna for Jewish girls for about nine months. And for me, this was a wonderful education, because I had always been sort of

isolated and on the edge in Baden and suddenly, I met all these very bright young girls, my age, a little older, younger, and some of them had already been politically active. They'd been socialists, communists, Zionists, and I didn't know what I was. So they asked me, "What are you?" Then I sort of made it up. I said, "I think I'm an anarchist." Just — it sounded great, you know. But I could see the excitement of identifying with some kind of political identity.

And don't forget, Austria was the very epitome of politics in the negative sense. I mean, everybody was political. Everybody decided who they would hate or who they might protect or respect. So it was in that sense a cauldron and I saw politics, not as something abstract, but about how people treat other people, how this filters down to your everyday life and your conceptions of what it means to be a human being or to be an outcast. So that was activism.

Now, if you want a tiny example of rebellion: in Vienna at that boarding school, we would walk two by two, along with the teacher, and we had to be always very careful because we were Jewish children. But when the teacher wasn't looking, because they trusted us, and we'd walk through this park, we'd quickly sit down on the bench, even though that bench was marked, "*Juden verboten*," "no Jews permitted." We would just sit down, put our little behinds on that bench and sit there for a minute. It made us feel very rebellious. Now it sounds very trivial but you know, actually, we could have gotten into a lot of trouble. It was defiance and refusing to be treated as some unspeakable kind of person who's not allowed to sit on a bench. So that's activism.

Oh, yes, we had also some little bit of protest when the Nazis took over Austria. On that day, I and another Jewish girl got together with two other girls who were gentile and of the aristocracy — the Austrian aristocracy, but anti-Nazi — pro-Austria, maybe pro-royalty, but anti-Nazi. And we had our agreement that we would walk around the school block, the block where the school was, and whenever we met each other, the Jewish girls and the two gentile aristocratic girls, whenever we met each other, we would say, "*Heil Osterreich*," or "Hail Austria," and not *Heil Hitler*, which is what most people were saying. And this seemed to us like great fun — great fun and very daring. And we did this for, I don't know, maybe half an hour, an hour, and then a man saw us and he came over to us. He said, "You'd better stop this right now. You can get in very serious trouble for doing this." And then I felt a kind of chill, you know — it wasn't play. Politics isn't play. It has real consequences.

WEIGAND:

Well, I guess that kind of leads me to another one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about, which was how much you knew and understood about what was going on, politically, when Hitler took power. I mean, clearly it affected your daily life pretty directly, in terms of what you can do and what you can't do —

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KOLLISCH: Oh, I tell you, I feel — I understood it instantly and very deeply, and I felt that all our lives had changed, unalterably, in that minute. I wrote a piece, I don't know if you know it or not, it's called "In the Land of the Absolute."

WEIGAND: Yes.

KOLLISCH: It's a memoir, an essay, in which I talk about that period. I think the first sentence of that piece is the idea that children have a much better sense of reality, really, because they haven't got time to build up illusions or myths, and that they don't play roles. So children are thrown into life, and they find, this is my town, these are the people, these are the neighbors. And adults can first of all be more choosy whom they can relate to. They have already found the sort of ways of repressing or protecting themselves through rationalization. So I think I knew, but perhaps I didn't really — I mean, I didn't know about death camps, certainly, but I had a very dark streak in me, I think, perhaps always. In some way, it has never surprised me that such evil and cruelty can exist. At the same time, it always surprises me. It still surprises me. I really can't ever stop thinking about it. It's part of my consciousness.

WEIGAND: So, do you feel like you always had a sense of being in personal danger yourself or that your family lived in danger?

KOLLISCH: It may not have been so concrete, but, I felt a great deal of denial on the part of my parents, and the denial was about everything about anti-Semitism. They felt it was exaggerated about inequality — things were not so bad. I don't really know how to say. Maybe I'm self-dramatizing, but I was never surprised to — I was sort of never surprised that suddenly our life had changed so radically. And we were, of course, extremely fortunate. We all survived. My family — my immediate family survived. And — I don't know, it may also have something to do with childhood. In childhood you have one drama, then another drama, and you're not yet so set in your ways. Anyway, of course, who could possibly understand this immensity of organization and deviousness and the fact that, for example, oh, so many Austrians seemed to be your friends including kids at school who were forbidden to speak to you and adults, neighbors, who the day after, wouldn't greet you, looked away, or crossed the street, or shouted, some of them, Jew, pig Jew, Jewish pig, you know? It gave you a glimpse into how just dangerous it is to be alive, you know, just with one's fellow humans.

WEIGAND: So, can you tell me something about the process of how your family managed to get out?

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KOLLISCH: Yeah, well, that's actually told very simply. We came out — my brothers and I came out on the *Kindertransport*. Ten thousand children were rescued through a *Kindertransport* from Germany and Austria and Czechoslovakia. You know, millions perished, but somehow my mother learned about this *Kindertransport*, and within a very short time my brothers and I were told that we would be going to England and that they would follow. And that's when I was in that boarding school and before I knew it, one day I was in a taxi going to the train station and there were my parents bidding us goodbye, and we went into the train that took us to Holland and then to England by boat. And I don't think any of us realized that our parents might be killed. And the truth is that 90 percent of these fellow *Kinder*, children, who were on the transport with us, and in various transports in those year from 1938 to late 1939, the beginning of 1940 — 90 percent lost their parents in the camps. They were killed.

Now there is a Kindertransport Association, which is — we still call ourselves *Kinder* — which is a group that gets together once every few years and we talk about various aspects of the past, the present. We all just marvel that my brothers and I are still alive and that our parents survived.

WEIGAND: How did your parents manage to get out?

KOLLISCH: Well, they managed. It was 90 percent luck. You had to have papers, you had to have exit visas, you had to pay taxes, a great deal of money had to be given to the government, and for America, you had to have an affidavit, that means someone guaranteeing that you would not be a burden and that they would help support you if you couldn't support yourself. In all this, my father somehow got his papers first and my parents agreed that whoever gets out first then helps the other one and the children. And so my father came to England very briefly and we children were living in different homes in different cities. My mother, because of bureaucratic error — I forgot now what happened — her passport was with the British Consulate and it wasn't returned. There were hair-raising moments in which my mother thought she would never get out and was trapped. And she really got out at the very last, at the very last.

And after the war had broken out in October 1939 she went to Holland and got one of the last ships to America. My father was already there, an immigrant, poor, lost everything, disoriented, not speaking English well. Then my mother came. She spoke English very well. My mother who had been this lady — I mean, in the best sense, educated and interested in culture — had studied to be a masseuse and she came here and gave English lessons to refugees for 25 cents an hour and started to become a masseuse. She had certificates and licenses and started to work as a masseuse.

But my father couldn't work as an architect here for a very long time. He had to wait to get his license and, since there was no building during

World War II, he worked in very menial work, going house to house, trying to sell vacuum cleaners, things like that.

WEIGAND: So do you remember how you felt during that period during which you were riding the train out of Austria to Holland and –

KOLLISCH: By now, there's been so much history about this and I've seen the films and I've talked to others. I think, in some ways, we saw it as an adventure. I wasn't always such a pessimist. I mean, I was terrified of the storm troopers who boarded the train and searched us and every few minutes the Nazis halted the train and I was terrified that we wouldn't get out. But the minute we got to Holland it seemed so wonderful that there were kind people there on the station platform. They gave you orange juice and smiled at you. And then, when we were in England, I very soon realized that I was extremely lonely and unhappy and missed my parents and was terribly worried. When my father got out he visited us briefly, but he was terribly worried about my mother. And that was — I think that made me a bit like a grownup, made me into a grownup certainly, and I shared that worry with my father and it was one of the times that I felt very close to my father.

When my mother came out, it was a great relief and I then went to live with another family in another city, in Bristol, where my brothers were. And that was very nice, and we looked forward so much to seeing our parents again, and we did.

WEIGAND: So by then, you had a sense that getting out was saving your life and not just getting away from the war?

KOLLISCH: Well, it was — it was. I mean, I knew, we knew that only terrible things would happen to Jews. We didn't know about the Final Solution. Nobody could imagine the Final Solution until after the end of the war when that started to sink in. That was a whole other level of consciousness.

But it also seemed like an adventure, you know, of the world opening up. There was an ocean. I had never seen the ocean. We were on a real ship. We had these wonderful meals. The ship was a Dutch ship the Pennland, and it was very exciting, too, to be on the move like that and to already have seen one country and now going to another country.

WEIGAND: And how about the idea of coming to the U.S.? Did that feel like — how did you feel about that decision and that process?

KOLLISCH: Well, I had really no concepts of the U.S. at all. I had read some cowboy stories and knew about New York and tall buildings and I was fascinated by the idea of New York. But we lived on Staten Island. To me, that was a letdown. It was again sort of quiet and suburban and houses and gardens. I mean, now it seems rather peaceful, you know, but then it just seemed

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dull. And I was — I wrote about it in my book, *Girl in Movement*, I said, “Why are we living in this dull place? It’s like Baden. I want to live in Manhattan. I want to live in New York.” And I did after a couple of years. I became independent as soon as I graduated high school and I got myself out of Staten Island to New York.

WEIGAND: How did your whole family life then, your family dynamics, change once you got here? I mean, you said that your mother had to work as a masseuse and your father was selling vacuum cleaners door to door. You talked about how he was a little bit of a temperamental father figure to be around. Did that change?

KOLLISCH: Oh, yes, I mean, I also wrote about that in *Girl in Movement*, how I felt that our family had become more democratic and we were all more equal to each other and we as children began to understand the struggles of survival and economics and we were happy we had an apartment. It was pretty crummy but it was an apartment, a shelter, and we very much respected our parents’ ability to change, to transform themselves, and to work on a fairly low level. There was never any complaining. They never felt sorry for themselves. And otherwise, we were all — my brothers and I got other lessons and we had our secrets and our own interests and we went out, we went away and there was not much supervision. My mother was out working, my father was out working, you know, and we went to school. We were good children, we didn’t do anything bad. But the inner life was very private.

WEIGAND: You mentioned in *Girl in Movement* that you thought your brothers had an easier adjustment to living here than you did, that your brothers had an easier time adjusting to teenage life in the U.S. than you did. Can you talk a little bit about that?

KOLLISCH: Well, I think my brothers continued to be boys in the setting of Boy Scouts and school, and I felt — well, it sounds sort of snooty, but I felt superior to most of my classmates. I thought I was much more intellectual. I’d experienced much more, and I demanded more from life and I didn’t just want to go out on stupid dates which were confusing in every respect. Going on a date was mostly not very pleasant, but not to go on a date was also not pleasant. So, I just — I knew somewhere there was a life that was more meant for me — just like how in boarding school, I had suddenly discovered the life of a community of equals, in New York I knew it must be right around the corner. And then one day I found it when I was less than 17 and I made contact with these Trotskyists a few years older than myself on Staten Island. Then I went into a class on Marxism, and then moved to New York and had my first love affair, which actually became a marriage with my first husband — I mean, a love experience, I should say. Well, that was all very liberating, and I suddenly knew who I was. I was

meant to be a person who would work actively for socialist revolution inside a small radical group, which would then suddenly become large and powerful and lead the world.

WEIGAND: I have a lot of questions that I want to ask about that period, when you were in the Workers Party. But before I do that, I wondered if you could remember what you thought about racism and class stratification in the U.S. when you got here. I mean, it sounds like you had some consciousness about class issues from your childhood.

KOLLISCH: You know, I don't think I thought about racism. I just don't think I understood it, and I didn't know any blacks, really, even though we were ourselves poor people. I didn't understand it. I don't think we had any black children in our school, now that I think of it. I don't remember. And class — well, I had already come down a bit in class. You know, I'd been in the upper class, now I was in the bottom and so, my parents were in the bottom struggling to get up a little bit. I understood that you can lose things, you know? You have a big house and then you're outside, and I felt that's OK too, to be on the outside. There's something to be learned from that. I really believe that.

35:00

And then when I was in the Trotskyist movement, in a sense we were so enclosed that again, I didn't really have too much to do with upper-class people. We were this small, intellectual, mostly Jewish group of young people. Most of the comrades had come from East European Jewish backgrounds — children of immigrants. But I knew from having read Marx and having read about class, and when I went to work in factories, I saw it. And I saw how the lives of people just narrowed. I saw how you're almost made to be kind of stupid and mechanical and just do this and expect nothing except Sunday off, Saturday off. Go out and have a drink, you know, and have very small expectations. And that always surprised me. How come people have such small expectations?

WEIGAND: So it sounds like you didn't really have a specific vision of what your life in the U.S. would be like. Would it be fair to say then that your experiences once you got here contradicted what you thought it would be like?

KOLLISCH: Well, you know, as I said, I don't think I had many expectations. I knew that America was very large, almost frighteningly large, and I knew that New York was not America, and that my New York was not most other people's New York. Later, when I was in Detroit, I was sort of horrified by the mechanical dullness of our lives as factory workers and sure, there were other lives, too, but I didn't see them. But when I hitchhiked across the United States, and I write about that in *Girl in Movement*, I couldn't believe how big this country was, how enormous, and how varied geographically, and how many kinds of Americans there were. There were

so many different kinds of men and women whom I met traveling and being young and the open road. I felt never part of that, either, you know, but I saw that America is many things, many things. Still is.

**WEIGAND:** So do you think when you were feeling different from the other girls in your high school, and that you weren't like the other people you came across, what did you attribute that to? You said that you felt like you were more intellectual than they were, that you had experienced more. So I guess I'm wondering, did you explain that to yourself as something that you felt because of your status of a refugee or an immigrant, or –

**KOLLISCH:** Oh, I think a little of that. I mean, you know, you get so trained in being an outsider. So, first of all, I was left-handed. That was already trouble. Then I was what you might call gender — not ambivalent so much as ambidextrous. I mean, I was both. I was a boy and a girl. I wanted the freedom of the boy. That didn't go down too well, you know, with teachers. But that was more of a spiritual thing. I thought my life should be big and rich and exciting. So I was on the outside there. I was more romantic in the sense that I really believed in either the great love or the great adventure. And I couldn't believe these girls, when they got their engagement ring and the fuss they made over it, you know — it seemed so petty. So I felt myself to be an outsider, quote-unquote. That meant both that I was superior and inferior — both, all the time. Because I often felt how nice it would be to be popular and to be a really good dancer and just be popular, you know, adored by everybody. But that's not what happened to me.

But now that I'm old I'm so aware, having taught college students for so many years, that most people seem to feel that they are outsiders. That's the thing that becomes real to you. My students, you know, they come from privilege and they come from America, and my god, they felt always, many of them, marginal and on the outside. But now I'm beginning to think there is no "inside," that this is another myth that we've created — this false sense of safety, false sense of center. But now, we truly live in a time of so much immigration. So much upheaval and displacement, that this is — I'm beginning to think as sort of the human condition in the twentieth century, the twenty-first century.

**WEIGAND:** Maybe this will be a good time to move ahead and actually talk about your political history. You talk in your book about what drew you to the Workers Party, and you talk about their view of history as the positive progressive thing that provided an antidote to your childhood experiences in Austria, where history seems to be this dark, awful thing. I guess I wondered — and you've addressed this some already — if you think it could have been some other organization that drew you in. Was it just being in that place at that time that pulled you into the Workers Party, or could it have been something else?

41:31

KOLLISCH: Yes. I think that's a good question. I'm sure there could have been any number of other possibilities that would have drawn me in. In the political spectrum, before I became so anti-Communist, anti-Stalinist Communist, I probably could have been deluded to become a communist if I had met the right people and wouldn't have known how to ask these questions — not at that time, anyway. I don't think I could have become a middle American. I don't think I could have become religious in any of those comfortable ways. I think that if I had known about a school like Sarah Lawrence, I might have loved going to an experimental college and finding my way there and being on the literary magazine, you know, or trying theater. I mean, there are an awful lot of interesting things in the world.

But I must say that the movement gave me the sense of — because it was so small and so close — being at home. We all knew each other. It was like a family of equals, pretty much of equals, and to have the sense that you are really responsible for world history and that you can make a mark, that you can really help transform it. That's a grandiose idea, you know, that — I mean, it's more grandiose than being in the experimental theater. So when that came along, it seemed just right for me.

But I think I could have become, possibly, a left liberal or leftwing Zionist at that time — maybe, maybe not, I'm not sure. And I in some way have always been a pacifist, and somewhere the idea of the war and the wars and the hatreds have horrified me. And even then I often thought, Isn't there a way we can bridge our differences, you know. So I might have, if I had come into a more pacifist spiritual environment, I might have also been moved by that.

WEIGAND: But it sounds like you think it probably would've been something political and not religious.

KOLLISCH: It had to be something social, something that had to do with society, and transformation. I mean, something which we could analyze and do over again (laughs).

WEIGAND: Well, that's understandable. How about — and again you write about this in your book, but I wonder what it was like to be a woman in that movement — whether it was more enlightened in some ways and whether the socialists you hung out with treated women more as equals than people in the regular world, or there were certain things that were more difficult? Can you talk about that whole experience?

45:20

KOLLISCH: Yes, that's — I think that's quite so. I mean, that was an additional reason why this movement attracted me, because you didn't feel this boy-girl dichotomy, you know, as I had experienced in my experiments going dating with boys, where you had to kind of make yourself stupid [so as]

not to frighten the boy (laughs). So here, you were really allowed to be as smart as you wanted to be or could be. And the men were quite respectful of the minds of the women. And the women were — a number of women were very ambitious intellectually and very bright.

When it came to sex — and there were several sexual cultures but one of them really was that promiscuity is OK. And since it's the war, something is owed to the boys, since these boys, even though they were against the imperialist war, still served in the Army, and had their lives uprooted. Many men had this attitude like, Come on, couldn't you at least spend the night with me? (laughs) It was, in a sense, very open, you know, and I don't remember that the women had to do much more cleaning up, anything like that. I don't remember these things.

But it did strike me that in the movement there were many more men than women who had the responsible positions, who got elected to the national committee, and who wrote for the paper. There were still differences but I must say that I did not feel I suffered from those differences. I felt respected. My first husband, Stanley — Walter, in the book — was in love with me, but he was also in love with my mind. He thought, This is a smart girl I have here, you know, and he loved that. And of course, I loved that too, that he could appreciate that so much.

It wasn't all good, though. I think that there was also a good deal of what you call, maybe, Jewish urban neurosis in the sense of sexual insecurities on the part of everybody, the men and the women — the men particularly. But in the '40s, there was nothing but sexual repression — nothing but sexual repression in America. At least, we believed in a certain sexual freedom and we also believed in dancing, you know, and we had great admiration for black culture and dance and sensuality, at least as an idea.

WEIGAND: So, what was the Workers Party's position on women's oppression or women's liberation?

KOLLISCH: It never came up. It was never an issue. The whole thing was that Marxists always thought there could be no freedom for anyone, including women.

WEIGAND: Uh-hm — until after the revolution?

KOLLISCH: Until after the revolution. I don't remember ever discussing the so-called women's question in the movement. And the funny thing is I did not feel oppressed as a woman. In fact, I don't think I've ever felt oppressed as a woman and that seems strange now. At times I felt I was sort of self-repressed. I made certain choices which I realized later were internalizing certain ideas, and quite specifically when I was — back when I was finally going to college, Brooklyn College, and I was deciding what to major in, I was quite tempted to major in philosophy because I loved that type of thinking. It seemed so fascinating to me. I also loved literature

passionately. And then, especially if I were to go to graduate school, which I did years later, what would I do? What would I do with it? And some little voice told me, I don't think you should become a philosopher because no man would be interested in you. They would be scared of you and you'd become so dried out and abstract — and you know, a certain stereotype took over my mind.

Whereas in literature, anything goes, as you know. You can love literature and be a writer and love poetry and be a poet and still more or less be connected to life, to the real life, you know, of men and women. So it was the abstraction, you know. I felt I must not become this abstract thinker. But I wouldn't have minded being an abstract thinker for a while. Now, I see all the clichés, of course. But something forbade me to become a philosopher.

WEIGAND: So it sounds like, in this period in the 1940s, I mean, that on the one hand you did have some gender consciousness, because you knew that you didn't want to be a stereotypical girl or —

KOLLISCH: No. Absolutely not.

WEIGAND: But on the other hand, you wouldn't — well, I was going say you wouldn't have called yourself a feminist and obviously, feminism meant something so particular then that you wouldn't have anyway, so —

KOLLISCH: I don't know. It was really not — those were just not concepts I came across and I think I would have become sympathetic very quickly. But I thought about it, you know. When I thought about the roles that most women played — as housewives and mothers and so dependent on men and their approval and often, you know, treated as sort of second-class citizens — I just said, Boy, I'm not gonna be like that. But I didn't understand, really, how that happened and I often thought, Well, maybe the women are just making too many compromises or they're kind of stupid, you know, and I'm not — and that kind of judgment. I didn't understand how it happens, how women are formed to become these women who were frightened or subservient or who questioned their own abilities.

WEIGAND: How about when you write about the Workers Party's emphasis on putting people out into the workforce and making them workers so that they could revolutionize the working class, and about your experiences working in factories and as a waitress — will you talk about that experience? I'm particularly interested in the question of how, if at all, that experience changed your ideas about workers, or your assumptions about workers. I'm also wondering, as you're talking about working as a woman in a factory or as a waitress, about how you got treated in those jobs and how you rationalized that.

KOLLISCH:

Well, it was hard to keep the illusion that workers are these totally superior human beings. It was impossible to keep that illusion for very long, because when you worked with them in the factories, side by side on the assembly line, you saw that they were just ordinary people, and some were very nice and some were horrible, and some were a little bit thoughtful and most were not. But I felt my mission was to revolutionize them. But in the factory, in my sweatshop jobs, I felt as much as an outsider there as I had felt anywhere because I couldn't share any of my thoughts or feelings with my fellow workers, the women I worked with.

And in the big factories of Detroit, working as an auto worker, something about that was very exciting — you were in this massive world of machines. But I didn't really like it, I didn't like all that noise and I was frightened by the boom, boom — and the men. But I did like my job of putting windshield wipers on Jeeps. I felt I was so lucky to have that job, because it was really a lot of fun and I became very skilled, and I loved riding on the assembly line. I described that in my book. But the idea that I might have done that all my life was unthinkable — unthinkable.

I felt guilty when I started to question, What's so great about this? Why should I — I mean, why do we assume that these workers are really the future, or that they would really liberate the world by becoming liberated? It seemed like it might. It seemed like nobody else could do it, and there were so many of them. But I also saw their oppression, their exploitation.

END DVD 1

## DVD 2

WEIGAND: So, we were talking about work and how it was for somebody who was in a group that emphasized the political importance of workers to be out there living as one. And then, I was asking you to, in terms of the work you did in the factory and as a waitress, as a woman, what that experience was like, about whether or not you got treated in ways that we would now call sexist. How did you think about that?

KOLLISCH: Well, I think that in my sweatshop jobs, there were only girls, women, and they were very oppressed. They often had husbands and got bad treatment at home. They would talk about it, about husbands or boyfriends who beat them up and I just felt very sorry for them. In the factory, the auto factory, it was totally sexist, now that I think of it. But at the same time, men and women were fellow workers. We earned a living, and they couldn't really mess around with us. I mean, there were some pretty tough ladies in there. Don't mess around with me, they'd say.

But it was much more insidious, because you also wanted the men to like you and then there was some flattery, you know. I was a rather pretty girl, and the messages were not simple. I always envied men, when they talked to each other — the messages were simple, straightforward, you know. But with women, here they were sort of jollyng you along. I don't remember anyone, really, touching me. They were really well behaved. But it was more like, Go out with me, go out with me. And many of the men were married and I found that shocking. I'd think, You're a married man, get your hands off me.

You know, you can't imagine how well behaved people were in those days. When I was hitchhiking across the United States, I didn't have one encounter that scared me — not one. I had I don't know how many rides with men and they would say, How're you doing, sis? Or, Kid, what're you doing out on the highway? It was a little patronizing but it was not threatening at all. So in the factories, I really thought of myself as cool, as they would say now. I thought I could ride on that Jeep and make the Jeeps and I don't think I felt discriminated against. Now I might see it differently. I mean, you get so used to flirting and using whatever charms you have of femininity and it becomes an unconscious way of winning sympathy. I'm sure I did that. You know, I had no problem with that. I wanted to be liked.

Now, in the waitressing, that was interesting. When I was a waitress in Schrafft's, which was a very middle-class establishment patronized by what I would've then called little old ladies, with white gloves. Of course now I am a little old lady but I don't like white gloves, you know. And there they treated the waitress staff really very badly, as if we were children. Show our nails, show our hair, combed for work and we have a hair net on. You had to approach the table from the left and it was all very ritualized, and I very much felt myself as a servant there, you know, and I

didn't like it, I didn't like it all. But I learned, I said, "I have to learn this skill and as soon as I have it, I'll get out of here."

But when I was working in the luncheonette, behind the counters in a basically working neighborhood of garment workers, very urban, I really loved doing it, and I saw that to be a skilled waitress I had to be quick, fast, organized, focused, and have quite a repartee. So it was always this joking back and forth and I was pretty good at it, answering back and laughing. But I actually discovered in myself something very maternal at that time — I liked to feed people. As simple as that. They would come in hungry and tired and I'd give them the food and liked to watch them eat. It seems such a basic thing.

So all of this sexism that we're looking for, I don't know when I became really, really aware of it. Not until feminism. And by that time, I was living in a very protected environment. I was living in Greenwich Village in New York and I was teaching at Sarah Lawrence. But I grasped that the feminist analysis is completely right in most ways. Very important. It just added another level of consciousness that I didn't have before.

WEIGAND: I want to talk about your process of becoming a feminist but maybe we should put that off a little bit. There's so much here. I mean, you've had such an interesting life. I feel like I could talk to you about 12 hours, but I'm —

KOLLISCH: Don't! (laughs)

WEIGAND: So, um, I've read your book, *Girl in Movement*, which follows your life until 1946.

KOLLISCH: To the end of the war.

WEIGAND: Yeah, and after all these years of really deep commitment to this group, you leave. I'm wondering if you could talk about what that was like, about how it felt at the time, and also about what happens to your relationships with your comrades when you leave? And what about your political ideas? Do they change after you leave the group? It's a lot.

6:20

KOLLISCH: It's a lot. So, maybe you can break it down a little bit.

WEIGAND: Yeah. Why don't we talk first about what it was like to leave the movement.

KOLLISCH: I think it was something that I must have rehearsed many times inside me and really asked myself about, almost like leaving a major relationship. I asked myself, What am I giving up? What am I looking for? This is so important, this is so serious, and why am I withdrawing from it? And yet, it seemed absolutely essential that I find another space, a larger space.

When I finally did it, it was not traumatic. It's just like life went on. And as I remember it, it was not, I'm leaving and I'm never coming back. I would go still to some meetings or some public events. But my life started to take place outside the confinement of the movement. I was working as a waitress and saving money to go to college, and then I had a few love affairs and experimented with things I hadn't done before, and then I was in college and that was pretty demanding, and I still considered myself a radical, still considered myself a Marxist. Even now, when I'm so drawn, in a way, to Buddhism, I feel that the Marxist analysis is absolutely eye opening. People often tend to reject their early influences. But I don't reject Marx and I don't reject Freud. I mean, I had learned so much from these thinkers.

It's just that I felt that I as an individual was not going to be very useful staying in the movement. It wasn't altruism that drove me out but just my hunger for a wider experience of life. So I don't think I felt particularly guilty, because I had committed myself really well. I thought that whatever there was in me would always be there to engage again in actions and things I believed in. Now that turned out, actually, not to be the case, because in the 1950s I was not at all political and I think I didn't read the *Times*, even, very often.

I was, you know, living with Gert, my second husband. We were living together before — we had this quite intense relationship, not always so happy one but a very potent one. We were always economically marginal, just trying to make a living any old way because we were really artists. He was a painter and I was a writer, and then we created a coffee house, you know, which, again, came out of my socialist impulses, really, to have a coffee house owned by all my friends — we would share all the work, would share all the profits, and nobody would have to work hard because there would be just enough. And you know, it was actually happening. We had nine or ten — nine owners. The coffeehouse, Rienzi, was an absolutely beautiful place that we created —

WEIGAND: In Greenwich Village?

KOLLISCH: In the Village. A lot of people in that group were artists, painters, who knew how to work, including my ex-husband, and we made — out of peanuts, going to auctions and buying secondhand this and that — a kind of magical large space, a real café, sort of on the European model. We had wonderful food, and we had chess sets and we had lots of foreign newspapers and we tried to model it on Austrian and French and Italian coffee houses.

10:20

Our first big ideological fight came when people said, "We don't want to do the dishes anymore. Let's hire a dish washer." That became a very principled issue and both Gert, my husband, and I and a couple of others said, "No, if we have a dish washer, he has to become a fellow owner, a co-owner. And it didn't happen. The majority felt this was just ridiculous and romantic and how many co-owners can we have, and the dish washers

were not educated. So anyhow, we had a very nice dish washer and we paid him about three times the going wage, because even the conservatives were liberal.

But that was another kind of activism. I would say now, this was like an experiment of how one can live in this society and get, create a mini-society of one's own, of which we saw so much in the 1960s and after that. But then came a period of my life when I lived in New Mexico and with Gert and that's where I became pregnant after a couple of years and had my baby, and I was not political at all. I was in this sort of escape in that very beautiful place — which was always very alien to me, actually, but beautiful. And I was writing, and I had almost forgotten what it was like to be politically active, I think, until the '60s. I mean, I was aware of McCarthyism and all that, but it just — it was far away. In that sense, I think I was part of the feminine mystique. I too retreated into a marriage, into the ups and downs of a marriage, and then into a child, having a baby — which was very important to me, and wonderful.

And the struggles with my then-husband were largely about him not going to work and making money. Get outta here, make me some money! (laughs) You know, he was too sensitive and too much of an artist and too self-involved and I had always worked and always had made money. But now I had my baby. I wanted to be a mom, you know. There were other problems, too, but it was an important relationship and he also was a Jew and a refugee from Berlin. He was in some ways very similar to me. We felt our attraction and our similarities as well as our differences.

But politics were not a real issue for me again until, I think, the election of Kennedy and the civil rights movement — those things, really, they woke me up. It was like I'd been in a stupor, you know. But since then I think I have always been political. When I came to Sarah Lawrence in 1963, you know, the movements of the 1960s were really more than beginning, and in no time I was in the antiwar movement and the draft counseling and I went to demonstrations and got arrested. Later on I went to Women's Peace Actions and got arrested some more. All of that seemed very important to me.

WEIGAND: Can you tell me more about your decision to have a child? And then about your experience giving birth at a hospital that used natural childbirth practices in the 1950s. 14:40

KOLLISCH: Yes. I've got to. Well, actually, Gert and I lived in a very tiny Spanish village called Chupadero. It's about 12 miles north of Santa Fe, and we had a very simple adobe house, very pretty, and he painted and I wrote, but we also tried to earn a living.

WEIGAND: What took you there?

KOLLISCH: My — Gert's romanticism. He wanted — he had this great vision of the Southwest and particularly New Mexico. He loved the colors and he

painted them, those blacks and browns and grays and those — I don't really know. He went there once by himself and he loved it. He said, "Let's go there." And I went with him.

Well, anyway, I learned from the women in my village, who were all Spanish women, that they had had their children at the Catholic Maternity Center in Santa Fe. But now, when they were getting a little more prosperous, they were going to have their children in the hospital, because they said, Oh, the nuns, they hurt you. So I became very curious. I was actually a social worker at that time, working for the welfare department, and I had had some clients who had given birth there. It was a beautiful old adobe house, a half a dozen nuns, and one or two secular women, nurses. It had a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere. And I said to them, "I'd like to have my baby here." And for one thing it was only 50 dollars, and the hospital, it cost 250. We never had any money. But also the whole idea attracted me, not to be in a hospital.

So they accepted me, and they taught you the breathing and the whole technique and they were so very nice to everyone, and they also really welcomed me. I said, "I'm Jewish and if I have a boy, I expect him to be circumcised. Is that going to be a problem for you?" No, not at all. And I said, "Are you going to try and convert me, because I'm not looking for that." No. And they never did, not the least bit. They were so affectionate and skilled, that it all seemed like play. I mean, not the birth itself, which, as you know, is not play — but everything leading up to it. One of their great feats was that I had a breech, a breech position. I didn't even know it. I didn't even know what a breech was, really, that it can cause real complications and require a C-section. But one day I was there, they were examining me and they told me jokes and they made me laugh so much. By the end of the laughter, they said, We turned him around. Who? They said, Your baby, you know, he's in the right position — they managed to actually do that, which was sort of miraculous.

Anyway, they were marvelous women, very emancipated, very liberal nuns. And after the baby was born — Uri, my darling son, my baby — then they would come and visit. They'd take a Jeep and come up where we lived, up in the mountains, and they taught me how to bathe the baby and how to diaper him. It was such personal care.

**WEIGAND:** So it wasn't so much a decision to use natural childbirth techniques but just that you liked the practitioners?

**KOLLISCH:** No, I believed in natural childbirth. I don't know if one always has to believe in it, but it seemed to me then very nice to be able to know what was going on and to be conscious. And they were doing it, and I had complete confidence in them. It's the first time I actually I saw a community of women that worked so well together, and they were all so motivated by something wonderful, to educate women and monitor the health of children.

But after that, I went right back to being a dumb mom. And I loved it. I was a happy dumb mom. And then we came to New York, because we couldn't earn a living in New Mexico. And you know, economics were always crucial and now we had a very intense social life, too, and knew a lot of artists. It was easy to live in the Village in those days. I mean, you could have an apartment. You could almost manage working part-time and supporting yourself. But, as I said, politics didn't really come back to me until the early 1960s.

WEIGAND: How did being a mother change your view of the world?

KOLLISCH: That's a good question. I can see why you asked that, because you yourself are a mother.

WEIGAND: Right.

KOLLISCH: I think that when we came back to New York and I walked around with Uri in the stroller, everybody would look at us very kindly. He was a very beautiful, charming baby. People looked at him, looked at me, gave me a big smile, and it was so wonderful to know that people can be touched on that elementary level. I'm sure you've experienced that, too. And whatever feelings of shyness I had, or feelings of being different — all that just went away. I said to myself, Oh, this is really so easy, you just have to meet people and look at them and smile and they smile back at you. That was a very wonderful fringe benefit. And has it changed me? It has forever changed me. Not only do I have my love and attachment to my son, but I adore his child. My grandson, Benjamin, is nine-and-a-half. He is a wonderful boy.

Of course there is also always the worry that never leaves you once you are a mother: what's going to happen to them, how is their health, can they manage, is the marriage going well? It is going well. He has a lovely wife. But the worry never quite leaves you ever again. And then, if you're conscious as I am and as you are, of the political world and the environment and all the bad things out there, well, it just becomes a very personal issue. How are they going to live? What kind of future will they have? What kind of a future will my grandson have? I mean, I can't do anything about that. I cannot understand how people who have children or grandchildren — and that goes for all our leaders — don't care more about the environment. To me that is the number one issue. The war in Iraq is a horror to me, but the number one issue is what kind of a world is this going to be 20, 30, or 40 years from now? And you know, except for small groups of people, nobody talks about it. It is so big and so overwhelming that, how come they don't know about that, too? No one will understand that in the future — if we have a future. So, yes, I think it does change one to have a child. It gives another layer of consciousness and emotional texture or something.

WEIGAND: Well, there's a way it makes, I think, politics even more personal, in a way.

KOLLISCH: It makes it much more personal. And also, you know, you don't really know how much fun it is to see a kid develop. I mean, the changes in a child from month to month and year to year are so miraculous to me, and they draw me to little children. I guess I'm one of those old ladies who waves and smiles and says, Peek-a-boo! But I just think that little children are so wonderful. I don't know what happens that we manage to ruin so many of our children. Anyway, that's another story.

WEIGAND: So did you, as a mother in the 1950s, read Dr. Spock?

KOLLISCH: Oh, yes, all of that.

WEIGAND: You more or less followed his approach?

KOLLISCH: Well, yes, and you know, I did know some other mothers and we talked about Dr. Spock and then we modified it according to our judgment. But I breastfed and I even remember what Dr. Spock said, he says, "That's OK, that's normal. Don't worry, that's normal." But I was very much aware that we held the child and played with the child so much more than I ever remembered being held or played with by my parents, you know. I think that's rather new.

WEIGAND: You mentioned McCarthyism and being aware of it. What sort of effect did it have on you personally? I mean, you weren't a Communist and McCarthy really was most concerned with Communists. Do you feel it had some impact on your day-to-day life?

25:18

KOLLISCH: Well, it didn't, because they were not going after us. And sometimes I would wonder, Why *aren't* they going after us? I mean, we're every bit as revolutionary as these poor Communists that they drag up, much more so because we were explicitly revolutionary during the war — before the war — and it just seemed a grotesque and horrible spectacle. And at the same time, I was so anti-Communist that I would feel, Well, why don't they stand up? Why do they take the Fifth Amendment? Why don't they say, I am a Communist and it's true that in Russia, things have gone badly but there's nothing wrong with the basic vision. What's wrong with *you*? Don't you believe? I mean, there was no one talking like that and I would've liked it. But it seemed like a terrible aberration, you know, in America — and scary, too — that this could happen suddenly. We had just fought a war and who are these people who are going to take away your basic American freedoms and send you to jail and blackmail you? At the time I didn't know Communists but later I learned how devastating this really was to people who had been Communists. Their lives were just destroyed.

WEIGAND: You talked a little bit about how your life in the 1950s was conventional in some ways: you were married, you had a child, and you wanted your husband to go out and earn a living and all of that. But it also seems like there are a lot of ways in which you and your life were very unconventional. So I guess I'm wondering how you thought about it at the time.

KOLLISCH: Both my husband and I were great lovers of D.H. Lawrence at that time, and there was a time when I really wanted to be one of those D.H. Lawrence completely natural women, whatever he meant by that, like Mother Nature. I wanted to grow things and be completely spontaneous and completely sexually open and yet submissive in the way that his heroines are. And I think I even worked on that, consciously or unconsciously, and began to realize that this is not really quite me. I'm really not submissive. I'm really not a "natural" person. I wish I were, but there's been too much culture and too much experience and too much pain, I would say, to be the simple spontaneous, you know, ideal image of the female that he draws. 27:52

WEIGAND: His mother type?

KOLLISCH: Well, his mother, but I'm thinking of *Women in Love* — the two sisters, remember?

WEIGAND: I actually haven't read them.

KOLLISCH: Well, of the two sisters [Ursula and Gudrun], one is more as I've just described and the other is more of an artist and complex. I knew I was complex and I couldn't kid myself about it. I knew I would be a very good mother but that motherhood would not be the total definition of me. I knew that with my husband I would always live in struggle because there were too many ways in which we disappointed each other in our expectations. There were happy times, too, I must say, like when we came back to New York, we had a large number of friends. At that time here was still this sort of Bohemia of New York, you know, the downtown Village artists' scene. But even then it was conventional in its sexism.

In some ways the feminine mystique was a real thing. We were all in this stupor — not noticing, not wanting to, not rocking the boat. And the first time I heard about something like Women's Strike for Peace, it blew me away. I was never in Women's Strike for Peace but I was just amazed that women could do this old-fashioned thing, get together and fight for peace. Wow. And before that, I thought of course that politics had to be shared completely, that if the men and the women worked together, then all problems would be solved. But then I began to see the importance of women's politics and that possibly women have different priorities. I certainly felt that, you know, and I still do. Not wanting to be what we call

now an essentialist. I'm not an essentialist — god forbid. But I do know that as a woman, and I think I share this with many women, I have different priorities. I may be jumping ahead, but this was definitely true in the Seneca Peace demonstration, which was very important to me and about which I've written a piece I will give to Smith.

In Seneca the townspeople were very angry at us — at this group of women who marched through their town. I really should tell this story in another context, but all I can tell you is that we sat down, the townspeople jeered at us and yelled and us and said, Go home, Go take a bath, Communist, whore, lesbian, lezzie, Nuke the dykes. There were horrible slogans. And I couldn't stand to sit. It was just too passive. So I stood up and tried to talk to people. I would look at the faces of the opposition, the townspeople, and try to pick someone. I only talked to women, and I would say, "Look, I think we want the same thing. You don't really want your kids killed in the war. You don't want to kill somebody else's kid." And sometimes, actually, there would be this glimmer of communication. I think you cannot have that conversation with a man. They'd say, Get outta here. What do you know? What do you know?

WEIGAND: Yeah, like they don't want to make that connection, somehow.

KOLLISCH: No. I mean, this utterly primitive feeling for life, you know, preserving life.

WEIGAND: Backing up to the 1950s again — you get divorced at the end of the 1950s, is that right, or the early 1960s?

KOLLISCH: Yeah, I divorced in the 1950s, the middle 1950s. No, I'm sorry. My son was born in the 1950s. I was divorced in the middle 1960s, yes.

WEIGAND: OK. And it's around that time that you decide to go back to school?

KOLLISCH: Back to graduate school.

WEIGAND: What led you to that decision?

KOLLISCH: Well, I was making my living, supplementing what Gert made, or sometimes making more than he. I was doing ghost reading, ghost writing, very marginal things — literary things but marginal things. And I realized, Hell, I have to support my child and myself. We can't always be these bohemians on the fringe. And it was clear to me I would have to get more education. I was very practical and was wondering, should I go to graduate school in German, in English? I said, It's got to be literature — that was clear to me. And then I got a job offer from Brooklyn College because I had done a lot of German there as an undergraduate on a serious level, because there were so many refugees around. My chairman said, "Look, if you're going to graduate school, if you work on a master's, we can give

33:40

you a job right now teaching.” And that’s what settled it. And I did the German, which was a very big experience for me, actually going back to that language with all its, you know complexities, and with my complex relationship to it as my mother tongue.

But I was just determined to get a job. I thought I would probably wind up teaching in college, or that I might be in publishing. I was very lucky to have gotten a job right away at Brooklyn College and then at Sarah Lawrence. As soon as I started teaching it seemed to me almost inevitable that that’s what I should be doing. It’s something I have a gift for and feel very at home in. I love the dialogue.

WEIGAND: So it was a conscious decision to be more professional then?

KOLLISCH: Yes. It was a conscious decision to join the middle class, finally.

WEIGAND: That makes sense.

KOLLISCH: And also to find work that I loved, if possible. I wasn’t sure I would love it but I certainly hated all the shit work I had done.

WEIGAND: Right. And so, it’s at the same time, I guess, that the U.S. starts to get a little more — I’m stumbling over my words here — we start to see a resurgence of more progressive social movements.

KOLLISCH: Yes, yes.

WEIGAND: And so, it’s concurrent with the time you start back to graduate school that you start getting involved in these things again?

KOLLISCH: Well, I went to graduate school when my child was almost three, in 1959. By 1963, I had a job at Sarah Lawrence — the first year, part time. By 1964, they begged me to stay and gave me a full-time job, and three years later, they offered me early tenure, which I turned down, because I didn’t understand tenure and what a big deal that is, because at that time it was much easier, you know, and I felt they were trying to make me complicit, because we had had some student strikes and I was very active with the radical students. I thought they were trying to buy me off so I thought, No, no. I’ll wait, I’ll wait. I don’t want anyone to get jealous. But anyhow, it was a very good match, Sarah Lawrence and I, and except for a couple of years which were very bad — and I will tell you about them — it was a great place to teach and to find myself and to learn and to expand my knowledge. I was able to do things like saying I would teach *The City as Metaphor in Literature*. I’d say, I’ll do Dickens, I’ll do Balzac, I’ll do Dostoevsky — you know, it immediately falls into place and then you start reading and you have a course. But you can’t do that everywhere.

WEIGAND: So when you start getting involved again in radical politics, how did that happen? Did you just sort of pick up where you left off, in a way?

38:00

KOLLISCH: No, no, no, no. It was so different, you know. It was so very different. It was less ideology and more activism. I think my first activism came through Grace Paley. She was doing draft counseling at the Greenwich Village Methodist Church in Washington Square and she said I should come on down and learn draft counseling, and I did. And that really led me think deeply about war and I became much more familiar with the various positions, including the pacifist position on war. The Vietnam War was very real and there was, as you know, a great deal of opposition that led to everything — to demonstrations, various acts of civil disobedience where we got arrested and got arrested together with my students and my friends. It just seemed like the right thing to do. And in a way I liked it better because it was less abstract; less theoretical. It had not so much to do with the distant future but with now, and there were, after all, a great many people in movement at that time and I felt part of something big.

WEIGAND: So it starts with antiwar, peace activism and were you also involved in civil rights at all?

KOLLISCH: Well, unfortunately, I wasn't. I was very much aware of it and totally in sympathy with it, but I couldn't go down to the South. I was so busy, going to graduate school, having a child, trying to hold a job. You know all about this. But I really didn't, and it makes me sad that I couldn't. But this was right back home, in my own neighborhood, and that, too, I liked. I liked that I could participate in making my own neighborhood a place from which I could practice politics. I liked that we had peace marches through the Village. For a number of years before feminism articulated itself more sharply, seven or eight of us women would have a sign that said, Not our sons, not your sons, not their sons. We just stood quietly, and people came and talked to us. Often they were angry and we would hand them a little flier and have discussions. Well, that would be seen from the feminist point of view now as, in some way, I don't know —

WEIGAND: Maternalist?

KOLLISCH: Maternalist, yes. Too much on the right. But it seemed very good when we did it. And this became only a model for doing many, many more things. I never thought America would go to war again after the Second World War. I sort of slept through the Korean War, but this was such an unnecessary horror and I suddenly was very wide awake. I believed there was hope in the world, you know. I felt the 1960s were kind of wonderful. A lot of people say bad things about the 1960s but it was also a rebirth in many ways. The young people looked so beautiful, and I loved their long hair and their flowers and their androgynous looks, and the feeling another

culture was being created. And New York was a wild city — sort of wonderful.

I raised my child in that atmosphere, to some extent, and it may not have served him completely. I think children probably need more sense of structure and safety. This is something we don't talk about but I have the feeling that he was a sort of hippy, but he's also an athlete, a very good athlete. And now he's an athlete and a wonderful father and a journalist at National Public Radio, and politically, much more conservative than I am. Not a bad conservative, but more of a realist, perhaps I should say.

So, you know, about this activism, it's really based on the idea of a community. In my life, I've had periods when I've experienced community very strongly and then there are periods when I've experienced loneliness very strongly, like just being in New Mexico with my husband and nobody else, really. And when you engage in politics and the time is with you, it's like it becomes a very large community, you know. You don't examine it too closely for how long or how deep, but it's intoxicating. And so, again, there's a lot of joyous memory connected in my mind with the '60s.

WEIGAND: So how about feminism? How do you come into contact with that way of thinking about things? I think you mentioned that you were in some consciousness-raising groups or group —

43:40

KOLLISCH: Yes. All of this happened, I think, in maybe 1970? Well, perhaps you know Gerda Lerner?

WEIGAND: I don't know her personally, but I know her work.

KOLLISCH: Yes, I think it must have been 1970. Gerda tried to get a few of us to start doing a women's studies course at Sarah Lawrence. It had never been done before and, at first, I was not so keen on it. She said, "How about you, Eva, coming in and doing women's literature?" I said, "What is women's literature?" She said, "Well, you figure it out." I thought women are really not interesting to women. I said, Women writers? I don't separate women writers from other writers. You know, it took me quite some time, and then I saw this was a very wonderful thing to do, a very interesting thing to do. Because you do read literature differently if you allow yourself to read as a woman, instead of with this aesthetic distance, you know. And you notice what happens to female characters in fiction. After all there's a lot of social realism, as well as symbolic truth, in literature. That's what it's about — it's about life and truth and how people relate. And all of that opened my eyes to things I had never criticized before.

So, it didn't change my feeling about the great writers. You know, Tolstoy's a great writer, Dostoevsky's a great writer. I still love them. But then I developed an interest in how women write about themselves and there's a difference in the way they treat their characters. And what were

the lives of the writers. You were never allowed to ask that in the 1950s. It was just not right. It was only the text, the text, the text. And I loved to analyze the text, but something always troubled me. What was behind the text, how did it reflect the world — all of that became an issue.

So that was my contribution. In our first larger joint course, my section was called Love, Marriage and Autonomy in the Novel. Gerda, of course, was already a feminist historian and she talked about the American women's movement. Joan Kelly Gadol was a well-known Renaissance scholar who unfortunately died young.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I read some of her work, though.

KOLLISCH: And she's a beautiful writer. For her, this was new. In the beginning she said, "Well, are we just going to think and talk about women?" And then there was Sherry Outner, who wrote a path-breaking paper when she was very young, and I think the title of it was "Is Man to Culture As Woman to Nature?" She went through a number of different societies testing that, and it was a very wonderful piece. So anyhow, that started it.

Simultaneously there was consciousness raising and I actually was with a number of friends and we talked about things we had never talked about, such as sex, our relationships with men, our feelings about women, our feelings about our own body, about stereotyping. All of these issues were new thoughts for me, and important thoughts. Lesbianism. In that group, I was the only one who said, "Well, I have had an affair with a woman, and I loved this woman." And another one said, "Well, I think that when my husband dies, I'll become a lesbian" (laughs) — something outrageous like that. And a number of them said, Well, we haven't done it but we would like to try. It was accepted but it was not a big deal. I didn't feel it was such a big deal, either. In the 1970s I had a long relationship with a woman. I lived with her and she was also a refugee, quite a bit older than me and in some ways, very masculine, and very domineering. In some, many ways, she reminded me of my husband Gert. The same vulnerabilities and the same need to, you know, to dominate.

Anyway, I think that there have been so many parts of the women's movement and in the most personal way, I think everything that had to do with androgyny pleased me more than the approaches that assumed the existence of masculine and feminine. That just doesn't speak to me. But as far as the oppression of women, the women's movement woke me up to that in the world. It still is such a big issue and we don't talk enough about that. And you know, when we were in our women's peace actions, we always had this essentialist dream of sisterhood — coming together, coming together, speaking truth to power, because we are powerless. But when I read something like *A Room of One's Own*, or — it just seemed like someone had taken the veils from my eyes.

So, you know, I am a feminist. I am a Marxist, but I am also very worried about the whole world and humanity, and where humanity is

going. It's no longer all the men have done these bad things to us, you know — it is not that simple.

WEIGAND: Well, we've got ten minutes left on this tape, and probably after that we should call it quits until tomorrow. But maybe you can talk a little bit about your coming out and how that was for you.

50:20

KOLLISCH: Well, I think what I can say about that is that in the 1960s I had a couple of affairs with women and I enjoyed them. They were important, but I didn't consider myself a lesbian, and after one of these affairs, I went back to having affairs with men. In the 1970s, I did live with a woman who was definitely a lesbian. Her name is Lily, a refugee, but she was very closeted for various reasons. She was a doctor, a psychiatrist, and she was very closeted. I came out at Sarah Lawrence, and in a very particular circumstance, which is really quite interesting, and I don't know if we have time on the tape now. It's a story that's going to get me emotionally quite involved.

WEIGAND: Maybe we should talk about that tomorrow.

KOLLISCH: I think we should really table that for tomorrow. I can say I didn't conceal the fact that I'm a lesbian, certainly not from my family, not from my son, not from my friends. In this building, people realize that my partner is a few floors below me. We're always seen together and it's the right choice for me, the right time of my life to be a lesbian. But it is not something that I spend a great deal of time "being," so to speak, because I have been so much already. I've had so many identities. It just feels right and natural and I love Naomi, and so in a certain sense, it is very simple. But I was quite fortunate, I think, that I wasn't a lesbian, practicing, or even fantasizing too much, at a time when it was so taboo that you had to hide completely, or had to feel shame, or you had to go meet in bars. I didn't go through this period of great suffering that so many women did in the '40s and '50s, and by the 1960s, you know, it was a part of my androgyny, really, to have loved some men and to love women.

You know, it just seems so unbelievable to me that this is so threatening, this natural feeling for a member of your own sex which exists in the whole world and always has, and is emotionally true for many people who never, never practiced sexually. I don't understand why this has to be so fought off and estranged and put up there as "other," as bad, unhealthy, sinful — that's so much what's wrong. And to me, that is what's wrong, the relationship between that and war is so obvious to me, you know.

WEIGAND: But did you feel like, when you started being involved with women, that you were sort of making a discovery about yourself? Or was it something that had always kind of been there?

KOLLISCH: No, it was not a discovery, because as a girl in boarding school, we fooled around and we had this sexual experimentation and it was all very jolly and exciting. I'd had a number of crushes on women whom I admired, but without ever going all the way or even thinking that I would, could, or should. But I think the first time I had a sexual experience with a woman, it felt very good. I liked it. And the intimacy, and the similarity of bodies, and the closeness, without such a sharp division between friendship and sexual love or love. With men, there was always much more struggle. I mean, I could be very angry at my ex-husband and then we would make love and that would be great and then we would be angry again and then maybe we would talk to each other. And being able to talk and be honest with each other is such an important part. It can — it does — also happen between men and women, but it's easier, at least for me, with a woman. Not with all women, but with this woman [Naomi].

END DVD 2

## DVD 3

WEIGAND: Here we are on February 17th. I'm Kate Weigand and you're Eva Kollisch. We're in your apartment. And today we're going to talk more about some of these questions about political activism and about connections between periods of activism, and conflicts between them. And we're going to talk about your coming out at Sarah Lawrence. And you wanted to talk about your Older Women's Network for mutual aid.

But before we do that, I was thinking about the way you were talking about in the '50s, having retreated from political activity and choosing to live as a more conventional — although not very conventional — life as a wife and mother. It occurred to me as I was thinking about it, but we didn't really talk about what you think about why that happened. So I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit, about why you think your life took that direction at that particular point in time. Was it because of your individual circumstances, or because of the historical context, or both?

KOLLISCH: Well, that's a big question. I can try to answer it on the personal level and then on the bigger level of what was going on in America. On the personal level, I suppose I had a kind of scenario in my head about what life should be, or what my life should be, and it would include radical views and taking risks and being adventurous and idealistic, committing myself. And then would come that middle period where I would commit myself to someone and have a child or possibly more than one child — have a family. That was quite part of my inner scenario. I thought I would learn to live intimately with nature, perhaps, pay more attention to the daily things, and after that it would be again wide open and anything could happen — something like that. I mean, I do think this sort of narrative is not the conventional narrative, because according to that you should get married by the age of 21, but it's the narrative of a more free, bohemian kind of adventurous woman's life.

But on the wider, broader level, you know that the '50s represented this move toward the domestic life and the family and fragmentation, really — everybody in their own little life in their own little house. This had so much to do with the war, and so much to do with the kind of engineered politics of depoliticizing the nation and locking them up in a purely private sphere. And simultaneously, there was McCarthyism, so that the kind of politics we did see was a frightening kind of politics. There was nothing that I could relate to. For example, there was nothing like a sort of social vision of how to raise children in some context of community. There was no vision of what the good life should be other than the individual private life with the house and the car, you know, and the jobs and the economic security.

Often you're not conscious of that when you're in that time, but maybe I was in a sort of vague way. It's depressing out there. You might as well withdraw. And then, of course, being a writer, and married to an artist,

there was always the temptation to withdraw and to simplify. So that was also part of it.

But in the 1960s came the wake-up call. I must commit myself to something. This is important, you know. There is a war going on. I want to struggle against it. That, too, was a private decision but it happened to coincide, you know, with that feeling of many, and it was a very good feeling to be part of that movement, whereas the going, the retreat into the purely private sphere, you know, in that period of my life, I was — I think, rather confused, really, and sometimes depressed and I didn't want to think about my life. I just wanted to live it, you know? Well, I don't have much more to say on that subject.

WEIGAND:

Oh, there was one other thing I wanted to ask you yesterday that I didn't get to, and this is sort of unrelated, in a way, to these other things we've been talking about, but you said that you and your husband went to Europe in 1951 or 1952 — somewhere around there? And I wondered just what that experience was like, having left there during the war and, you know, kind of barely escaped with your life, really, and then, by the '50s, you knew that. So I just wondered what it was like to go back there and to —

KOLLISCH:

Well, it was 1951, '52. We spent a few months in Europe and the first place we went to was Austria. That is actually, only I could go to Austria — no, that's wrong. We both went — the first thing we did was go skiing in Innsbruck, near there, and that was wonderful, you know. I mean, snow, mountains, and there were these jolly Austrians and young people. I didn't feel part of anything at all, but it wasn't threatening.

But then I had to go to Vienna by myself because my husband couldn't. He was actually the man I lived with then — I married him a little later — but he was not allowed into Vienna because he was a stateless person. That's really not too relevant, but Vienna was, at that time, controlled by the occupation forces. It was divided into four zones: the British, the American, the Russian, and I guess there was a French zone. So I went by myself. I walked around in Vienna.

It was a like a dream. It felt totally unreal. I felt as if I was a spy from another country checking out this city which I had loved as a child, even though I didn't know it well. But it was to me a very cosmopolitan city, very attractive, and, you know, is a rather beautiful city. I felt I was just literally spying on people and feeling the German and hearing that language, and having a tremendous ambivalence about that language, really, in many ways.

Through some coincidence I stayed in a very modest place. It was not really a hotel, but a convent that rented rooms. My mother told me it would be a good place to stay because it was very cheap. It was clean, it was OK, so I checked into this convent, had my own room and bath, very luxurious, went out in the street and walked a little. It was evening and a man yells from behind me, and I will just say it in German first, then

6:16

translate it. It was like a shouting, saying, in dialect, “*SIE, JUNGE FRAU, GEHÖREN SIE IM GEFÄNGNIS?*” Do you speak German?

WEIGAND: Not really, but I took four years of German in high school, so I understood some of that.

KOLLISCH: “You, young woman, you belong in jail.” I had no idea what he meant, what he saw from my back, and whether he thought I was a streetwalker, because I was out in the evening by myself, swinging my pocketbook, or whether he had seen through me that I was a Jew. I have no idea. But it was so chilling. It was so incredibly — I was so vulnerable. Anyway, to answer that question more broadly, I have been back to Austria a number of times and each time I try to understand more what happened and who I was and what my family was in that context. And I’ve been back maybe five or six times. I’ve written on that subject. I’m never the same, it is never the same. That country’s changing.

There is a new generation of young people who are quite wonderful and I had occasion to lead two discussions with them, just now in November when I was invited there for this conference on memory and language. This is the first generation of Austrians I can connect to, because they are awake, while their parents had repressed everything. I mean, their grandparents were these so-called perpetrators. They were my contemporaries. And it is said — I’m merely repeating what I read everywhere — that the next generation, their children, didn’t dare to ask, and didn’t want to know. You know, it was just too awful for them to think that their parents were complicit. Were they Nazis? Did they participate in killing people? So that was the silent generation. And their children, who are now in high school and college, are asking, What happened? What happened? What’s the truth of this?

Austria has always claimed to be the first victim of Hitler because of the annexation, the so-called *Anschluss*. But what is not told is that they, the great majority of Austrians, welcomed Hitler with open arms — celebrated, became Nazis. I don’t know the proportion, but there were also a large number of people in Austria who had been politically on the left, social democrats, some communists who, of course abhorred Hitler, and some religious people who, on religious grounds, rejected Nazis. Many of those also ended up in prison or in the camps, but many of those who originally participated in the labor movement, or who were social democrats who defended the right of the workers to free speech and political rights, immediately turned around after the *Anschluss*. They took off the pro-Austrian pin and put on the Nazi pin overnight.

I witnessed some of that and I’ve read many such witnessings, you know, of German troops marching in and the population jubilant. Immediately the arrests started and the beating of Jews and the public humiliation of Jews, a frightening climate which made clear to you that you were not a part of this society, had no more rights, and you’d better get out of there.

So I'm faced with how to juggle this understanding, which partially comes from reading a lot and partly from meeting people. It's not as if I left there with a clear understanding of what happened at all. How to juggle that with the ongoing life in Austria today and who are these people. Are they really worse than other people? That takes a certain amount of processing. And then, I don't know if you want me to talk about this now, but very important to me was a reconciliation, a friendship that has developed with a couple of classmates of mine from Austria.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I read your piece.

KOLLISCH: You read my piece about how I came to connect to these women whom I hardly remembered from my early years in public school or in high school, and I became quite persuaded through correspondence that they were authentic, real people, good people, who had actually — in small and not so small ways — resisted the Nazis. Suddenly there were three of them I was corresponding with, and then I went back to Austria a few years ago and I met two out of the three and we liked each other so much and became more real to each other in daily life. They were very welcoming and knew me and accepted me and understood my life as much as you can when you come from totally different culturally worlds. But they understood my life: my politics, my intellectual interests, that my partner was a woman — everything. They just welcomed me. I've had a long correspondence with them which is a very interesting record. One day, I'll give it to the Smith archives. It's in German, but it's really the story of learning, slowly, to trust people.

So that was, on an individual level, very appealing to me and I didn't think therefore all Austrians were good, but I could no longer feel that they were all bad. To think they were all bad would be a terrible view. It's a view that I don't have intellectually because I really do think people are different from each other and that there must be an element of trust or hope if you're going to live. But in my heart, I felt very dark and bitter about the Austria that I remembered.

WEIGAND: Should we move ahead now toward these things that we've said we'd talk about today? When we finished up yesterday, you were telling me a little bit about coming out and having relationships with women and you mentioned the story about coming out at Sarah Lawrence which we decided we'd put off until today. Do you want to talk about that now?

KOLLISCH: Well, this is the story. I had a relationship and partly lived with a woman who was also Austrian. She was a doctor, a psychiatrist and it was one of those good/bad relationships. It made me feel somehow, for a while, very secure and loved and later on, it really became full of problems. Anyway, I had this relationship and I never concealed it from anyone who knew me at all personally, my friends or my colleagues. A Sarah Lawrence, being a small place, that sort of thing gets passed around — Oh, Eva Kollisch, she

15:30

lives with a woman, or she shares her life with a woman, or she's a lesbian, or whatever. OK. I mean, I was not up there on the barricades but I was not hidden, so I can't say coming out was a dramatic step.

But then something happened which is really a very bitter memory. One day I got a manuscript in the mail from someone who remained anonymous, and this manuscript was a draft of an article that was to be published in the *New York Times Sunday* magazine. It was about homosexuality, about lesbianism primarily, at Sarah Lawrence.

WEIGAND: What year was this?

KOLLISCH: This was — I'll tell you right away — 1977. I think it was 1977. Well, I have to say that until then, I felt very at home at Sarah Lawrence. I felt it was my home in many ways. I was very well liked and was on all kinds of important committees. I was the head of something called the teaching faculty, which I created — a group of people who were questioning the administration and its policies, and I was the director of the Center for Continuing Education and I had the trust and respect of many people besides my students. I think I was known to be a very good teacher. Well, this manuscript presented me with a problem. What am I going to do with it, you know? I had an idea who might have sent it, some alumna who worked at the *Times*, but certainly I wouldn't even want to know who sent it.

And the author was Ann Roiphe. She's quite a well-known writer now and she had been a student at Sarah Lawrence. The gist of this article was that Sarah Lawrence is a very neurotic, sick place, intellectually superior, but full of unhappy lesbianism. And it was full of — not photographs, but drawings which were absolutely horrible, despicable, like cartoons, of very masculine-looking, dykey women. There were interviews with students who were frightened of lesbians. It was just an unbelievable smear.

So, what should I do with that document? I finally said, "I must bring it to the president of the college and warn him that this is going to happen." And simultaneously I thought I would bring it to my colleagues. But I didn't want to, you know, make it a big deal. It was very delicate what I did. So I left a copy of this at the president's office. I said, "You have to read this, and it has to be discussed with some of the faculty. And the teaching faculty, I had a large meeting there, and I said, "There is a document in the dean's office that has to be kept very quiet. But it is a draft as I received it and I think people should really read it."

They all began to discuss with each other what should be done about it. Well, the president wanted to have nothing to do with it. He said, "This is a free speech issue and you'd better stay away. Hands off." My colleagues became quite frightened. And they started to withdraw from me. And the gay students — it was mostly women in 1977. I mean, we had some male students but I don't remember them in this. Anyway, word came to the lesbian students and they were very frightened and I and another colleague

of mine who was very supportive had some meetings with the students and we told them that the college was not going to do anything but that this article would appear and they should be ready. They should prepare themselves psychologically for whatever reaction there would be from their parents and the public.

And then I had a call from the *New York Times*. I was called into the president's office and the *Times* charged me with — I don't know what you call it — stealing a manuscript or improper use of a manuscript and it was like an inquisition. How did you get this manuscript? I got it in the mail. Who sent it to you? I don't know. (laughs) I don't know and I don't care. I said, "I'm very glad I got it." Well, they couldn't really intimidate me. I had done nothing. In fact, I think I was really innocent and responsible in acting the way I did. The people who called me at the *Times* decided to do nothing.

The article came out. When it came out, it was modified from the draft I saw. It was edited down. It was still absolutely scandalous and you can find it if you do the research. You will find it in the *Sunday* magazine. I wish I could be more exact on the date, but you'll find it. I think it was 1977, and it still had the pictures. They were sort of muted down because one of the things that were considered was that we could have a law suit against the *Times* for smearing our college.

What I had proposed was that several faculty members who were respected would go to the *Times* in a very discreet way and say, Look, we know you are planning to have this article. It's scandalous, and it's really smearing the college. What goes on here goes on elsewhere, and we don't monitor the private lives of our students. We trust them to find their own way and they have the right to their own sexuality while here. This is a college which has a reputation for being very open and free. Under McCarthy, we brought in a number of scholars who were thrown out of other universities, and this is something to be proud of.

And so, that was my thought, [that] we should present that to the *Times*, but that was rejected by my colleagues. And the administration was very worried about my little maneuvers, you know. But the fact is, the article came out and after that, I do remember that I thought that the college should answer and that the answer should be very much along these lines of free speech and free private life. The college did nothing. Nothing. They were so scared, they put their head in the sand and said, Oh, this is going to pass us by, and so on. And it did not pass by. The college lost a lot of enrollment. I don't know but they probably lost money too, subsidies. Some students were withdrawn. We were smeared as a queer college. This went on for several years. Our enrollment dropped and the quality of our students dropped and the quality of the climate. It became very cautious. They tried to bring in mostly very conventional students. It was really awful.

Personally, I was demonized. Since I was known to be gay, I was demonized. Not for being gay but for having "stolen a manuscript" — for interfering with free speech. There was an editorial in the student paper

against me, and no matter what — it was mostly quiet and subtle — but suddenly a lot of my colleagues withdrew from me. Several stood by me, but I became suddenly very isolated. I was never elected to committees anymore and no longer even tried to run for a committees. I withdrew, and I did my teaching as well as I could. But suddenly I was a very lonely person in this college, which I considered my home.

Well, just to round this out, when did the gay rights movement really start, the late 1970s, the early 1980s? Then things did become more open, after maybe five, six, seven years. Then there was a different atmosphere at the college and my own colleagues, many of them, again tried to approach me and I was being elected to things again. But I went through all this and I no longer had the trust that I had had before, you know. In odd ways, it reminded me of the Nazi experience and the McCarthy experience — how you can suddenly be singled out for being “other.”

WEIGAND: Right.

KOLLISCH: But shortly before I retired, which was about 1994 or so, I decided to speak to a few people whom I liked, you know, who had at that time withdrawn from me. One was the dean of the college, and several were colleagues. And I said, “I really — I’m not blaming, but I’m just trying to understand, it’s very important to me: What happened? What happened those years? What did you think? What did you feel?” And whoever I spoke to was sort of taken aback at this, and also was full of remorse.

And the dean and several others said, It was homophobia. We were scared. We were simply scared and some of that was then put on you. You had been the troublemaker and we didn’t think about it but we just thought, Stay away. Keep hands off. It was homophobia and uh, now, by that time, the early ’90s, they’d had enough time to reflect on this and to change and not be so frightened by the fact that some people are gay or lesbians.

But for me, it was — I would say this was another kind of political education. And this is known to several people, this story, and for some time, I thought something should be written about it. I have an absolutely darling gay male student who is a writer and a poet and he helps some of the poets and writers on the faculty. He’s very bright, and I said to him, “You should really tell your gay and lesbian teachers or your history teachers or someone about this and maybe someone can do research into it.” And he said, “Yeah, that makes a wonderful article, at least.” The records are all there, you know — faculty meetings. But so far, nothing has been done. Anyway, it’s an old story now but it belongs — it’s part of our history.

WEIGAND: It really indicates sort of just how frightening an issue it was for some people, even in the 1990s.

KOLLISCH: Yes, yes.

WEIGAND: How about other people? How did they react as you identified more as a lesbian? How did other people in your life respond to your coming out? 29:20

KOLLISCH: Oh, nothing dramatic at all, you know. I mean, the people who were in my life, my family, they knew [I was a lesbian] when I was living with a woman and there was never a question about it. They have accepted it and they particularly accept Naomi, who is like family. She's part of our family. But Lily, she was much more difficult and not always such a pleasant person. They had reservations about her but not the fact that I was living, sharing my life with a woman. I can't say that I lost one friend. I was in a fairly broad-minded world and that was not a problem. But coming out? In a sense, I didn't ever need to come out. It was known and I wasn't persecuted. But then — do you want to hear more on the subject?

WEIGAND: If you have more to say, sure.

KOLLISCH: Well, you know, we belong to something called the Kindertransport Association. These people are my contemporaries and they're largely well educated, middle-class professionals who are now old. Much of our talk is about the past and our lives and what happened to us after we left Germany or Austria, when we were sent to England as children. We talk about our happiness or unhappiness, our sufferings. Once I heard a woman talk with great emotion and bitterness about how she was mistreated in England and abused, physically abused, and I could see she was risking a lot in sharing this confidence with a large group of people.

I had felt very much at home in these Kindertransport meetings but nobody knew that I was a lesbian. I had once gone there with Naomi but so what — two older ladies, friends. So I said to myself, Do I have to come out again? Do I have to do this, you know, here? I feel at home, but how at home do I really feel if I can't come out? But isn't it very artificial to come out? I mean, they don't care. Why do I have to push this down their throat. And it was something that I became more conscious of, and I was really asking myself, Do I have to do this? I also felt it was it was a test of courage in some way. Well, what I did was, I wrote a piece which — maybe you know it?

WEIGAND: I did see it in that book, edited by Joan Larkin?

KOLLISCH: By Joan Larkin. I've forgotten what the title is.

WEIGAND: *Women Like That.*

KOLLISCH: I have it here somewhere. We can look it up. But in a sense, that piece was the story of my conflict about how I felt at home and then suddenly didn't feel at home. I was concealing this and would I have the courage to stop concealing it? And in the piece I said, "No, I don't have the courage." But

then it ended with a kind of fantasy that Naomi was there with me and we heard them dancing below and Naomi and I were dancing and then suddenly they all came and they danced with us and embraced us and it ended in a sort of happy image. But it didn't — it really ended with the thought, I have not dared to come out, but maybe the next time. So, in a sense, that was my coming out piece. Being afraid to come out was my coming out piece.

And then sure enough, the next time, I was one of the people chosen to lead a little seminar, or group in which we were to talk about our lives. And in that group, my brother — one or both of my brothers were there and there were maybe 15 or 20 people — and I said, “Oh, I also need to tell you this and that and that and also that I'm a lesbian and I live with a woman in a happy relationship and I wish she were here but she is not.” Just sort of wove it in, and people came up afterwards and embraced me and congratulated me and it was fine. It was fine. I'm sure not everybody wanted to hear this. Why are you telling us your private life? Why are you bothering about this? Well, that's a long story. That's the story of being an oppressed minority. Well, you were telling me about your life. You're married. What else is there to tell, you know? So, why do I have to hide the fact that I am in close relationships to a woman? That's always the dialogue underneath. But anyway, I was pleased with myself that I had come out, so to speak — first not coming out, then a coming out story in writing. And I had been practicing and then I did it. I did it. But that's no longer an issue for me. I think I've done all the coming out that I need to do in an honorable way.

You know, I'm one of these people for whom the emotional, sexual, private life is a very private thing. It was a real burden to me to have to discuss it and to make it public, because it doesn't feel quite natural to tell people who don't know you *whom* you love, or *why* you love them, you know? So it is a burden, but it's a necessary burden in that climate of oppression. And something else we have to shoulder. There was a time I was sometimes afraid I was a Jew, and sometimes I didn't dare to say it in certain situations. So there are many analogues to this already. To me it's amazing that straight people don't understand that this is not a choice we make because we are exhibitionists, you know — because we have no sense of boundaries or discretion. It's about our own survival and self-respect that we have to do it.

WEIGAND: Well, yeah, and then to think about how they talk about this stuff all the time.

KOLLISCH: Yes.

WEIGAND: Yeah. I remember a friend of mine, when she came out, her parents, her mother said something like, “Oh, I don't know why you have wear that tee-shirt that advertises that you're a lesbian.” And she said, “You're

wearing a wedding ring, you know. Why do you have to do that?" I don't know that her mother got it then, either.

I'd like to talk now about some of these bigger questions about continuity and change and conflict in your political activism. How do I want to do that? Let's see. Maybe I'll start sort of concretely. Can we talk a little bit more about Sarah Lawrence? I'm wondering if you could talk some more about the process of helping to set up a women's studies program there and what that process was like. Was it conflict ridden?

KOLLISCH:

Well, historically, I think it was the first place where a women's studies course was taught, an interdisciplinary women's studies course. Really, all the credit goes to Gerda Lerner, who was way ahead of us in this whole concept of women's history needing to be put under a lens, that there are issues which are not covered in general history which belong to women. And this course which we gave was quite successful. It was a large lecture course and then we each had our individual smaller groups, seminars, so we all got together for the big lectures — everybody gave four big public lectures. So the fields were anthropology, history, literature — totally comprehensive. We used the Renaissance as an example of how to look at a historical period through that particular lens. And so, we had our lectures and we all tried to be very good and drew in lots of students and some faculty. It was, I think, on a very good level.

37:25

I think my general topic was love, marriage, and female autonomy in the novel. I think I went from Jane Austen through Virginia Woolf in my little seminar group, which by now was somewhat merged with the other groups. It was really great fun. The women and girls who came into the course just loved reading, opening their eyes and reading these things *as* women — looking at characters as women, speculating about authors who were women, seeing the tremendous stereotyping of women in fiction, and the sexism that always had been taken for granted in fiction. That was perhaps the beginning of women's studies.

It was questioned by some of my colleagues, my old-fashioned colleagues, very much. Why do women have to have a special history? Aren't they part of humanity? What are you really saying? You mean, you're not gonna read the great works of Shakespeare, or Dante? Yes, we are, but right now, we have this. This is our subject. It met with a lot of animosity. And finally, as you know, it prevailed and women's studies now is practiced there and everywhere. Then it was followed by, or simultaneously by, black studies. I don't even know which came first. They were pretty much about the same time, weren't they? And then we had the Jewish studies and the gay studies (laughs).

In the long run — I mean, now, for example — I am not particularly interested in reading as a feminist anymore. That's part of my consciousness. I read for literature. I read to experience the writing of people who are writers and their vision and their creation, and I feel I have the right now to read what I want. I don't have to prepare courses

anymore. So I can read new things and I can read old things, too, and that's what I do.

Gerda Lerner was most eloquent in defending a feminist view, but we all learned to do it, and it was really fun. There was a time when the men wouldn't sit with us at the same table. I don't know if it was that we didn't sit with them. I don't think so. I think they were just intimidated, and this went on for a number of years. There was this sort of women's table, which was not just the four of us but a lot of women who became very interested. They were in some way feminist, even if they didn't carry it into their teaching, particularly. And so we had this very animated women's table and then we'd look over to the — we called them the old farts (laughs) — then we looked at the old farts' table and there they were, and they looked kind of grim and lonely. I mean, they had a few women sitting with them but those were the women who were quite old-fashioned and didn't approve of us.

So, that's the story of women's studies at Sarah Lawrence. There's much more to tell but I'm not the one to tell it, because it's evolved, you know. It's become more and more sophisticated and they have a master's program in women's history — I mean, women's studies — and everything, including the writing program. It's just —

WEIGAND: Mainstream?

KOLLISCH: Yes. But maybe superior.

WEIGAND: So, this is stepping back a little bit. We talked yesterday about how you left the Workers Party and how you continue to think about things with a Marxist interpretation. So I wanted to know how that experience has colored the rest of your political life, what you learned from it and how that was useful later on — and also, the ways in which it was disadvantageous or problematic. I realize I'm being vague here.

42:45

KOLLISCH: Well, that's a very broad question. I think it was a very important part of my life because — well, first, because I was young, and it really was my first intellectual choice, and my first emotional choice, and it was the choice of wanting to live the ideas that I had. These were my ideas. Socialism, I mean, revolution, which was not a very bloody concept for me, ever — in fact, I hated that kind of blood conflict — but kind of utopian socialism. In my mind, it was utopian. Certainly, it hasn't happened anywhere. But it really had to do, basically, with making people's lives better and happier. Having no economic insecurity and having great educational opportunities and health care and a new kind of culture where people would be more open, more trusting, and there wouldn't be this strict division between the private and the public life. I think that's how I thought of it, privately.

And we didn't spend much time talking about socialism, what it would look like. We always talked about strategy and tactics, and we tended

always to inflate our importance, you know. I mean, just to think that a group of about 300 people would be the vanguard of a revolution in America. I mean, it's so utterly nutty (laughs). And in some way, I knew it was nutty but I also thought, Maybe that's going to happen. Maybe we have the truth. We were always assured by Trotskyism and Leninism that the movement would grow and swell and consciousness would broaden.

Of course, none of this happened. So, one thing I can say is that I'm no longer trustful of vague, big ideas where there is a whole program of how to get it done. I am always suspicious of bureaucracy and power. Our movement was fairly democratic, democratic centralist, but there was a certain amount of bureaucracy, which, of course, forbade me to go to college when I wanted to. It was presented as idealism but I also felt I had to listen to — to obey — the party even though my heart was broken that I couldn't go to college when I wanted to. But that mixed in with the idea of sacrifice for the greater good.

So there was so much to sort out here, but I would say that the people who were in this movement with me, whatever happened to them afterwards — some continued to be very liberal left and many of them became quite right wing, but for all of them that experience was a high point in their lives, in our lives. Because in a way, it was a life of total dedication, and there was no split here between the private and the public. Everything was public, except maybe the private sex life of people. But the private never was as important as the public.

Well, how has this carried forward? You know, as I said, there were periods when I was not at all political. But when I came back into the peace movement, the women's movement, I noted differences in style, for example. Very simple things, but still — that we sat in a circle rather than in several rows with the speaker or the committee in front. And I thought, This is very interesting. This means something, and it does mean something about a very different structure. And then I found, to my relief, that in the peace movement, and especially in the feminist peace movement, there was much more respect for the emotional life of people. You could speak the truth of your own feelings about an issue. That was unheard of in Marxism. I feel? Forget it. You think. I think therefore I am. Not I feel.

Well, thinking and feeling are both very important to me. I don't like just feel-good politics, or touchy-feely things. You need a head, a critical and curious mind. But the split [between thinking and emotion] is something that's one of the great problems in this society.

**WEIGAND:** So — let me interrupt for a second. Do you feel you had that when you were young, in the 1940s and in the Workers Party — do you feel like you had that critique in your mind, that it was too intellectual and not emotional enough?

**KOLLISCH:** I don't think I had it in my mind but I had it in my heart. I felt often so constricted that I could never listen to my emotions. Even the marriage I

made, which was really, in a sense, a marriage of convenience, because although I was very fond of this man — Walter, Stanley in real life, was a very nice man — I was not ready, psychologically, to be married. If I was going to be married, it might not have been he. I was ready to have experience and have some love affairs. But I was ordered to marry him, and I did it, to keep him safe, to keep myself safe. I was an enemy alien and he was on a bad list of the secret police. So we did these things.

But I am after all a writer, though I'm not a famous writer, and I have always written in journals and letters. My writing, I think, is a much richer, fuller language. It uses a fuller richer language, which is in conflict with political language, which is, in a sense, very linear and goal oriented. So, I think, on a personal level, I probably always have felt that conflict to some extent.

And now, we are doing something really interesting in his group called the Older Women's Network. Do you want to hear about that?

WEIGAND:

Yeah. Why don't you talk about that?

50:56

KOLLISCH:

I mean, this is something I'm very proud of. It's my creation. It's now about three years old, and I just started by my sending out a letter to some friends and people I've known, women. I'll give you a copy of that letter. I'll give you that whole material. Essentially, the letter said, you know, We are all getting on in our lives, we are getting older, and most of us are lucky to have still very good lives. We are still doing our work, whether in the professions or at home, as artists. We love our autonomy. Many of us live alone. But we also worry about our future — what's going to happen when we get really old. So I was proposing a very simple thing: that we get together once a month, or twice a month, and have a kind of consciousness raising about what it's like to be older, or old, and what we look forward to, what we fear, and how we could help each other.

So ultimately, the goal of this, of my vision, was mutual aid, which is an anarchist concept. It comes out of anarchism, really, the idea of self-help, but it's also a very human concept. It's a concept that was lived naturally in small communities but now has to be reintroduced in this sort of theoretical way, almost. We can be a community on the basis of the fact that we are women, that we are old, that we have a certain basic understanding about the world. I mean, there are no Republicans in this group — we don't ask questions about people's politics, but there are no Republicans. For example, we have a wonderful woman who was a nun for years and then, in the liberation period of the church, she left it. She was always someone who taught and gave and she still is a very religious Catholic, a radical Catholic. And we just admire her greatly because she has such dignity and such openness about her faith. So we are such a mix of women.

We are, most of us, writers or painters or have been teachers or in some profession. It's a mixture of straight and gay, or people who were straight and became gay. But we have widows, we have a couple of

married women, and it just doesn't make any difference at all, because we are all facing the future, which is one in which one has to be prepared for various losses, growing limitations, and how to keep the spirit burning and life interesting and fun, you know, even knowing that these are the realities of aging. That's our project.

So, what we have done, practically speaking, is meet once a month. We are about 20 or 25 women. There are other women who would like to join us and — wonderful women — but we can't take any more because then it's no longer this. I keep thinking maybe they could start forming their own version of this group — become a pattern. But anyway, in our group we meet once a month, the first Sunday of the month, in Westbeth, which is an artist's community down in the Village where we rent a large community room. We sit around the table and we have an agenda. We pay five dollars a month dues and we now have over three thousand saved up for personal emergencies, in a very modest way, but it's a taxi fund even now — anyone who needs to take a taxi to get there, or to get to the doctor. But we don't know yet how our savings will be used — maybe to help people with medical bills or to get somebody to come in and clean. So that's a minimum, and you know, some people have a large amount of money, or a fair amount of money in the group and others are very poor. So socialism — it's not that we have a policy for distributing personal income but it's sort of understood that in times of crises, some people would help others.

So we meet and we discuss our health quickly. We go around the room: this one has had an operation and this one is facing surgery and this one has cancer and this one has osteoporosis. You know, there are lots of things wrong with many of us — heart conditions and you name it. But the spirit is strong. After that we bring up any pressing business that there is and there are always announcements, so-and-so's giving a dance recital. There will be a reading. We talk about movies and recommend this or that.

Then comes the main topic of discussion — every month a different topic. And about half of our topics have been something called personal history, very similar to this, where one of the women is prepared to talk about her life for about a half an hour, and then we will ask questions. And the other topics are — there are a big range of topics, but some of them are how do we see ourselves and how do we think others see us. My god, we have such a list — I've forgotten it. How do we see the young? Are we still political today or are our concerns more of another nature? Anything, really. About clothing. But it's really very much like consciousness raising, trying to begin to understand what women — the kind of women we are — talk about. And that includes our fears, our shame, our relations to children, to grandchildren, loneliness. Every human issue has been raised or will be raised there.

WEIGAND:

And I can see how this sort of pulls together a lot of things you've done in the past: the consciousness raising and community building.

KOLLISCH: Absolutely. But the only thing we don't do, we do not define ourselves as political in the sense of saying, Now everybody has to meet for a demonstration; everyone has to boo Bush. We don't do that. A lot of us do do it, or some of us do it, you know, and we will announce there's going to be a meeting, or a demonstration or something. But no one is pressured at all, because some of the people really are not political in that sense. This is beyond politics. This is about life. This is about the end of life. So, death is also a topic. You get the picture.

And then — this is very important — after our discussion we have a stretch break and we have a wonderful dancer, a movement teacher, and we are all in a circle and we do stretches up and down, we exercise, we move, and then we have our potluck supper. People have brought in food and very good food and spread it out and we all eat and have some wine, and it's very nice and warm. And then we clean up and go home.

WEIGAND: It sounds great.

KOLLISCH: Yes, and some of us have formed smaller groups, like spin-offs from this. We had one group called the Dante reading group, because one of the women there is a Renaissance scholar specializing in Dante, and she led us through the *Inferno*, just four or five of us, and it was very nice. And now I've formed something called the Journal Group, and this is for people who keep journals or want to keep journals and are willing to share some parts of their journals with the others. We've met a few times now and it's just fascinating. We are four or five women and we really get to know each other — journals, really, can be very intimate. They can also be what you think about, what you read. They can be anything. But it's a way of really getting close and sharing; having someone with whom you can share this utterly private enterprise. Though a journal doesn't always have to be so private, you know.

WEIGAND: Well, we're out of tape here.

END DVD 3

## DVD 4

WEIGAND: Your biographical information sheet mentioned that you participate in Women in Black?

KOLLISAH: Yes.

WEIGAND: And this — I don't know how to pronounce this — Brit Tzedek?

KOLLISCH: Brit Tzedek, yes.

WEIGAND: And you've been involved in SAGE. So could you talk about some of these groups?

KOLLISCH: Yeah, well, they are all very different from each other. Women in Black is basically a pacifist protest against war in general, and it meets every Saturday. I haven't gone for a long time. We had a vigil in Union Square. We stand there, we wear black, and we pass out some kind of literature. It's a kind of witnessing activity, and when people ask, Why women? We just say, Well, it's our concern as women to see that the world is safe, you know. Some of the protests have been more specifically to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. That brings me to Brit Tzedek, which is a new organization. Basically it is, one, totally committed to the existence of Israel in the Middle East, and two, a settling of the settlements — that is, withdrawing, and mutual support of Palestinians and Israelis and economics and electricity, water. It's a kind of visionary but at the same time practical view. Largely, the group wants to make it known that there are Jews in America who are really very much against that whole expansionist politics and the repression of the Palestinians, and are seeking a different solution. They want the American public opinion, particularly this government, to realize that they are not represented — that the various major Jewish organizations are not the only view in America, that there are others who are not represented.

And I, as a pacifist, abhor that war, and I abhor suicide bombings, of course, and military action and the destruction of people's homes — it's all a nightmare, and I always think, there's got to be another way. But to me, it's amazing how one gets into the habit of mutual destruction. It seems to be as if that's the answer to everything. Well, in that sense, I'm a little gloomy about the human future, you know. Yet you can't give up and suddenly a new vision arises or some charismatic figure who touches a chord which makes people rethink. Again, the environment is such an important issue to me. That would be enough — to make a human community, warding off these really terrible things that may happen in the future connected with air and water and climate — that is enough. If you need to be in struggle, struggle there, you know?

WEIGAND: The fundamental stuff.

KOLLISCH: Yes. The fundamental things. So, in that sense, it's a mystery to me how politics is conducted in such very narrow terms. So, Brit Tzedek, *Women in Black*: what else? SAGE? What's SAGE? SAGE means Senior Action in a Gay Environment. I'm a member. I pay my dues, and I have participated there in a couple of classes. I took a little Italian class, which was fun. There are a lot of things going on there, and I have been to a couple of public readings. But I am so rich in my own personal life and my friends and my work that I don't really need to go there for companionship or for self-affirmation, as many people do, but I'm very glad it exists. It's important. It's a lot more men than women, and it's also a way to meet people and have friendships. It's social. If I were very lonely, I would go there a lot, you know? But I would also go to a lot of other things, to other groups, you know, which are not limited to the gay thing — though I must say, those people are on a very high level.

4:25

I recently participated with my friend Joan in a three- or four-week discussion about death and dying, at SAGE, which was led by a minister, a much younger man. It was very disappointing because this minister had a kind of program: today we discuss this and today we discuss that and then we discuss the living will, and da-da-dum, and he showed us films which were full of denial of death, really, and very sentimental, or much too pretty. But what was wonderful were the people who were there — mostly men, a couple of women, and the first session was great, because people really spoke about what their own concerns or fears are, and people were so honest, you know? I was really moved.

One of the things that one man said, he said, "I am afraid to die, because I'm afraid I haven't lived. I haven't lived because I have never been able to love, and it's probably too late now. I have already died in a certain way." This was so incredible. And there were others who were equally, equally moving. One said, "I have no one to talk to, no one wants to hear about it, but I am afraid of death." And then others said, Well, I have different visions of death and is death a horror? Is death a continuation of life by other means? Or is it some kind of experience that awaits us, that we shouldn't prejudge so much and be open to it? But all the wisdom came from the people and the minister was like another bureaucrat, you know, like a bad teacher interfering with our more sensitive issues. But that's SAGE.

WEIGAND: I have another question that seems like I'm stepping back here, but there's all this stuff written about the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism. I wonder how that's been for you — retaining some aspects of a socialist analysis and identity and then also being a feminist. Have you had trouble integrating these two things, in your mind or in reality?

7:50

KOLLISCH: You know, it seems to me I once read that book, years ago, and I don't remember a thing about it. But it doesn't present itself to me as a problem, really. But I suppose one of the issues must be an issue of class, that is, if you're feminist, you will try to find the commonality between yourself and other women, even of different classes. Isn't that right?

WEIGAND: Yes.

KOLLISCH: And, uh, we're not only be thinking about class but thinking about the particular experience of women as females in their culture and in their social order, whereas Marxism is very strongly oriented to the working class and class difference. So, in that sense there may be contradiction between my feeling close to women — if I do feel close, you know, even to women who may be poor or may be street women. I mean, it's not that I feel close, but I would like to. I would leave myself open for that, as well as queens or princesses, and of course, that's actually hard to achieve, but it's an idea that we do share, if we share certain common issues, of being female.

I'm very aware of class. I can never forget it. I mean, I just cannot forget it, because to me, it's about injustice and such great disparities in privilege. So that's very much with me. But you can also take this class analysis and join it with your feminist vision or feeling, to double your interests in women who are oppressed, quite simply, who have suffered, in the male culture and the masculine culture from every kind of violence and inequality. So, it's not an issue for me, emotionally, at all, and I haven't followed that. Is that still a very ongoing discussion?

WEIGAND: I don't think it is so much, now. I've always felt like how could you be a socialist and not be a feminist, you know.

KOLLISCH: How can you be a socialist and not be a feminist, yes, yes.

WEIGAND: You know, there are other people who would ask that question.

KOLLISCH: And of course, I don't want to exaggerate my own abilities as a woman to identify with all other women. I mean, I look at Muslim women and my feeling is, Oh, I feel sorry for them. They have such repressed lives and they're so totally dominated and segregated, and then if I hear of a woman, a Muslim suicide bomber, I am heartbroken because I say, Well, she's just — she has nothing — there's nothing else, and this horrible politics have destroyed even her feeling for her children, for her families, that she can do this, and that she has no imagination, that when she kills, she kills others who are not very different from her. To me it's just another kind of horror, how human beings can be squeezed into extreme caricatures. But to say that I feel close to Muslims would be an exaggeration, because I don't know any, you know? And if I met them, I

would be probably very timid and self-conscious. What do we talk about, you know? I mean, in that sense — you asked this before — political ideas are so thin, and like a recipe or something, compared to human reality.

WEIGAND: Right. It's just too complicated, so complicated. How did you meet Naomi? Whoops, I'm totally changing the subject here.

KOLLISCH: I met Naomi at a reading of Grace Paley. Grace read at a group called — 12:30 was a lesbian group at a church, I have forgotten the name of the group. It's a group I don't know and don't belong to. I went there and I saw a few people I knew, and as I came in, I noticed this very, to my mind, beautiful and interesting-looking woman who was sitting there reading a book. I had noticed her and I didn't know whether I would meet her or not, or if I would be introduced to her or something. I'm trying to remember what the book was — it's important. Oh, god. Um, well, in any case, at intermission, I passed by and I said, "Oh, is that an interesting book?" and she looked up and she said, "Well, I'm just starting to read it and I don't really know yet." I think I can give you the name of the book afterwards, but (laughs) it's awful. It's a Canadian writer.

Anyway, we talked, and very quickly she realized my accent and she could see that I was a German Jew, I mean, Austrian Jewish refugee, and she told me that she had done a lot of work translating poetry from the German and from the French. I told her I was teaching German and she said, "Oh, perhaps you know somebody who could help me. I need to brush up on my German. Do you have an assistant or a student who would work with me?" She asked this very sincerely. And I said, "Maybe I can work with you." And she said, "Oh, I wouldn't want to take up your time. You are too busy as a teacher." And I said, "No, I would enjoy it and perhaps you could help me with my reading of French poetry."

So then Grace Paley came over and she said, "Oh, you know each other?" Naomi had met Grace already, and Grace was my colleague and a dear friend. I hadn't even wanted to go to this meeting, especially. I was tired, you know, but I felt I had to go with Grace. When she comes and reads, I have to be there. And later, Naomi told me that she had never gone to this group before but she wanted to hear Grace read. Naomi's not a joiner at all, you know. She's a very very private person. But she had gone there and she was nervous and she read a book, just to ward off the nervousness. So that's how we met.

And in fact, we did give each other certain literary — we had a little literary exchange of reading poetry together, talking German and French literature, and I had a country house at that time, a shared country house, and I invited her up. I could see this is a woman who was really deeply wonderful and beautiful and I was nervous that she might be with somebody but it turned out she was not, so it was just right for both of us.

WEIGAND: Fate.

KOLLISCH: Pardon me?

WEIGAND: Just fate that you both went there on the same night.

KOLLISCH: That's right. That's how I feel. Marguerite Yourcenar — it was one of her books [Naomi was reading]. A difficult writer. I had a pretty hard time reading it. So, it alerted me to the fact that she was a high literary — someone with high literary taste, OK?

WEIGAND: Yep. So, the other questions I have are sort of wrap-up kinds of questions, you know, things like, What do you think are some of the most important things you've done? What are the things that are going to sort of leave your legacy the most?

16:30

KOLLISCH: I wish somebody else would answer that question instead of me. I mean, I imagine that after my death, there would be some kind of memorial and somebody would say, Oh, she was this or she did that and so on. It's very hard to think of yourself in those terms, you know. I mean, I am very grateful. I've had a very interesting life and a very rich life, and I know I have touched other people's lives. I've touched my students, certainly, and my friends, and now with the Older Women's Network, there's a lot of opening between myself and others whom I didn't know before and who I see socially and we talk humanly.

And then, of course, there's my family. I did all I could to be a good mother. I was a single mom, basically, to my son. It was not always easy, but I feel we had a trusting, loving relationship. But it's complex, especially since he was a boy, a male, and I was a woman, and the father was there only minimally. I did not have a community of other mothers. I hardly had a community, and the fact that I became a lesbian and how that affected him. We've talked about it. He seems accepting, you know, but at one point, he once said to me, "Why don't you want to be with a man again?" I said, "Well, you know, I have had those experiences and I have loved your father though there were many difficulties, but it is — I feel more, so much more natural and easy for me to be with a woman. It's so much easier." And he said, "Well, why do you want it to be easy? Why not have the conflict?" and I said, "I've had that already. Leave me alone. This is my choice now." And that's about as much as we ever said. He said, "OK, Mom." That's about as much as we talked about it. Maybe when we're done, I can just pull out a couple of photographs and you can incorporate them, of my son and my darling grandson, Benjamin.

So it's the kind of question that's — who's to say what kind of future will there be? Who'd even want to know? But let's hope there's a world wonderful enough that there will be some understanding or interest in someone who's led my kind of life, because I have lived through large slices of history — and in that alone, I have been formed. This whole

juggling act of the private life and the historical forces that push us or limit us or terrify us, that itself is such an important subject for thinking and for writing. And in my writing, I usually don't forget the world in which my — whatever private things transpire, there's a world out there, a world which is both wonderful and terrifying.

WEIGAND:

We've talked about all these different sort of identities that you had, you know, socialist and feminist and lesbian and refugee — all these many things. I wonder — and this is a huge question — how do you feel about all those and which ones are sort of the most central for you now and which ones are kind of more secondary?

20:20

KOLLISCH:

Well, you know, maybe in being old now — I guess I really am old, almost going to be 79 — I think perhaps one looks for simplification, and not so much for differences. I have become part of a small group of people who meditate once a week and these people are much more — they're committed Buddhists and I'm really not a Buddhist but I'm drawn to certain aspects of Buddhism. But I very much feel this meditation is a good thing, and in this meditation — there is mostly silence but some speaking — we have formed again another small kind of community. From the little bit of Buddhism that enters these meditative sessions — there's usually somebody says Metta at the end, which is a kind of prayer. And sometimes we study a Buddhist text or a poem or something. And I come away with two basic precepts of Buddhism which are very simple. But to me, it seems that if one could incorporate them, and if this were widely practiced, we would have an entirely different world. One precept is called mindfulness. I don't know if you're aware of this at all?

WEIGAND:

I've heard it.

KOLLISCH:

Mindfulness. And again, this is perhaps interpreted differently by different people, but I've given it my own quick interpretation. Mindfulness is awareness, and awareness means knowing who you are, what you feel, and opening your eyes to the other so that the other, and things right or wrong, can enter you and you are in dialogue with it. So, true mindfulness would mean that we couldn't possibly objectify another human being. So that's mindfulness.

And the other precept is called loving-kindness — that's one word, or with a hyphen, loving-kindness. Does it mean you have to love everybody? I don't think so, but it means that you have to practice, you have to begin to develop within you a kind of affectionate way of looking out and seeing whatever there is that is lovable about another human being, even if it's just that that person is old or a child or that he's going to die. This is another way of making the connection to another human being, and also an ethical practice. We are not always loving and kind. We aim to be, we aim to be. So these are two very important precepts which I

sometimes say to myself. Mindfulness. Mindfulness. Loving-kindness. So, it's a form of reeducating myself along those lines which, I think, open the doors to others, but have no ideology, no ideological content. It has nothing to do with reincarnation or the Buddha or you know, anything like that.

WEIGAND: Just about being human.

KOLLISCH: It's about being human. So that's how I've come, in a sense, to be a very, a much more simple person — a simpler person, in some ways, than I've been. It's hard to practice, sometimes, especially with someone like Mr. Bush, to practice mindfulness or loving-kindness. But you know, when I look at him in those lights, I see him just as another jerk, which he basically is.

WEIGAND: Right — with a lot of power.

KOLLISCH: Another jerk who has power he doesn't deserve to have and shouldn't have and has become very dangerous to other human beings and who has been totally brought up to be false — false to himself, false to what's important. A terrible product of our American education, you know, which is false, machismo, posturing and simplification and stupidity. And even Bush to me is not as hateful as someone like Rumsfeld or Cheney, who are the real powers. So I'm not yet good enough as a Buddhist or as a practitioner of meditation to extend my loving-kindness to Cheney or to Rumsfeld or to Ashcroft. But at least I know in my mind, in the back of my mind, they too were born of mothers and they too were children and they too are going to die and they too are going to suffer. And they're blind, they're arrogant and they're blind but they will yet have to learn what living really is. So in that sense, I can offer them a little bit — a little bit of compassion. Because loving-kindness, I think, is very closely related to compassion.

WEIGAND: Well, there's a way in which that's similar to the kind of really, broad, idealistic kind of vision of socialism, you know? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but —

KOLLISCH: Well, yes, I mean in the sense in which socialism — well, socialism is more class based, maybe — but basically it tries to create a society in which there is openness and this kind of humanity, and that's — why it has become such a poison word. I really don't know. I really don't know. I mean, I understand about communism and the great disappointment, that some good ideas became terrible realities. We have seen in the 20th century the great proclivity of societies that turn fascist in one way or the other, I mean, fascist through nationalism and self-inflation or fascist bureaucratic, totally gulag kind of control over others — so, you know,

that makes you very suspicious of ideas, of larger ideas. But socialism as a process by which we make life better for each other and where there's an enlightened government that is committed, elected, democratically elected — because democracy's very important here — to come up with health care and child care and using our money wisely, and improving the environment — I hardly see how anyone can be against that. (laughs) I always think, There used to be the L word. The L was liberal. You mustn't say it. And the S word, socialist, and the L word, lesbian, and the G word, gay, and the J word, Jew, and (laughs) — these are all total misunderstandings of what's important.

WEIGAND: Are there things I haven't asked you about that you want to talk about?

KOLLISCH: You have covered my life very well. You have raked through my life. I feel you have asked good questions and helped me to think, and to move my memory or my perspectives from this part of my life to that. You've helped me make the past more real, at least for the moment, and I don't know whether I can deliver you a clean package. But I've done what I could to convey to you and to whoever is going to look at this tape, that this is me, I'm Eva, Eva Kollisch, and this is my life. Here. You've got it.

WEIGAND: We're done.

[The following records dialogue between Kollisch and Weigand, and later among Kollisch and Weigand and Naomi Replansky, which took place as we were looking through photo albums and filming around the apartment.]

KOLLISCH: All right, you've got some great pictures, obviously, my son and his child. Here's one of my son and myself. This was at my reading, at my opening, my book party. And I'll turn to another page, and here's my daughter-in-law, all three of them.

WEIGAND: It's a nice-looking family.

KOLLISCH: They're beautiful. And lots of pictures. I don't know if you really want to —

WEIGAND: Yeah, this will give us a sense of who people are.

KOLLISCH: This is Grace and myself after a reading.

REPLANSKY: I never saw that one.

KOLLISCH: Well, it's already a long time ago, five or six years ago.

WEIGAND:                    Here are more pictures of your son. A beach.

KOLLISCH:                Well, this is my new apartment. I've only lived here for about six months or so — eight months — and am very happy to be in this building. Naomi lives in it, on another floor, and my brother Peter lives upstairs.

WEIGAND:                    Oh, that's nice.

KOLLISCH:                I was on the waiting list 12 years to get this place. It's a Mitchell Lama building and that means it's subsidized. There are monthly payments, and you own the apartment, and the care is very good. But when you leave, or die, the apartment goes back to the building for other low- or middle-income tenants. It has a nice bathroom, closet space, and I like this neighborhood, too, you know. It's not Greenwich Village, but it's more typically — I mean, nothing is typical in New York — but it's a real urban neighborhood with many different people, many minorities, living, coexisting, and many children, many families with children. It has a great park on one side, Central Park, and Riverside Park on the other. It only takes 20 minutes by subway to get down to the Village, so I have no problems with it.

WEIGAND:                    Very nice. It's spacious.

KOLLISCH:                It's got space and — I don't have any pictures up yet because I still have a lot of my things in storage, including a lot of my books.

WEIGAND:                    Here's Eva and Naomi in Eva's apartment.

END DVD 4

END INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Luann Jette.

Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kate Weigand.

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