

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
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Northampton, MA

GERDA LERNER

interviewed by

NANCY MacLEAN

September 12–13, 2003
Madison, Wisconsin

This interview was made possible
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Narrator

GERDA LERNER (b. 1920) is a long-time peace and civil rights activist and pioneer in the creation of the academic discipline of women's history. Her writings include *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (1979), *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1980), *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (1996), and *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (2002). Lerner's papers are at the Schlesinger Library.

Interviewer

NANCY MacLEAN is Associate Professor of History at Northwestern University where she teaches twentieth-century gender, race, and labor movements and their relationship to public policy. She is the author of *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (1995) and "*Freedom Is Not Enough*": *How the Fight for Jobs and Justice Changed Race and Gender in America, 1955-2000* (forthcoming 2005). MacLean earned a Ph.D. in the Women's History Program Lerner directed at the University of Wisconsin. Her review of Lerner's *Fireweed* appeared as "Reviewing the Second Wave" in *The Nation*, October 14, 2002, pages 28-34.

Abstract

The interview focuses on Lerner's grassroots organizing through the Congress of American Women in the post-World War II years, the relationship of the Congress to the Communist Party, and the evolution of Lerner's political thought from Marxism to feminism.

Restrictions

None

Format

Recorded (audio only) by Bruce Orenstein on eight 30-minute Betacam SP tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Nancy MacLean. Reviewed and approved by Gerda Lerner.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video recording

Bibliography: Lerner, Gerda. Interview by Nancy MacLean. Video recording, September 12 and 13, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Gerda Lerner, interview by Nancy MacLean, video recording, September 12, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

Transcript

Bibliography: Lerner, Gerda. Interview by Nancy MacLean. Transcript of video recording, September 12 and 13, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Gerda Lerner, interview by Nancy MacLean, transcript of video recording, September 13, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 24-25.

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Transcript of interview conducted September 12 and 13, 2003, with:

GERDA LERNER
Madison, Wisconsin

at: Lerner's home

by: NANCY MacLEAN

MacLEAN: Gerda, we're going to talk about the Congress of American Women.

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: In a moment or two. But you talked about the food protests in 1946 after the war as being very important in early organizing among women that led to the Congress of American Women. Can you say more about that?

LERNER: Well, there was a lot, you know, that's why I have always been critical of Betty Friedan's book and her approach even at the time it came out, because she didn't have a clue about what was happening on the ground in terms of women organizing. I mean these women that were war workers and were dropped out of their jobs as soon as the war was over, as soon as the soldiers came back the women were fired. They didn't just go back home and cry and bake cookies and have babies. They were used to working together. And there was a lot of various types of activities going on. It was, much of it was around some of the unions. And some of it was around the housing question in California; housing was a very big issue because millions of people came to California during the war. Many of the dependents of the soldiers that were shipped to the Pacific and sailors stayed in California during the war. When the men came home they wanted to stay in California. There was no housing. The housing crisis was horrendous. And there were no arrangements to make it easier for the returning soldiers' families to get houses. They have Quanset huts, settlement. But they had no housing for them. So that was a big issue. So these meat boycotts were organized at that time, in '46 around, by the union women in Detroit and in Chicago, the

packinghouse workers, the UAW women. But it caught on just spontaneously in the neighborhoods. And I lived in an area called Echo Park which was sort of a working class neighborhood [in Los Angeles]. And one of the things we did is we, I talked to a few women in the neighborhood and said isn't it awful about the price of meat and we should do something about it. And then we put signs, we made homemade signs and put them on and went and negotiated with the butcher [laughs].

MacLEAN: What was the response of the people at the stores to see you out there in front?

LERNER: Well it caught on. I mean it was it was nationwide. It caught the media's attention. And it definitely caught the butcher's attention, you know! [laughs] And we were able to actually, as you saw from this clipping, to get the price down a few dimes a pound. I mean I have to, when I see that, think back on that, I wonder how people are now so passive about everything. I mean the prices are through the sky and people can no more afford it than we could then. But they're not organizing. So.

MacLEAN: Why do you think that is? Why do you think people found it so much easier to organize?

LERNER: Well, I think the war had a lot to do with it. There was the opposite atmosphere. The atmosphere was: pull together, act jointly, improve the world, improve the home front after you've taken care of the fascists over there, you know. It was that kind of a spirit. And it was encouraged. Reform was encouraged and activity was encouraged. So, then when CAW was organized in '48, it picked up on the meat boycott and the price boycott and made it an issue that they worked on. As I said in *Fireweed* [*Fireweed: A Political Biography* (2002)], there was a lot of organizing being done at the grassroots around childcare issues. Because during the war, you know, the factories were working twenty-four hours a day. And they got their money based on efficiency. And so efficiency meant that if you had women workers and there was no childcare the women weren't efficient. They were constantly running home. And so almost every major defense industry had a system of nursery schools and kindergartens. And they were able, I mean, the fact of the matter is that there's historical precedent: it is possible to organize that. It is possible to get the employers to pay for it without the employer going bankrupt, okay. Without having socialism. You can do it. And we did it in WWII. And then at the end of the war the same mothers were sent home and no childcare. Okay. So childcare was a big issue. And my daughter was born in

'45. So I had a toddler. My son was born in '47. So I had a toddler and a baby on the way in all this period, which is a very good organizing tool.

MacLEAN: Why do you say that? Why is having children a good organizing tool?

LERNER: All over the world I can organize women whether I speak their language or not. All I have to do is haul out the pictures of my children and grandchildren. And I've done it. See, this is one of the things that the second-wave feminist movement, because it was mostly a movement — [self-corrects] some of it was a movement of daughters. And they didn't understand that.

MacLEAN: The power of —

LERNER: They didn't understand the power of organizing women as mothers. There's nothing wrong with it. There's nothing unfeminist about it. That's what women—part of the occupation of women in their lifetime is to be mothers, most of them. Not all of them but most of them. And if, it seems to me it's like saying we're going to organize workers but we won't go in the factory.

MacLEAN: [Laughter]

LERNER: You know. It doesn't make sense. So.

MacLEAN: Was that the first organizing that you did among primarily women, this wartime organizing over child care?

LERNER: No, no, no, no, no! I'd get fired from jobs because I tried to organize a union before that. I've always worked with women. When I was an x-ray technician I was [working with women].

MacLEAN: Back in New York? Or when you first arrived in New York?

LERNER: No, it was not when I first arrived. It took me two years to become an x-ray technician. And then I worked in a hospital, I worked with women, right. And when I worked as a saleslady, I worked with women, which I did for years. I was a candy sales lady. You work with women most of the time. So I got fired from a couple of jobs for calling the Labor Department complaining about conditions and things like that [Laughter].

MacLEAN: Had you organized women in their roles as wives and mothers before the war years?

LERNER: No. No. When I became a mother that's what I did. In other words, you know, that's the great thing about women, they're everywhere. And wherever you are, you can organize if you want to organize. Now I don't want to make it sound like I was a great organizer in those early days. But I've always been working in women's occupations, you know. And I could see the totally miserable conditions. I mean, at that time, before WWII, the minimum wage was fifty cents an hour. So you worked forty-eight hours and you got twenty-four dollars at the end of the week with all the deductions, you know.

MacLEAN: Let's pick up from where you were talking about 1946 and the food protest. How important was the Allied victory in the war in encouraging that spirit of organizing? Do you think that was part of it, or was it because there were already such strong organizing networks from the earlier work of the Left?

LERNER: I don't know. I can't judge this in historical terms, how important it was. But I can tell you that, for example, in California, we went from the situation that we had in wartime with childcare available to war workers, and we went to a situation in '46 with millions of children without childcare and their mothers told that they should go back to the home. Which is one reason the mothers did go back to the home, because what were they going to do with the children? And many of them had children just before the war started so they were maybe four years old. Or they had just babies, infants from [when] their husband came home and they had children, all right. So within, I don't know the years — it's not a field of my research — but I know that one of our demands was that we should have a kindergarten program for the five-year olds. And it was accomplished in the state of California. Somebody would have to research just when. But that wasn't nothing. And then right away there was demand for pre-kindergarten, okay? So, it seems to me these things were at the grassroots. Now, historians have notoriously paid no attention to that issue at all.

MacLEAN: To what happened with demobilization?

LERNER: No, to the issue of childcare organizing. Organizing for childcare. Organizing for food prices. Those were women's issues, right? Why they should be women's issues I don't know. Men do have those children too. But that's how it's been defined. And that hasn't altered. And the feminist movement hasn't — who in the feminist movement studies that? Very few people, okay. I'm sorry about that. I think it's a mistake because it's not inconsiderable that

you could organize the women. You could get, like, where I lived I could go talk to my neighbors door-to-door. It's like when you have a dog you talk to other dog owners. When you have children you talk to the mothers, right? And I could talk to the mothers and get them to come to an action on a spontaneous basis. We're going to picket the A&P to get the meat prices down. We're going to go to the Board of Education to see if we couldn't get a kindergarten. They would come to that. There would be no carry over. I didn't afterwards organize the local or something; I can't say that we did that. The Congress of American Women did that. But we didn't do that before, see.

MacLEAN: And when you're saying "we" in this conversation, who are you talking about? Is this women in the Communist Party or is this looser?

LERNER: No, I'm talking about what we used to call "progressive women." Which is people who were actively politically active on progressive causes. The same as what we mean now by progressive women. That would embrace quite a few women.

MacLEAN: And how were they coming together?

LERNER: Well, they weren't. That's the whole point. They were not coming together except for these individual actions. And then, of course, I mean, you didn't get a sense that they were part of a movement nationwide except in the left press. Sometimes when it was trade union women organizing it, the *Daily Worker* would write about it and the *National Guardian* would write about it. Or the *People's World* in California. But if it wasn't trade union women, just housewives, forget it. It wasn't even in there.

MacLEAN: So it was very loosely –

LERNER: Very loose.

MacLEAN: Not even structured.

LERNER: It wasn't structured.

MacLEAN: And almost spontaneous.

LERNER: It wasn't structured, but it happened all over the country.

MacLEAN: Based on local issue. So how might historians try to find out about some of this if it was so spontaneous?

LERNER: Just talk to the old ladies, huh? (laughs)

MacLEAN: [Laughter]

LERNER: I don't know. I don't know. I, you know, I've tried in my teaching, I've tried to interest students to do work on this and I never succeeded. So, I'm not a good person to ask on that.

MacLEAN: So Party women would be involved in some of these protests and sort of women who —

LERNER: I can't say about that. I wasn't in the Party then.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: But I can say that progressive women, women who have been shipyard workers and now they had no childcare, they would know how to organize in the neighborhood for an action, you know. Now how you research that I don't know. I guess you would have to look at city records and petitions.

MacLEAN: Local newspapers.

LERNER: And things like that.

MacLEAN: But you're saying that the CP [Communist Party] papers didn't really pick up these actions unless they were a sort, of well-organized through the unions.

LERNER: That's right.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: That's right.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: That was one of the problems in the Party with women. They did not consider women, organizing women was considered like the lowest of the low.

MacLEAN: Well, let's go in that direction now.

LERNER: No, I want to finish on the community organizing because what happened when Congress of American Women was organized, like

if I was involved with my neighbors, I had been involved for several years with my neighbors already. So it wasn't like I started from nothing. And I would say, "listen, there's an organization now. It's nationwide, in fact it's international. And we could form a branch over here, a club." And then you could organize it, and you would have follow-through. You would have a report from New York and Detroit and Chicago and other places where they were organizing. So, I have a lot of things to say about Congress of American Women.

MacLEAN: Before you jump into that could we talk about the process a little of how it got created? What happened between 1946 and 1948 to make the Party interested?

LERNER: Well it was created in New York, I mean in Paris. And it was the creation of, definitely, the Communist women's movement internationally. And one of its main aims was to not let the gains of the war be eroded for women. That was very important. And another aim was to work for world peace. Another aim was to work for the welfare of children worldwide. And to work for the economic equality of women. That's about it. But also there was an explicit understanding that this organization was going to carry forward the wartime alliance of capitalist and socialist countries for world peace. Now there's no question that that was a Soviet aim. But it was also the aim of millions and millions and tens of millions of people all over the world. So, therefore, in other words, it was accepted, therefore, that if you had that aim you had to work with communist groups. If you couldn't sit in a room with communist women, how were you going to have peace in a period of Cold War? So that organization was formed, there was a Congress held, I describe that in the book. I don't want to go over that. It's all documented. And Amy Swerdlow's article in *U.S. History as Women's History* is the best thing written about the Congress. I talked to her extensively about it. I gave her what documents I had and she did a lot of good research. But there were people at this world Congress from the United States. And they came home and they said we need to form a branch in the United States of this organization. And they did that. That was done in '48.

MacLEAN: And what was the effect of that? Did that encourage women's organizing? So what happened after the 1948 establishment in the U.S.?

LERNER: Well, first of all I want to say that the discussion, other than Amy Swerdlow's article, especially the discussion in Kate Weigand's

book [*Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (2001)], of the Congress is really erroneous and gives the wrong impression.

MacLEAN: Tell me more.

LERNER: Well, I want to say this was an organization that had the potential and used the potential to be a broad coalition of various groups of various kinds. And to form coalitions around specific issues. So the United States chapter was set up with three different let's call [them] branches, it was called divisions, or task forces, or whatever it was called. I have it in the file with one on children; one on peace; one on economic rights, right? And each of those appealed to a different constituency and worked with existing organizations. Now the major, major, major accomplishment of that organization was that it's, to my knowledge, the only functioning coalition of black and white women in decades, okay? And on a level that was not done before and not done after. Five or six or eight members of the leadership of Congress of American Women were leaders of the National Congress of Negro Women— prominent leaders. So, I mean where did you have that? It doesn't exist. And these leaders in turn represented a coalition. So you had coalitions of coalitions. Now, it's very easy to exaggerate, as Congress did, and say we represent two hundred and fifty thousand women. They didn't have a mailing list of two hundred and fifty thousand women. And it's not to be found anywhere, okay? And I haven't seen the FBI files on it — it's not a research of mine. But I'm sure the FBI didn't have two and fifty thousand either, okay? So, but that would mean that if current historians look at this and say, oh, exaggerated figures. It doesn't mean a thing. It's not so. For various issues they *did* touch tens and hundreds of thousands of women, okay? And they organized them in a local action on one particular issue and then they didn't see those women again for the next year. And then the red-baiting began and the women went away. But the fact is that they *did* reach into areas where the women's movement hadn't reached since the getting of the vote. So this is an extraordinary organization. And it isn't, it wasn't, at all — while it's true that it was heavily dominated internationally and in America by Communist women, dominated in the leadership, but down below they didn't have a clue.

MacLEAN: What do you mean when you say they didn't have a clue, that it was much broader?

LERNER: Much broader. Much broader. I mean in the Los Angeles branch that I helped to organize we had these two or three black women.

Each of those women was connected with about ten to twenty organizations, including churches. Okay? I describe that in *Fireweed*. They had a hard time with us. But they gave us a good going over too. (Smiles). And yeah, the point was that they could [at this point she observes herself gesticulating in excitement]: I wonder, when they strap my hands to the side of the hospital bed whether I'll be able to talk? [Laughter]

MacLEAN: (Laughs): I can't talk without my hands. You were talking about the wide reach of the Congress — communities that hadn't been together since suffrage.

LERNER: Yeah, I mean when they had an action by a local church in the black ghetto and these women came to us and we sold raffle tickets for it, excuse me, *who else* had that contact, of any organization? And it had nothing to do with who was sitting in the leadership. It had to do with what was happening on the ground.

MacLEAN: Are there any particular moments that you remember that really made an impact on you at the time, where you sort of felt that this was almost a historic moment, where you were coming together with women who hadn't been together —

LERNER: You remember I wasn't a historian then. [Smiles].

MacLEAN: Yeah.

LERNER: I wasn't talking in such terms. I felt it was the most exciting organization I've ever been in. It was fantastic. I mean when they had, look, they had a celebration at Seneca Falls when the Susan B. Anthony, the Stanton House was the laundromat. The Susan B. Anthony House was falling apart. There wasn't a marker to mark this as a historic site. They [CAW] organized a ceremony on March 8th [International Women's Day] in which Susan B. Anthony II spoke. Nora Stanton Blatch spoke. The great grandson of Frederick Douglass spoke. One of the leaders of the National Negro Women's Congress spoke. And they read from the [1848 Seneca Falls] Declaration of Sentiments. Okay. So, only maybe, well only forty people were there to see it? I don't know. I wasn't there. But I think it's a major accomplishment on many different levels. And when I saw that, to me that was a wonderful thing because it did show an awareness of a long-range significance. And it wasn't just using these women. I mean how can you use women like that anyway? It's absurd. That's a police concept that you use people [as anti-Communism alleged].

MacLEAN: Say more, explain what you're –

LERNER: Well, I mean, people who have deep convictions on social issues, who have spent years organizing on them, they can't be used. They can go in wrong directions. They can, you know, they can do something that they think will have this effect and it doesn't. But they weren't used. I mean, that's what they believed in doing. So I felt very strongly that whatever we did had a lot of significance because it was a national organization and because it was an international organization. And I want to show you this, it's the only thing I have left. Where is it?

MacLEAN: Let me say as the interviewer that Gerda has a file of materials from the Congress of American Women here which will be part of the Schlesinger collection [Gerda Lerner Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University].

LERNER: Yeah, [pointing to photo or news clipping]: Here is when I came back from the International Congress. This was my first experience at being a lecturer. And I went around in California. I received this scroll at the Women's International Democratic Federal Congress. [Pointing]. And I was the Los Angeles delegate to the conference. And now here you see [again pointing] one of our black leaders that was a member of my group: Mabel Gray. And I went around to four, five, six places in California and here is the write-up of it in the *Daily People's World*. And here I have a meeting at the Dance Center Auditorium in Los Angeles by Charter Film Service where I speak in defense of peace. So I have a document of that.

MacLEAN: Let's talk about that Congress. What was it like to go and attend?

LERNER: Well, it was, it was mind-blowing! It really was. Now we do know now that a lot of it was staged, and a lot of it was coerced. And a lot of it was government sponsored. But you have women from, what was it? I think forty different countries. It was the first time I've ever been in a place with women from every nation: African women, Asian women, every European country was represented. And *only* women. It wasn't like some of the demonstrations later where you had some — I don't know, I can't say about later. I mean at the time —

MacLEAN: Yes, let's stay in the moment.

LERNER: At the time, after the war this was extremely hopeful. I mean, you felt, if all the women in the world, if in every country there's a group that's working for international understanding and peace,

we're going to get it. [shifts voice]. We didn't. But it seemed to me very hopeful. Very exciting. And also, part of what went on at the Congress, as has been happening at congresses [of the recent women's movement] since.

MacLEAN: Hold on, let's switch tapes.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

MacLEAN: Okay. Gerda, we were talking about the Budapest Conference in 1948.

LERNER: Yes. Well, what I was trying to say is that at the Congress, while a lot of it was scripted, and especially the resolutions and all that were definitely manipulated as I have said in my book, yet every delegation got a chance to give a report. And people spoke about the women's activities in the war and post-war period in their countries. And I mean that was just mind-boggling to hear that, and to hear the sacrifices and the hardships that people had lived under. And to hear partisans who came from guerrilla hideouts [speaking here of the Greek delegates, in photo] who had spent years in the mountains fighting the Nazis and risking their lives and reporting on what was going on now. I mean it was, it was very exciting.

MacLEAN: Do you remember any of the informal discussions you had with people at the Congress?

LERNER: No.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: No, I can't. I don't.

MacLEAN: Because there are a lot of published material.

LERNER: Well, there was published material and then we were taken on these guided tours which were heavily scripted and controlled. But you couldn't get away from the fact that you had brought all these women together. And there was a lot of dynamism. The modern woman's movement has taken several decades to learn that, that the issues of different countries, that women's issues were different depending on where you came from and what the conditions were. And we learned that [back then]. And of course [the] disappointing part was that the leadership of the Congress didn't allow you to express that in the resolutions. So that was bad. So, anyway, when I came back from Budapest —

MacLEAN: Could you give an example of that? Are there discussions that you remember having with women in very different circumstances that brought home to you how the agendas were different?

LERNER: No I can't remember that in detail, no. But also even having what I have here, these few pamphlets—every delegation had a table [gestures to scrapbook from Budapest]. And they had dozens of pamphlets and petitions and everything else that they had issued in their languages and how they appealed to the women. I mean, I had never been exposed to anything like that. Nobody had since [suffrage leader] Cary Chapman Catt organized the World Congress [for woman suffrage]. I mean it was a really exciting thing.

MacLEAN: It also looked like you had fun [pointing to photos].

LERNER: What?

MacLEAN: It also looked like you had a lot of fun.

LERNER: We did.

MacCLEAN: There are pictures of people dancing and laughing.

LERNER: And then the American ambassador in Hungary invited the American delegates to a cocktail party and tried to brainwash us. Tried to tell us it was all a Soviet conspiracy and we shouldn't be taken in. And people didn't like that very much.

MacLEAN: Did you say anything to him at the time?

LERNER: Yes, people were upset about him doing that. But also we were aware of the fact that we didn't want to be used against the United States. And we tried to project that peace demanded, you know, adjustments on both, on all sides.

MacLEAN: So you felt that back then? [Referring to not wanting to be used by the USSR].

LERNER: Oh, we did. We did. And we had a lot of — [interrupts herself and switches gears]. I describe that in *Fireweed* in detail. I don't want to go over that. You can just read that chapter. But when it came to the end resolution, when we were presented with the official resolution, we were so upset that we were up all night in a meeting. And we wrote a different resolution with the — we were joined by the Swedish and Dutch delegations. And we said we can't present that resolution in America without being called traitors. And when we come back we won't be able to circulate this resolution because it's a Soviet resolution that tells us that everything in the world is the fault of the United States. And we went so far as to write an

alternate resolution and to send the top-level delegation to the Steering Committee—only to have Mina Popova, who was the head of the Soviet delegation and who was the head of the Congress, come in person and tell us forget it. That resolution was not going to be adopted.

MacLEAN: Was there any fallout when you came back to the US from the Communist Party leaders about it?

LERNER: Sure. Sure, the papers were all full of that resolution. And all the attacks that happened later, that were made against Susan B. Anthony and Nora Blatch by the FBI and the [House] UnAmerican [Activities] Committee—they all cited that resolution as an example —

MacLEAN: The one you were protesting.

LERNER: — that these women were traitors to the United States—when they sat up all night protesting this resolution. But the alternative [to going with the resolution we opposed] was that we would have had to get out of the Congress and unanimously as a delegation condemn their resolution, which we didn't think we could do.

MacLEAN: But you were very troubled about it.

LERNER: Very troubled [Face and voice disturbed]. Very troubled.

MacLEAN: And had you organized before? I mean, to have that confidence and those discussions among yourselves at that conference would suggest to me that that you had these kinds of independent conversations before.

LERNER: Well, this group was an ad hoc group. They had never met. Many of them had never met before [the Budapest conference].

MacCLEAN: But when you were, you know, at home in your own branches, working among other women —

LERNER: But there wasn't a branch then.

MacLEAN: Yeah, I guess I'm confusing the Party and the Congress of American Women.

LERNER: Yes, don't confuse the two.

MacLEAN: Okay.

- LERNER: Don't confuse the two. That's the mistake that Kate Weigand makes [in *Red Feminism*]. They're not to be confused. They were very different and they were on a collision course most of the time.
- MacLEAN: What proportion of the delegates to the Budapest Conference would you guess were Communist Party members?
- LERNER: Well, I can't say that. I mean, there were some open Communists like Claudia Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. They were open Communists. And Betty Millard. But how many others who were or were not, I won't say. That's not a game I play. But it was clear that — I mean, everybody was worried about that. We, the whole delegation, we wouldn't have rewritten the resolution if not everybody had been troubled by it. We were very troubled by it. But they sort of said to us, Well, who are you, one little delegation trying to make changes. Which shows you how the Congress was run. I mean [makes a critical gesture].
- MacLEAN: So, other delegations weren't trying to make their own changes?
- LERNER: Well, the Swedes and the Dutch were with us on it. But you know, that was troubling.
- MacLEAN: You mentioned a few of the leaders—Claudia Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Betty Millard — and I was going to ask you about them. Did you have personal experiences of working with any of them?
- LERNER: Yeah, I knew them all. I knew them. Ella Winter was there, she was, whose wife is she? She's the wife of a famous writer [pauses, trying to recollect].
- MacLEAN: Oh, okay.
- LERNER: Lincoln Steffen's wife. But also we had — I wrote all about that. I don't remember.
- MacCLEAN: Let me just ask you, which at the time were you most impressed with? Like what did you think of Claudia Jones, for example?
- LERNER: I, again. [gestures impatience: does not want to go in this direction]
- MacLEAN: You don't want to talk about particular individuals?
- LERNER: That's another subject.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: [Seeks to explain her reluctance]: It's unfortunate that women's history has followed in the lead of general journalism in dealing with personalities and leaders. We weren't thinking that way. We were not after "who's the star?" It was not a star organization. It was a grassroots organization. It was a coalition. [Emphatic now]. We were working our butts off to try and work with anonymous women and empower them and not—and not sit around and say follow this great leader. That's not how we were thinking. And any rendition — I mean that's why I'm so upset about Kate Weigand's book. Because, first of all, she's wrong about the people who were the leaders. And secondly, she talks like this was a leadership type of organization. It wasn't.

MacLEAN: How is she wrong about it? Who does she think were the leaders?

LERNER: Well she happens to have access to the [Mary] Inman Papers and the Susan B. Anthony II Papers, so she makes them into great leaders—which they never were.

MacLEAN: What did you think of Inman? You worked with her in California right?

LERNER: I didn't know Inman and I met Susan B. Anthony only at a meeting. I didn't, but I never [frustrated here that her interviewer is missing her key point] heard of her and she wasn't a great leader. And she wasn't writing the resolutions. I mean that's all fantasy. The people who were great leaders were Mary Jane Melish, who was the wife of a Universalist Minister. Minister Melish.

MacLEAN: M-e-l-i-s-h?

LERNER: M-e-l-i-s-h. Her husband was an Anglican minister in Brooklyn and they were great community leaders. And she chaired the [CAW] commission on children. And I mean, they were writing resolutions, they were writing plans. I mean *those* are the people you heard of. Heloise Moorehead, who was a black woman trade union leader.

MacLEAN: Do you remember what union she was associated with?

LERNER: What? [Interrupted from her train of thought].

MacLEAN: Do you remember what union she was associated with?

LERNER: No, I don't remember now. [Urgent now]. But I just want to tell you black women in CAW—I just made a list [of black women she remembers in CAW]. Aida B. Jackson, Pearl Laws, Heloise Moorehead, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Vivian Carter Mason (a leader of the Brooklyn Baptist Church and the National Congress of Negro Women), Thelma Dale, who by the way is alive and well and quite elderly and lives in Durham [North Carolina] and should be interviewed.

MacLEAN: I have a graduate student [Erik Gellman] who's actually interviewing her.

LERNER: Okay, she [Thelma Dale Perkins] was an officer of the National Congress of Negro Women and a leader in the YWCA. And she was an Office and Professional Workers Union organizer. Okay? Irene McCoy Gaines was a Chicago leader.

MacLEAN: Whose Papers are at the Chicago Historical Society.

LERNER: All right, so I mean those were the —

MacLEAN: I don't mean to stop you. Are there more people on the list?

LERNER: No, but I just made that list of people I remember [meaning that there were many more]: Eleanor Gimble, whose family owns Gimble's [Department Store], was a leader for professional women's concerns [in CAW]. What I'm saying — Muriel Draper and Jean Weltfish were the national leaders, neither of whom was a Communist. They may have been sympathizers but they were not CP members. So what I'm trying to say is that the people who were leaders of the organization worked on distinct areas of their interests and organized at the grassroots. And any depiction of the organization that looked at the national files and pulls out two or three people's files is just wrong, plain wrong. This is not the kind of organization it was.

MacLEAN: Can I [seeing that Lerner is more emphatic about that point than anything else in the interview so far] say for you what I'm hearing in this, then, is that part of what was so exciting about the Congress of American Women for you is that it created a space that invited grassroots women into leadership and into activity at their communities' levels —

LERNER: And, and —

MacLEAN: — and they're not being written about by historians.

LERNER: That's right. [Now satisfied]. And it legitimized their work. Now, for example, middle-class leadership that Amy [Swerdlow] cites is Mrs. Gifford Pinchot, she's a high-society lady [married to Governor Pinchot]. Anne Schneiderman, who was the vice president of the American Jewish Congress, hardly a left-wing organization. And these people were active. There were affiliates, twelve affiliated organizations that Amy lists, that were grassroots, mainly.

MacLEAN: Now you mean Kate when you said Amy?

LERNER: Amy Swerdlow lists them. So I'm saying that people should pay attention to the coalition activity that took place. And my own personal experience was I came to Congress from a neighborhood organization, right? The first time I had anything to do with the national was when I was going to Vienna anyway and I let my local CAW group know that I was going to be two hours away from Budapest, and they raised two hundred dollars to enable me to get the train to Budapest and back. And that made me the Los Angeles delegate, see. [Laughs] It's like the Grimkes were the delegates from South Carolina, the same way. And when I came there, it's the first time I met the national people. But these people also weren't — I mean nobody had elected them. They came from local groups. So Moorehead came from her union and so on, you know. And then in the middle of all this—when the Congress became already embattled and red-baited—we moved to New York. And I joined — [self-corrects] I didn't join a branch of the Congress because we were moving around where there wasn't one where I was living. But I joined the National Committee. So I was, the crucial year when the organization was dissolving I was on the National Committee. I never heard of Mary Inman on the National Committee. [Laughs] So I mean it's just a different — I have a totally different picture of the organization.

MacLEAN: Well, I'd like to see you maybe even say a little bit more about this, because it seems like a really important point. I mean we live now in a celebrity culture, I mean on every hand we're getting —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: — the stars stuck in our faces and made to think that's, you know, that they're the important people.

LERNER: And that's happening again now.

- MacLEAN: What you're saying is that's infiltrating, in a certain sense, women's history writing, that people —
- LERNER: It is, it is. [Emphatic].
- MacLEAN: — that people are just singling out individuals —
- LERNER: And I think that what's now passing for creating a record of the current movement is the very same celebrity culture that bedeviled us when we were getting the Stanton-Anthony version of the women's movement. And we're getting that all over again. Everybody's writing their own [memoir]: And I'm besieged by people wanting me to write my role, you know, they give you two sheets: "your role in the women's movement." [Laughter]
- MacLEAN: What's *wrong* with that? Say a little more. Because I think that really needs to be on the tape for people to hear and understand. I mean what kind of model —
- LERNER: Well I think.
- MacLEAN: — of social change were you working with?
- LERNER: Well, I think that we need to work with a model that some people are now doing in African American history, which is to look beyond the big stars at the grassroots. And this wonderful book by Charles Payne [*I've Got the Light of Freedom*] is a perfect example. And, not surprisingly, Charles wasn't looking for this but he found a predominant number of activists were women, *preceding* the great ministers that walked in from the outside and that the nation recognizes as the leader. They weren't the leaders. They didn't organize it. And I mean it's [this misguided notion of leadership] over and over again. I've seen that so many times. Just to make one last example of that, I have a chapter in *Fireweed* on our [Gerda and Carl Lerner's] work on the Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington and which is another —
- MacLEAN: Which is 1957, right?
- LERNER: Well, '57 or '58, I'd have to look it up. I don't remember. I think it was '57, yeah. It was the training ground for the [1963] March on Washington. And it was organized at the instigation of the man who always wanted the March on Washington, which was A. Philip Randolph. It isn't Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King was an outsider who had to be taught step by step. At that March

on Washington there was an enormous amount of the usual posturing and competition between this leader and that leader. But what made that march [the Prayer Pilgrimage] spectacular and what happened again in the real March on Washington, later March on Washington, is that people came by busloads from communities. They came with their local leaders. That's what happened. And unless we tell that story, we tell nothing. We tell the wrong story.

MacLEAN: Charles Payne in the book that you just mentioned, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, makes a distinction between the community-organizing tradition that he associates with Ella Baker and with the early years of SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and the community-mobilizing traditions that King would be associated with, and some of the people who mobilized big events.

LERNER: Right, right.

MacLEAN: Is that a distinction that you think is useful in thinking about women's history?

LERNER: Well that hasn't worked for women. That didn't work in women's organizing. Women never got to the second place, I mean.

MacLEAN: Well, in the later years —

LERNER: Yeah, in the later years the modern women's movement organized by public events.

MacLEAN: Right.

LERNER: To its peril. And to its detriment, in my opinion.

MacLEAN: Say more: what gets lost when —

LERNER: Well, what gets lost is what —

MacLEAN: — people organize just by mobilizing big events?

LERNER: Well, you have no follow-through. You have to start all over again. Over and over and over again for the same thing. I mean that's the difference.

MacLEAN: Charles Payne in that book talks about the importance of relationships in organizing and he talks particularly about, you

know, he has that wonderful chapter I think it's called "Men Led but Women Organized." And that seems like the kind of distinction that you're making, too.

LERNER:

But that's exactly what I—that's exactly what I've been talking about all my life. Only I haven't made a theory out of it and I haven't really, you know, I haven't really formulated it abstractly. But that is what I know in my guts. That's the difference between *real* organizing and organizing for the media. In a certain way, organizing for the media, whatever you do, is a form of guerilla theater, right? And it's easy to do compared to real organizing. When I lived in this different community in Los Angeles where I did most of my political organizing later, I was — I don't know what you call it in the Midwest or in the East — but I was in charge of thirteen precincts, okay? And the thirteen precincts were part of a district. There were four such units in each district, Congressional district, right? So thirteen precincts, each precinct was like maybe four city blocks, okay? And I worked for the Democratic Party in an area that had been solidly Republican for the last fifty years. And where the Republican Party and the whole government was owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad and then by Boeing and by the shipyards. The wartime industries, okay? So I'm talking real organizing. That's what we started with. And that was the time I had two babies. And part of this [time] I was pregnant with one and I had the other one in the stroller. And part of the time I had the baby in the carriage and the big one dragging along. I used to know every single household in those thirteen precincts personally. And visited them before the election two to three times. Now, then I began to organize, and I had thirteen precinct captains and they were supposed to know everybody in *their* block, okay? But the point is, that by the time we did the third campaign, which I can mention, they knew us and they trusted us. They didn't throw us out. *Because we were neighbors*. Come with the baby, you come with the children. How are you? How's your mom? You know? That's the difference. That's *organizing*. So, I could go back then with the Stockholm appeal when everybody was saying in the newspapers that we're traitors for having this appeal and I didn't get killed, at least. [Laughter] Yes, that's already a good thing, right?

MacCLEAN:

Can I go back to where we started? Very early on today, you were talking about how the meat protests were so easy to organize and people would just come right out and that doesn't seem to happen now. Do you think that what we're talking about right now helps to explain why we can't do that now? That those relationships of trust among people who were neighbors and friends, and you know, you

communicated with everyone in those precincts, you had already a network —

LERNER: That's a big question. I can't, I'm really not prepared to comment. But I'm sure that the fact that now if you ring the bell, first of all, people don't answer, they're afraid. Right? Who is this?

MacLEAN: Right.

LERNER: You know. That used to be our first answer when we used to go around the first time. They wouldn't let us in. And then you had the woman that would open the door with the chain. And I would say, "I'm your neighbor. I'm from the Democratic Party." And she would say, "I'm sorry my husband isn't home."

MacCLEAN: What did you say, when she said that?

LERNER: I say, "I'd like to talk to you. You're a voter, too, aren't you?" "Oh yeah, but I always vote with my husband." And then I said, I might say, "Do you have children?" And then we would get into that and the door would open. Or I'd get thrown out, you know, depends. But the point was, what I'm saying is, there was a distinct difference. I'm trying to think of which election it was. '46? Gehagan Douglas and Nixon, that was when I started. We won that whole district for the Democrats. We then won the state for the Democrats, and it's stayed Democratic ever since. They're about to blow it now, but, okay. And then in '48 we ran a recall election of a city councilman named Meade McClanahan who was a fascist, who was a Nazi fascist, I mean, and we had him recalled. And that was not a popular issue. I mean recall elections are notoriously difficult. And we won that one. But, I'm saying, I could tell the difference between the organizing in the first round and the second and third round because people remember.

MacLEAN: Because you built those relationships of trust —

LERNER: You have a relationship. And then you would go to the Democratic headquarters, and I would be all excited — I have such good results and blah blah blah. Nobody would want to hear about it. And they're all men in there, except the women were typing and answering the telephone. And then when you came to delegates, they were all men.

MacLEAN: And they weren't excited because the people you were signing up were women? The people you were developing relationships with were women? I wasn't sure what the implication was.

LERNER: They were interested in the results. “We’ll see at election day, very good, carry on,” you know, like that.

MacLEAN: Oh, so they weren’t interested in the relationships, they just wanted the vote tallies, gotcha.

LERNER: They would count just the vote. And then they were ecstatic when we — I mean we turned the district over. But, I mean, that was an area, too, where this first election where we dealt with Nixon, who was an unknown person. He answered an ad to run for, you know, Schwarzenegger is not the first.

MacCLEAN: You have some great material about Nixon in *Fireweed*.

LERNER: Right. And he did these things which were just *unbelievable*. Nobody had ever heard of such things, where he switched the ballots. He wrote fake ballots. He sent around, he *paid* black people to go door-to-door and say, “I want you to vote for Helen Gehagan Douglas because she’s a real good lady and she’s going to help us to get housing in this district.” How do you answer that when you’re a Democrat? I mean: “no, she’s not going to get housing”? I mean that’s the kind of election it was. It was a stinking election. I wasn’t surprised by *anything* he did after what I went through with Nixon. I mean really. [Laughter]

MacLEAN: Oh Gerda, you were just talking about the kids and going to, you know, speak to women about electoral issues and connecting with them through their children, and you mentioned the PTA earlier. Could you talk a little bit more about your involvement in the PTA because that seems like a continuing theme in *Fireweed* and it’s something that’s *so* neglected in women’s history scholarship. And yet throughout the 1950s that kind of work was going on. Do we have to stop the tape? You want to take a little break?

LERNER: Yes, I want to take a little break.

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

LERNER: I want to talk about something else. I want to talk about the fact that—I look back on when I was writing my autobiography, I read the back issues of the daily *People's World*, which is some form of punishment, [laughs] for several years for those pertinent years, and there were a few things that were really astonishing about it. First of all, every issue had a half a page or a page that was called the Woman's Page. And it had these happy housewives in aprons. And it had recipes. It had how to remove spots from linens. It had little hints about childcare. Okay? [Disgust] And then it usually had some little feature story about some heroic woman in the Soviet Union doing something real brave, okay? And then it had every other issue, instead of the happy housewife with the apron, had a cheesecake picture of some pin-up girl, okay? And that's the bit, the communist press on the woman question. Now, this was in those years I'm talking about, right after the war. And I made a special notice, because I was interested in it, that they had a very nice write-up of the first founding meeting, public meeting that we gave in Los Angeles of [the] Congress of American Women chapter. I'll come to that in a minute. And then they had an announcement about some meat boycott someplace months later. And that's the last time you heard about CAW in the *People's World*. Okay? So now here comes this historian telling you that the Communists ran this organization for this and that sinister purpose. They paid no attention to it. That was the problem. Okay. And we in the Party, the women in the Party, were outraged by it. And we kept writing letters about why don't you print this? Why don't you print that? And we ended up with having a resolution that we formulated — it wasn't Mary Inman — that *we* formulated on how to change the attitude toward women inside the Communist Party.

MacLEAN: This was in 1948?

LERNER: I don't know which year it was. And we sent that to the State Committee in which Dorothy Healey was a leader and she ignored it, okay? So she can't remember CAW [referring to Healey's comment in *Science and Society* forum on Weigand, *Red Feminism*]. No wonder she can't remember CAW. [Laughing]

MacLEAN: Because she wasn't paying attention.

LERNER: She wasn't paying attention to it then. It wasn't a real issue. [in the view of Party leaders like her].

MacLEAN: And when you say “we,” can you fill that out a little?

LERNER: Well there was a group of women who were interested in the woman question.

MacLEAN: And were a lot of those women working on the Congress of American Women too so there was overlap —

LERNER: Well, when we had the Congress we could work in the Congress and we were outraged that our work was not being considered important work. And when we would try to discuss it within the Party they wouldn’t want to hear about it. “You’re not organizing. You’re meeting with housewives.” Well, so, there was a big, big difference between the leadership and the grassroots there, too, okay? And I think that’s really important to understand. And as far as New York is concerned. I mean, we used to make fun of New York, you know! New York was where you got these long resolutions that nobody could understand. [Laughing]

MacLEAN: Do you remember, can you tell me more about the resolution that you all came up with?

LERNER: Well, we came up — it was as a result — and then when we were turned down, we sent it to the New York [office] and that’s how they formed the Women’s Commission.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: We had something to do with that. Now I don’t want to be quoted on being the author of it because I just was one of many. But my friend, Virginia Warner, who was the columnist for the *Daily People’s World* and who is in my book as Virginia Brodine—was her name. And she was a very leading person in this. And she wrote—the only thing in those years on the woman’s page of the *People’s World* that had any substance—was a series of articles that she wrote on women’s history. And they’re good articles. And she was very strong in her conviction. And there were others, women who had worked in the shipyards and who had worked at the grassroots level and they were *outraged* by all that’s going on. And so it’s not a monolithic thing and it’s not that we all — [shifts direction]. The same is [true] with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. She did not like the woman question. She did not believe in it. And she came down on it hard because she thought that, well — she came down and explained that the miner coming up from underground after his hard work, coming home, does not want to help his wife cook dinner. [Showing her disgust for Flynn’s position]

MacLEAN: Wow, she said this to you?

LERNER: Yes!

MacLEAN: In the *Science and Society* Symposium on Kate Weigand's book, I don't remember who it is, but one of the commentators says that Flynn and that Claudia Jones both resented being appointed to the Congress of American Women.

LERNER: Right, right.

MacLEAN: And they saw it as kind of trivializing their leadership.

LERNER: The Women's Commission — they didn't want to be on there. They didn't want to be on the Women's Commission. And that was the leadership of the Communist Party on women! I mean it was scandalous. It was bad. And the people who are now writing their memoirs are the very people that were the obstruction.

MacLEAN: The obstacle.

LERNER: Yes. So I'm not very impressed with that.

MacLEAN: Gerda, there's an unsigned document in the [Betty] Gannett Papers that articulates —

LERNER: In which papers?

MacLEAN: — in the Gannett papers that articulates women's grievances in the Party. And whole sections of that document, pretty much verbatim, appeared in a later article by William Z. Foster in *Political Affairs* in 1948. Do you think that was your resolution, the grassroots resolution?

LERNER: If I saw it—I'd like to see it. I'd like to see it. I could probably —

MacLEAN: Certainly that's the kind of *process* you're describing —

LERNER: Yes, yes.

MacLEAN: — where women were making these protests —

LERNER: Women were complaining, women were complaining. You see, the Mary Inman debate fits into that. You have to understand that she gave us a theoretical foundation for justifying working, organizing

at the grassroots. Organizing women as *women*. Which is the feminist position. But these guys, and the women up there, had no sympathy for us. They didn't like it. They didn't agree with it, and essentially sabotaged it as much as they could. So then when you present Congress of American Women as being a sort of, from the FBI point of view, a conspiracy of the Party [it's ridiculous because] they couldn't be bothered with it. They couldn't care *less* what happened at Congress of American Women.

MacLEAN: Interesting.

LERNER: I mean, that's one reason why I want to set that straight because many of the women that I knew, we were disillusioned with that very strongly. I mean that was one of the things that really made us furious because if somebody sold, you know, somebody got out and distributed the *Daily Worker* at a shop gate, they got all kinds of credit for what a wonderful revolutionary work they were doing. And if we organized on childcare, [all we heard was] "oh, thank you very much." Finished.

MacLEAN: Were there men who were sympathetic to what you were doing? Like Carl [Lerner, Gerda's husband and fellow Party member], for example.

LERNER: Yes.

MacLEAN: Did he think that was important work and argue it with other men?

LERNER: Yeah, but very few. Very few. Very few. I think, now, my thinking is that the whole Marxist understanding of the women question to begin with, from Marx back and Engels and Bebel, they were wrong in their theory and that's where all this comes from to begin with, you see? They were wrong about peasants. They were wrong about racial minorities. And they were wrong about women, see? It wasn't bad leadership or, you know, whatever [that explains it, but bad ideas].

MacLEAN: Say more about how they were wrong. You're saying they were too economic, too focused on work places?

LERNER: Well, the analysis was that social change is made by the working class. And the working class consists of males. And then later they added women working in industry doing what men do. They weren't interested in the service industry. They weren't interested. Theoretically, under Marxism, it is the heavy industry. That's 19th century thinking. And it was wrong. It was totally wrong. And

from that flowed all the other things — that it isn't worthwhile organizing women. I mean look at that leaflet I read to you, "Comrade, recruit your wife." It should say, "Comrade, do the dishes!"

MacLEAN: [Laughter]

LERNER: [Laughter]

MacLEAN: That's great.

LERNER: Yeah, but that's, I mean it flows from that. It really flows from a basically different analysis. And Mary Inman proposed a different analysis. And the reason they *bothered* to shoot it down [because Inman challenged the core theory], I mean it's interesting. [Musing] See, they didn't shoot down what we had to say. They didn't even dignify it with an answer.

MacLEAN: Because she was talking about theory, she was taken more seriously?

LERNER: I think so.

MacLEAN: And what was your take on Inman? I mean, as long as we're talking about her because, you know, the Party leadership tried to make her sound like a kook. Some people seemed to think she didn't start that way but she became marginal and disrespected.

LERNER: I don't know. I don't know her. I didn't know her personally. But I could say that she probably went through the same process of being totally disillusioned and didn't give up.

MacLEAN: It sounds like she wasn't really connected with the organizing though.

LERNER: No, I don't think so.

MacLEAN: That she was more interested in theory and not actually doing work among women.

LERNER: I really don't know enough about her [to say]. But let me just point out that I'm the first person that published Mary Inman in the postwar [years] in *The Female Experience* [Lerner's documentary history].

MacLEAN: *Female Experience*, yes.

LERNER: Right?

MacLEAN: I mean, I went back to check, because I was sure I read it there, in that first edition, and there it was, yeah.

LERNER: And I did it because I thought she had a wonderful theory. I still do. I think it's a very good theory.

MacLEAN: What did you like so much about it?

LERNER: Well, it just dignifies organizing women where they are. If the majority of women were housewives then — at that time something like seventy-eight percent of all women were full-time housewives — [Mocking] So you're going to organize the population and leave out seventy-eight percent? I mean excuse me.

MacLEAN: And it [Inman's work] talked about housework as work too which is —

LERNER: Yes, housework is work.

MacLEAN: Always been important to a feminist analysis.

LERNER: And she showed that housework is work that benefits the exploiter and the husband, which is, you know, is something that feminists have yet to deepen that analysis. Feminists can show you how it benefits the husband but they're not interested in the exploiter. In fact, it's structurally connected. So she had a very, very important theory and a good insight. And she was abominably treated, as were many people who had ideas that the leadership didn't approve of.

MacLEAN: Were you ever treated that way?

LERNER: No.

MacLEAN: You know, even after the Budapest conference when you made that counter-resolution?

LERNER: No, we were just ignored. We were just royally ignored on that issue and got nowhere. And then of course, by that time, the Smith Act had started. And you could see where you felt, well, this is not a time to have struggle with the leadership over something else. Everything was distorted.

- MacLEAN: Well, we're moving into the late 40s now and getting to '49, it sounds like, and when you were in New York. But before we move into New York I just wanted to ask you a question about California because many of the people writing about the Communist Party and participants in the Party describe California as being unusually independent in the Communist Party and being a little bit more innovative than some of the others. Was that your experience?
- LERNER: Well, I think the biographies of southerners, southerners that were in the movement, they had the same feeling.
- MacLEAN: That they were in a different county?
- LERNER: Yeah. People at the grassroots looked at New York like some kind of freakish bunch of bureaucrats that are sitting there that you can't deal with. That was about the respect we had for them.
- MacLEAN: [Laughing] It's great. It's like the classic *New Yorker* cartoon. It's great. It's the reversal of that, with people looking *back* at New York from the rest of the country.
- LERNER: Right, right. "Oh well, that's New York," you know.
- MacLEAN: And that's interesting, too, I think, for people to understand, that in a sense you kind of *tolerated* the leadership because the Party was making all this activity possible.
- LERNER: Absolutely. That was true also for the people in the trade union movement. I mean New York tried to make pronouncements that people should join the union local? [Ironic tone?] Didn't have a clue.
- MacLEAN: Gerda, in those years were you connected to any of the radical organizing that was going on on women's issues in the labor movement? You know, like U.E.W., United Electrical Workers?
- LERNER: Well, I was aware of it. I wasn't.
- MacLEAN: But not directly connected with it?
- LERNER: Well, I —
- MacLEAN: Or the cannery workers I'm thinking, you know that Vicki Ruiz has written about.

- LERNER: No, I wasn't directly connected with that. But in CAW, one of the CAW leaders in Los Angeles was a woman who had been educational director for the UAW local in San Pedro in the shipyards. And we had union people. And one woman was in the seaman's union.
- MacCLEAN: Really?
- LERNER: Yeah. So I mean we had grassroots people. We had real people who did real work. And all [frustrated] — I don't know how we can combat this as historians ["this" being the failure to understand the grassroots as the key site for women]. Because the kind of work that's needed to find these people. I think you need more community studies work. It's like everything else—it's like when we didn't, when people didn't think there was a black women's history? I always knew there was a black women's history because I'd worked with black women. Well I didn't have to, it didn't take a stroke of genius. I *knew* them. I knew what they had done. I knew that if I wanted something done in that south Los Angeles black community, I needed to go to people like Mable Gray. And she would immediately know what needed to be done and she would initiate it. Well, so how can you tell me [as some historians imply] that history doesn't have room for these women? They don't exist? I mean, they don't have a clue? So, so.
- MacLEAN: So what we really need is a much more careful kind of local history so that people can find the records of those —
- LERNER: You have to have a conviction that part of history is important. If you don't have that conviction, you can't find it. If you know it's there and you have the conviction, you're going to find it.
- MacLEAN: I'm not sure if you're familiar with Martha Biondi's book on New York [*To Stand and Fight*] —
- LERNER: No.
- MacLEAN: — on what she calls the Black Popular Front in New York. But her study, which I was just reading, looks at the years pretty much from 1945 into the 50s. And she does what you're describing. She's really, really looking at local sources. She read the *Amsterdam News* for the whole era.
- LERNER: Yes, that's it.
- MacLEAN: She has these wonderful black women and men leaders —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: — people from the trade unions, people from the community organizations, et cetera. But that really was the only way to get it. And she said, you know, when she sat down to write that, nobody even *knew* there was a civil rights movement in New York in those years, but it was —

LERNER: That's it. That's right.

MacLEAN: — just sitting down and going through the grassroots newspapers that revealed it.

LERNER: That's right.

MacLEAN: And then doing follow-up interviews.

LERNER: Well, when I first interviewed Ella Baker for *Black Women in White America* she talked at length about her organizing on 125th Street [in Harlem]. She organized the boycott. But that's not stressed now. But, I mean, there's a woman who had superb long-range grassroots experience. [A case in point], all right?

MacLEAN: So, let's talk a little bit about New York. One of the things I thought the most fascinating in *Fireweed* was your discussion of organizing against white flight in your community in Queens. Could you talk more about that because that's certainly not —

LERNER: Yes, nobody knows about that either.

MacLEAN: — part of the story. Most historians are writing about the suburbs. How did you get started on that? What —

LERNER: Well, it was the same —

MacLEAN: — were you hoping to achieve with that work?

LERNER: It was the same thing again. I think if I hadn't been a radical, and if I hadn't had the experience of organizing in CAW, this wouldn't have happened. But Carl and I both had very strong convictions about we didn't want to raise our children in an all-white community, and so when we had to move and buy a house — we had to buy a house because we couldn't rent, couldn't afford the rents. And so we looked for an interracial community. And there

weren't very many. So where we moved was sort of on the fringes of the, was a white working-class community.

MacLEAN: Was that St. Albans?

LERNER: St. Albans. St. Albans is an upper-middle-class black community that centers around the Veterans Hospital. And has a lot of ex-soldiers and people who were employed at the Veterans Hospital and doctors and so on. And then it began to attract more people. And so we found the street where a black family had just moved on the block, you know. And we picked that street. And we knew at the time we were buying, we knew that we were paying black prices. Which, contrary to the common myth—you know, the common myth is black people move in the community the real estate values drop. The exact opposite is the case: (coughing) [blacks pay more].

MacLEAN: Do you want to take a [break?]

LERNER: Real estate values rise for black people that move into a white community. And they drop when there's white flight. But people don't understand that. Which is why the real estate business promotes it. It's very profitable for them. So had we moved two blocks further in the white area we would have paid two to three thousand dollars less for our house. And we would have gotten a better mortgage because the mortgages were red-lined, too. So we took that chance, knowing that that's what we wanted.

MacLEAN: Were you alone in this? Or were other people in your, you know, political friendship network making those conscious choices?

LERNER: No, we just did that. That was a personal decision. And then once we were there we could see this, [realizes] I describe that [in *Fireweed*], and I have nothing to add to that. We could see the real estate people coming around and busting the neighborhood up. Trying to get the white people to sell, by scaring them and by lying to them. And *then* we found out that there was a group already in existence—in Jamaica—which is the larger [area]: St. Albans is part of Jamaica—that was trying to fight that. And so we joined, I joined that group. And they're the ones that did this thing with the signs.

MacLEAN: And what, the signs said "this house is not for sale"?

LERNER: The signs – We love our neighborhood, We love our neighbors, We're not selling. And that was very powerful. So we were able to

hold our street for about three years. But the thing is, the way you can tell is, when we first moved in, the children had the graduation picture at the elementary school. There were like one or two black children. And three years later there were maybe five white children. So [the transition was dramatic].

MacLEAN: Do you remember the kinds of responses you got from your white neighbors as you went from door to door? Because again, you know this is the kind of thing that would be very hard for historians to get in another way.

LERNER: Well, this was very hostile, yes. It was very difficult because the people there were working-class people. And their one big investment was their house. And if you say to them the house is going to lose [value, they think] I better sell now, you know. But some of them listened to it and — I don't remember how it went. But for a while there we were able to stop the real estate agents coming on our particular street. But then when all around the other streets they're coming, you know —

MacLEAN: Was this kind of organizing going on in other places too? I mean is this an area that historians should be paying attention to?

LERNER: Yes, it was going on in other places too.

MacLEAN: Even in Levittown right? Wasn't there some organizing going on to open up Levittown?

LERNER: Yes. And you know I didn't write about this and most people don't know that. But I wrote a novel that was never published about housing struggle.

MacLEAN: Right.

LERNER: And it was based on the experiences of two or three friends of mine who were active on this issue. And that's another thing — we [historians] always talk about nothing happened in the '50s and the civil rights movement started it all, and all that. It's also not true. I had friends in Levittown — no not Levittown, in Stuyvesanttown, downtown in the Village. [Greenwich Village, New York] —

MacLEAN: Oh wow, Martha Biondi talks about that in her book.

LERNER: What?

MacLEAN: Martha Biondi talks about the struggle in Stuyvesanttown at some length in the book I just mentioned.

LERNER: Write down the title of that book for me—I want to get that. So I know people in Stuyvesanttown. And I knew people in a housing project in Queens. And they did what I described in this book. They tried everything to get the real estate management to have open housing policies and they didn't, and so then they invited a black family to live in their apartment with them. And then while they lived there they tried to organize a committee, interracial committee, and blah blah blah. And then, of course, they got evicted. It was a struggle. It was going on in a lot of places. Because remember, at that time restrictive covenants were legal. And you had to sign a restrictive covenant in order to get a mortgage.

MacLEAN: And so if you broke it, it would be breach of contract.

LERNER: Yes. They could cancel your mortgage on you. That's very scary for people who don't have much money except what's in the house.

MacLEAN: Now what time did you want to go?

LERNER: I think I want to leave in about half an hour.

MacLEAN: Okay.

LERNER: Okay. And I'm also getting exhausted. [Laughs]

MacLEAN: Okay. Let's talk a little bit more about the suburbs maybe, and —

LERNER: About what?

MacLEAN: — the PTA question that we ended that last reel with and didn't get to pursue and maybe take a break for today?

LERNER: Yeah, well, one school.

MacLEAN: We're talking about the PTA question.

LERNER: Right. Again, PTA is where your community people are. Now in fact, nationally working-class women are less, much less likely to be in the PTA than middle-class women. And on the other hand, black women are very active in the PTA because they know about organizing. And that's something also that's been totally neglected.

Nobody — it's hard to document that historically because PTA meetings, you don't keep records. But you take, well, the two things. I was very active in the PTA in the school in St. Albans where we had the, again the counter-intuitive or counter-myth phenomenon where this was a working class white neighborhood. And by definition, in urban America that means it has the worst schools of any. Worse than the black community. Worse than the Hispanic community. Just the worst schools. Because white working-class women don't organize. They don't go to PTA. The men don't care or can't if they're around. And the Board of Ed knows that they can get away with murder. So, in that school, just to give you an example, my daughter was there in the fifth grade. And at that time in the sixth grade they decided which intermediate school the child would be assigned to. And ostensibly, by law, they're supposed to take an IQ test. And according to the IQ test some kids, very few, get selected to go to the best high school. So, when it was time to do this, first I went to the principal and I said, "When is the IQ test?" "Oh, you want an IQ test? All right, we'll do an IQ test," like that. Then, I heard nothing. So I went back. "Yeah, well I looked it up, oh, she's very smart. She should really be on this and this track." I said "excuse me. Why didn't you do anything about it?" "Well, we'll do something about it, don't get excited." Okay. So the next thing I find out, and he told me that in this conversation, we have never sent a student from this school to any of the better high schools. At which point I got in touch with all the PTA members. By that time the majority of, many of them were black women who were professionals. And I said we got a little problem here: a lousy administration who doesn't even use the few facilities available for the children. And so the next year we found that we had three or four or five children that were going to go. And the following year we had ten, okay. Now, this had never happened before. So we were *improving* the school when the black women came in, the black families came in.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

LERNER: I describe in *Fireweed* the other PTA that I was active in but I don't describe it in full. There was a perfect example. That was a white, ethnic neighborhood. There were very few people of color at the time. But the school was dreadful. I mean, beyond-belief dreadful. And this was the period when you had all this development of children, air raid drills, and hiding under the desk, and what not. And I got active in the PTA there. And they were, more or less the middle-class white women were active in the PTA. The first thing I did was to organize a childcare study group. Because the principal's idea was we should come to the school, we should discuss giving a fundraising luncheon, we should turn over the money and get the hell out. That was his idea of what we should do. And so I knew that I had to do something to organize the women in order to have any life in that PTA. And we organized the child study group and that went very well. And we met every so often and the principal got very nervous about it. And he started accusing us of stealing pencils and then he told us we couldn't come at night because he had to pay the custodian. And on and on, I mean, it was harassment. This principal was past retirement age and refused to retire. So that was a scandal to begin with. And then it turned out that at the PTA, at the open PTA meeting where everybody comes, I noticed that the Catholic priest from the local parochial school came with about five or ten women and would vote at the PTA meeting. And they're from St. whatever, St. Anne's or whatever. And if we asked a question how come? Well, they're members of the community. It's true their children don't go to the public school but they're concerned about what goes on in the public school and they have a right to be there. And of course when we — I forget the sequence, but I organized some kind of a group. Yes, then this incident took place about raising money for UNICEF and the priest was all upset about it. And so in other words, it was a stacked deck there. Well then it turned out that they were beating the children in this school, systematically.

MacLEAN: Beating?

LERNER: Beating. Yes.

MacLEAN: In the public school?

LERNER: : Yes. And before that came out the principal had already made an edict that we could not enter the school building without his permission. Which was patently illegal. And it was very hard to convince the mothers that that was wrong. I mean, they had great

respect for the principal. And [they thought] it was an OK thing that the priest was coming. I mean it was really hard, it was difficult to get. And then we had this incident where one boy came home and he had black and blue marks on his buttocks. And finally his mother got out of him, and the kid said very matter-of-factly, Well that's when you're bad, you have to run through that row in the gym. And what row? They had the six graders, the oldest kids, lined up with bats or something, hitting the little kid. In the public school! [Outrage] Well, we organized on that one, believe me. And it was very difficult because many of the mothers said, Well, if they're bad they should be beaten.

MacCLEAN: Wow.

LERNER: Then some of the mothers thought it was really bad and we threatened that a few of us, individuals, would go make a lawsuit but we would first go to the Board of Education. And the Board of Education was a Byzantine establishment. The public schools were run essentially by the — what were they called? — the custodian. The custodians were a private enterprise. And they each had an individual contract with the school. And they set the rules. If the custodian said after 4:00 nobody gets in the building, nobody got in the building. That was it. Unbelievable conditions.

MacLEAN: And was there a kind of left/right politic in the school's organizing? Were you with other progressive women when you say we?

LERNER: No, no. I —

MacLEAN: Because you also pushed for some multi, what would today be called "multicultural" organizing.

LERNER: It was multi-ethnic. The big split was Jewish women, the Italian women and some Hispanic women. On my side was my neighbor from Malta and some Italian people and some Jewish people. It was more along class lines and education. The less-educated women didn't want to go against the principal. But anyway we stopped the beatings. We opened the school. And we got rid of the principal two elections later, when I was gone already. Two years after I was gone from the neighborhood, the people who had been active in my committee had all the offices in the PTA. So it was a successful effort. Who did it help? Children. Does it belong in the history books? Probably not. But you know. Was it worthwhile? Yes. It was a lot more worthwhile than a lot of other things that are going on that people spend time and energy on. And the situation

was a scandal. It was, you know, the same thing was going on all over New York. And you know the politicians were playing games with the Board of Ed.

MacLEAN: Did you get any support from unions in trying to improve the school, or from other quarters of progressive politics?

LERNER: We weren't that fancy. We just wanted —

MacLEAN: It was very local.

LERNER: We were just local. We were a bunch of aggrieved mothers who thought that you couldn't do this. This is America. This is not Hitler's Germany. We used that a lot you know. It was right after the war. And we said you know the Board of Ed doesn't have a right to beat our children. And the other children, they made the children beat the children.

MacLEAN: I know that while we need to wrap up for today in a few minutes and I don't want to come up to the McCarthyism and the Cold War and everything. We'll save that for tomorrow. But are there other things that you want to add based on what we've been talking about today in your experience in California and Congress of American Women, you know, the way scholars are writing about the Communist Party. Are there any points that we haven't covered that you'd like to mention or get in there?

LERNER: Well nothing that's burning a hole in my chest. Just in general, I think that if people paid more attention to *continuity* in political work and less attention to stars and phenomenal events we would have a better image of what actually goes on in the world.

MacLEAN: That's a really interesting point. Can you say a little bit more about that? Is this also connected to looking at decades rather than —

LERNER: Yes, decades is a meaningless division. And, you know, everybody will highlight where were you when this big event happened? But that's much less important than what happened before and after and what continues. And, I mean, I feel very proud of my work in the PTA. And I'll tell you, I took a lot of ribbing and a lot of, you know, from all my highfalutin political colleagues who were doing sexy stuff and I was doing, you know. But look, you give a PTA luncheon in an ethnic community, you organize a PTA luncheon, and you've got five to seven or ten different ethnicities. And the first thing you have to learn is that when you say everybody bring a dish to pass, five percent of the people will bring a dish and the

rest will bring nothing. And when you look at who's not bringing anything, it's the ethnic women because they feel that what they have to offer is not going to be appreciated. So you go through the process of trying to convince the ethnic women to bring their ethnic food. And actually gain their trust to do it. And if you then have the ethnic food and some woman from a different ethnicity says, What's that, worms? or whatever, the worst has happened. But once you've gone through the experience of doing something simple like that, you can organize the work. Because, I mean, I always said that to my various academic colleagues, The trouble with you is you've never had to organize a PTA luncheon. So you don't know about diversity. You don't know how to handle it. You don't know what's going to come up." You finally got them to bring those foods. Now you got them, get them to eat it. (Laughter) You know: it's really like that.

And I think appreciation of the dailyness of the grassroots work and the simplicity of the issues. But they're never simple. They're all important. And I just tell that anecdote because I'm very pleased with it. When I years, years, years later, got a grant to organize a conference on housework at Sarah Lawrence College, I drew on my actual knowledge. And I conceived of the conference as being the getting together of women who write about housework and women who are house workers, domestic workers, and women who are housewives. Now you stop right there, and you tell me how you organize that. With great difficulty. I had the black woman who was the chair of the Domestic Workers Union in the state of New York, she was a student in that famous seminar that Women's History Week came out of. And she promised to bring her people. And I had all these expert women writing about housework. And then I knew the Congress of Neighborhood Women that I had worked with in coalition work. And the Congress of Neighborhood Women is an ethnic working-class women's organization that was active in Brooklyn and in the Bronx. And I knew that if we were going to try to get these people into one room to do anything together, we needed a warm-up. It wasn't going to work. And so I wrote into the grant to have a warm-up conference and have some funds for it. And I got these people together. You can't get them to Sarah Lawrence—that's the end of it. Can't do it. So we met in New York someplace. And at the warm-up conference we discussed how we were going to run this and where we were going to run this. And the black women said, well, you're not going to run it out in Sarah Lawrence. And I said I know. And they said why don't you come to Harlem? And I said can you get us a room? Yeah, we'll get it in the Federal Building. Good. And the Neighborhood Women got very nervous. Is it safe? And we had to confront that, talk about it. And the black

woman said we guarantee you it's going to be safe. We're going to be with you. And then the Neighborhood Women said well if that's what we're going to do then we want the next meeting held in our neighborhood, and you're all going to come to our neighborhood. And then they said, and we're going to show you how we run a meeting. And we arrived in Brooklyn. And these women had put on a feast. Everything homemade. Everything ethnic food. And then we held the conference. It was one of the most successful things I've ever done. I could never have done it if I hadn't had all that experience of actually working at the grassroots with people. Because I knew you couldn't put these people in the same room without them killing each other, right? So, that was, that was good.
[break for the day]

DAY 2

MacLEAN: Before we start on some of the new things today I just wanted to ask you if there's anything that you want to revisit and comment more on from yesterday about the Congress of American Women, the California years, what you think about the history writing?

LERNER: Well, nothing I can think of at the moment, no. That's okay.

MacLEAN: So let's talk about the peace organizing during the Korean War then.

LERNER: Yeah, I wanted to tell you about that in general because I don't know if that has been treated in writing. Well, first of all, you know, the Korean War started as a police action, that was the legal term. So that was the first time I think the president didn't have to go to Congress for a declaration of war because it's a police action. And of course in that case it was the United Nations police action. So that way they avoided all the implications of it. And at that time the big issue was the nuclear weapons and the control of nuclear weapons. And there was this committee, I'm not sure of the title. It was like committees for social responsibility.

MacLEAN: SANE?

LERNER: Huh?

MacLEAN: The committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy?

LERNER: Well, SANE was one. And then there was the Atomic. Yeah, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and they always, they put a clock [in their newsletter] and they told you what time it was. When the Korean War started, it was like ten minutes to midnight and then they moved up to like practically one minute to midnight. Because when the Chinese got into the war it looked like it was going to be a nuclear war. So, there was a lot of this mainstream peace activity. All I can say is I was in, I lived in Peekskill that year. And, you know, in Peekskill the year before was that riot where they almost killed Paul Robeson. And I wrote about that in the book but only very briefly.

MacLEAN: Were you there at the time of the Peekskill riot?

LERNER: I was there, but I didn't go to the meeting. But a lot of people I knew went. And it was terrifying because it was a riot that was obviously supported by the police and by the — I don't know whether they had National Guard — but the mayor and everybody was winking and nodding and clearly supported because what they did was, it was a big outdoor venue. And there were lots of people there, thousands. And there was only a two-lane highway. To get out you had to go on a two-lane highway. There's nothing else. There was no other way. And they had that highway lined with citizens that were throwing rocks and stones and beating people. I mean, it was a collusion — you could have easily cleared it. So, as a result what happened was that Peekskill — I mean, nobody dared to stick their head out. This was maybe six months later or something. And well, I had seen in the newspaper they had a picture of John Foster Dulles. The day before the war broke out he was in the front line of the American troops in South Korea — I mean on the border — and he was inspecting the troops. And you have this picture of him. He was just like Rummy [Donald Rumsfeld] — you know, that kind of a Dr. Strangelove type. And there was this picture of him talking to the soldiers in the trenches. It was like old-fashioned WWI warfare with trenches. And then the next day, the North Koreans invaded South Korea. Well, I've never believed that. What was Dulles doing there? So I clipped that picture from the newspaper and I pasted it on to a sheet of white paper. And I said something like "end this war." And I walked around with this petition. That was crazy. [Laughing]

MacLEAN: What was it like? You went door to door with it?

LERNER: Yeah, I went door to door. [Laughter]

MacLEAN: How did your neighbors react?

- LERNER: Well, these were not neighbors, you see. I didn't know these people.
- MacLEAN: Oh, because you were in Peekskill.
- LERNER: They were all strangers.
- MacLEAN: It was pretty courageous to do it, six months after the riot.
- LERNER: It was crazy. I shouldn't have done it. I mean. They slammed the door in my face. They cursed me out. And one guy pushed me.
- MacLEAN: You were by yourself?
- LERNER: Yeah, I went by myself. That was crazy. But a few people signed it. It was like a petition to the President: don't let this escalate. I forget. Well, anyway, there were communities, kind of progressive communities, around that area. Like summer communities. And so out of these communities we formed a committee, a peace committee. And then I got involved. Then we moved, the end of the summer we moved to Queens. And I got involved in forming women's peace committees. And what we would do is wherever, you know, we had five or eight people that met together. I had a standard speech about the United Nations and the law and how could you solve this peacefully without having the danger of nuclear war. And it was clear, I mean, it was a situation that was always escalating very rapidly, a very dangerous war, actually. Because, half the time the public didn't even know where things were, who was what. Nobody had any idea. And you couldn't pronounce the names—Pyongyang and God knows what. But still, it's a war and the government is in it so people had this knee-jerk patriotism reaction. But we would have a peace committee that might, you know, meet in somebody's house and there might be eight or ten or twelve people. And they would have a talk about the role of the United Nations. What were the alternatives? And then we would have peace petitions and try and encourage people to circulate them, pass resolutions.
- MacLEAN: By then was it too dangerous, too risky to have public demonstrations or pickets?
- LERNER: I don't remember any public demonstrations. There wasn't enough support. There wasn't enough support for this. But I personally helped to initiate five different peace committees in Queens.

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MacLEAN: Wow. And these were all women's peace committees?

LERNER: Yeah, they were women.

MacLEAN: And was it, in that climate of the developing red scare, was it easier to organize in some ways as women, as mothers about peace?

LERNER: Yeah, mothers about peace. I think that was the approach. That was mostly the approach. And it was the mothers. I mean, they felt very strongly about it. If you had a 17-year-old son, you knew he was going to go there.

MacLEAN: I.F. Stone was writing against the Korean War...

LERNER: What?

MacLEAN: I.F. Stone, the journalist.

LERNER: Yes.

MacLEAN: Remember him?

LERNER: Yes.

MacLEAN: He was writing very powerfully against the Korean War.

LERNER: Oh yeah, he was.

MacLEAN: Was that helpful to you?

LERNER: Very good, yeah.

MacLEAN: I mean, were you all looking to these national writers?

LERNER: In fact, that was our main source of information because he was a genius. He only used government sources. So when he said something, it was from the other side's sources, so you knew it was accurate. Nobody ever caught him in an error or a lie. I mean, he was really an amazing guy. So that was one of the activities that was going on. We also sent delegations to the United Nations urging them to send United Nations troops instead of American troops and things like that. And that was also difficult, I mean, like, they wouldn't — after a short while they wouldn't let us in. And so we used these tactics of dressing up as ladies —

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MacLEAN: (sneezes) Excuse me.

LERNER: You want a Kleenex?

MacLEAN: No, I'm okay.

LERNER: — with hats and gloves and pocketbooks and then we would get in.

MacLEAN: But they wouldn't let you in when you didn't look like "ladies."

LERNER: When we just came in jeans, and so on — no, no, no visitors. No visitors. And then we would come in and we would say, Well, we're from the Association of American University Women or something like that. And you could get in. I don't think they made much difference, these organizations, but they did allow people to feel a continuity of resistance effort to the war.

MacLEAN: And stay sane, almost, by staying connected to other people who thought similarly.

LERNER: Yeah. I'm trying to think, I've been trying to think all morning, I'm not thinking very well today because of my bad night [Lerner was ill the previous night and slept poorly, hence her tiredness in the interview] but have you ever heard of the baby tooth survey on Strontium 90?

MacLEAN: No.

LERNER: All right, I just want to use that as an example. In this period, between the dropping of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs and when, especially also when the Russians started testing nuclear weapons — you know the Russians contributed enormously to the nuclear fallout too. We now know even worse than Americans, because they really were totally ruthless about their own population. But people tried to develop an argument against nuclear weapons in terms of the danger of air pollution and contaminations. And not just in case of war but in case of peace. And so this Committee of the Atomic Scientists, they had leaflets where they showed if a bomb fell in the center of Manhattan, they showed in a sixty-mile radius everything would be burned, totally burned. And you make a sixty-mile radius around New York City and you've got something like twenty million people, okay? And those were the things we would circulate and show to people and argue that we have to do something about it. So at that time, of course, the government tried to show us that nuclear was really

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great, it was all peaceful, it was clean. And that had a big impact. They hauled out their scientists like Teller and others, and they said, No, it's ridiculous. These liberals are wrong on it. The lefties are wrong about this because it's really clean energy. And then a group of these scientists under the leadership of Barry Commoner decided that they have to find a way to translate to the American people what this nuclear fallout is doing. And they hit on the idea that they would collect the teeth of babies, the infant teeth, that fell out when you get the second teeth, from all over the nation and they would test them to see what they had in them. And what they found they had in them was Strontium 90, and in enormous doses. And my friend Virginia was the organizer of this campaign.

MacLEAN: Oh really, Virginia?

LERNER: They did it out of St. Louis. Barry Commoner was at the University of St. Louis. And there you had Virginia, you know, an active communist herself. I think it was one of the most important actions taken for peace in the entire postwar period. [What? Stop? Paused to change tapes].

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

LERNER: Well, first of all tens of thousands of people responded by collecting baby teeth. So, it was a large-scale experiment and it was all over the nation. And they showed the differences in an area where there was no nuclear fallout possible and an area where there was. It was very dramatic. And the fact that you could show it in the teeth of babies under age 5. And I think it becomes more dramatic in retrospect when you now realize, which they have admitted, how they lied about the fallout in Nevada — the sheep that were dying of radiation illness — and that was absolutely denied by the government. And in fact they have these pictures where they sit — I saw a photograph where right after the Hiroshima explosion, they had a group of army people and politicians sitting on bleachers in the desert watching an atom test with just sunglasses. [Marvels] Nothing covering them. Nothing to protect them. So this issue of being able to translate the danger into people's, the teeth of their children. It was very, very effective. And it was used to collect the signatures for the Stockholm appeal. And then of course —

MacLEAN: Could you say more about Stockholm appeal? Describe what it was and what it was trying to achieve?

LERNER: Well the Stockholm appeal came out of Stockholm. And it was an international appeal that was circulated all over the world, but I guess mostly in Western Europe and Canada and Latin America too. And it simply called on the nations of the world to discontinue the production and use of nuclear weapons. It was, like, two sentences, very simple. And it was immediately in the United States branded as having been a Trojan horse of the Russians — the Russians had written it, it served their interests and anybody that signed it was helping the Russians. So it was very hard work to go around with the Stockholm appeal. And that was also the time where — I think one was done in Madison and one was done in Boston — where somebody stood [at a corner] with a copy of the Bill of Rights and asked people to sign it and they wouldn't sign it.

MacLEAN: I remember that, standing out on the street corners.

LERNER: So, I'm trying to give an inkling of the fact that there was countervailing organization or organizations. And most of them were not the kind that the media paid attention to. Because they were, I mean, coffee klatches, you know, and small groups meeting in homes.

MacLEAN: And women, you said, largely.

LERNER: A lot of them women, right. And then many of the women that I knew in say Queens, and people who were in the Peace Committee, then joined Women Strike for Peace. That appealed to them and that offered them a way of fighting for what they believed in.

MacLEAN: And this was *during* the Korean War, or then after the war? Around that time?

LERNER: I think you need to look that up in Amy Swerdlow's book. I don't have the dates in my head. But it was during this period. We were mostly focusing on bringing the United Nations and the work of the United Nations to the community. So some of the things that I did is, in one of the schools where I was active in the PTA, I started a United Nations Committee. And I got into trouble there, they didn't like it. The principal was very upset about it. But I said I thought it was a perfectly legal thing to do and we should do it. So, we did these kinds of things. We would explain the different world organizations of the United Nations — how they functioned, what they did, and what they did for children. The various treaties, international treaties and so forth. Now, unfortunately, my memory is not precise and it's not chronologically accessible. In other words, I can't tell you the sequel but I can tell you that the Peace Committees in the Korean War were followed by Women Strike for Peace and then some of the United Nations organizations.

MacLEAN: What about the connections with earlier work? Yesterday, I think it might have been when we were actually off tape, but you were talking about the importance of continuity —

LERNER: Yeah.

MacLEAN: — in the history of organizing, and the way that gets overlooked by many historians who are writing about this. Did these Korean committees come out of your earlier peace activity and involve some of the same people who had been working with the Congress of American Women on peace issues?

LERNER: Some, yes, some. Usually the person that would organize the local committee was somebody who had been an activist before. So, you know, this stands to reason. I mean, things don't happen —

MacLEAN: Right, who else would do it?

- LERNER: — spontaneously, right? But I think I put that in *Fireweed*. I had a Forest Hills, a Kew Gardens, St. Albans and several other, five peace committees just in Queens, that I know that I helped to organize and I spoke there. I used to do educational work essentially. That was my specialty.
- MacLEAN: There was a lot going on in Manhattan in these areas, too. Were the boroughs like Queens, were you connected to the work that was going on in Manhattan?
- LERNER: Well there was no —
- MacLEAN: Or were you operating more on your own?
- LERNER: There was no overall organization.
- MacLEAN: Yeah, yeah.
- LERNER: And there was no effort to make it. Because that has to do with the repression.
- MacLEAN: The Red Scare.
- LERNER: You didn't want to know too many people. You didn't want to get too many people into the same room. Women Strike for Peace worked the same way, you know. They brought that to new heights organizationally. Like they kept no records, of anything. They wrote nothing down.
- MacLEAN: Because of the experience that earlier groups had had?
- LERNER: Because they didn't want to give, you know, the police or the FBI a chance to infiltrate the organization and expose the people and victimize them.
- MacLEAN: Let's go back a little to when this started, you know, when the Red Scare started, and you were working in the Congress of American Women and you heard that HUAC had put CAW on the list of subversive organizations. Do you remember when you first heard that?
- LERNER: [Struggling] No, I don't remember. It was *continuous*.
- MacLEAN: Everything was non-stop?

LERNER: It just went on. It went on all the time. In other words, '48 you had the loyalty oath, the Truman loyalty oath. And then you had the HUAC hearings, the first hearing in Hollywood, which got nowhere because the motion picture industry at that time was resisting it. And then they came back, and they then formed a state HUAC committee. I mean they had, in every state they were forming these committees. It was just —

MacLEAN: It was the Tenney Committee, I think, in California?

LERNER: Tenney Committee in California. They had the Rapp-Coudert Committee in New York. They went after the high school teachers, the elementary school teachers. Different committees specialized on different people. But it was, like, all the time! You know, the big cases were going on, the framework was always the big cases like the Hiss case and the Judy Copeland, and so on. But the real — see, this is the other thing that's what I was saying yesterday — I think we were off the line — but nobody has yet, to my knowledge, studied the entirety of what went on across the whole nation, simultaneously, and the effect of that, the chilling effect of that. That's really what you have to picture, and that's one reason that I tried to do that in *Fireweed*, to give people an idea of what it was like be under constant — I mean, you were under constant assault. If it wasn't one thing it was another, you know. And, I mean, if you had a friend who was a musician, right? Well, he wasn't very good, he wasn't affected, he wasn't in the film industry. But then they went after the musicians. It just —

MacLEAN: I remember in *Fireweed* there's a very powerful section where you talk about being in the car with your children and hearing that your gynecologist had named names — hearing it over the radio.

LERNER: Right. Yeah. So that's kind of how it was, you know. So when you say, "when did you hear it," I heard it all the time. [Laughs] And of course, see, then you had the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations. And that was another, I mean, another very powerful way of discouraging people from organizing. Right? I mean, who in their sane mind would put their energy into organizing something so then the Attorney General would make a list and say you're a conduit for Soviet propaganda and you have to report, you know, report your membership list. And if you don't you get fined for every day that you don't report. It put millions of organ, I mean, it put organizations with millions of members out of business. And, I mean, the very good example is the International Workers Order, which was a conglomerate of ethnic self-help insurance groups. Where immigrant workers, Germans and

whatever they were, Italians, they each had their own little groups, where they paid in for burial insurance and for health insurance, and for accident insurance, you know, in case you had an accident at work. And that's how it was. That's all it was. That was the basis of it. And then they would meet in the Italian branch in Brooklyn, whatever. They'd carry on certain activities that celebrate the arrival of Italians in America and stuff like that.

MacLEAN: Madison still had some of these buildings. The Italian Workingmen's Order —

LERNER: Yeah. Exactly, exactly. But these organizations were united under an umbrella, International Workers Order. Well when they got on the Attorney General's list, I mean, people by the tens of thousands lost their insurance. It was just wiped out. And these were working people. And now if you picture the effect of that — any sane person isn't going to join anything. You want me to join a group for health insurance? Forget it. I'm not going to do that.

MacLEAN: And what about you as an organizer of CAW? Because you had been involved, you were excited, you'd gone to international conferences. You were organizing local activities. When you saw that CAW was coming under HUAC's —

LERNER: Well it wasn't HUAC. HUAC wasn't doing anything to Congress of American Women.

MacLEAN: Oh I thought HUAC put CAW on the list of subversive organizations?

LERNER: No, the Attorney General did.

MacLEAN: Oh I see. Right, yes, of course.

LERNER: The Attorney General did. And that was the kiss of death. You had two choices, three choices. If you complied with the Attorney General's order, then every publication, where it says your name and address of the organization, you had to say "agent of the Russian government." Yes, that was the idea. And, I mean, you couldn't do that. It was ridiculous. We weren't agents. I've forgotten all the ins and outs of it, but it made it impossible to continue the organization. And so your option was to go to court and show that you were not an agent of the Russian government. Well, you know that's very difficult to do in the best of cases, because to prove something negative is always very difficult. But by that time they had this army of FBI and police informers who

were paraded around the country and all they did was to swear under oath that, Yes, I saw Mr. X at this meeting and I have a copy of the membership card of the Communist Party of Mr. X. That's all you needed. You needed one guy and they had these people—I mean you couldn't, to fight this in court would take years. And people, some of the organizations, tried it. I think the I.W.O. tried it because they really were very hard hit. But nobody won. It wasn't, I mean the climate in the country wasn't, you didn't win those cases. So we knew that when we got this information from the Attorney General that we were one of those. So we tried to negotiate. Our first response was that we disaffiliate from the international organization. We were willing to do that. We didn't like it but it would have been, you know, they, because they cited that [our affiliation] as proving that we're agents, that we are members of this international group. So that we negotiated that for several months, with lawyers.

MacLEAN: And were you part of that?

LERNER: I was on the executive committee making the decisions. I wasn't part of the negotiations. They had lawyers and they had — I wasn't that important a person in the leadership, I was just a member of the executive board. There must have been maybe fifteen, twenty members of the executive board. But of course if you didn't comply, then each member of the board was liable for the whole organization.

MacLEAN: Personally liable, right for those fines and everything, right?

LERNER: Yeah, yeah, so it was serious. It was a serious thing.

MacLEAN: And there you were with two small children and the husband who was being victimized, blacklist —

LERNER: And of course they would publish the names in the newspapers and they would advertise. You would be asked questions by reporters. But this didn't happen. We disbanded the organization, because we couldn't, we could not fight it. Now, that's all. [Sounds sad, final]

MacLEAN: What about the records? I mean was there a group decision —

LERNER: No.

MacLEAN: ...that it would be a good idea to get rid of the records.

LERNER: No.

MacLEAN: Do you think other people also [destroyed their records]?

LERNER: Yes.

MacLEAN: Yes.

LERNER: Yes, there are no records. I mean it was very difficult to find any records any place. And anybody who had anything to do with it — do you think Betty Friedan kept her records?

MacLEAN: No. What kind of records did you have?

LERNER: Well, you had records of the meetings where you did publicity on some issue. Or you might have records of the members — a mailing list in Queens to whom you would send the mailings.

MacLEAN: Minutes of meetings, that kind of thing.

LERNER: Yeah. And then we had a journal that we sent out once a month. I have one issue still left that I think I gave to Schlesinger [Library] already where we did a peace calendar. And I have some, I had a couple of poems in there. And we had women's history in there and so on. A very nice thing. But you didn't keep that hanging around. You weren't going to take it, you know, I don't know. [Dispirited].

MacLEAN: At the time you weren't a historian. Did you have a sense, thoughts, that these were records for posterity?

LERNER: Sure, I'd been through this before.

MacLEAN: It must have been an awful decision.

LERNER: I'd been through this before, remember.

MacLEAN: Yes, yes.

LERNER: You know, we went through our library in Vienna and took out all the books that had anything Marxist, socialist, Red. Anatole France we took out. And, you know, anything.

MacLEAN: Oh, my God. It must have been so horribly familiar.

LERNER: It was terrible. Yeah, it was terrible to me. It was hard not to get hysterical about it. Because it did seem — and that was a mistake

too. I think we didn't make that mistake. We did understand that this was not Germany.

MacLEAN: You *did* understand. But it was so frightening.

LERNER: Well, yes. I mean, well, when you, you know – picture to yourself, you've worked for four years to build up a good coalition that's done a lot of good work, and that's *rooted* in many communities, and you have to destroy it yourself.

MacLEAN: It's like destroying your child, yeah.

LERNER: Yeah, that's not good.

MacLEAN: There's a point in *Fireweed* where you talk about these years and you say that you and Carl and your friends just sometimes felt like you were going crazy because of the impact.

LERNER: Yeah. Oh yeah. It was *very* difficult. It's just like when you have severe sickness in the family or something. You go through that period and all your energy is focused on just getting through. It's afterwards you look at it and say, How in the world did we do this?

MacLEAN: How in the world did we survive?

LERNER: Well, how in the world did you keep your morale up —

MacLEAN: Keep cooking dinner for kids?

LERNER: — and not feel that it was all, you know, that everything you had done was useless, and all that. I mean, it was difficult. But on the other hand, when you worked on something like this baby tooth survey and we found our own government lying to people about scientific evidence, that sort of fortified you in the fact that you're doing a good thing by resisting. You just have to. It was small steps. It wasn't anything very big and dramatic. But I think people should get credit for those small steps, because we did slow down the process.

MacLEAN: And you did keep a tradition going, and keep that continuity so there would be something for later years.

LERNER: And keep a tradition going. And also it was also a question of physically helping the black-listed people to survive.

- MacLEAN: You personally wrote many pieces in defense of people who were going to lose their citizenship and be expelled, right?
- LERNER: Yeah, I worked for the —
- MacLEAN: Did you keep that writing? Is that at the Schlesinger?
- LERNER: Yes. Yes. I worked for the American Committee, I think it's called the American Committee on the Foreign Born, of the Foreign Born, I'm not sure. And they were fighting the deportations. It was, I mean that to me is very difficult right now, because it's going on the same way right now. And only now I don't see that there's much resistance of any sort. Then there was still, there were lots of lawyers who gave their services and fought for these people. What you had mostly was pathetic because they went after very old people who had been in the country fifty, sixty years. And these were people that came from Central Europe and they were active maybe in trade unions. And when they applied for citizenship they were turned down because they were Red.
- MacLEAN: And I assume many of them were Jewish. Were they? So the idea of being expelled after the Holocaust must have been horrifying.
- LERNER: Some were Jewish, some were not. At that time it wasn't so much racial immigrant groups as ethnic immigrant groups. Poles and Czechs and Serbs and so on. And they would take these people who had, you know, American children and grandchildren who hadn't been out of the country and dumped them into Slovakia where they hadn't been for seventy years. So that was bad. And I also worked with the Civil Rights Congress, a black organization. I'd like to talk about the Willy McGee case and Rosa Lee Ingram—
- MacLEAN: Great. Excellent.
- LERNER: ...because that was part of what we did.
- MacLEAN: Did you know Bella Abzug, then?
- LERNER: Oh, I do know Bella yes.
- MacLEAN: Didn't Bella Abzug work on the Willie McGee case?
- LERNER: And we knew, we had a friend who was the (what are you writing?) [Speaking to audio person here]

- MacLEAN: So you were talking about the Rosa Lee Ingram case, Willy McGee case.
- LERNER: Yeah. The Rosa Lee Ingram case. I explain it in *Fireweed*, should I repeat it here?
- MacLEAN: Sure, just do a little for someone who hasn't read the book.
- LERNER: Well, she was a sharecropper in Mississippi. And she had a little piece of land. And I think she was widowed. And she had a lot of children. And she had had a running conflict with a white neighbor who used to complain when her cattle strayed on his land. Well, that's common, you know, that happens everywhere. And this one time when one of her cows, I think, went on his land he hauled out his shotgun and was going to kill the cow. And she ran out and put herself between him and the cow or something. And so he had his shotgun on her, at which point her two sons who were 15 and 16 years old, very tall strong boys, came out to defend their mother and wrestled the man for the shotgun. A shot went out and he, the farmer, got killed. So they got her and the two sons for murder. Murder one. Right, it wasn't even, they wouldn't take a self-defense plea. And well, it was Mississippi, you know. And the case became – well, the NAACP took it on but didn't do much. And there was some overtones, too, that I don't know.
- MacLEAN: They didn't think it was respectable enough somehow or they thought it would be too dangerous for them?
- LERNER: No, I think there were some overtones that he had been trying to make advances to her in the past. So there was a sexual question added. And they didn't, the NAACP didn't want to get into that. They were practically an illegal organization in the South at that time. So then the Communist Party got into it and took on the case and publicized it and started a campaign which resonated across the world. And, oh, she had, I think, five or six more children than these two boys. And they were convicted and sentenced to death, she and the two boys. And so then we had, they organized women's delegations to defend Rosa Lee Ingram. So that was interesting.
- MacLEAN: What was the thinking behind having *women's* delegations, specifically?
- LERNER: Well, mothers. Mothers. That if the sons defend the mother, you shouldn't treat them like criminals. But anyway. This is one that I remember very sharply because it's extremely unpleasant. It was

when Eleanor Roosevelt was the US delegate to the United Nations. And part of the effort was to enlist international protest. And so I was part of a delegation of black and white women who went to see Mrs. Roosevelt to appeal to her to act to defend Rosa Lee Ingram. And Mrs. Roosevelt was hysterical. She was shrieking at us, You are—this is a communist plot. You're dupes of the Communist Party. You're dupes of the Soviet Union. You're unpatriotic. Blah blah blah. I remember that very vividly because she was an, I mean I *idolized* her. I thought she was a great woman. And this one was really bad.

MacLEAN: Why do you think she responded as she did? Was that because —

LERNER: Well, that was the State Department [line] right.

MacLEAN: — the Red Scare had been, yeah, underway for —

LERNER: What?

MacLEAN: Because the Red Scare had been underway at this point for so many years that she, you know, even she was affected.

LERNER: She believed it, I guess. But you have to remember that if you look at the defense of the Scottsboro boys, which was a similar story, where the NAACP took it and did nothing. And then it became an international campaign that damaged the reputation of the United States very much. Then it turned out that the whole thing was a set-up, that they were innocent in the first place. But you see, there were several such cases. And in this Cold War atmosphere nobody cared about the defendants. It became an issue between the reputation of the United States for being a democratic country and Soviet — so I think, well that's another part that I think people today maybe find hard to believe. But among the biggest red-baiters and witch hunters were liberals. [To audio person: You finished already?]

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

- MacLEAN: Gerda, you were just saying as we finished the last tape that people don't really understand but among the biggest red-baiters were liberals. What was your experience with that?
- LERNER: Right. Well, like this thing with Mrs. Roosevelt. How can you understand that?
- MacLEAN: How *do* you make sense of that? At the time, how did you think about it? Because a lot of these were people you had worked with, right, during the war years in the Popular Front, not necessarily Mrs. Roosevelt?
- LERNER: I hadn't personally worked with Mrs. Roosevelt but I had admired her and I thought she was a truly humanitarian person, and I think she was. But at that time everything was so polarized that people like her — I mean, if she had investigated this case at all I think she would have been on the other side. But she had to take — I mean, she was the government representative at the United Nations, so she had to say — I mean, it was clear that she did not want to have to deal with this. We put her in an embarrassing position.
- MacLEAN: What about at the grassroots? Did the same thing happen in some of the local organizations you'd worked with? You know, did women who were liberals turn against women who were radicals?
- LERNER: Oh sure, yeah, sure, yes. That's what happened when CAW was attacked, before we were listed by the Attorney General, but attacked, then a lot of the liberal people would just drop out. They'd give you one excuse after another but it was, you know [obvious]. But I *do* need to say that it was difficult to take all the risk and the trouble. I'm not trying to excuse them, but I think that's what happened. The point I'm trying to make is that the chilling effect of this polarization and of the Cold War at home far, far outlasted the time of a repression itself. And that people remember, people who went through it remembered it and learned whatever they had to learn from it. Yeah. So the women who organized Women Strike for Peace, they learned a very good thing. They learned that they have to find modes of organizing which can't be tracked down easily. And they did very well with that. They got very creative. But also, I mean, that's another thing, see, some of the feminist writers criticized Women Strike for Peace because, like I said, they hid under their positions as mothers. Well that's nonsense, you know. [Irritated].

- MacLEAN: Why is it nonsense? Say more.
- LERNER: Because they *were* mothers. And the people they organized were *mothers*. And it's the same thing I talked about yesterday.
- MacLEAN: So they were using that to try to find a point of commonality —
- LERNER: That's right.
- MacLEAN: — in this really polarized climate.
- LERNER: They were finding, they were finding a dialogue that they *shared* at a time when they didn't share dialogues, you were polarized. You were either on one side or the other. So I think that that has to be understood. And interestingly enough, the middle class and middle-of-the-road black women stayed very, I mean they *stayed* with the defense of Mrs. Ingram. They did not give up.
- MacLEAN: They probably understood much better than the white women what the Red Scare was trying to do, right?.
- LERNER: I think they understood better, yeah, yeah. And they also were suspicious of, they knew about the racism that existed in Mississippi, you know.
- MacLEAN: When you were doing this organizing around the Ingram case did you find ways to connect the racism in the South to what was happening in the North? Or did you try to stay focused on saving the lives of these three people?
- LERNER: It wasn't that theoretical. You just — [tired].
- MacLEAN: It was an important issue to organize around.
- LERNER: Yeah. I mean it was, but you take in St. Albans, when we were trying to organize interracial work between the old residents and the incoming black residents, if we had brought in the Ingram case there, it would have been divisive. You couldn't do that. So you had to pick (cough).
- MacLEAN: Be very strategic about what you worked on.
- LERNER: You had to pick what issues you were going to deal with here or there. Right? That's what I would say about it. But I was very concerned about the Ingram case. It meant a lot to me.

MacLEAN: Gerda, we're in kind of a difficult political [Audio person gestured to know how the case ended].

LERNER: They were freed in the end. They were freed. Both she and the boys. We won that case.

MacLEAN: Wasn't Bella Abzug pregnant then too. Wasn't she like —

LERNER: Yes.

MacLEAN: — didn't she have to sleep in a bus station down there or something because they wouldn't, no hotels would put her up, because she was an attorney for black clients?

LERNER: They wouldn't give her, yeah, right. But you see that's it.

MacLEAN: So it was worthwhile. [Laughs, addressing audio person, about exchange off-tape].

LERNER: What?

MacLEAN: I said I wish Bruce hadn't shut the tape off. He should have just joined the interview there.

LERNER: Yeah. Well, all right. Let's talk about something else. What else is on your agenda?

MacLEAN: We're talking about years that were very difficult. And you've emphasized that what was important in that is maintaining continuity and keeping a kind of a radical tradition going. How *did* you guys keep your spirits up? I mean were the arts important to you?

LERNER: Very.

MacLEAN: I know you were a novelist, a poet —

LERNER: Yes. Yes. I was saying about supporting the blacklisted people. You know, again, the blacklist has come down in history as the Hollywood Ten and a few other personalities. But the blacklist affected tens of thousands of people. And nobody has cared much about those people. The record of what happened is very skimpy, I think. And there were people — I mean, people did different things. Some people, many people that had families, that had any kind of business, they would go in the family business because you

couldn't throw them out. You couldn't get a job if you were blacklisted elsewhere, because the FBI would come to the employer as soon as you started the job and they would say, you know, This man is such and so, and then you would be out of a job. So they worked for family businesses.

And other people, the veterans, they used the GI Bill of Rights and got some kind of advanced degrees and started new careers, some of them very brilliant. So, like my friend Jeff Corey who was an actor in Hollywood who was blacklisted, at the height of his career. I don't know if you ever saw the film *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*? He played Lincoln. So he was a character actor, and very, very talented, and well on the way to being a major, major character for the studios. Well, he was out of everything. So he was a decorated veteran. He had been a photographer in the Navy in the worst battles in the South Pacific. So he went back to college and got some kind of degree, I forget what. But he couldn't do much with it. And then somebody said, You know, Jeff, you're such a great actor and acting teacher, why don't you give some lessons, take students? And before you knew it he built up the biggest, he's the biggest acting coach in Hollywood. And the same studio that would not allow him in the front door, at *their* expense sent all their starlets to study with Jeff Corey and become great actresses. So to him the blacklist was an absolute — I mean he turned it into gold.

But many people, like many of the school teachers, were very badly off. They had nothing to fall back on. So what we used to do is, there used to be a regular circuit. And they would go and give, you would have a house party and invite twenty people, and they would give a talk or a lecture or they would whatever they do. This one guy was a science writer, and he would give you a talk on some aspect of science. And everybody would pay a couple of dollars, three dollars, at the end of the evening we would hand him forty dollars. He could live that week. And that's how we did that. And then the next month we had another kind of person, musicians, composers. And there was this movement, this cultural underground network that allowed people to stay alive, which was not inconsiderable. It was an important thing.

MacLEAN: And it sounds like it also enabled you to maintain community —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: — at a time when people were being attacked and atomized.

- LERNER: And you had a good time! I mean, you had brilliant people come and give you, you know, give you their stuff. People like Foner, is an example, he was a —
- MacLEAN: Moe Foner?
- LERNER: Not Moe, his brother, the historian.
- MacLEAN: Philip.
- LERNER: Philip. He was unemployed and unemployable, so he used to come and give lectures. So there was a whole [network], and this was — but again, who did it? Who knows? I mean everybody did what they could.
- MacLEAN: Did people bring their kids? You know was it like a potluck?
- LERNER: Sometimes they did, yeah, sometimes, and when there was music. And then also, remember when the Weavers were formed? Well these were blacklisted people too. And you created a new audience. So in a sense, I think, we always were, we were turning things around. And I think that's what sustained you. You had a feeling you didn't just get victimized. You did something with it. I think that's what it was. [Musing, curious tone].
- MacLEAN: So it must have been so hard when you had, against all these odds, kept people together, sustained this community, run these discussions, to then get the Khrushchev revelations in '56. Did that, I mean, I imagine that really shocked people.
- LERNER: Well, but then you, you had the big things, you know the big issues where you had demonstrations and everything, that went on. So in a sense, I think — I wish this aspect of the historic experience would get better treatment, I really do.
- MacLEAN: The importance of the cultural work in sustaining the movement?
- LERNER: Yeah, the cultural, and the survival techniques that people used.
- MacLEAN: What about the musical that you did with Eve Merriam? Did that come out of this ferment? [Merriam and Lerner, "Singing of Women"]
- LERNER: Yes. Well, that wasn't — she was a successful playwright and she was not blacklisted.

- MacLEAN: But there you were at the height of the so-called “feminine mystique” doing a radical music review about women. How did that happen?
- LERNER: Yeah, right. Well, my friend Virginia wrote a review and we put it on. Carl directed it for the opening of the Los Angeles chapter of Congress of American Women. And she had the Sojourner Truth speech. And we had a scene in the Lowell Mills and so on. And it was just for one night. And it was quite successful. And I wrote a few of these things.
- MacLEAN: You did?
- LERNER: Yeah. Joyce Antler wrote about it. I did a show for the I.W.O., the Emma Lazarus Foundation, the Women’s branch of the I.W.O., on Jewish immigration in America. What did I know about it? Nothing. [Laughs] But I worked in a public library, pulled together a few [things]. And so, I don’t know whose idea it was, probably hers, and we did this show together. And it was put on – well, there was a cultural committee that was in the resistance business. It was called, it started out in Hollywood, the Hollywood Committee of Screen and Professional Workers. And then there was a national branch. It was sort of a left-wing cultural defense umbrella organization. And they sponsored our little play, our musical. And we had three nights of off-Broadway production. It was very good.
- MacLEAN: And did you keep the records of that? Are those at the Schlesinger?
- LERNER: I have one copy and it’s at the Schlesinger. It’s there. It’s not even embarrassing. [Laughter] .I mean it was quite good. The only thing that I would have done differently later is it had this framework of the Marxist concept. So it was in the framework of a dispute between a husband and wife. And the husband was a good union organizer who had to see the light about the wife, you know. So it was in that in-the-end-he-sees-the-light, in that framework. But the historical material is great. We had everything in there. We had Lucretia Mott knitting and helping a slave escape from the courtroom. And we had the Sojourner Truth speech. And we had the Lowell Mill girls organizing. It’s a whole historic thing.
- MacLEAN: So just hearing you talk about this — you know, Sojourner Truth, the Lowell Mill Girls — what do you think of this idea that seems to be out there among many young women historians, now among graduate students, that women’s history ignored race and class in the early years and didn’t even pick up these issues until the 80s and 90s?

LERNER: Well that's just —

MacLEAN: Is that the way you remember it?

LERNER: No, they're wrong. They're wrong. They're wrong. [Emphatic]. You can say that only if you ignore the women of the left. But the women of the left were very important. I mean all you have to do is open Eleanor Flexner's book. It paid a lot of attention to black women. And everything I wrote in that period had black women in it. And there were others, you know. I mean it just wasn't true.

MacLEAN: Did you know Eleanor Flexner?

LERNER: Yeah, I knew Eleanor Flexner.

MacLEAN: In the early years, you know, before she published *Century of Struggle*?

LERNER: No. No, I knew her through that book. I contacted her when I came to Smith to do my research. And she was living there.

MacLEAN: We read that in your women's history class in my first year at graduate school here. It's a great book. I mean, it's still a good read today.

LERNER: Which one?

MacLEAN: *Century of Struggle*, it was a kind of textbook for the class.

LERNER: Yeah, it was. It was very important. And so I looked her up and then we had contact, quite intimate contact, for a number of years. But she was a very difficult person. And again, if you silence the witnesses and you silence the people who did what you say nobody did, then of course you end up with a distorted picture. But it's just not true.

MacLEAN: But somehow there's this notion that people marched in step, in cohorts, where everybody thought the same way, and there weren't arguments about these things, which [is] ridiculous.

LERNER: Ridiculous. I mean Eleanor —

MacLEAN: There is a letter from you to Betty Friedan in her papers —

LERNER: Right, right.

MacLEAN: — saying, Very nice book you wrote but where are the trade union women and black women?

LERNER: That's right. Right. But even, I mean there were *other* people doing this. Combahee River Statement, the whole lot of early interracial things out of the early women's movement. Even a mainstream organization like NOW had black women in the leadership. So how can you say they ignored it?

MacLEAN: Let's talk about that actually. Let's go into the early 60s and talk about the early women's movement. When did you first — you had been through the Red Scare. Then there was the upsurge of activity in the civil rights movement and you were involved in the Prayer Pilgrimage. At what point did you start becoming aware that women were organizing? Were you watching the news of the President's Commission on the Status of Women?

LERNER: Well, I was always aware of that. I was always interested in that and always looked up for items of that. You know and was reading whatever I could on it. But I was not involved in it. My first real contact was the Jeannette Rankin Brigade. You know about that?

MacLEAN: Could you say a little bit more about that?

LERNER: You're going to ask me when and I don't know. Jeannette Rankin was the member of Congress who voted against, the single member of Congress who voted against America entering WWI. And so there was a Jeannette Rankin Brigade mobilization to go to Washington and lobby for peace, essentially. And I think it was also the Stockholm appeal, against nuclear weapons, and they had positive programs. And while we were in Washington, the meeting was disrupted by this group of wild-looking young women who paraded around. They paraded a mannequin around the hall and said, All of you are just, you're just like mannequins. You're using femininity to enhance your situation and you're exploiters of women. And what we need is women's liberation. What else did they do? They disrupted the meeting. And I was among the people who were very upset to see such a meeting disrupted by women. And I tried to urge them to leave. And they didn't leave. And then the Jeannette Rankin Brigade people left the room, left to do their stuff, and we were doing our serious business. It was upsetting. It was very, you know, it was street theater, guerrilla theater. And then, on the way back, I was traveling by train, and it's a four-hour train ride, and I was sitting on the train with two or three of the women who had organized this. And one was —

- MacLEAN: Who organized the protest *against* your meeting?
- LERNER: Yeah. One was — I should think of the name now. The woman who wrote “The Myth of the [Vaginal] Orgasm”?
- MacLEAN: Oh, Anne Koedt?
- LERNER: Yes, Anne Koedt. And the other one was Sarachild somebody. Kathie Sarachild.
- MacLEAN: Kathie Sarachild, the one associated with consciousness-raising.
- LERNER: Yeah. Kathy Amatniak, who was an old Red. A young, old red-diaper baby, sort of. And we argued for four hours on the train.
- MacLEAN: Tell me about the content of the argument.
- LERNER: Well, I was still sputtering with disgust, “you’re disrupting a meeting that people worked months to organize. And we’re doing serious business. We’re talking about nuclear war.” “Well the oppression of women is more serious than nuclear war.” And it went on like that. And Anne Koedt was a lesbian and she began to talk about her favorite theory about the orgasm, which did not appeal to me either. The female or, you know —
- MacLEAN: “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm”?
- LERNER: Yeah. *However*, I was impressed with the fact that they weren’t just disrupters, they had something on their mind, that was clear. And they were serious about whatever it was. I could tell that.
- MacLEAN: Was that the first time you had encountered people involved in women’s liberation?
- LERNER: Such women, yes. I had never encountered the new wave, these young women. And then we stayed in touch. They sent me each a couple of pamphlets they wrote and I read those pamphlets and I thought they were very interesting. And then, at that time I was studying at Columbia. I was in graduate school. And there were these seminars, the Tannenbaum Seminars. They were arranged around different topics. There was a seminar on urbanization, a seminar on labor, a seminar, so. And they would bring people, faculty, from different institutions in the New York area and New Jersey area and Connecticut area to Columbia once a month for an evening of discussion workshop. And I had, I as a result of this

exchange with these women and what they sent me, I wrote an article called “the Feminists, A Second Look.”

MacLEAN: Oh yes, (phone). That’s in *The Majority Finds Its Past*.

LERNER: This was published in the Columbia, in a journal. This article is published. And it’s an article in which I am trying to explain to myself what these new feminists are about and how they’re different from the old feminists. And it was clearly written from the point of view of, I’m looking at this as a historian objectively. I’m not part of them, okay. So then I got asked by one of the seminars to give a talk on the subject to them. And I went there and I did it. And I was very nervous, because before I went I said to Carl, You know, I don’t know how this is going to go because I am going to have to talk sex as an issue. And in all the years that I’ve been at Columbia the word ‘sex’ has never been mentioned. And what the, you know, how am I going to do this? [still shocked]. And he said, Well, you’re going to do what any actor does. You’re going to look straight ahead at one person and give your talk, and not be flapped. Well, they didn’t — they snickered, they laughed. That’s what happened.

MacLEAN: This a mostly male audience of professors at Columbia?

LERNER: Yes. And the point I was making was that the new feminists consider the issue of sex and gender definition — gender didn’t exist, the word didn’t, but sex roles — a crucial theoretical point. I understood that already then. And when I said “sex,” yeah, [mimics audience reaction] — funny, you know. But that’s how it started. And then of course after that I got very quickly into organizing in the professional meetings on behalf of women.

MacLEAN: Can I back up a little bit? In the earlier years on the left, there were some women who lived with other women, you know, who presumably were lesbians, who had life-long partnerships, like Grace Hutchins who wrote some important early work on women in the workplace. Did other people know about that? I mean was there kind of a knowledge of homosexuality on the left in those earlier years when you were active?

LERNER: Well, it wasn’t it was like Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, you know? People knew about it, and it wasn’t an issue you should make. But it was considered, at a certain point when the persecution started, it was considered a liability and that’s when they, at one time they purged all homosexuals. Because the point was that the FBI would

use that against people, as a lever to get them to become informers.
So, that's the way it was looked at.

END TAPE 6

TAPE 7

- LERNER: [Continuing conversation while tape being changed] But it's much later. It's in the 80s.
- MacLEAN: Oh yeah. Are we taping?
- LERNER: I just talked about the seminars at Columbia. There were a total of something like a hundred and sixty-four seminars. And not a single one had anything about women in it. And together with Pat Graham and Annette Baxter and Marcia Wright, I helped organize the first seminar on women.
- MacLEAN: Were you still a graduate student then?
- LERNER: No. No, but I was still in New York. So it must have been, I organized, in the 70s.
- MacLEAN: When you were at Long Island University?
- LERNER: In the 70s. And then, maybe ten years later, they gave me the big honor that once a year they have a meeting of all the seminars, and they have one speaker. And it's such a great honor, they don't pay you, they don't anything. [Laughs] And I was at that seminar. And I gave a talk, a very hard-hitting talk, "When Women Move from the Margin to the Center." And I wrote a letter afterwards. It was a very, very disturbing experience to me, the whole thing. And I am talking about how it is, and this is after I'm, you know, successful and famous and all that. "During the question period, all the resident trouble-makers, be they male or female —
- MacLEAN: May I interrupt here for just a moment and explain that Gerda is reading something that she wrote.
- LERNER: — "tried to provoke me to say something which they can later use against the feminist women on campus. Often these supposedly innocent questions relate to some controversial issue on campus of which they assume I'm unaware. I'm pretty experienced in spotting these traps and usually manage to refuse to answer them. But it leaves me with a feeling of being used, or even abused. This is the way it's been for many years now." And I said my visit to Columbia was of that kind. "Each year one faculty person is selected to give the Tannenbaum lecture at the annual dinner. I was it this year and found out only after I'd accepted that I was only the second woman in forty years to have that honor. The other one was Barbara Tuchman. Great. I also know that mostly the ultraconservative men from the traditional seminars come to the dinner. And I was told that to mention feminism in the title would

keep them away. So I called my lecture 'When Women Move from the Margin to the Center' and made it a hard-hitting defense of the feminist critique of academic knowledge.

"There's only one seminar among the eighty which deals with women. It's the one I founded together with 9 or 10 other Columbia women some five years ago. Well, these wonderful women all turned out, about forty of them. And they sat together at three tables in that mass of male faces, and that was good.

"Before the dinner you get handed around by the chairman to meet the quote 'important people' who were deans, department chairs, trustees, provosts, even a Nobel Prize winner. Only these folks don't know what to talk to me about. They dredge their minds to find something to say about women, assuming, as one does with all tokens, that that is the only topic on which one can talk to me. Honorable black, what do you think of Jesse Jackson? I tried to touch on all kinds of other topics, but they don't like that. All right. By the time we sat down to dinner, I had had at least three, quote, 'friendly' sexist remarks. The one good thing was that I had invited a friend, a black friend of mine, who was my guest sitting next to me. Okay.

"I sat at dinner next to George Frankel who was the Dean of Graduate Studies when I was at Columbia in the 60s and who was and is one of the most reactionary obnoxious men alive. [MacLEAN laughs]. He entertained me with vile jokes all during dinner. No matter what topic I tried he brought it to the subject of sex. That kind of man always equates a feminist with a whore, so that's why. Example: I started a conversation about teaching foreign languages to undergraduates. He interrupted with a speculation about why there was only one annual Anglo-Saxon word for the sex act [MacLEAN gasps], and so forth. In any other circumstances I would have gotten up and removed myself. But as the honored speaker of the evening, I was trapped. The man to my right was very nice. But Frankel kept talking to me. I mentioned to him before dinner that I thought we had met socially before but could not remember where. And then he comes up with a connection through his wife to my daughter, okay. Hoping to distract him, I told him about you [her daughter to whom she was writing this letter] and he brightened at once and proceeded to give me a detailed description of you and how you looked — that's my daughter [Aside to MacLEAN] — how frail and delicate and feminine you were. That, he remembers all these years. In the context in which the conversation took place, he implied clearly that it was *amazing* that you were my daughter. Somehow the whole tone was so offensive, I felt really angry. So I asked him quite coolly if he had recently retired. Since I knew he had been kicked upstairs [laughs] to some post invented for him, this hit home and finally shut him up. Well, that was the warm-up.

And then I describe how the female introducer used some of my writing out of context to make it sound that whatever I learned and

whatever I accomplished was due to my training at Columbia. "I began my lecture by stating that all I was and had become would have been impossible without the women's movement and without the feminist scholars who had been my support network. As I said, my lecture was hard-hitting but also very interesting and intellectually rigorous. I had spent several weeks writing it. Had it critiqued here by some of my friends and had rewritten it. Great applause.

"Then discussion. I might have talked about quilting or spear fishing. The questions had no connections with what I said. There was a heckling kind of quibbling, which I often get. There were attacks on things they thought I had said, which I had not said. There were comments about ERA, the women's movement, the peace issue. One elderly sweet man asked me a question about teaching women students, which I was happy to get because it least showed he cared for women students. The final curve came in the form of an innocent question by a man I did not know. Did I think a separate woman's college was still viable in today's world. I recognized that at once as a hidden reference to Barnard. He was setting me up to say something to hurt Barnard. I made a joke of it. 'You don't expect me to answer that question here sir?' Which brought the house down. And so it ended.

"I felt bad then and the next day and for days after, so much so that I decided not to go on any lectures next fall. I'm still trying to understand what made me feel so bad. For one, I'm tired. I'm tired of being the pioneer, the second woman ever, or the first woman ever. Tired of being a token, and of finding ways of not letting myself be made into a token. Tired of having my life used as an example for this or that. I'm tired of answering the same arguments for twenty-three years, and of being applauded by people who don't hear what I'm saying. I'm tired of men telling me with a friendly smile they came to please their wives. Above all, I'm sick of being treated as a deviant freak. No matter to what high level I pitch my presentation, in the end I'm forced to be brash, assertive, snappy, just so I can keep some kind of control over the content. That's the set-up. The same way that they've set up Bella in Congress. Get the token woman to have to take a determined stand in a strong position, then harass her and heckle her, and when she responds the way any man would, sit back and grin. 'Abrasive, unfeminine, aggressive, just as we thought.' Well, you can't expect to make a serious critique of the male academic bastion without them howling and kicking back. But I guess I'm tired of being the one up front."

MacLEAN: Wow. That's a powerful document.

LERNER: What?

MacLEAN: That's really powerful.

- LERNER: Yeah. I don't usually say that so I thought it would be interesting, because that definitely has happened to me many times. And as late as last year, well, as this year. This year in Salzburg and last year getting the Bruce Catton Award. I'm the only woman to get it. First woman to get it. I mean it never stops.
- MacLEAN: Wow. So there is a whole interior world that doesn't get talked about. We talk about the exhilaration of a new field, and the fun of the fight, but —
- LERNER: No. And these guys that come up to you — they really come up to you, shake your hand and say, "I'm so glad you're here. I'm glad I came to hear you because my wife insisted on it." I mean [disgust].
- MacLEAN: Just year after year until the present.
- LERNER: Year after year, I hear that.
- MacLEAN: Do you think things have changed?
- LERNER: Sometimes I used to say to them, Don't you make up your own mind? I mean, how can you be sweet about it? It's an insult. It's insulting.
- MacLEAN: Take me back to those early years, Gerda, when you know you were one of the founding members of NOW, right?
- LERNER: Yes.
- MacLEAN: One of the first people to [organize] and the whole name "feminism" was charged negatively then because of the National Womens' Party. What was it like being part of those early [efforts]? Were you at the founding meeting of NOW?
- LERNER: Well I was not, see, I was not very active. I was not at the founding convention. I'm not one of the first hundred members. I'm one of the first two hundred members, the next year. And I went to one meeting of national NOW. And then I said, Never again.
- MacLEAN: Oh, really. Tell me about the meeting.
- LERNER: Well, they were very, they seemed to me very elitist. They seemed to me all into this celebrity business; it was all around four or five women who were strutting around there and showing how they were the center of the world. And it didn't seem to me *at all* going in any kind of grassroots direction. They were interested in influencing the national

[scene] and the media. And I really wasn't interested in that. And I tried to interest them into endorsing the development of women's history which they weren't interested in doing. So I stayed away. And then I went to the founding meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus and it was the same story. I didn't like it.

MacLEAN: NOW organized over the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's failure to enforce Title 7 [of the Civil Rights Act of 1964], equal employment for women?

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: So did you see an attention to working women's issues there that was encouraging or was it by, even that early day, more celebrity-driven?

LERNER: I can't tell you. I can just tell you that when you spent as many years in the grassroots work, you kind of have a sense when it's not. So that's all I can say. I felt it wasn't. It was never going to be.

MacLEAN: Say more: how could you tell that? Because some people, you know, Betty Friedan had also had a left background in the earlier years —

LERNER: Well but she —

MacLEAN: Pauli Murray was part of the early group. She left, I think, by '67, but she had a left background, had worked on civil rights issues. There were the trade union women. So was there was a moment, you know, when it *looked* more promising or it just never seemed so to you?

LERNER: I can't recall that. I can just tell you that I was never, I never got active in it. By that time, however, I was already much involved in the history, women's history movement. And I decided that that was going to be my focus. And if they weren't going to be interested in it — like I made an effort when, I had an item in the first issue of *Ms.* Magazine, a quiz on history. And I tried to, I talked to Robin and I talked to Gloria...

MacLEAN: Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem?

LERNER: Yeah. To see if they wouldn't have a regular column on women's history or a regular feature article. And I would have been glad to work on that, but they weren't, they weren't really responsive to it. And they had other, you know, they had a different agenda. I'm not saying anything *against* the organization. It performed what it set out to perform, I think. But it just wasn't something that I wanted—I didn't feel at home there.

- MacLEAN: And yet, years later, you initiated that very important oral history project on —
- LERNER: Yeah.
- MacLEAN: — women in the Midwest and women who were involved in early NOW.
- LERNER: But that was different.
- MacLEAN: Was that because the Midwest had a different —
- LERNER: Very different. Very different.
- MacLEAN: Say more about the differences between the Midwest and New York-Washington axis.
- LERNER: Well, you see, I knew all these women. I knew Dorothy Haener from the UAW. I knew her from Congress for American Women. See, these these trade union women were in Congress [of American Women]. And I had met them and I knew them. And they were, on paper they were also in NOW. But they were never the featured actors, you see?
- MacLEAN: And many of them grew very alienated in, I think it was 1967 when the ERA was pushed through as a big focus.
- LERNER: Yeah. And many of them left, felt alienated. That's right. That's it. And it was clear to me from the first meeting that the people who were in media, in PR and media work, they were the ones that were running this organization. That was the focus.
- MacLEAN: As opposed to grassroots organizing.
- LERNER: And I just had no interest in that.
- MacLEAN: Yeah.
- LERNER: I just didn't have any interest in that. I didn't have any time for that.
- MacLEAN: Gerda, after *Fireweed* came out, Joyce and I were talking about that oral history project – [Joyce Follet, researcher and interviewer, Documenting the Midwestern Origins of the Twentieth-Century Women's Movement, Oral History Project]
- LERNER: Yes.

- MacLEAN: — at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. And Joyce was reflecting that she and other interviewers had just never thought to ask about connections to, say, the Congress of American Women or the Communist Party in those Midwestern interviews. Do you think that in retrospect they might have gotten some interesting material if they'd *asked* more directly about the left?
- LERNER: Maybe from some of the trade union women, they would have gotten it. I don't know how many of them would feel open about it. I mean so many people have difficulty, had at the time we did this, might have had difficulty talking about it. And I certainly, you know, I worked on the questions. I didn't put the questions in.
- MacLEAN: Did it occur to you to put the question in and then you decided not to?
- LERNER: No.
- MacLEAN: You just —
- LERNER: No, it didn't occur to me. It didn't seem, I didn't think that people would answer them, you know. Because, again, I mean, you take somebody like the women in UAW. UAW was a proscribed organization. It was a union, was one of the unions that was in deep trouble with the government because they were "Communist-dominated," right? And these people had been through years of having to defend their right not to inform about people's political opinions. Well, I'm just not going to go in and be the one to say, Tell me about how many communists were in the UAW women's movement. I'm just not going to ask that question. I, I maybe — maybe it should be asked. I'm not saying that. But that's certainly one of the things that it did to me. And I have that sensitivity that I think many of the younger people, your generation, don't have. You haven't gone through that. But when you think of how many times these people in the union have to take a position. "He's a worker in my shop. Whatever his beliefs are, it's his business. This is America. It's a free country. Don't ask me about his opinion." And I think that's a very important position to take. So then, years later you know, we impose that on it. I don't know.
- MacLEAN: And then it creates a kind of ethical dilemma for the historian, doesn't it? Because you want to respect people's sense of privacy and the trauma of those years. And yet, at the same time, if those left connections were part of what helped people keep an activist tradition going —
- LERNER: That's true.

- MacLEAN: — and we don't *know* about it, the next generation won't know how to keep a tradition going. They won't know how that tradition survived.
- LERNER: Well, there enough of us now who are writing about it I think.
- MacLEAN: Yeah, so you think it is coming out?
- LERNER: And of their own free will doing it, when they're ready. But I just didn't think that that was appropriate at the time. And it didn't, I mean frankly, it didn't, it wasn't like I had that idea and rejected it.
- MacLEAN: Last night at dinner we talked about these issues a little bit, about writers who have outed Communists and I wonder if you want to say anything about your own feelings about this issue for the tape. I mean you *voluntarily* came out yourself in *Fireweed* as having been a radical, but what do you think —
- LERNER: Well, I feel that it's something, I feel that way about it, like, people who have lived as homosexuals in the closet. I think it's *their* decision to come out or not come out. It's not the decision of other people. I think that free speech also means the right to refrain from speech. Right? And that's not lying, that's just acting on your own experience. People have to be able to do that. And, yes, many, like, let's say Harvey Goldberg and George Mosse, right? They lived in the closet. They had two separates lives here in New York, in Madison, and then in Paris, okay? Well everybody in the department knew that they had that. But they didn't know that everybody knew [smiles affectionately]. So, it's just a personal question of what is your, what is your feeling —
- MacLEAN: But you were saying last night, too, that you feel that the generation of historians that's coming up today really doesn't quite appreciate how traumatic the impact of the Red Scare was and how how charged all these memories are, and how difficult it is.
- LERNER: But there are, there is now enough oral histories of people who were blacklisted. You can find out. And you can, I think people could find out if they would *try*, if they would do the research and have the right concept of what you're looking for.
- MacLEAN: Gerda, would you be willing to say anything here about why you are doing audiotape instead of videotape [in this interview]?
- LERNER: No, I don't want to comment about that. No.
- MacLEAN: You don't want to say anything? Okay we'll just drop that. Let's go back to the movement in your life from being a radical and grassroots

activist, a peace activist on the left, to being part of the feminist movement. It seems like in your later life, you know, like at the time you were writing *Fireweed* you see a lot of continuity with the early years and are seeing —

LERNER: Yeah.

MacLEAN: — how being on the left really kind of enabled your feminism and informed it. But it seems like in the 70s and 80s, you were more conscious of the rupture, of how much you had to do to get *away* from Marxism and get away from that to think [in a fresh way]

LERNER: Yeah, well.

MacLEAN: Could you say more about how your thinking on these issues has evolved over time?

LERNER: Yes, I think that's important. Because you know when you're a dedicated Marxist, you were, you accepted a whole world philosophy that explained everything, supposedly. And the only way that an intelligent person stays in such a system is by either refusing to think very deeply about it, which many people did — they just, once they had their conviction, that's it. Or by twisting everything to make sure that you're not criticizing the system from within. And I think that the moment you begin to lose faith in the total explanation of the system, everything falls apart. And for me that has been a long process because as I tried to work on theoretical work, on theoretical approaches to how to deal with women as historical agents, I had to abandon a lot of these binary concepts and the whole set of explanations that gave primacy to one kind of oppression over another and all those things. And in each case, each time I did that, another brick fell down, of that wall. And by the time I came to — the real change for me, I mean the real landmark is *The Creation of Patriarchy*. And nobody has noticed that, that criticized the book. But *Creation of Patriarchy*, I think, one of its outstanding achievements is that it, as Engels used to say about Marx, he used to say about Marx that Marx put Hegel on his feet. Well, I put Engels on his feet. [Laughs] That is, I critiqued and destroyed Engels' main theoretical contribution and resurrected that aspect of his contribution that is useful for discussing women. And I did that very deliberately. I knew that's what I was doing. Well, when you do something like that, and you're doing it as an intellectual, seriously making an intellectual chain of arguments, and doing it consciously, I mean, I was well aware of the fact that once I had done that, I was finished with Marxism. And I had been finished with it before. But I hadn't been finished with the intellectual edifice. And this was precisely the time when the second wave of feminists discovered, Hallelujah there's Marxism, something

wonderful. So I was totally out of sync with them. And I couldn't get very excited about what they were doing. And I thought it was — you know, I'd been there, done that, thank you very much. So I don't know whether that answers the question. But what I'm saying is that it was a process over many years. And that the main, for me the main process, was to really understand the system fallacies of Marxism, the errors in the system itself, and they have pertained to race and gender and colonialism. See, so that's the route that I have gone on that. And that to me was more, I mean that was important, to not just get away from the *organization*, but get away from —

MacLEAN: The restraining ideas.

LERNER: — the ideas, yeah. Because I was always interested, from the time I started becoming an historian, I was always interested in a theoretical framework for what we were doing. And *the* single most important framework was the Marxist framework laid out by Engels and Bebel — and had nothing to do with the Party organization — that was very influential among many intellectuals who would be totally opposed to everything else, but they still accepted that. And to me it was very important that I had to come to terms with, what did I really *think* about this and *why* did I think it was wrong? And I think I did that in *Creation of Patriarchy*. And it had the effect, for the first time, once I had done that, I was able to begin to think about religion differently. And I was able to understand the enormous impact of religious thought on feminism in a much newer way, that I had never before been able to see.

MacLEAN: Which you began in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* and then later picked up in the Grimke work.

LERNER: Right, right. Right. Yeah, but in a certain way you can say it started with the Grimke book, but, really, it had to go through these stages.

MacLEAN: Am I right, though, that you've gone through a kind of evolution, that in the 80s it seems like in particular you were thinking your way out of those restraining ideas and getting away from that tradition and feeling the *distance* from it. But now it seems, in recent years, in the writing of *Fireweed* and the speaking you've been doing about your early life, that you're reevaluating the importance of your radical roots and seeing the ways that enabled much in your later years.

LERNER: Oh, but I'm not, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not upgrading Marxism.

MacLEAN: It's the *activism*. Would you say that it's the commitment to organizing?

LERNER: It's the activism, the grassroots activism, that had a very important impact on who I am, and how I do things, and the way I go about something. And also the way I think. And I think that's, that's what I came to in talking about that in *Fireweed*. But I think that the acceptance of the Marxist explanatory system was a mistake, was an error, that kept me, maybe I could have found something about women sooner if I hadn't started out with that. But there was nothing else, you know. There was very little else there. I mean, in a certain way, you know, Mary Beard was influenced by the Marxist approach to women. And her emphasis on women in organizations came out of her trade union experience. Very similar to mine. So, I—you finished? Tape ending? Okay, I think we should stop now though, don't you think? Have you got...

MacLEAN: Can we have another half an hour? Or maybe have lunch and then break?

LERNER: No, just tell me what else you have?

END TAPE 7

TAPE 8

- MACLEAN: In the early 1980s, I guess was it about 1983, you initiated that Oral History of Women in the Midwest Project because there were aspects of the early women's movement that you didn't think were making it into the historical record that were important.
- LERNER: Right.
- MacLEAN: Can you say a little bit more about what it was you wanted people to know more about?
- LERNER: I was very aware of the fact that the 19th century women's movement, the history of the movement, was for fifty or more years based on *The History of Women's Suffrage*. And it's obvious that that's a very biased and unbalanced source and left out a lot of what happened. And I could see the same thing happening again in the 20th century. And it seemed to me —
- MacLEAN: How did you see it happening in the 20th century? What were people relying on to create the historical record?
- LERNER: People were beginning now to write the history on the women's movement. It was all Betty Freidan and her book and these SDS women, and that's it. And that just wasn't right. And then, when I came here, I became acquainted with, and then became a very close friend of, Kathryn Clarenbach. And I initiated a grant to tape Kathryn Clarenbach's oral history. I think we did about nine or twelve hours. And when I read that, I could see there was a gold mine there, just a gold mine of material that nobody had looked at. And it was exactly in the line with what I've been talking about — about women who had deep roots in community organization over a long period of time. One of the findings of this project was that the participants, the twenty-three women we finally interviewed, had between them, the least, the shortest involvement was about ten years, and many of them had up to thirty years *continuous* organizational involvement in a woman's organization. So, this idea that out of nowhere came all these brilliant women that organized everything out of nowhere when they got this one book that told them the truth—it's just not right. That's not true. What happened is that they, the link between the grassroots and the more extremist pioneers, that link was made through the network of state commissions on women, and through Kathryn Clarenbach, who was the chair of the National Committee on the State Commissions of Women and who, in every state, could put her finger on ten or twenty leading women, and very deliberately used her position to bring the new

feminist message to these women and, through them, to their communities. And this is one of the things that, it'll be a lasting frustration of my life— we never have had a history article written about this.

MacLEAN: About this oral history project?

LERNER: This project, right. And the reason for that was, is that I refrained from writing it, in order to give a chance to the students who had worked on the project to do this. And not of not a one of them has done it.

MacLEAN: Although there's a fabulous documentary that came out of it! [*Step by Step: Building A Feminist Movement, 1941-1977*]

LERNER: There's a *wonderful* documentary. And there's been a lot of discussion. But it hasn't, I mean we haven't had the —

MacLEAN: There is not a book yet or article, yeah.

LERNER: — article in the *Journal of American History* that actually would tell you what this project was about. And I am still hoping that somebody can be found to do this. I really don't want to do it. Because it's not my field. I'm not a 20th-century —

MacLEAN: You have 19th-century projects going.

LERNER: Yeah. I don't want to have to start from scratch. I'm too old for that.

MacLEAN: What are some of the outlines of a new way of thinking about the history of the movement that would come out of looking at these materials and others?

LERNER: Well, as I said, you would understand that, above all, like all major social mass movements that made social change, these movements have to be organized on a broad spectrum. And they have to have reformist aspects, and they have to have people in policy-making positions, and they have to have a radical wing, and they have to have extremists. That's true for all movements for social change. That's how social change is made. And if any one of these aspects is missing, nothing happens.

MacLEAN: [Laughs] Which makes it so sad, that in the course of making the changes all these groups are often attacking each other —

LERNER: Right, right.

- MacLEAN: Like the young women who saw you and the Jeannette Rankin Brigade as sort of the enemy and the obstacle, when in fact, a historian can see them working together.
- LERNER: Yeah, right. And, I think, I would like that message to be built on, because it also holds true for political change.
- MacLEAN: How would looking at this grassroots organizing that was going on in places like the Midwest and, you know, away from New York and Washington, change the idea that the women's movement, you know, in its incarnation of the 60s and 70s was just a white, middle-class movement. Which is really —
- LERNER: That it was what? That it was white middle class...
- MacLEAN: That it was *just* a white, middle, you know...
- LERNER: Well, it just wasn't!
- MacLEAN: And it often goes with the adjective "just," just a white middle-class movement. That's really out there now. Is that your reading of this history based on what you know about the records?
- LERNER: Well, first of all, all social movements in America have been middle-class movements, because the people at the bottom, people who are living under poverty wage conditions cannot have time and leisure to organize. So it's not realistic to think of it that way. The women who work at Wal-Mart, okay, and who work between sixty and seventy hours a week, with luck, and don't make enough to feed their families on that and house them decently, those women cannot organize on extraneous issues of whatever kind. They know it. And they never have and they never will. So, in one sense, it's a nonsensical statement. All organizations require the availability of middle-class people who have time and leisure to devote to them.
- MacLEAN: So would we see, for example, more of black women's participation, including middle-class black women's participation —
- LERNER: That's right.
- MacLEAN: — if people looked away from New York and Washington D.C.?
- LERNER: If we counted and paid attention. But also when you make these generalizations, they're usually made in a very sloppy way. For example, there has been analysis of the female anti-slavery movement that they were largely white middle-class women. Well, I've studied

two of these women extremely thoroughly. I know all about them. I know more about them than I do about my own children. And they were born upper-class. And they were paupers from the time that they, Angelina married Theodore Weld. I mean, paupers. They didn't eat meat, because — they made a virtue of it, but they couldn't afford it. They didn't eat, you know, they didn't have extra money for this or that. So, what are they, middle-class women? Don't give me, "they were middle-class women." They were born upper-class women. They left. And when they left, they became paupers, which they were. Much of the time they had a little income from their inheritance and it was not enough to keep them above poverty level. Lydia Maria Child? Middle-class woman. She's educated. She had access to books. Her income was not that of a middle-class woman. So where do these generalizations come from?

MacLEAN: And as I hear what you're saying, you're also saying that these are labels, that they're dismissive, that they're almost insulting —

LERNER: Yeah.

MacLEAN: That they're like signs telling us that we don't have to pay attention to these people —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: And so you miss this incredibly dramatic story —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: — of people who transcended their backgrounds to become something very different.

LERNER: And people who give up their white skin privileges, who give up their middle-class privilege. I mean, Dorothy Day, a middle class woman? She didn't live like a middle-class woman, okay? She got her clothes out of the Goodwill. She bought her groceries at the, you know, the food handouts. So, was she a middle class woman? She may have been born a middle class woman. But I think —

MacLEAN: So it's almost that labeling stops us from thinking —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: — about the interesting —

LERNER: Right.

MacLEAN: — questions about historical process.

LERNER: It also presupposes that you're one thing, that your identity is one thing. And that's the other fallacy. We all have multiple identities. We all have different positions at different parts of our lives, at different periods in our lives. And to just do these labels, it's just counterproductive. It doesn't lead to anything. Also I think there's a great big difference between, how shall I put it? Just because a person comes from a wealthy family, you can't (cough) —people don't choose where they're born. So, it's what they do with it, right? (coughing)

MacLEAN: We're coming up to the present. We're going to let you off the hook. [Laughs] What time is it? Where is feminism now, Gerda? What do you see that makes you hopeful, and what do you see that gives you concern?

LERNER: Well, I don't know, I don't know. I don't think I want to talk about feminism.

MacLEAN: Feminists?

LERNER: I think women's studies and women's history is in a very difficult place where, on the one hand, you've made tremendous gains and, on the other, we are following all kinds of dead ends, and we are closing off avenues of exploration that should be explored. I think that, fundamentally, 1963, when I entered the profession and I became a graduate student, if I go from '63 to 2003, that's forty years, right? Well, we have succeeded in critiquing the patriarchal intellectual edifice. And we've succeeded in critiquing it very thoroughly, to a point where it can't be put together again. We have succeeded in exploding the structure of the university system that's been with us since the 11th century, and that was based on the purpose of educating the clergy to follow in a hierarchical order and to maintain that hierarchical order on the secular level. That led to the rigid division into fields, so-called specializations, turfs, with big fences around each. And with an elaborate system of mystification to maintain the power of the elites to keep other people out. We've exploded that pretty well to the point where it won't come again. As always happens in such explosions, all kinds of extraneous and sort of outrageously weird things are coming to the fore, and that's okay. I mean, the world will survive that. We have, at the moment, reached a point where the splintering and the dismantling, deconstruction, have taken over as if that were in itself a worthwhile aim itself as well, as if that were what it's about. And I think that's *not* what it's about.

MacLEAN: Is that what you mean when you speak of “dead ends?”

LERNER: Yes, partially. Right. Right. And if we, what we are beginning now — for example, I’ll use an example, the concept of writing a new world history which will not be written from the point of view of the conquerors. Now that’s the first interesting intellectual thing that’s happened in six hundred years in the academy. It’s really interesting. It’s not where it should be, you know, but it’s there. It’s no longer additive. It’s transformative. What we have *not* done in the feminist movement, and we have not done in the academic feminist movement, and we have not done in the women’s studies and women’s history movement — we have not attacked, nor have we analyzed, nor have we organized to change the institutional structures which persist like dead weight. I mean, everything is in a state of flux and the structures are there like [gestures in frustration].

MacLEAN: What kinds of structures are there?

LERNER: Well, so we have a professor of women’s studies now. We have two professors of women’s studies. We have women’s studies people being picked off one after the other to become administrators. The minute they become administrators they serve to maintain the old rigid structure that is totally destructive to what they really believe in, but they don’t know it. This has happened in a thousand different ways, okay? We are so busy building careers for women inside the establishment that we’re not challenging the things we *must* challenge. I mean, just forty years, and we have no childcare in universities? I mean how is this possible? It’s only because the people who have never organized a PTA luncheon are running this show. [Laughter] I mean it’s just pitiful. It’s totally pitiful.

MacLEAN: So we’ve been co-opted at some level.

LERNER: Yes, definitely been co-opted. We have been totally co-opted. And we have, some of us, become intellectually co-opted. Not all, but some. And that’s to be expected.

MacLEAN: When you say, “intellectually co-opted,” what do you see there? What are those dead ends that are drawing people?

LERNER: Well, when people begin to write in jargon that’s incomprehensible except to the initiated in their own narrow field, then they are no longer doing intellectual work that’s transformative. They’re doing the old mystifying. I mean, the monks did that a lot better, they knew how to do it. They’re doing it over again, you know. Judith Butler, to me, is just like the old monks arguing about how many angels fit on the head of a pin. If I can’t, with two advanced degrees and seventy years of

intellectual life, if I can't read her, read a page and comprehend it, excuse me, there's something wrong with her, not with me. And it's just, I'm picking on her, but it doesn't matter — I mean, that's a dead end. I don't care what she says. If you cannot translate what you say into something that is translatable to the ordinary person then you are doing the old stuff. You might as be talking Latin or Aramaic, okay? But let's just use that example of childcare for a moment. Supposing that equal amounts of energy have gone into creating institutionalized childcare as a responsibility of the institutions. Do you doubt for a minute that the intellectual content of the work done would change?

MacLEAN: No.

LERNER: It would have to. It would have to. And that's where we are. That's where feminism is and that's where women's studies is. The easy cooptation by which gender studies has been substituted for women's studies worldwide. I mean when I was in Europe ten years ago everybody was building women's history courses. There is no women's history anymore. It's all gender courses.

MacLEAN: And how do you interpret that?

LERNER: Bad. Bad. It's bad.

MacLEAN: What does it mean to you though? What does it connote to you?

LERNER: It means that we are studying again, we are allowed to study with a focus on men and women. And we are not compensating for four thousand years of male hegemony in intellectual construction. And therefore, we're not dealing with all the wrong and erroneous things we were taught, which have to be dismantled before you can build something new. And I'm not saying that studying the *construction* of gender and race and whatever is not a worthwhile thing. I've done it myself. But it cannot be done out of context, and it cannot be done alienated and divided off from practical changes in the institution. And that's what I see. I see that, I view it with great alarm. I'm not happy about it.

MacLEAN: It just occurred to me that this shift to, the way you're interpreting this shift to gender, suggests a parallel to the talk about colorblindness today —

LERNER: Exactly, exactly.

MacLEAN: — that conservatives do. They say, Well, we had the civil rights act, we had the voting rights act, it's time to stop talking about race —

- LERNER: Exactly.
- MacLEAN: — and African Americans and just talk about color blindness. Do you see some kind of, that kind of conservative undertow?
- LERNER: Well sure, sure! I see it entirely as a conservative move. I don't see it as any positive move. I'm not saying that we shouldn't study the construction of sex roles for men and women or the construction of sexuality. That's very good, very interesting. But if that deconstruction is not anchored in and contextualized in actual social change in the institutions, it serves as nothing but cooptation. That's what I'm saying.
- MacLEAN: Do you think people are afraid to say "women" now?
- LERNER: Sure, they're afraid. Sure, sure. They're afraid. And it's not good for your career. Well, I mean if we had done that forty years ago, we still wouldn't —
- MacLEAN: We wouldn't have jobs. [Laughs]
- LERNER: What?
- MacLEAN: We wouldn't have jobs.
- LERNER: You wouldn't have jobs, that's right. Exactly. And see, I've compared this transition that we live in, I've tried to compare it to the changes that the Protestant Reformation made in religion. That's a good, it's an interesting comparison —
- MacLEAN: I think that's a really helpful comparison.
- LERNER: — because Luther posted his theses in 1520, okay? And you then had a hundred and thirty years of incessant warfare, cultural warfare and actual warfare, about the idea. And there's only one simple idea: every soul has direct access to God. It's as simple as that. God speaks to men and women—doesn't need a priest. That's it. Well, if you stop the clock at 1580, what would you find? You would find that contrary to his best intentions, Luther created a counter-establishment just as oppressive and repressive as the one he fought against. You would find that Luther turned in horror from the peasant rebellions which he unleashed, which his thought unleashed, which his German translation of the Bible unleashed. But he turned against it you know, furiously. Okay. You would find that you have four or five major Protestant churches now, establishments, fighting for power and turf. And if it's 1580, you don't know yet that you're going to have a thirty years war in Europe that's

going to devastate two thirds of the European population and all of the European territory. And at the end of this war, what are you going to have? You're going to have a treaty that says to each prince and their religion, tolerance. Well, if you stop the clock at 1580, that's where we are right now. We've brought down the edifice. We've critiqued it into the ground. We have created counter-institutions in the model of the old. But we're not going where we should be going yet. It's an open question whether we'll get there.

MacLEAN: Gerda, one last question. If you were starting a political career today where would you put your energies?

LERNER: Where would I what?

MacLEAN: Where would you put your energies? What would you focus on? Given what you just said, you know. [Lerner laughs]

LERNER: Oh, I don't know.

MacLEAN: You know I was thinking of the CAW motto, the Congress of American Women motto, that "Ten women anywhere can start anything."

LERNER: Yeah.

MacLEAN: Well, if you had your ten women now, given all that you've said, what would you do?

LERNER: I think the defense of children in the United States is the *most* important issue. And it's totally shameful how we treat our children, and how we treat the neediest of our children. And how the juvenile justice system in the United States is a humanitarian disgrace. And the fact that people just accept it — a certain percentage of the population are throwaway people that we warehouse in jails, and that's it. So I think that that's an issue. That's a first, you know, first-cause issue. And that's the kind of issue, you can't affect it unless you build a broad coalition around it. Unless you have a long-range commitment. Unless you're going to attack it on the legal ground, on the economic ground, on the nutrition ground, on the ground of the garbage that goes out of the television and that substitutes for ideas and information. So I think that that's where I would start. And it's the most universal because people all feel that way about children, when you come down to it, whether it's your own children or your nephews and nieces or your whatever. And I think that's something that we need to address. I don't know of any other country in the world, except the worst dictatorships, where 16- and 17-year-old males are sitting on death row.

MacLEAN: It would transform the culture and it would transform the structure of the society to take these issues seriously.

LERNER: It would. The point is that radical change has to be made in the *institutions* of society and not just in the understanding of the intellectual product of society. It's not enough. I think that's, that's where I come from, and that's where I've been going very consistently. I mean that hasn't changed. I'm now, I'm sorry about the fact that I, the last eight years or so, I haven't been able to be active. I'm not active organizationally anymore. And in a certain way I think I've earned a right not to be active organizationally. So I'm not. But I, I really — but I haven't changed my views about the significance of that activity. All right, that's it. I think we.. —

MacLEAN: All right, I know you wanted to finish, we're going to finish with this tape. Is there anything else that you want to add at this point?

LERNER: No, I think I've said enough there. [Laughs]

MacLEAN: I think you've done a great deal—it's a really powerful interview. Thank you.

LERNER: I've said enough to really fill a lot of volumes. And I enjoyed doing it, actually. You prodded me along very efficiently. And you, I noticed you kept changing your approaches, from time to time, which is good interviewing technique. So, I think this is fine. And I'm satisfied.

END TAPE 8

END OF INTERVIEW

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