

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **MEREDITH TAX**

Interviewed by

KATE WEIGAND

June 11–12, 2004  
New York, New York

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## Narrator

Meredith Tax (b. 1942) grew up in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, area, graduated from Brandeis University in 1964, and studied seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literature at the University of London as a Fulbright Fellow and a Woodrow Wilson Fellow from 1964 to 1968. Tax got involved in radical politics in London in the late 1960s and went on to participate in the founding of Bread and Roses in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1969, of the Marxist group the October League in Chicago in the early 1970s, of the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) in New York City in 1977, and of Reproductive Rights National Network (R2N2) in 1979. Tax is also a well-known feminist writer. Her best-known works are the nonfiction *The Rising of the Women* (1980) and novels *Rivington Street* (1982) and *Union Square* (1988). Since 1986 Tax has combined her roles as activist and writer through her work with the Women's Committee of the PEN American Center, the International PEN Women Writers' Committee, and as the founder and president/CEO of Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development (Women's WORLD).

## Interviewer

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

## Abstract

In this oral history Meredith Tax describes her childhood in a Midwestern Jewish family in the post-World War II period and her life as a young woman at Brandeis University in the early 1960s. The interview focuses on her activism as a Marxist and a feminist and on her struggles to sustain herself personally and financially while maintaining a commitment to her political ideals. Tax's story documents the impact of feminist ideas and activities on both radical political organizations such as the October League and mainstream organizations such as the PEN American Center and International PEN. It also illustrates the variety of ways that feminism has survived beyond the second wave in contexts outside of the academy.

## Restrictions

Meredith Tax retains copyright to this interview.

## Format

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

## Transcript

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

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Tax, Meredith. Interview by Kate Weigand. Video recording, June 11–12, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Meredith Tax, interview by Kate Weigand, video recording, June 11, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Tax, Meredith. Interview by Kate Weigand. Transcript of video recording, June 11–12, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Meredith Tax, interview by Kate Weigand, transcript of video recording, June 11, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 64–67.

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Transcript of interview conducted JUNE 11–12, 2004, with:

MEREDITH TAX  
New York, New York

by: KATE WEIGAND

WEIGAND: This is Kate Weigand here with Meredith Tax in New York City on June 11th, 2004. We are here in her apartment on the Upper West Side and we're going to talk about her life and feminism.

So, because we're trying to get a life history here, I usually start out asking people about their childhood and, even before that, about their parents and what their backgrounds were, what their educations and occupations were.

TAX: OK. I grew up in Wisconsin. My parents were both the children of immigrants. My father's family were from the Ukraine and they started in Chicago where they had relatives, then moved to Milwaukee. My grandfather was a very small-scale entrepreneur, I guess you would have to say. I'm not quite sure of everything he did. He built a couple of houses which we lived in at one stage. At another point he had a nickelodeon and I think he sold things. I think he ended up with a store which survived him and which his brother ran when I was a child. He died before I was born, as did my grandmother on my father's side.

My father's side were city people. My mother's family were basically peasants, transplanted from a very small town in Latvia to a very small town in Wisconsin. My grandfather wanted to live in a small town because he wanted to have a farm, although in fact he didn't have a clue of how to do a farm because Jews weren't allowed to have farms in Russia and he never learned how. So it didn't last real long, the farm. After that, they moved into Menominee Falls, which was then a very small town with just one street, and he started a butcher shop, which my grandmother always claimed was a kosher butcher shop, but I somehow doubt it because there weren't any other Jews in Menomonee Falls except for his immediate family and their cousins, my grandmother's sister's children and her husband and her.

So there were some class differences within the family. My father's family was much more educated. I don't believe my grandmother on my mother's side ever learned how to read, even Yiddish. I certainly never saw her read anything. My grandfather read two books: Spinoza and the Bible. And he read the newspaper. Those were the only books in their

house. And my grandmother never learned English. He learned a little English.

WEIGAND: They would have come here in the late nineteenth century?

TAX: No, they came here before World War I, in the period before World War I — I'm not sure exactly when. My grandfather, my mother's father, came first and then he sent for — he didn't have a wife — he sent for his cousin. My mother didn't know how close the relationship was biologically. She said, "Everybody called each other cousins but (laughs) I wouldn't be surprised if she was his cousin." He barely knew her, and they were not — who knows? I used to ask my mother if they were happy. She said, "Who knows? Who knows who was happy in those days." You know. My grandma had a lot of children. Five of them survived. They didn't survive well.

When I was little, we lived with them, because my father joined up in 1942 and went overseas. He was a doctor. He went into the medical corps. He served two hitches; he re-enlisted because he wanted to defeat Hitler. My mother didn't — I don't think it ever occurred to her to go anywhere but home, which was in some ways unfortunate, because her sister was in the house dying of tuberculosis, which means I was exposed to TB. And, you know, not everyone would have found this was, you know, just routine.

But anyway, we lived in Menominee Falls from the time I was a baby until my father was back. He came back to the States when he reenlisted and was at different forts, and then he went overseas again and came back. So when he was here, we would be with him in Fort Dix or Baltimore or someplace like that, but most of the time we were at Menominee Falls until I was about four, five. And then he got out of the army and we moved to Milwaukee and he started setting up a practice there.

WEIGAND: So you moved around a lot those first few years.

TAX: Oh, yeah, yeah I did. I didn't have any friends except my relatives because I was never in one place long enough. I had cousins my own age on my mother's side, boys, but they were somebody to play with and we remained close for some years. I had a cousin on my father's side my age but she lived in Chicago, and two cousins who were older. And those were the main kids I knew because, in Menominee Falls, it was the country. I mean, it was a country town. And the family was big. There were a lot of adults around. Many of them were a little crazy, but as a child I didn't know the difference. And that was OK, but I was not socialized to play with other kids.

And when I started school, when they put me in kindergarten in Milwaukee, I couldn't do it. I freaked out. I started screaming and screaming and screaming. They had to take me away. And then we moved. We started out in a rental house on the West Side of Milwaukee,

which is the poor side. And then there was a fire next door and my mother didn't want to stay there, so we moved to the East Side, to one of the houses that my grandfather had built, which was a double house. So we lived in the middle house, and then a couple named the Rosenfelts, who were very nice, lived on the right, and then my Aunt Toots and Uncle Hi and their two daughters lived on the left.

And then I was sent to another school, also in kindergarten, and again I had a lot of trouble. I was very scared of the other kids and very shy, and I wouldn't play with anybody at recess and used to hide under the — what do you call it? — the see-saw. And so they didn't want me to graduate and go into first grade. And my mother got mad because they said I was socially immature and my mother said, "If she can't be socially immature in kindergarten, when can she?" So they then put me and my brother in private school where we stayed for about three years until we moved again, back to the West Side, and I switched schools again. But by then, I had begun to have an inkling of how to play with other kids. Do you want me to keep going or do you want to ask me something?

WEIGAND: When your father was in the army was he in Europe?

TAX: He was both in North Africa and Europe. He was in North Africa first and then, I guess, after he reenlisted, he was in the first army, the Fifth Armored Division. He was in Germany, because I know that he was one of the troops that opened one of the camps. He never talked about it. I only found this out after he died. He never would talk about anything about that. I asked my mother why not and she said, "He didn't like those people." He thought they weren't grateful enough. They were starving. I mean, they said, Why didn't you come sooner? Well, a reasonable question in my mind, but anyway, my father loved being in the army. He loved being with the guys. He was really much more at home with guys than he was with women and children. And we used to go to reunions for some time — he would drag us there.

WEIGAND: Reunions of his army people?

TAX: His army buddies. I think those were probably the happiest years of his life, actually. He was a doctor so he didn't have to kill anybody. I mean, there was all that male bonding, and he got to save people's lives, and he got all these medals. He was a hero and everything. And then he became a family practitioner in Milwaukee and was a very hardworking, dedicated doctor. His patients were mostly poor people and black people and Native Americans and people on the wrong side of town. He was very cheap. He would make house calls for fifteen dollars up until the point he retired, and he had patients calling the house at all hours of the day and night. I used to have to answer the phone, which was very stressful because he always told me if I didn't remember something, or wrote it down wrong, somebody might die. So, but that was my father.

WEIGAND: So was he much of a presence in the household?

TAX: No, he was never home. And by the time he got home, he would fall asleep, he would be so tired. He would fall asleep on the floor often, or just go up to bed. So I never — I mean, he liked me when I was little. I used to go out on calls with him sometimes, and just sit in the car while he went in and out, and so we would sort of hang out together. But he never really spent much time with any of us. He worked all the time.

And so we were stuck at home with my mother, who was rather crazy, especially about me, and sick. She had what she called agoraphobia. She made this diagnosis from a women's magazine. She had some kind of generalized anxiety disorder, which her mother probably also had, and probably half her family. I mean, her family, they were all a little crazy. The aunt who died of tuberculosis could have been saved. There was an operation that could've saved her, but she wouldn't let them do it. Another uncle died very young of cancer. Another one killed himself, though at the time he was old.

And really, the one that my mother was closest to was my Aunt Rosie, who lived on the West Side, and when we moved back we moved a block from her, and that was nice. I played with my cousins. My mother was always very happy with my Aunt Rosie. They would make a lot of jokes about their childhood and it was fun to be with them when they were together. It wasn't fun to be with either of them at any other time. So my mother was sick a lot. She would never do anything. She wouldn't go anywhere. She was afraid to make phone calls. And I think I'm counterphobic. I mean, my worst fear was always to end up being like my mother. So I was, you know, flagrantly courageous in very inappropriate ways just to not end up like her. And she was always afraid for me and didn't see — I mean, the whole family was always saying, "It's too bad. She's so smart. What will become of her? Who will marry her? It's too bad. If only her brother had her brains and she had his eyelashes." Things like that. "Nobody will ever marry you, Meredith. You're too smart. Learn how to shut up."

WEIGAND: So this was one of my other questions. How did the stereotypical gender stuff of the '40s and '50s play out in your family, if it did?

12:45

TAX: Well it came from both sides, although it was much less subtle on my mother's side, since they weren't very subtle people. But I was expected to go through school, start dating in high school, go to the University of Wisconsin, and marry some nice Jewish boy I would meet there — and stay in Milwaukee. And I made it clear from a very early age that that wasn't what I was going to do. And they really didn't know what to make of it.

I didn't like the suburbs. When we moved back to the West Side, I had friends there that I really liked. There were a couple of them that, if we'd

stayed there, I might have felt different about Milwaukee, because the West Side was starting to be more integrated. That's why we left. I mean, we stayed there for three years. Then it was white flight out to the suburbs. And the West Side was nice. We had a nice house there that was a block from my cousins. That neighborhood's all black now.

And the minute, you know, the first black kids started at Washington High School, my parents started looking for a house in the suburbs. And I figured that out, actually, because they were starting to have stuff about the civil rights movement on TV by then, and I said, "Why are we moving?" And they said they wanted me to go to a good high school. But I said, "Washington High School is a good high school." And they said they didn't want me to be in any danger. And I said, "What are you talking about?" And, you know, finally I dragged it out of my mother and I said, "That's terrible." You know, "That's segregation." And she said, "Who are you to tell me? You're just a kid. You don't decide where we live. I'm the one who decides where we live." You know, there was nothing I could do about it.

I hated the suburbs. I really hated them. I mean, maybe — I don't know. They were supposed to be blissful places for kids. If you have the kind of kid who likes sports and plays outside and everything, fine. For me, they were miles away from anything I wanted to do and I couldn't drive. I was too little and there was no public transportation system worth a damn in the suburbs. There was a bus once an hour about a mile from my house, or maybe a mile and a half, the stop. And if I got on that bus, I could eventually get to the downtown library. Otherwise, my mother had to drive me everywhere, until I learned to drive, and then I would have to get the car. So you were completely dependent, whereas I was very independent. I wanted to be able to go around by myself and do things by myself and not have to have my parents know where I was or be looking at me all the time.

WEIGAND: So, was this a postwar suburb or was it an older kind of —

TAX: Whitefish Bay was — I don't know. Our house must have been — when did we move there? I graduated high school in 1960. This was seven years earlier, so it was about 1953. Part of the suburb was built up in the '40s and part the '50s. Our house was probably seven or eight years old when we moved into it, maybe a little older. But it was a classic '50s house, you know, three bedrooms, garage, all that stuff. There was a yard in the back. Nobody knew what to do with it. There were all these flowers that the previous owner's wife had planted. She'd gone crazy and been put in an asylum after which he sold the house. She came once. She got out of the asylum and came looking. It was really awful. She didn't know anything about the house being sold. She planted all these beautiful flowers but my father didn't know anything about flowers and he got this power mower and he just flattened the whole backyard.

It just wasn't the right place for me. I mean, probably it was all right for my brothers, although they certainly never seemed that happy there either. I mean, it was hard to be happy with my mother around, and I just wanted to get out as soon as I could. So I would go down to the library and I would spend a lot of time reading. I read my way through the local library and then I went downtown, after I got old enough. And I started finding feminist books. Mostly George Bernard Shaw and Louisa May Alcott — that's what I mean by feminist books. That's what there was. And I wanted to be an actress, that was the other thing. This was true of many unhappy kids, I think.

The one really good thing that happened to me, after we got to Whitefish Bay, was I went to a camp that was a theater camp, which my father always thought was what ruined me. But there were kids there from Chicago. It was more urban. And, you know, you've never seen drama till you've been to a theater camp. I mean, everyone there was so over the top all the time. It was wonderful. I mean, I just listened to them and looked at them and tried to figure out what was going on and I got to be in all these plays and I loved it. And so I decided I wanted to be an actress.

And I told everybody, when they said nobody would marry me, I said, "That's all right because I'm not going to get married anyway and I'm not going to stay in Wisconsin. I'm going east, I'm going to live in New York and be an actress and have lots of boyfriends." So (laughs) they laughed. What else could they do? But they didn't want me to go east.

My father really didn't want me to leave. I mean, they wanted me to go to the University of Wisconsin. I had to fight. I got a National Merit Scholarship, and that helped, but he wouldn't fill out the forms. I mean, I could've gone wherever I wanted. He wouldn't fill out the forms although finally, I prevailed. I got his whole family to gang up on him and we used the family seder as an occasion to bring this problem up. And of course (laughs) they said, You should let her go: what's the matter with you?

WEIGAND: It was a good tactic.

TAX: Yeah. I used that to try to get a dog, too, but it didn't work. And so I went to Brandeis, which I chose because one of the things about Milwaukee and Whitefish Bay was that, until shortly before we moved there, it was restricted. So we weren't the first Jews on the block but there weren't a lot of them. There were some. The older part of Whitefish Bay had more Jews. And in high school, the Jews and the gentiles were very separate. And my mother, having grown up in a town where there were no other Jews, was very paranoid about gentiles, although she made friends with people on the block, but she was always talking. Everything for her was, "What's good for the Jews," whereas my father wasn't that into it.

And Milwaukee was a German city. During the war, it had a big Nazi Bund. One of the places that we used to have sweet-sixteen parties — although I didn't have mine there — was the Bavarian Inn, where during the war, there'd been a — oh, before the war. Before we entered the war,

there had been a sign in the bar that said, “No dogs or Jews allowed.” Just like in Germany. And when I went down to the library, there were these stores that I called Nazi stores. They were war memorabilia stores that had all this Nazi stuff in the window and I used to wonder, Who buys this stuff, you know? So I wanted to be in a place where there were more Jews, because I wanted to feel what it was like to be in a place where it wasn’t an issue. And so, that’s why I picked Brandeis.

WEIGAND: Can we back up a minute? I was asking about gender socialization stuff and you talked about your parents’ expectations for your adulthood. But can you talk a little bit about the way that worked on the day-to-day level? Were you treated differently from your brothers, for example?

TAX: Well, none of us were treated particularly well, I don’t think, because my mother was quite crazy. She would say, “Meredith is the creative one, Bobby is the smart one, and Tommy is the good one.” You can’t win, you know, no matter where you are. She felt very antagonistic toward me, where she bonded with my brothers and tried to keep them close to her and had them be her sort of appendages, whereas I was always fighting with her. So, of course, that was affected by gender. She felt threatened by me and worried about me at the same time because I was so different from her, trying to be so different from her. And she was worried about what that would mean. She was worried that I would get messed up or get hurt or — but she also felt threatened by it.

Whereas my father just worried that I would get pregnant. He used to give me lectures about how I shouldn’t become a drug addict and I shouldn’t become pregnant, various things he’d seen in his medical career. I shouldn’t ride on motorcycles without a helmet. That was another big one. And, you know, he would try to monitor my activities as much as he could, but he was never home so he couldn’t do very much. And god knows, I wasn’t wild. I didn’t even date anybody until I was a senior. I mean, I was much too intellectual. But I certainly lied and did anything I could to have a little privacy. And I was terribly unhappy because my mother was really very mean to me. I fought with her constantly, just trying to get a little bit of space.

So that was really much more central than any kind of gender dynamic. I mean, the dynamic was you have a house that’s centered around the needs of somebody crazy, who’s trying to make everybody quiet and dead and not do anything. And she used to watch — we were all supposed to be watching television with her every night. By the time I was in high school, she was watching reruns of *MASH* and nothing else almost, you know, because she didn’t like new shows because she didn’t know what was going to happen. In *MASH*, she already knew what was going to happen. There was nothing that could upset her, you know. She was very nutty. And my father also gave her a lot of pills, which didn’t help — you know, uppers and downers because she couldn’t sleep and she couldn’t get up.

And I don't think I had a very clear gender identity. I wasn't exactly like the other girls. I mean, there were a couple of girls who were weird like me, who were my friends. It wasn't that we were gay, especially, although I think a couple of them became gay later in life. It was just that we didn't know what to do. (laughs) We were really weird. I mean, I didn't act too weird, except I was too smart. I was always talking in class and I was getting the best grades in the school and stuff, or almost the best grades. There were a couple of boys who did a little better. And everybody would always say, "Who will go out with you? You're too smart," you know — like it was a given that nobody would ever want to go out with a girl who was smarter than them, which I couldn't even understand. I thought it would be good to go out with somebody who was smarter than you. It would help (laughs).

So I always had a hard time with that stuff. I just had trouble understanding it and, my aunt, who was my father's sister, was more middle class and conventional. She didn't realize how crazy my mother was. Nobody realized it, because it was pretty much kept inside of our house. But she tried to get me to do the things that my mother should have done but she wasn't up to it. She got me to, you know, join BBG. You know what that is? B'nai Brith Girls. It's like training for being a good Jewish woman. So I went to these meetings. I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on. All these girls were talking about their sweaters, how many cashmere sweaters they had. And they were talking about boys and parties and planning parties with their matching — I forgot the name of it. There's a boys' equivalent to BBG, and there was one conference I went to in Madison, and it was mostly about having this party. There was some pretext of doing this or that to raise money for charity, but it obviously wasn't anything very interesting to anyone. They were interested in the party, the color themes of the party and what should they be — Hawaii or, you know.

So after a few months of this, I went to my aunt and I said I had a question. I said, "What is BBG for?" She couldn't understand the question. I said, "What is it supposed to do? What is the point of it?" It really took a long time for her to understand the question. And finally, she said, "In BBG, you will meet the girls who will be your friends when you grow up, and through its activities, you'll meet the boy you marry some day." And I said, "I'm not going anymore. You think I'm going to stay in Milwaukee and be friends with those people and marry one of those guys, you're crazy. I'm not doing it." So I dropped out.

And I was on the debate team. I was in all the plays. I was on the yearbook. I was on the school newspaper. I got censored a number of times in high school. I wanted to do *Under Milkwood*. They wouldn't let me because it had sex in it. It didn't actually have very much, but for the times, it did. I mean, that was why I picked it. I wondered what would happen. I had a feeling they wouldn't like it.

And I wrote a column for the school newspaper — I had a regular column my senior year called "Incomes Tax." I said, "Why is everybody

making such a fuss about who gets elected class president when the officers have no power to decide anything except the theme of the junior prom anyway? What's the difference?" So they wouldn't run it. I mean, the kids were willing to run it. The principal insisted they take it out and put a lot of pressure on the editor, who wrote me a smarmy letter about how it took her a while to understand but now she saw that really wasn't good for the school. So I already had experience of censorship, quite a bit, by the time I went to college.

WEIGAND: So my other question about this time in your life is how much awareness you had about politics? You've written that your family wasn't particularly political.

28:20

TAX: No, they weren't political at all. My mother's cousin Sherman ran for alderman once. We never saw too much of Sherman and he didn't get elected. Nobody exactly understood why he did this. Sherman's other main interest in life was his dog (laughs). So, I don't know. But nobody else had any connection with politics at all, except I gather that my uncle Sol, who was an anthropologist at the University of Chicago and who became quite famous as a major sort of anthropological entrepreneur. He told me once that, at Madison, he and my father — I think more he than my father — had been in the socialist club and had hated the Communists. That was the only thing I ever heard about dad. I mean, my father was quite conservative. He believed in all systems of authority, beginning with the family and the school, country.

But they weren't political. My mother, actually, was — I heard her talk about it more, about the McCarthy stuff, than my father — because my mother was worried that it was bad for the Jews. She would listen to the Army-McCarthy hearings and I remember coming home and having them on when I was 12 and I would try to figure out what was going on. I also remember the day of the Rosenbergs' execution, because we were visiting our Aunt Toots and Uncle Hi. We were all out on this lawn that was between our two houses. I don't remember if we were still living there at the time or not, but we were all out there, and they had the radio on. And they were listening to the broadcast of the execution and I couldn't figure out what was going on. I asked, and they told me, and I said, "Why?" and they said, you know, Because they were traitors, and then it turned to the theme of whether this was bad for the Jews or not. That was the main thing they thought about it. My father always used to say, very frequently, "My country, may she ever be right, but right or wrong, my country." He was very patriotic. He had a flag that he used to fly on all holidays. We had a flag pole in front of the house. And we had a lot of conflict about politics once the Vietnam stuff started.

But when I was little, in this private school and then later, too, it was during the big air-raid period. You know, the big bomb-shelter period, and you would turn on the TV and there would be horrible stories about what was going to happen, how you were going to get fried one way or the

other, all these doom stories. I was very scared. This was when I was eight or nine and in school, they would have frequent air-raid drills. Sometimes we would have time to get down to the basement and huddle against the wall, and sometimes we would just have to go under our desk. And we had these little bracelets that were supposed to identify our charred remains. And during one of these air raids — I mean, it was just — I mean, everybody who listened to the television knew that going under your desk was not going to do you any good at all. And furthermore, you knew that if your mother and father were within a 30-mile radius, they weren't going to be there to get your bracelet anyway. And I tried to ask about this in class and they shut me up.

And then I noticed that we were going under the desk, but the teacher wasn't going under her desk and she was outside in the hall laughing. And I thought, "Ha! What is going on here?" I started thinking about this a lot and I decided — I knew very little about the world at this time — that this was some kind of plot to scare kids, that the grown-ups were not really scared themselves. That they were trying scare kids to make us behave better, and that obviously you couldn't trust grown-ups. I mean it was — they were doing everything possible to terrify us. And I suppose some of them — you know, there were people you'd see on TV, people building their bomb shelters and stocking them with canned goods and so on.

So I was conscious of that and I became conscious, through watching on television, of the Hungarian revolution and of the civil rights movement. And you know, true to the philosophy I'd formed when I was eight or nine about kids and grown-ups, I saw both of those events in terms of kids and grown-ups. I saw the Hungarian revolution was kids. We even had one of them come to our school. They toured him around, you know. The guy that got out was very short, quite young, couldn't speak English. And instead of seeing it as, you know, we were the free world and the Hungarians were trying to be part of the free world, I saw it as, you know, kids revolting against unjust authority.

And I very much identified with the kids in the civil rights movement. I thought they were heroic and cried when I watched TV, and would fight with other kids. I fought with Susie Bensman on the bus going to religious school about segregation, because she said, "Well, you wouldn't want one living next to you, would you?" And I said, "Why not? What would I care." And she said, "It would lower the property values." And I said, "Well, who cares what happens to my parents' house anyway? It's their house, not my house." And so we really weren't communicating at all. (laughs) But, you know, there were no black kids at Whitefish Bay. I never met anybody black except for my aunt's maid — my aunt lived in Birmingham — until much later in my life.

WEIGAND:

That's interesting, though, that you felt sympathy with these movements and that it was because you perceived them as youth —

TAX: Perceived them as youth and also, I always felt that I was misunderstood and mistreated and alienated, you know. I felt sympathy with anybody who was rebellious. My senior year in high school was the year of — maybe it was my junior year, those two years — we were members of the temple and there was a youth group at the temple I used to go to. There was a discussion group and we talked about alienation. There was a guy named Edgar Z. Friedenberg who wrote a book about the alienation of teenagers, or something, that I read and I loved that. And I read *The Organization Man* and I read David Riesman. The paperback revolution had started by then so I could get these books myself. I went downtown and there was a bookstore near the library, and I got them. I read them. And I thought, Yes, that's what it's all about. They're trying to make us all conform, but we're not going to.

So, that's one reason I picked Brandeis, because it was full of weirdos. Obviously, I belonged there. I also got into Harvard. Looking back, nobody at Brandeis believed that I had gotten into Harvard and then I chose Brandeis. They had all done the opposite. But at Harvard, everybody — there was a dress code. Everybody looked very straight. They looked, you know, very genteel. At Brandeis, they all had beards. They were lying out on the lawn with dogs and, you know, not wearing very many clothes and I thought, That's for me.

WEIGAND: Yeah. So, there you were. You went to Brandeis. You won the battle. And how was it once you got there?

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TAX: It was good in some ways and bad in some ways. When I was a freshman I got in with a theater crowd of kids who were mostly seniors, who I loved, who were wonderful. A lot of them were gay guys. They were brilliant and great at theater, and that was that whole year for me. That was the only thing that was important for me. And then, after they left, the school really — I had to start paying attention to school, because they were gone, and I sort of fell in love with them as a group, and the theater wasn't that great after they left. I started noticing how obnoxious a lot of the theater people my own age were, how they couldn't stop acting all the time. Traits that would've seemed attractive to me when I was young started being much less attractive and I drifted away from that.

I majored in English, and I was like a star student, you know. I got A's all the time, except in math, which I almost flunked. And I was very unhappy. This was the thing. Everybody at Brandeis was very unhappy. It was, you know, the social norm to be alienated and miserable, and part of the culture of the place. But I also worked very hard, which not everybody did. And so I did well in school and I did the paper, I did the theater, the literary magazine and all that kind of stuff.

And I never had a woman teacher, not one, the whole time until my senior year, when Hortense Calisher came and taught a writing course. And I was always looking for women role models, and there never were any. The only one I could find was Mary McCarthy, who wasn't there. I

did get her to come up. I got myself into a position to be able to help choose speakers and I got them to bring her. And she was very nice to me and I had her to my house afterwards. We had a bunch of kids over. She was very nice. She didn't stay.

The *Partisan Review* crowd was very heavy at Brandeis. Phil Rahv taught there, Irving Howe had taught there — all these New York intellectual sort of leftwing, but not communist, Jewish guys. But they weren't interested in me because I was a girl. I took all the classes with Philip Rahv. I will never forget an experience my junior year when I — I think it was the class on Faulkner and James — and I had written a very good paper on Faulkner. We got our papers back and there were two guys who were the stars of the class who were a year ahead of me, Steven Dinadio and Jonathan Finkle. Steven is now a professor and I think Jonathan went crazy or something. I got an A+ on my paper. And he wrote some nice thing on it. And they got — one of them got an A and one of them got an A-, and he asked them to read parts of their paper in class, but he didn't ask me. And I was trying to figure out what was going on. So I asked to see their papers and I saw I had gotten a better grade than they had. I was really freaked out because I couldn't think of any other reason why he would've asked them to read and not me, except that I was a girl. And this was always something I was resisting thinking, because it seemed it would be doom, you know. But it was unavoidable. And of course, there was a lot of talk about that sort of thing.

At least one of the big guys in the psychology department was a Jungian and the rest were Freudian, so the kids I knew who were majoring in psychology were always telling me about how women's creativity was expressed in having babies and men's creativity was expressed in making art. I had a big argument with one of them, with Lucy Newman, about this at the snack bar. And I said, "This is ridiculous. How can you say this? You know, women are just as creative." She said, "No, they're not. Where's all the art they made? Where's all the literature?" Da, da, da. So I, you know, started lamely naming people, as one did. She was not convinced, you know, and neither was I, but I felt, you know, furious, just furious about it. And there was no way I could convince anybody.

And then this group of girls — Lucy and her friends — I spent a lot of time hanging out with them in the snack bar because I lived off campus. They were graduating a year ahead of me and one day they were talking about what they were going to do when they graduated. They were either going to have to go on to graduate school, which none of them really wanted to do, or else they were going to go back to New York. They were all from New York, and they were going to have to get jobs in publishing or something like that where they wouldn't earn enough money to live away from home, or only with great difficulty. And they would end up, in a few years, working for guys they had been to school with. And they couldn't think of anything. I mean, they didn't want to be lawyers or doctors but even if they did, it would have been very difficult at that time. I graduated in 1964.

My father used to say to me, “It’s really too bad — you’re the only one of my kids who would’ve made a good doctor, but it’s impossible. Maybe you can become a medical illustrator.” Because I was good at art. I was very rebellious, but you can’t be a movement all by yourself.

WEIGAND: Right. I mean, you’ve written that you were sort of a premature feminist as a kid and you read Shaw and you read other things.

TAX: Right, and I passed this petition around in gym class, about how girls should be elected president of the class the same as boys and the gym teachers said, “Where did you get this?” The kids just thought I was weird. Many of the women who were at Brandeis with me did go on to become feminists. Temma Kaplan was my roommate, freshman year. A whole bunch of them were there, because Brandeis did attract very strong, smart girls, but there was no way to be a feminist there. And there was still the what-boy-would-want-to-go-out-with-a-girl-smarter-than-him thing, you know.

WEIGAND: So, did Betty Friedan’s book have any impact, or make any waves there?

43:20

TAX: I don’t remember reading it. My mother read it. I remember that she was excited about it and I was surprised. And somebody else who was at college with me told me a few years ago that she remembers me running up the hill waving this book in the air, but I don’t actually remember. I think I remember my feeling reading it was that it was about my mother, you know, who was very smart and had completely isolated herself and not done anything to be socially productive or even to have a good time. But I also always thought this was because she was so crazy. And the book that really made an impression on me was Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. I stayed up all night reading it and, when I finished reading it, I started over again. And I had a date and I couldn’t get rid of the guy fast enough. I just wanted to read. That book really blew me away. And that was really the first contemporary feminist thing that I –

WEIGAND: It came out in 1965?

TAX: Well, this was my senior year, so, this must have come out in paperback in 1964, which was the spring of my senior year, I think. Maybe the fall. And Mary McCarthy was a feminist, and I read her, and, you know, it was impossible to get information on birth control. The main source of information I had about birth control was *The Group*, the story in *The Group* called “Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself.” That said where Planned Parenthood was. So I went there. I went to New York and I went there. I mean, there were no other books that were available about birth control. And that was the other thing. It’s not like I was sexually active or anything, but in high school gym, I thought everybody should know this stuff. So I would raise my hand — we had sex education — and

I would ask the teacher to tell us about birth control. She would say, “Oh, honey, I’d love to but the Catholics won’t let me. I’d get fired” (laughter) So.

WEIGAND: Well, and I guess Massachusetts is sort of the last bastion of –

TAX: You think? I think these books just weren’t in print yet.

WEIGAND: Yeah. I guess that’s true.

TAX: I mean –

WEIGAND: Birth control wasn’t even legal in Massachusetts until the early ’60s, I guess.

TAX: No, it wasn’t. I mean, I got it. I had a diaphragm by the time I was a junior. That was what there was then, you know. If you wanted to control it yourself, you had a diaphragm. They weren’t so easy to use, either. I had a lot of trouble with mine. And there were plenty of girls who got pregnant. A friend of mine got pregnant and had to have an illegal abortion. It was very unpleasant and scary. And you know, there wasn’t any sex education available at school, that’s for sure.

You know, you had to go outside and find a doctor and the first time, I had something wrong with me. So when I started having, you know, having sexual experimentation and so on, I couldn’t do it. It turned out I had an abnormally thick hymen. It couldn’t be broken except surgically, and so this girl — I said, “I can’t go to the student health service for this.” I mean, I had no idea whether confidentiality rules were — I didn’t want to talk to them. I was scared of them. So she got me an appointment with her mother’s gynecologist. She was in Brookline, so I went there, and he told me what was wrong and he wouldn’t do anything about it because he didn’t have my father’s permission. And that son of a bitch wrote my father because he thought medical attention was needed.

And my father, who was a doctor, had never given us any medical attention in his life. I mean, I had never had a checkup all the time I was a kid. If I had, maybe they would have noticed I had thyroid disease, which I didn’t find out until much later in life. Or at least I had the beginning of it. I mean, Wisconsin is part of the country called the thyroid belt because there’s no iodine there because it’s so far inland. But, so my father went ape-shit, you know. He was sure I wanted to have sex. I lied, of course and said, no, that wasn’t why. It was because I wanted to use Tampax. And we had a huge fight. But finally he got me an appointment with a gynecologist — a man, naturally, and a friend of his.

So, I wouldn’t tell the guy anything and he did the procedure without anesthetic, you know, I’m sure partly to punish me. It was extremely painful, extremely painful, and he found out I’d had a cervical infection for probably, you know, ten years or something. And it was a very good

thing they did it, you know, because the blood wasn't able to flow out freely. So he had to cauterize the cervix, which also was very painful. But at least I got it done. I got it that out of the way because it was very difficult, trying to have these sexual relationships when you couldn't sleep with them. I didn't know what was wrong. And — where were we? How did we get off on this?

WEIGAND: Um, well, you were talking about what it was like to be a woman at Brandeis, and — oh, I know, premature feminism and reading feminist books and Mary McCarthy and *The Group*.

TAX: Yeah, Mary McCarthy was very, very good. I mean, there were very few — who was there. We read Hannah Arendt, but I had no idea she was any kind of feminist. All we read was the *Origins of Totalitarianism*. I didn't know anything about her. I thought it was boring. I didn't like these big heavy books. And, you know, the stuff I read in high school stayed with me. Shaw was really, you know, a big influence on me. And these guys I would date would say things. The worst of them, who I didn't date for very long, was always in English classes with me because he was one of the other smart kids. He said, "Why do you always have to write these long analytical papers?" I was writing these long ambitious papers about, you know, the structure of dramatic comedy. I did an independent study on that. So, "Why do you have to write these big ambitious things? You know, why can't you write little lyric poems like a girl is supposed to?"

So, I didn't know what I was going to do when I finished. I wasn't from New York. I couldn't go and live at home, you know. I certainly wasn't going back to Milwaukee. So, I decided — and I did not want to — I was sick of school. I did not want to go to graduate school. There was nothing else I could do. So I applied for a Fulbright and I applied for a Woodrow Wilson, and I got both. And so I went to England on a Fulbright. And then the Wilson carried over there. So I was able to stay four years. And they sent me first to the University of Durham. I wanted to continue the stuff I'd done about the structure of dramatic comedy and Elizabethan comedy, Jacobean comedy, but the guy they sent me to study with had just moved to LA. So I went and had a shit-fit in the Fulbright commission and said you have to bring me back to London. There's nobody there I can study with. I hated it up there. I mean, if I'd been more political then, I probably would have liked it, because it was interesting up there, but I didn't know, and the people that I met up there were not.

So I moved back down to London and I got myself into the University of London, because a friend of mine from Brandeis was also there, and she told me who to go. I had to find a teacher. They said, "If you find somebody who'll take you on as a student, you can come to London." And the way the system works there is you have a tutor. You don't really have classes. There were some seminars that you could or could not go to. You have a tutor. You have qualifying exams. And that's all. I mean, you're completely on your own, which I could handle. But there was no social

50:06

life, because you didn't meet any of the other people who were students. You just spent all your time at British Museum.

So I was somewhat adrift. I mean, I knew some Americans and I actually became roommates with someone who's still my best friend, Myra. Myra Rubin, she was called then. And Ann Snitow was another one who was my roommate. And I — you know, I was not political at that point. I spent most of my free time going to the theater, which was very cheap, and it was wonderful. It was a great flowering of the theater then. And, you know, I was able to travel in Europe some. I mean, I didn't have that much money. The grant wasn't that big, but I was able to do it. And I spent most of the rest of the time, you know, studying and trying to figure out what my thesis would be. I started doing Restoration and Carolinian drama instead of Renaissance because that was a specialty of the guy I was studying with.

And the problem was that I soon realized that I wanted to do a thesis that was much more than about comedy, that was very historical, and it had a lot to do with the changing marriage relations and stuff about gender and sex. I was studying a period in which sexuality was very out there. Everybody was writing about it all over the place — much, much more than any other period before or since, until modern times. It was, like, all those barriers were breaking down at the same time, that a revolution had just been put down and a court had come back into power. So it was a very contradictory period of, sort of, licentiousness and loosening up in some ways, and tightening up in other ways, although it was a reaction. Since the revolution had been a Puritan revolution, I mean, there was a reason why they weren't being Puritan. But it was very interesting and complicated. And so I wanted to write about all that social stuff, and they wouldn't let me because they said, "You're not a history student. You're an English student. You have to write about the text."

So I started having more and more trouble with that, and you know, then I was just also having trouble in general. I was lonely. I had no real social milieu. I had a few friends, but — and I was increasingly bothered by the war in Vietnam, and by the stuff that was happening back at the States, even though I wasn't here. I mean, the thing about being in a foreign country is you see your country from afar and so you see everything that everybody else is saying about it, and they were saying much more than the U.S. press would have. There was much more information available to an ordinary person that just read the paper about what the US was doing, about the situation of black people, about the war than I would have easily — I mean, I could have had access to that information if I'd been in the movement here, but I wasn't.

So I got more and more upset about this. I didn't know what to do, because I knew myself well enough to know that if I got into politics, that would be it. I wouldn't do anything else. I wouldn't finish my thesis. I already wasn't really wanting to finish my thesis that much anyway (laughs) because I couldn't do what I wanted. And by then I had finished the qualifying exams.

So, in 1967, in the spring, my friend Myra, who was my first roommate in London, got married back in the States. She married an American and I came back for her wedding and then I went to see my family. And it was the first time I'd been to see them in three years. And it was just really strange being back here. I was in New York, where I'd never lived, which is very overwhelming and very intense. Everyone I met was — the news was all over the place. And then, when I went home, my family seemed to me so awful. I couldn't stand being there. And they seemed so undeveloped and crazy, and I had terrible fights with my father about the war and — I forgot to tell you about graduation. Let me digress and go back.

WEIGAND: Actually, we're about to run out of tape.

END DVD 1

## DVD 2

TAX: Where were we?

WEIGAND: You were talking about coming back to the States and then you were going to talk about just –

TAX: I think I had, essentially, a nervous breakdown. I mean, the contradictions in my life were all converging and being back in the States and seeing my family really did it. And I got back to London and I couldn't sleep. My mind wouldn't stop. Nothing I could do. I mean, I didn't have access to major drugs or anything and I'm too conservative to become a lush (laughs) so — so I didn't do too much of that sort of thing. I couldn't sleep for about two weeks. I was really — it was like one of these experiences in a Doris Lessing novel. That was the only thing I've ever read [that discussed this kind of situation], so I figured, well, that those people are having nervous breakdowns, that must be what this is. I didn't know what to do and I was alone. I was rooming with Ann at the time but she wasn't there, and I really didn't know what to do.

And I felt like it was all connected to politics, because it was all about what it had been like to be in the US and how horrible it was, and how everything there seemed to be about money, everybody was talking about money and everything cost so much and everything was so commercialized compared to London. And there was this war and there was this stuff with black people which, you know, being in New York, there were a lot of black people — angry black people — around the place, you know. And then my family being so strange. I don't really remember any particular thing that happened with my family. I have some pictures, that's all. My brothers were still pretty young. Everything seemed wrong and jangled.

And then, I saw these announcements for something called The Dialects of Liberation, which was a big, almost like a fair, a radical fair that was put together by a bunch of radical shrinks, especially Laing and his crew, R.D. Laing, and Gregory Bateson, and various people who were against the war. I think they had money from the Bertrand Russell Foundation, various leftists of different kinds. Allen Ginsberg. I don't know who actually did the work of putting it together. Those were some of the people who were prominently featured — all men. I think maybe one woman. I don't remember who it was.

I went. I didn't know anybody who was going. I didn't know a soul when I got there. They all knew — they were all radicals. They seemed to be very hip. But I heard Laing speak. Do you know who Laing was?

WEIGAND: A little bit.

TAX: He was an enormously important shrink in the 1960s. He was one of the people who talked about insanity being socially induced and that a lot of

time, people who are crazy, who are institutionalized — he worked with schizophrenic patients — are actually are trying to communicate something in symbolic language that other people aren't able to read. He believed in deinstitutionalization. But a lot he was talking about how inhuman — he wrote about schizophrenia in terms of the families of people who become schizophrenic and how a family will focus on a certain child and make that child be the brunt of everything and drive that child crazy. And he talked and wrote about some of the families that he'd studied.

He was a very compelling, good-looking guy with a Scottish accent. But he was also a very brilliant writer. His book was called *The Divided Self*. It was about how people become schizophrenic, and how political it is. And he talked about the same — basically, he was writing about denial and scapegoating and projecting, and how — he connected it all to the war in Vietnam and to racism and to various other kinds of things that make people into “others” and dehumanize them and enable whoever's tormenting them to treat them as objects.

And it just all seemed to be about my family. And I felt like that was what they were doing to me. And the story that he told was about some family where the mother would hold this child out of the window as a young child and say, “See how much I love you? I'm not dropping you.” I thought, “That's my mother.” So it was an enormously powerful experience for me.

And I realized that if I ever wanted to sleep again, I was going to have to work through some of this stuff and figure out what to do about it. And it never occurred to me to go to a shrink. I mean, I didn't have the money, I guess, and you know, I was in London — I could've, but I didn't think of it. I decided what I had to do was become political because if these things were fundamentally political, as he was saying, and as this whole conference seemed to be saying, then there were things you could do about them and the reason that I was going crazy was that I was living in this denial of what I had to do and pretending that what I really wanted to do, could do, was my thesis, when in fact I didn't want to do my thesis anyway and would have to figure out what else I would have to do.

So that fall, I went in search of Vietnam groups and there was an American group there called the Stop It Committee. It was a handful of Americans living in London and it was about doing stuff about the Vietnam War. And so I found them — this was in the fall of 1967 — and I started going to their meetings. It was a small enough group so that it didn't take long to get to know everyone. They were a very brilliant bunch of people, many of whom I still know. Linda Gordon was one of them. She and I became friends.

The group was divided, beginning to be divided, between what we called the liberals and the anti-imperialists. That is, the liberals were the people who controlled the group in that the office was in their house, and they had the mimeograph machine, and their names were on the bank account — some of their names, I mean. The anti-imperialists didn't like

this. And the liberals thought that America had gone astray and should return to its true self and stop doing bad things in Vietnam.

The anti-imperialists thought that America was an imperialist country and it had always done bad things. Look what they did to the Indians. Look at black people, da-da-da. They connected everything up, and thought that we had to be part of a world anti-imperialist movement and work with English people, and direct our propaganda, such as it was — pitiful little mimeographed leaflets, modest reproductions of articles in the *Times* — at England, because that was where we were. We couldn't just hope that if we did stuff in front of the American embassy, America would notice. That was the approach of the other group.

So I immediately became an anti-imperialist since that made much more sense to me, even though I didn't know anything. I knew nothing at all about the world. I started reading furiously. And I'm a quick study. And I soon got elected to the steering committee, found an office for them that wasn't in somebody's house, very cheap. I was very proud of that. And I spent the next year doing that instead of doing my thesis. And it was great learning experience, and I loved it. I loved the people and I stopped feeling crazy. I felt like I was doing something really useful.

In that group I met the guy that became my first husband, John Schwartz. He came to England in the fall of 1968. He was in the middle of splitting up from his wife. He was a labor organizer of sorts. I mean, he had worked for the UE and he had dropped out of college so that he could be in the labor movement. And Danny Schecter, who was Linda's boyfriend, introduced us and said, how, you know, he was the only labor organizer in the entire movement. People ought to give him a little more credit. And so I started going out with him. And we started living together.

9:23

He was from an old left family. His father had been blacklisted. His father was one of the founders of the United Public Workers. He'd been blacklisted during the McCarthy period. He had a very tragic history. The mother had gotten polio. One of their sons died. Very traumatized family, but very political, and so John grew up with all these — he was in kiddie study group with Harry Magdoff. He just knew all these people I had never even heard of, but, you know, soon realized these were important people in this world. I learned a lot, a lot about politics from him.

I also learned a lot about music, because his mother, who had polio and was in a wheelchair, had worked with Alan Lomax collecting songs for the Library of Congress in the Depression, and knew every song in the world, and had taught a lot of them to John. They were just part of that folk world. So that was also very interesting to me because I love music and I started writing songs when we got back to Boston.

Anyway, at the end of that year, my Wilson was over. It was clear that if you wanted to build your life around being anti-imperialist and fighting the war in Vietnam, the U.S. was the place to do it, not England, at least if you were American. And so I got a job offer for a one-year job from Brandeis. They were trying to be nice to me. Little did they know how I'd changed. They said there was somebody who was leaving for a year, did I

want to replace him? Because I had written letters about how do I get a job. And so we went to Boston. And Linda and Danny were also going to Boston. Linda had a job at UMass-Boston, and a bunch of other people from our group ended up in Boston.

Before we left Europe, John and I went to France and to Italy, and this was after the great rebellion of 1968. We actually would've loved to go there during it, but there was a blockade. Nobody could get in, except Danny managed to get in, but nobody else did. I was there that summer and it was still amazing. It was just amazing. It was like being where there had just been a revolution — a totally different feeling from anyplace else I've ever been, because that was the only place where the students and the workers really did manage to get together. I mean, they stopped the whole country dead. I mean, they threw a blockade around the country. They wouldn't let anybody from England in or out. So it was amazing, just seeing the signs of that. I was very moved by that.

And because they were in Europe and because I was getting my political education there, I was always much more — I was always very interested in other countries. I was never like one of these people who are only interested in what America's doing. And so I came back that way.

And so, we came back to Boston, found a horrible apartment above a bar on the edge of Somerville, because it was September. We had to find a place right away, because I was starting teaching the next day. At least it was close to the train. And I started teaching, and John got a job in a factory, U.S. Gypsum. No doubt he has asbestos poisoning by now. And we kept in touch with these same people that we'd been friends with in London and we soon met a bunch of people who were in Harvard SDS.

13:25

WEIGAND: So had you, by this time, decided you were giving up your thesis for good?

TAX: No. I was still thinking I could be a teacher and I would have to finish my thesis eventually. I was just putting it off, because they wouldn't let me do what I wanted to do. I had to switch the subject and make it be something very narrowly text based. But I had all the research done. I actually could have written it. But I really didn't like my supervisor. And everybody expected — you know, I was all-but-dissertation. And people could teach for some years with all-but-dissertation. The problem was, that at Brandeis, I was now a big radical, you know, so I had to teach radical, so I had to learn a whole shit-load of stuff. You know, I shoveled it down their throats and most of them got it.

I had some students — they now had a few black students at Brandeis — and they were not prepared and I found this very difficult because I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to teach them how to read and spell and do all this stuff they hadn't learned how to do. And I didn't want to flunk them, but they couldn't do the work. This was really only one kid. I really — that was very hard for me. But the hardest thing was that that spring. I mean, I was doing fine until this happened.

A couple of years earlier, there were enough black students, enough so that they had started wanting a black studies program, and Abram Sacher, who was president — oh, maybe by then he wasn't there anymore. It was Morton Abrams — yuck — had said, "Oh, OK, OK." But nobody had ever worked out how this was going to happen, where the money was going to come from, whose lines, which departmental lines were going to be used for hiring black faculty or anything. They just let it drift. So it was, like, the kids had been promised this thing and nothing had happened for two years.

So, some of these kids got organized and they decided enough was enough, and they occupied the switchboard. Brandeis was all these little old buildings. It was a little tiny building but it was the switchboard. I mean, they didn't stop telephone traffic but, you know, they made these announcements and everybody went totally crazy on the campus, the faculty and the administration. You would have thought that, you know, there had been an airlift from Nazi Germany. I mean, one of my old professors got up and in the faculty senate, and said, "They marched over us in Germany but we won't let them do it here." Somebody else said, "We will not negotiate through fear." I mean, this is a little handful of black kids. What was so threatening?

So, I mean, some of the faculty, mostly in the sociology department and a few radicals scattered here and there supported the students. I was one of them. I had no tenure, of course. I had a one-year job. And any chance that I had of getting another year at Brandeis was immediately forgotten. Out of the window. And this dragged on forever. And I was so appalled by the way that the faculty acted. I just couldn't get over it. I mean, I couldn't believe the things I was hearing. And nobody seemed to have any sense of proportion at all.

And then, one day when I was leaving one of these meetings, Phil Rahv called me into his office. He had been, you know, my great professor, one of the ones that I really liked. And he said, "Meredith, these people are not like us. These people are not like us at all. You should not be on their side." And I just — and I said, "I think they are." He said, "They're not." And so, I didn't know what to say, I just left. I thought, here's the big leftist on campus, you know. I hated it. I didn't know what to do. I mean, I can't even remember what happened. Eventually, the — now there is some kind of black studies. I mean, eventually, they got something, some crumb, and another crumb the next year and all of it was like pulling teeth, when it should have been totally different and could've been, you know, except they had such bad leadership, and you know, this Jewish paranoia gets totally crazy.

And so then I started looking for another job for the next year. And because of this, there were things in my file that made it very hard for me to even get an interview. I got an interview at MIT where Louis Kampf, who was another radical, said, "Look, the only reason you don't even have a job is — I want to tell you what's in your file. You have to do something about your file or you're never gonna get another job." I didn't know how.

I didn't know what to do. Nobody offered me a job. There were only a couple of places that I even interviewed. And at the same time, by then, I was in the women's movement and I was thinking about how I wanted to write a book. So, I should backtrack at this point, at some point, anyway.

WEIGAND: Yeah. I'm thinking — maybe you have another idea — but it might make sense here to talk about your introduction to the women's movement.

19:50

TAX: Yeah. I think so. I'm trying to remember the chronology here.

WEIGAND: In one of the things you write, you talk about coming back on a plane with Linda Gordon.

TAX: With Linda, right. She denies that this ever happened. She doesn't remember it. Yeah, she gave me a copy of — she really had it in London but I read it on the airplane — of *No More Fun and Games*. I was just blown away. I thought it was so cool. It was so cool to see these women saying this stuff. And you know, then I was plunged into teaching. Anyway, so at some point, that same spring — we're talking now about this spring of 1969. Roxanne [Dunbar] had a group but we couldn't be in it. None of us could be in it, because we hadn't been in it before. She only had the people that were in it before. It was a very small group of about six people. They all lived together in a house, and nobody else could figure out, well, what do you do. She didn't want any other people? She said, "Go make your own group."

So, I was teaching, Linda was teaching. We didn't do anything. And then, summer came. And I didn't have a job, I was starting to get very — you know, I'm an intellectual, I wanted to write, but I wanted to write stuff about women. And I had already written something. John and Dickie Cluster and Michael Ansara and a bunch of other people — and Trude Bennett, who was becoming one of my friends — had started a newspaper by now, called *The Old Mole*, which was an alternative — an underground paper, as they were called in those days. It came out every couple of weeks. I think it was every two weeks. It couldn't be every week. I mean, it was on a shoestring and everybody was working for nothing, or, you know, hardly anybody got paid. John didn't get paid. He had a lot of newspaper experience because he had worked on the *UE News*. And other people had other kinds of experience. And I wrote a little thing for them about Anais Nin and feminism.

And then we heard that Roxanne wanted to do a conference. Two things were happening at the same time. Linda and I and a bunch of other people started having a study group about women's history and I started thinking I wanted to write a book that would be about American women's history and have some — more about the labor movement and stuff like that, because I was very influenced by John, and then bring it up to the present. And so, I started working on an outline for this book. Also then we had the plans for this conference. We weren't involved in the planning,

but Roxanne said anybody who wanted to do a workshop could do a workshop. So Trude Bennett and I decided to do a workshop on women and psychology, which neither of us knew very much about, but we knew we didn't agree with Freud and we had our own things to say about our own psychological development, and that was really all that was necessary because people just wanted to talk anyway.

WEIGAND: Right. And was this influenced by that workshop you'd been to in London? I mean –

TAX: Not — yeah, pretty much, yeah. A lot of the same kind of psychological ideas were very much in the air then. And this conference took place sometime in the winter — I think probably November of 1969 or something like that. But it was a circus. Everybody in the world gave workshops. I mean, there were a lot of people there. It wasn't just Roxanne's people. So Roxanne's collective gave their program for the revolution which was very short. It was karate — leave your families, and live in collective houses, and destroy the family in general. That was the program.

And Roxanne also gave a workshop on revolutionary strategy which consisted completely of her reading out loud from *Fanshen* (laughs). She was a Maoist at the time. Roxanne was also very charismatic and very brilliant woman, even though quite loopy, at least at that point. Very charismatic and interesting. And she'd pulled this whole thing together. And other people gave demonstrations of karate. And we had our workshop on psychology which was very exciting and we loved it. And then the conference was over and we wanted to do something and –

WEIGAND: Can you talk a little bit about the workshop and what it was like and what you talked about?

TAX: I remember. I have notes on it somewhere. I talked about what had happened to me in London, about that experience of having a nervous breakdown and feeling that the only thing that — it was about the family and about being a girl and that the only thing to do was politics. That was the only solution. And I don't remember what Trude talked about. And there were other workshops that gave a critique of Freudianism and there was one about the vaginal orgasm and da, da, da. And we put pieces in *The Old Mole* about all of this stuff.

WEIGAND: And was it a big conference?

TAX: It was a big conference. It was at Emmanuel College, where Roxanne was teaching at that time, a Catholic college. Quite an improbable location. And the worst thing about it was that this woman named Julie Baumgold, who worked for *New York Magazine*, and was married to its editor, Clay Felker, came up and didn't say she was press. She went to a lot of the

workshops, including ours, and then she wrote a bitterly satirical piece for *New York* magazine about what assholes we all were. That was awful, and it made us very mad and we decided that never again would we have anything to do with the press, the bourgeois press. They would only betray us.

But coming out of that, I mean, I felt like somebody has to have more of a program than karate and destroying the family (laughs) — this is ridiculous. We were never were going to build a mass movement on that basis. We had a lot of other issues we had to deal with and we wanted to talk about it. So I talked to Linda and I talked to Trude and we eventually pulled together a meeting at my house, which turned out to be the first meeting of collective number one of Bread and Roses. And it was more or less arbitrary who was invited — I know we can ask this one, we can ask that one. A lot of them were from *The Old Mole*. And then we were so happy after we had that meeting that, you know, we wanted everybody else to do it, too, so we called a big meeting of all the women we knew and we said, Look, we want to have this collective. Why don't you all make collectives?

And of course, everybody was mad at us because we had done this instead of all doing it together. But we didn't know how to do it. We didn't know how to organize it and everybody was very worried, we were very worried about whether we were being elitist. But I said, "Look, let's just do it." I never was as worried about people being mad at me as many other people because I had grown up in a household where my mother was constantly mad at me, so I was completely used to people being mad at me all the time and in fact sort of expected it. So I'm somewhat tougher about that than many women.

So during the summer of 1969, Bread and Roses pulled together all these different collectives. And we also had big meetings every — could it really have been every two weeks? I think it was every two weeks. It was a complete burnout. We were meeting all the time. And then we also had work groups trying to figure out what to do, and we wanted to set up an office, did we need an office? We wanted to have — now, wait a minute. We planned an International Women's Day demonstration. I guess that was in — must have been in March of 1970, because that was one of the things I worked on, because I knew about Women's Day from doing this history stuff. And we did a wonderful march, you know, through Boston. And it obviously was about women's history. And we wrote a sort of — our own version of the Declaration of Independence, the way everybody else was doing at the time, you know.

There was another collective that founded — that started a health group. They started by wanting to do a blacklist of evil doctors who gave women bad advice and made them feel bad. Then they wanted to, you know, to do a sort of protocol about how you should act with doctors and how you should always take a friend with you. They later became the Boston Women's Health Group collective.

And there was a project group that I was in that started trying to think about work and labor and stuff. We didn't do much for a while at first; we were writing things. And then the history group kept me busy. So, there were all these meetings all the time. And then, we started getting in touch with people from other cities. I don't know how I knew Ros Baxandall — it must have been through Linda. But Ros was very involved in the women's movement here [in New York City]. Oh, and Sarah Eisenstein was part of the history group, because she was in Boston for the summer, although she'd already graduated from Radcliffe and moved down to New York. So she was like a link between our group and the New York groups. Anyway, so I met Ros. I think we had some meetings with Boston and New York, a couple at least, doing history stuff.

Meanwhile, I was working on this outline for this humongous book that had everything in the whole world that had ever happened to women, at least in America, in it. You know, I didn't know how to research. I was using the Schlesinger Library. I realized it was too big and I really didn't know what to do with it. But in the meantime, I had some publishing connections. John's cousin was Ed Doctorow, who was then an editor; he hadn't really started writing much yet. And I met with him, and I met with some agent who then moved to England. But anyway, somehow or other, either through Ros or some of these people, I got advice. They told me what to do. Do an outline, so I did an outline. And I sold it to a woman Ros knew named Joyce Johnson, who was then working at McGraw-Hill. She bought it for five thousand dollars, which was, at that time, a decent amount of money, you know. I could live for a year on two thousand, especially because John was working, and we didn't spend any money — we didn't buy anything.

WEIGAND: You were going to too many meetings (laughs).

TAX: Right. All we did was go to meetings. We didn't have time to spend money, and we didn't have any money, and we didn't care about money. Our rent was cheap. We didn't go out to restaurants. We ate at each other's houses. You know, we were constantly running around to meetings. The main expense we all had was cars, which were always breaking. So that was great. So I decided, fuck teaching. I'm never gonna get a job anyway. I don't know how to clean this stuff out of my file. I'll become a writer. And so I started working on this book, which ten years later, became *The Rising of the Women* after many other things. I'll take a breath here. Ask me something.

WEIGAND: So, in these Bread and Roses meetings, as you're talking about stuff and trying to formulate a program and strategy, did what you were doing have any relation to consciousness raising? Did you call it that, or —

32:04

TAX: We didn't call it that because we knew about consciousness raising from Ros and from people in New York, and Kathie Amatniek, [who became]

Kathie Sarachild. They'd written up these rules for how you do consciousness raising. Everybody in New York is always so doctrinaire about everything. We just did our own stuff. In my collective, what we did was pick a topic that we wanted to talk about, and somebody would write up something, and maybe a couple of people would write up something. The topics could be anything.

You know, that's where I started writing. I wrote the stuff that became *Woman and Her Mind* out of some of those discussions and the psychology workshop we had done at the conference. Linda wrote a pamphlet on the family, saying things I don't think she would say anymore. And other people, you know — we talked about Cuba. We talked about what are we going to do about the antiwar movement. We couldn't stand the way the boys did the antiwar movement.

And meanwhile, the antiwar movement in SDS was getting totally crazy because of the split between Weathermen and Progressive Labor [PL]. I mean, this was all new to me. I didn't know any of these people but Trude, who was really one of my best friends, had come from Columbia SDS where a lot of the Weathermen leadership came from. In fact she went out with Teddy Gold, who was one of the people who blew himself up in the townhouse, and that was really hard. She was completely devastated, and so scared about what was going to happen to the rest of all of these people she knew. She had left New York because she thought they had gone crazy. And they were.

And then they came up to Boston to organize. And there was PL, which seemed to be mostly made up of millionaire's children from Texas — at least in Harvard SDS — and they were off talking about working in factories, and how we had to cut our hair short, and rock music was bad, dope was bad. I was never into dope, but some of my friends were. They all hated the people in PL. They hated them. And there was Weathermen, which seemed to me and to the people in the women's movement, very crazy and very macho, but which had people we liked in it, or who we used to like in it.

And then there was a group, which was Michael Ansara's group, which was trying to be in the middle of them, or to be a third path, which didn't work, because you couldn't. And they all went to the SDS convention, which was in the spring of 1969, in Chicago. I didn't go to the SDS convention because I wasn't even a member of SDS. I thought, I'm not a student, why should I join this? But my brother got married the same weekend in Chicago, so we were there. So John and I went in there for a little while and it really seemed very crazy. That was the convention where they split. And some of the people in my collective in Bread and Roses had been in SDS and were very close to some of those people, so we talked about it a lot and I thought I was much more against Weathermen than many. I mean, some of them were more vulnerable to guilt politics than I am, and to wanting to be the vanguard, not that they ever did anything except a couple of them went and painted something on the wall of Holyoke Center and got caught, including Linda and Trude, the

Holyoke Three. They had to pay a big huge fine. They painted something about Vietnam on the wall.

And there was also all this stuff that was happening with the Panthers. I mean, this was just a time in which something new happened all the time. Every week, two or three things would happen. In December, Fred Hampton was killed in Chicago and the Panthers sent out this call to all the movement people saying, Please come down and defend our offices. We're afraid we're all going to be killed. And so we all got up in the middle of the night and went down to Dorchester and stood around in front of their office and nothing happened. But it could've. I don't know. I think that was an FBI thing.

And there was the Panther 21 trial in New Haven and some people were — a lot of people in the New York women's movement were involved in that. And the New York women's movement was much more split than Bread and Roses. It was split between people who were radical feminists and people who were socialist feminists who were the people who wanted to do stuff about Vietnam and about the Panthers, but to do it as feminists. Whereas the others said, Leave that stuff alone. We have to work on our own needs as women. And they always wanted us to pick, and we wouldn't, you know. I said, "We think both those things. We're going to do both those things. Why do we have to pick?" You know, we were very resolute about opposing that kind of split. We thought of it as people in New York are always splitting about everything, and they're so doctrinaire and all they want to do is argue with each other all the time and we don't like them.

When I finished the article "Woman and Her Mind" it had four parts. The first couple were sort of about consciousness and being harassed on the street, and the second two parts were more about economics and consumerism and a vision of the future and so on. They were all published as a pamphlet by the New England Free Press. And then, I got a call from *Notes from the Second Year*, from Shulie Firestone, saying she wanted to publish the pamphlet and I said, "Great." But she said, "Only the first half." And I said, "Why?" She said, "We don't agree with the second half." So I wasn't sure I would agree, but then she said, "No, it's not that. It's too long." So I said, "All right." And then Roberta Salper only wanted to publish the second half. She was on the other side of the New York split. So I let them both publish it, but I felt like, these people are crazy. They don't know how to work together. And I was very proud that Bread and Roses didn't do that. I mean, we had plenty of trouble working together but it wasn't because of doctrinal stuff.

The gay stuff, which came up in the second year, was also generational. It was younger people. It was very confusing because some people were becoming gay and wanting to separate, and some people were becoming gay and not wanting to separate. And the rest of us — oh. We didn't know what we were supposed to do. I mean, we were very clear that we wanted to keep a broad group together. We weren't *very* broad. I mean, we were very contemptuous of NOW, for instance, you know, whom we

38:48

referred to as the Brookline women. But we didn't know anything about them. We were just being stupid and, you know, student-y. We thought of them as our mothers, basically. We didn't want — some of them were our age, you know. But we didn't have anything to do with them.

WEIGAND: Um.

TAX: I'm starting to get tired and dry up. Maybe I should have some more tea or something. How long do you want to go?

WEIGAND: We could stop at two hours or we could go longer.

TAX: Well, let's go as long as we can, but I might need to take a break.

WEIGAND: Do you want to do it now?

TAX: Yes. [BREAK]

I was telling you about Bread and Roses and some of the left stuff. One of the big struggles we had was about the antiwar movement, which we in Bread and Roses thought was not very well led. The big — it wasn't even so much the big organization, it was the boys, as we called them. It was our counterparts who were getting so crazy. And they wanted to — they were very keyed up about this thing that Weathermen was going to do in Chicago, the Days of Rage, where they were going to go around and break windows or do some goddamn stupid stuff like that. And they had this thing called the NAC, the National Action Committee, that was going to try to do similar stuff in Boston and we just thought it was — I thought — we didn't all think the same thing — it was off the wall, and so we used to have these debates, which I guess mirrored the ones in New York to some degree, what do we do about this, you know? Do we have a responsibility to go in there and argue with them and try to make them do it right? In that case, we're gonna spend all our time doing that and we're going to end up working with the same guys and their same obnoxious ways that we started the women's movement to get away from. But if we don't do it, they'll screw up the antiwar movement, and we never really resolved that contradiction, because we just didn't have enough people and there was so much happening.

And Weathermen came to town to recruit for the Days of Rage. Eric Mann came, I think. They had a place — I don't remember where — I think someplace at B[oston] U[niversity]. He gave a speech and I was really, really opposed to this. I thought this was like macho politics to the degree of total absurdity. I mean, what was the point of going to Chicago to break windows and get beat up and put in jail? I mean, what did this prove? How did this help the Vietnamese? What did it do for anybody? It was just this macho bullshit. But not everybody in my collective was as opposed as I was because some of them were friends with Eric. So I made

these signs — me and Cynthia Michaels, who wasn't in my collective but felt the same way I did — signs that said, "Machismo to the Vanguard," and we went to this meeting and when Eric started talking, we held up the signs. We almost got beat up. (laughs) Trude was reminding me of that. She and a bunch of other women had to rush to surround me because we had no idea of what was going to happen. I didn't think about it at all. And I wrote a paper denouncing this as something-or-other, some Marxist terms, because I was becoming more of a Marxist under the influence of my husband. I just didn't know anything before. So, infantile left adventurism — I think was what it was.

The Panthers were another thing, because on the one hand, you wanted to defend them. On the other hand, they had their problems, and some of them in Boston — we gave a benefit and we were going to split the money between ourselves and the Panthers. I don't even remember what the benefit was. I didn't organize it. Diane Balsler organized it, and she was at the door, collecting the money. And these two guys came in from the Panthers, and they said, "We want the money now and we want all of it." And Diane stood her ground and said, "Well, you can't have it. I'll give it to you when it's done and you'll get half of it, like we said." Gr-r-r-r.

But that's the way it was then. People were very vulnerable to this kind of posturing, this kind of macho posturing and guilt-tripping about race, partly because we all felt so guilty because there were no black women in Bread and Roses and we didn't have any idea what to do about it. No idea in the world. And this is one of the problems we never solved and it ultimately drove me in a different direction because I saw it as really very fundamental.

WEIGAND: You've talked here about some of the conflicts that the group had, or disagreements, or questions, at least —

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TAX: I mean, there are also — there were disagreements or questions about leadership a lot. More attitudes than disagreements — I mean, it wasn't like people had an alternative, you know. And I was somebody who was always becoming a leader because I'm very outspoken and I can take a certain amount of shit. I don't get scared about people not liking me and somebody has to do it. So we would have these big meetings, 30, 40 people. No chair. No rules. And nobody would know what to do. Somebody would have to sort of say, Well what are we gonna do, you know? And often it would be me. And then there would be anti-leadership stuff. But I didn't care. I mean, what is the alternative? What're you going to do? And then there were people who said they were anarchists. I said, "Fine." You know. The big meetings were very difficult. They would get very chaotic. People would interrupt, you know? It was difficult to get — but we were pretty sane, I think, among groups in the women's movement. We were among the saner, more broad-based —

WEIGAND: So did you have strategies in the group for dealing with those kinds of problems?

TAX: No (laughs), not that I can remember. Maybe some people might have. I wasn't especially good at them. I would just get mad. I mean, it's never been one of my great strengths, figuring out what to do about that kind of stuff. But it wasn't that many people. Most people didn't want to be disruptive, you know. It was mostly Sue Katz, and, after a while, people just — Oh, there she goes, you know. And the real thing that bothered me was that we didn't have any strategies for anything. We were basically improvising everything we did and figuring it out as we went along, which was OK for a new movement, but we would not be able to sustain ourselves unless we had more of a strategy for what we wanted to do. I mean, if we wanted to make a revolution as we said we did, how were we going to do it?

We put together a group, I think, the second year of Bread and Roses, that was trying to address questions of strategy and program. And we did come up with a program. Unfortunately, it had about 40 points in it. We didn't know how to condense it and figure out which were the priorities. We probably couldn't have agreed on them so we had everything in the world in there. At least it was going in some direction of program, but there was really no organization or coherence to do anything with the program. We had it and then there was nothing — nobody knew what to do with it. And there wasn't even any — we didn't have any clear way of even talking about it. It was, like, this group is doing program and this group is doing health, you know. We were very inexperienced politically and we'd been cut off by American history, from the previous generation, which knew how to do some of this stuff — not that we necessarily would have wanted to do what they did — but we could have learned from what they did. But we just didn't know about it. I was very serious about revolution. I had changed my life to do this kind of work and I wanted to be effective.

WEIGAND: Well, let me ask you this. I've talked to some other people about this period, the late '60s, and they say that it [felt] at the time like the revolution might really be at hand, like things were sort of on the brink, perhaps.

TAX: I didn't feel that. I felt that there was a lot of stuff going on. There was also a lot of repression going on. I felt in despair much of the time. I felt — yes, life was enormously exciting. There was a lot of movement stuff happening. I mean, there was this enormous student strike after Cambodia. It was very, very big and powerful. But the war didn't end. The war didn't end for years and years after that. And I was in despair. I felt like we didn't know how to do what we wanted to do and probably I didn't have a long enough time line and partly, I didn't have enough historical experience.

But also, I had been studying history by then, you know, for several years. I was studying the history of other women's movements and I realized they didn't know what to do either, and that they suffered from the same problems that we did. They were all white, they were pretty much, with a few exceptions, divorced from the working class, and they were very easy to marginalize. That, more and more, seemed to me to be the central problem: how to integrate the women's movement, the ideas of the women's movement, with a different social base, you know? How do you build a women's movement that's based in the working class, that's multinational or multicultural?

And it was absolutely clear to me that nobody had the slightest idea of how to do that, and that was the problem that interested me, and seemed to me the main problem. And so, I got more and more frustrated with Bread and Roses because I would be posing this question all the time and people would go, "Duh." They wouldn't say, "I don't know but let's try to find out." They would just say, "I can't deal with that." You know. Or they would say, "I'm doing this. I'm doing that." Or, what they said more and more, increasingly, "I'm going back to graduate school. How am I going to make a living?" And so people started getting better jobs and, you know, started being a little less marginal.

And those of us who really had put our identity completely into the movement started feeling like something else was happening, that we weren't in, or that we didn't understand. Why were these people doing that instead of what we were doing? How did we make what we were doing work?

WEIGAND: Were you all roughly in the same age cohort?

TAX: Yeah, we were all roughly the same age as me, maybe a couple of years younger. And there weren't that many, you know. More and more people started getting jobs and, or having families, or talking about doing that, whereas I thought of myself as a full-time revolutionary, or full-time radical, whatever that meant — that what I was going to do was going to be determined by the political decisions that I made and that those were going to be determined by what I thought needed to be done.

Now, if you're going to be a committed revolutionary, and you're looking for historical examples, there aren't very many. I mean, you are inevitably led to communism because that's all there is that takes it with that kind of seriousness and says, This is what you do with your life: A, B, C, D. This is what works. Look, we did it. And you can say, Well, I wouldn't do it that way. I would change this, you know. Women — that wasn't right, you know. But you cannot argue and you certainly couldn't argue at that point in time. This is long before the fall of the Berlin Wall. You can't argue with the fact that they did it. You know, John, my ex-husband, was much more attracted to the CP than I was. I always thought they were totally bullshit.

WEIGAND: By this time –

TAX: Yeah, they were just so — I mean, the people that I met who were my age were just so lame, you know. But China was another story. I wasn't that interested in Cuba either, for some reason. I just thought it wasn't applicable. It was just too small and too different. But China seemed to me much more — I mean, that seemed to me a sufficiently big challenge and so they — if they could do it, you know? And also — the people that I had been working with in England — there was a lot more talk about China in England than there was in the U.S. And by — when was it? by 1971, John and I had already decided we were sick of living in the Cambridge-Somerville area. We wanted to be with the working class.

We moved to Jamaica Plain. We were meeting other people who wanted to do work with the working class, many of whom were feminists. None of us knew what to do. I mean, John still had a job in a factory. I was still trying to write my book. People started coming through who were Maoists who were looking to recruit others. First, they were just talking about China and about the Cultural Revolution. This was still in the middle of the Cultural Revolution. And nobody knew anything about the Cultural Revolution. There had been a complete blockade of information about China in the West and the Chinese weren't letting anything out either. And so, you just — I mean, when I was in London, I remember one of the guys in our group saying, “Thousands of kids running into the street. The counterrevolution. The kids have taken over the country.” You know, it sounded cool. But I had no idea what it was about.

So there was a woman named Geri Steiner who had been in PL and had been to China at a period when nobody else had been to China, and she came around and talked about it. And another woman, Ann Tompkins, had been to China. Ann Tompkins wrote about China and had spent many years there and she was trying to recruit people to any organization, just trying to say, “You should know about this. If you're serious, you should know about this. This is what happened there.” And it was a lot about the Cultural Revolution as — I mean, it's so different from the way it actually was, but the way it was presented was a populist uprising against corrupt rulers, led by the great helmsmen who saw that the people in between him and the people were screwing up, and that revolution was getting damaged and it must be revived, you know, with the zeal of a new generation and liberate the young, and let them — they'll find out what to do.

So I got very interested and started studying about it. And even when you studied about it, then, William Hinton, for instance, wrote stuff that made it clear that there were a lot of complicated things going on, that it wasn't so easy to see who were the good guys and the bad guys all the time. And you could change your mind from one page to the other. But it was very interesting. These people were serious. They were serious about making the kind of change that would end racism, that would make wars like the Vietnam War not happen anymore. Women were more complicated because nobody — Hinton wrote a chapter in *Fanshen* that

was widely reprinted as a pamphlet about the uprising of women in a particular village. But women weren't equal in China. Nobody said that.

On the other hand, was there some path that was more likely to make women equal than that one? I couldn't see any. I just kept coming up against the fact that we didn't know what we were doing. We had no idea how to develop a strategy. We needed to be with different people, working with different people to learn what they knew and to learn how to think differently. So I decided I had to do it. And so, in 1972, John and I and two other couples formed this little study group. Well, first, we were in a bigger study group with some people that had been in the feminist movement, and then we had this little study group of people who were really going to do it. And we decided — we picked — we looked around the country. We would pick a place that had a strong working-class movement, we would go there, we would get factory jobs, and start trying to figure out what to do in that situation with those people. It was very like what PL had done, which we had complete contempt for, but that's because PL were so nerdy. We weren't nerdy. We were cool.

We decided, before we did this, we were also going to try to make contact with other proto-Maoist groups. There was one that had already made contact with us in New Jersey, a group of about six people that had been living underground for five years who decided the revolution was imminent at some point in about 1968 or something. But they knew a lot about the dialectic and they were working in factory jobs. So we met them. They seemed a little crazy. One of them — John had gone to college with one of them in his brief period of college — one of the guys in the group had a van. We all got in the van and we started roaming around the country looking for groups. We found there was one in Baltimore, there was one in St. Louis, there was one in Atlanta, there was one in Philadelphia. The ones in Philadelphia were younger than us and they knew less than us, so they wanted to do whatever we wanted to do. They decided they would join us. The ones in Baltimore seemed pretty cool. They were working at Sparrows Point in a steel plant. They were interested in a group in Atlanta. They thought they were the best group. So we went down.

The Atlanta group was called the Georgia Communist League, and it was led by, among others, a woman named Lynn Wells, who had been high up in the leadership of SDS. They had a relationship of some fraternal kind with a group in LA called the October League, which was led by Mike Klonsky, who used to be the head of SDS. So we ended moving to Chicago in 1972, going underground, basically — which was totally unnecessary, but, we felt we should do it — and freaked out the FBI, who we found out had been tracking John for years and couldn't find him. They started calling around to various friends and relatives. But we moved to Chicago and got factory jobs. We picked completely the wrong neighborhood in Chicago. We also had hooked up with a couple of people in Chicago who really didn't know what they were doing, who picked the neighborhood that they thought was the most integrated neighborhood in

Chicago for us to live in, which turned out not to be an integrated neighborhood at all but a neighborhood that was tipping and tipped within the next year, completely, so we had to leave it, Roseland.

So we were going to be working with these people in Georgia and we had gone down there and I had already had problems with them, because they didn't like me. They liked the rest of the group but they didn't like me because I was a feminist. And they made that clear. And they said, you know, basically, you're gonna have to leave all that crap behind, you know. Lynn Wells said that. And I said, "I'll think about it." And I thought, I need to learn what these people know. They can't make me stop thinking whatever I think. I'm going to hold my judgment in reserve and go in there and see what I can learn. I didn't tell them that.

They could tell though (laughs). It was very obvious. I'd never been very good at concealing my views. So there was a certain amount of friction from the beginning. But on the other hand, I was the leader of our group and god knows how that happened. John should've been the leader. We sort of both were at first, and then they insisted — I mean, they had this view that everybody had to have a democratic centralist structure even if there were only, like, two of them. That if we were on a desert island and there were only two of us, one of us would become the chair of the central committee.

So, I became the chair, and I really didn't — it was really a mistake, except that I was the best writer. So, I was always writing these analytical papers, just like I did in college and people would be snowed by them and they would think I knew more. And I was also a good teacher. I was good at teaching people about the dialectic. So we moved to Chicago and I was all of a sudden the head of this, what I thought of as basically a family of about 16 people who didn't know what they were doing. I didn't know they should do, and I had no experience in this. So we all got factory jobs, tried to figure out what to do, and it was very interesting. Working in a factory was very — worked at Zenith TV.

WEIGAND: What was that like?

TAX: It was a hell house. It was one of the worst places to work in Chicago. That's how we could get jobs there so easily. Nobody else wanted to. And the only white people in the factory were Communists. Many of the people were illegals. Most of the people were black. A lot of them were young kids who hadn't graduated high school. And it was — I mean, it's not there anymore. They've shipped all that work out overseas. I'm not even sure Zenith exists anymore, as a company, but we were making the insides of TV sets.

It was a moving assembly line. You had to stand up eight hours a day and do an incredible number of operations with a pliers. I had to do, I think, 12 in under a minute. The sets would come by in less than a minute each. So there were a lot of mistakes. And then there would be people called floaters who were to intervene when something was going badly

wrong, and then there were people who would check the sets and fix the mistakes. But it was better for them to do it that way — even to make them with a lot of mistakes, and make them fast — and fix them afterwards, than do it properly.

It was very low standard work and it was horrible to work there. There was no union. There had been several attempts to organize a union and they'd always been smashed. We wanted to organize a union, so we put a lot of people into that factory, mostly women. We didn't have a clue how to organize anything. I mean, none of us had done this before. It was very interesting. It was the first sustained contact with a lot of black people I had. I learned how to fit in and how to talk to people. And I worked harder than I — I'm not physically strong. It was hard work for me and I — by the time I left, I had already the beginning of arthritis and I thought it was very hard work.

Some interesting things happened there. Somebody — one of the other women came running up to me once with this guy she'd met in the cafeteria who, it turned out, had just gotten out of jail. A Puerto Rican guy. He was one of the Puerto Rican nationalists who had opened fire in the Senate in 1954. He'd been traveling all over the country trying to get a job. Wherever he tried to get a job, the FBI would be there within a week and then he'd get fired.

END DVD 2

## DVD 3

TAX:

In three months I was invited to go to China. I had already been invited once and hadn't been able to go at that time because I was in the middle of moving to Chicago. The *Guardian* newspaper, which was a leftwing newspaper that had been in existence for many years but isn't anymore, had sort of been asked to organize tours to China by the Chinese government — all expenses paid for movement activists — and this was the second or third group. I was invited to be in the first movement activist group but I couldn't do it. Linda [Gordon] went on that, I think, and maybe Ros [Baxandall]. I'm not sure they were on the same group, but anyway, they both went at some point.

So I missed the movement activist group, but was asked to be part of the cultural workers' group, because I was a cultural worker, a writer. So I said yes. This was a very weird group: Candace Bergen; her boyfriend Burt Schneider, who was this Hollywood producer who made *Hearts and Minds*; a bunch of older people who used to be in the CP; Ring Lardner; Howard DaSilva; Ring's wife, Frances Cheney; Howard's wife, whose name I can't remember; Alice Childress, whom I loved; various other people my age whom I didn't know, mostly from California; a nice guy from Milwaukee named Larry Robbins, who was a singer; a painter from Chicago, a muralist, Ray Patlan; Earl Ofari, a black writer from San Francisco, I think, who had been one of the first distributors of the *Little Red Book* in California. Anyway, so, off we all went to China.

This was during — it was in the middle of the Cultural Revolution. The Gang of Four were still running the show, but Lin Piao had recently disappeared and we heard, when we were China, in fact, that his plane had crashed and he was trying to flee to Russia, the enemy. So we didn't know what to make of any of this.

Most of the people on the trip weren't Maoists. They didn't really care about any of this stuff. They just wanted to see China. I felt like I had this, you know, tremendous responsibility to be politically correct at all times and, at the same time, try to figure out what the hell was going on, which was extremely difficult (laughs). There were things that were quite disturbing and there were things that were wonderful. And I couldn't figure out what was real and what wasn't. And I wanted to be inspired by everything and was somewhat conflicted inside about some of it, like the fact that they had not made any movies in the last eight years except for these model operas. Everyplace we'd go we'd see the same movies and hear the same songs. It was like this whole enormous country has only one song and one movie. So, those things were disturbing because we were artists.

On the other hand, you know, we heard talks from old workers about their conditions before the revolution and how they had changed. It was, Now I am the master of this enterprise, or, Now I run this farm. That was wonderful. And the country was very beautiful, and it was very strange. I didn't really know what to make of anything. I wanted very much to

believe that everything was exactly what they said it was, and try to convince myself of it, and then I kept crying every night. I came back into this world where I was supposed to be carrying out the same revolution and I didn't know what I wanted to do and I was thinking, Maybe this is not what I want to do, maybe I should leave John — because John clearly wanted to do this. This was really his thing more than mine. I wanted to do it, too, and I, to some degree, had talked myself into it because he had been working in a factory alone for all these years and was so isolated that he needed to be in a group. And I loved him.

So I talked to him about it and he persuaded me — I had been wanting to have a baby and he never wanted to have a baby. He didn't think revolutionaries should have children, although this was not the Maoist line. So he said, "All right, let's have a baby." So I stayed and I got pregnant, with some difficulty.

And I got a job in another factory, Stewart Warner, where they made metal gauges. That was a factory that every group was in. It was easy to get a job there. It was a factory where there were a lot of white people. It was easy to get hired on there. It was full of radicals. Every revolutionary group in the city was in there, giving each other dirty looks. Everybody got fired just when they were ready — at three months you could get into the union — everybody got fired the day before they hit three months, including me. Then I got a job at a factory that made cooking ware, where I worked a punch press, which I couldn't do. It was much too big for me and I was too slow. I got fired from there.

I didn't know what to do. I was pregnant, and somehow or other, it was decided that I could just do organizational work while I was pregnant. I turned out to have a dangerous pregnancy, and the organization was going through various internal struggles, which I no longer remember very well, which I was always in the middle of. Either I was the bad guy or the good guy. I think at that point, I was the bad guy. Yes, I was the bad guy and it was a good thing I was pregnant because it enabled me to lie low for a while.

And because I was always getting — I had also always wanted to work in the women's movement. So when I was doing all this factory work, I also kept pushing and pushing to have them let me work in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, which I had to do without telling people I was in the October League. And that was another thing. I didn't feel good about that. I wanted people to know. So I had been doing that before I went to China, and after I came back, they finally said, All right, you can tell people." So people dealt with it. They weren't all thrilled.

WEIGAND: So what were you doing with that group?

6:53

TAX: What I did with them? At first, I was just, you know, a member and trying to figure out what the organization was about. And then I and a couple of other women — Diane Horwitz and Caren Levy — decided we wanted to organize a big [International] Women's Day march that would be about

economics as well as — because there was this sort of mini-recession going on and it was hitting Chicago pretty hard. There was a lot of unemployment and prices were going up, and women were suffering. So we focused on that a lot. Also, we worked some in DARE [Direct Action for Rights in Employment] — not very much — which was the economics and union committee.

But mostly we organized this march called The March for Women's Equality and Economic Justice. It was a very broad-based march. We did a fabulous job. It was the biggest women's march that had ever happened in the women's movement in Chicago, and the biggest. It was bigger than some of the antiwar marches. We brought a lot of unions in, brought black people's organizations in. It was a big march. I was very proud of that work. And I made the mistake of saying how good it was inside the October League and I got slammed for being a careerist and pushing feminism, and I got into trouble again. They were saying I was taking all the credit for something and — so then I got sick. I had toxemia with both pregnancies and I had to be on bed rest. It was a very bad time because I was sort of in trouble in the organization, which meant that people weren't being particularly friendly to me, and I was alone all the time because I was on bed rest. John was always away or at meetings. Everybody else was at meetings most of the time, too.

And finally I had the baby, my daughter, Corey, on August 1st, 1974. I stayed home with her for a while and then they wanted me to go back to work. I resisted. You know, by then, the pendulum had shifted again. We were having another struggle. This time, I was leading it. It was about rectifying some of the male chauvinism and racism inside the organization, da da da da da. So that struggle was very consuming. I put a lot of things on paper I shouldn't have put down.

It ended up, eventually, I had to get a job anyway, even though the struggle was very, very intense and I was looking for a job and I couldn't get a factory job. And I got a job at a hospital where several other people were already working. Actually it was very hard for me physically to do factory work. I'm not very big, and I [couldn't] do this [easily]. So I became a nurse's aide at Henrotin Hospital in Chicago. I stayed there for over a year. What a nurse's aide does is she takes temperatures, she makes beds, gives people baths, you know, brings them their food, helps feed them. It's pretty easy. I mean, it's hard. It's physically exhausting. But you don't have to be big or skilled. It doesn't pay very well. And, again, it was almost black people and Latins. There were a few whites.

I liked that job. I was good at it. I got along well with everybody. It was really interesting to me. I was very interested — I've always been interested in diseases because my father was a doctor. So the medical stuff was interesting to me. I got in trouble sometimes. I had too much of an attitude, you know. But I did pretty well. I could've stayed there forever. But, what happened was, meanwhile the struggle in the organization was accelerating and I was a target. I became a target because I'd put too much on paper. I'd criticized leadership too openly. I had said that they were

chauvinist, da da da da da, showing that I was an unreconstructed feminist and careerist who was trying to take over the organization and prevent the formation of a new party. I was trying — I mean, they had suddenly decided that it was time to form a new party, and there was no reason for it. Things were no different than they had been the year before. The only difference was that a rival group had just decided to form a new party. So I said, “Well, hey,” so that got me in a lot of trouble.

So there was a big campaign against me, all kinds of articles written against me, all under assumed names. And the upshot was that I was kicked out of the organization. And when I was kicked out of the organization, it meant the end of my marriage, because, you know, this was a communist organization. I was now a traitor. My husband would either have had to give up me and his daughter — though he claimed he wasn’t giving up his daughter at the time — or stop working with the organization. And it was a clear choice. I mean, he was very angry with me. He was angry with me for making him do this. It was my fault. He came, you know, with another guy who used to be my friend. They collected all my papers because I couldn’t have any organizational papers because I might really be a police agent. I said, “Come on.” They said, “Well, we can’t be too careful.” So I don’t have any of those papers.

11:05

And I was sent to Coventry. Nobody would talk to me. My best friends wouldn’t talk — they weren’t allowed to talk to me, although some people in the organization didn’t know what was happening, so they talked to me if they ran into me, but I was too embarrassed to talk to them, actually. So I was working in the hospital now with two people who couldn’t talk to me. Close friends who I recruited into the organization couldn’t talk to me. So it was a very tough thing for me.

And at the same time that was happening, my father was dying, and I went home. I mean, it wasn’t clear at first he was dying, you know. He hadn’t been feeling well. I went home after John left me and I didn’t — they didn’t know anything specific about the politics that I was into. They just knew it was horrible. I was totally down. My father had really barely spoken to me for years because I had betrayed everything that they stood for — namely, I had a college education and I was working in a factory, and I was some kind of communist. They didn’t want to know, but it was — I mean, they actually did not know the difference between one radical thing and another. My aunt once was worried that I was throwing bombs and I was a Weatherman. And another time, she looked at my arm for tracks, which I — so they really didn’t — they were totally clueless about any of these differences, and I didn’t enlighten them.

But my father said, “All right. So, have you changed your views?” I mean, I had been kicked out a couple of days before and I said, “I don’t know.” So he said, “Well then, I don’t have anything to say to you.” And he basically never spoke to me again. And then he died a few months later. So I had no support system of any kind in Chicago. And I had a baby of one year old. John took her every other weekend, or something, when he could. He was also working and he was very angry, and I didn’t really

want him to take her because I didn't think — I thought she probably was better off with me most of the time. It was hard finding a good babysitter. I finally found somebody I trusted, a woman who took kids into her house a couple of blocks from me, so that was all right. So I kept working. I had no money. I was on food stamps, I had so little money. My family didn't give me anything. And a couple of friends from, you know, Myra and another friend from London came and visited me. That was the only company I had, the only people I had to talk to.

WEIGAND: So you weren't continuing to be active in the women's liberation union?

TAX: It was just too hard. I mean, I had too much — I was on a rotating shift. I couldn't make most meetings. There were a couple of women that I kept in touch with, but I also didn't tell them all the stuff about the October League. I didn't want to tell people. I was too — you know, it was just too hard to explain. People wouldn't have understood. Nobody was much help that I remember. I mean, I also may not remember everything. Diane Horwitz, who I see now, you know, says she came over and brought me stuff for the baby, so she probably did. I just don't remember. I think that might have been before any of this happened, at an earlier stage.

And the woman that John very soon shackled up with, like within a week or so, was from the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, who had been in the October League study group, you know, somebody I know. So that was a little awkward. So I just, you know, I just kept going as well as I could until I could get myself together. I was very, very, very depressed. I had no idea what I was going to do next. And then, after about — go ahead.

WEIGAND: What sustained you during that time?

TAX: My baby. I mean, I think I might have killed myself. I don't know. I'm not a very suicidal person. I did burn a lot of manuscripts. I was very self-destructive at this point and wanted to punish myself and I agreed that I had done everything wrong. I had miscalculated everything. Even if I wasn't sure that all the political things that I had said and done were wrong, I had completely destroyed my life. But I had this one-year-old baby whom I adored and who I had to be there for. She was really a wonderful, wonderful baby. She was always a very happy baby. Now, if it had been my son — he was a very difficult baby (laughs). But Corey was an easy baby and she, you know, she was — she was just easy. She was pleasant. She ate what she was supposed to eat. She didn't stay up all night. She slept when she was supposed to sleep. She liked to be read to. She sat still. She was a wonderful baby.

After about six months of this, nine months of this, working in a hospital and just getting from one day to the other, I started thinking there was no reason for me to be in Chicago. My family wasn't there for me. I had family in Chicago, too. My brother was there, but they were not —

they were just so freaked out by me. They had no idea, you know? They were all very unpolitical or anti-political and just couldn't deal with me. So I started thinking I should go back east.

I had a vacation coming from work and I took Corey and I went to Boston and New York, trying to figure out if I should move to one of them or not. And I visited many old friends in Boston, and it was nice to see them. But I felt like I'd been there already. I'd done that. I wanted something different. So I went to New York and I decided I would move to New York. And Sarah Eisenstein was there. I stayed with them. She was wonderful. And she was one of the main reasons I moved back here, was to be near her. My other closest friends were here. Ann Snitow was here also, and Myra had just moved to Ithaca because her husband had gotten a job at Cornell. And Ros was here, Ros Baxandall. And a lot of others from Bread and Roses were scattered around.

So in August 1976, I moved back to New York. I had no money. I had a thousand dollars, because my father had died. He hadn't left me any money but he had left me the car, or my mother said I could have his car, so I sold it for a thousand dollars, and that was all I had. I had no job and no job prospects, and no daycare. I was staying in Sarah and Hal's apartment while they were away on vacation and looked for a job and looked for an apartment. And Myra came down and helped me look for an apartment. But it was very tough. And it took a long time for me to get a job because I didn't know how. I had this résumé that was just ridiculous.

Eventually a friend of John's father, Annie Stein, told me how to fake a résumé and said she would let me put her as a reference and say she had hired me. And his father helped me get a — his father worked for Montefiore Hospital — and he got me a job as a legal secretary with a firm that they used for their medical malpractice suits. But that took about three months, and I had no money for child — it was really bad. I think this might be a good place to stop. [BREAK]

WEIGAND: OK. One of the things I wanted to ask you about that you didn't really touch on so much, was about this whole experience of your own family life and being a feminist. And I know that — what am I trying to ask you here?

TAX: You mean about my marriage or about my birth family?

WEIGAND: No, your own, your marriage and your daughter. I wondered what it was like, being in a group like Bread and Roses and doing this sort of consciousness-raising stuff at the same time that — I guess you didn't tell me when you got married.

TAX: I got married — well, John and I started living together in 1967. We got married on New Year's of that year. See, John was considered an exemplary male, because he'd been brought up by CP parents with a disabled mother, and his father did a huge amount of housework. And so,

he grew up expecting to do housework and, in fact, he was the one who gave me Aileen Kraditor's book. He had read a lot of feminist stuff, and he talked a good line. He was actually, compared to my second husband, very good. He was socialized to be pretty good about women and also to respect women. In fact my main problem was people were very jealous and wanted — you know, other women were interested in him and they would say, Well, why — you know, there's so few good men in this — why should you have him? You know.

WEIGAND: So it wasn't a huge contradiction, then?

TAX: It was a contradiction in that I was never with him, because I was always at different meetings from him and he started screwing around because he was lonesome and he was working in this factory all by himself, and we had a big crisis about that. But, you know, we stayed together, and I mean, he was sort of in a hippy phase then. He was much more — he changed a lot after we got into the October League. It was like he turned into his father. He became very rigid. He started using Bryl-cream on his hair all the time. He had all this hair. When I married him, he had hair like that, like a halo. And you know, he dressed in very bright colors and you know, was sort of — he was always pretty spacey. I mean, he was the kind of guy who was born to be a computer geek, but there weren't any computers then. So once computers came along, he found his calling, but at that point, he really didn't know what to do with himself except he was a radical. He wanted to organize unions. But he wasn't a very good organizer. I was a much better organizer than he was because he always had trouble talking to people in a natural way. He would always have to think about what he was going to say and write it down and stuff. Because he never had — he just never felt really at ease with people.

And he had had a very difficult childhood. His mother had gotten polio when he was an infant and he had to go live with his grandmother, and his brother was in foster care and it was very difficult. His father was blacklisted and traveling around looking for work. So, I mean, some of that may have gone into — was part of the geekyness and very basic problems, which I think were illustrated by the fact that he made the choice he did, although I knew he would. I felt it was completely — you know, it was doomed. There was nothing I could do about it. And his parents also understood. You know, they had come out of that world and tended to blame me, I think. At least his mother did. I don't know about his father. I think his father was more in touch.

WEIGAND: And how about experience of pregnancy and birth and having a child and being a mother: how did that sort of square with, or how did it change your politics, how did it fit in with your politics?

24:18

TAX: Well, you know, Maoist organizations are very pronatalist, so they were all for people having children, but not necessarily for them taking care of

their children, because there were always so many other demands. So it was a lot of conflict and many of us had children around the same time, and it was very hard. There were a lot of conflicts with the women, especially, because we did not want to leave our children all the time at a babysitter or be at work all the time. So we had struggles about that and they were not resolved well. I mean, if you're poor, you have to work all the time. And then the meetings were another thing. And people were holding us up to the standard of self-sacrifice. You know, it's one thing to sacrifice yourself but you don't sacrifice your kid.

So, in some ways it's good I got kicked out when I did. It was better for my kid. So I was able to spend a lot of time with her. I loved being a mother. I always wanted to have kids. I think of my kids as, in many ways, the best things, among the best things that have happened to me, even though I think I would have been more successful as a writer. I would have done more and so on if I hadn't been a single mother for so many years, being so focused on my kids.

You know, I interviewed a lot of women who were in the Communist Party at various points in my research and one of the things so many of them said was, My one regret is that I didn't spend more time with my children. And I thought, I'm not gonna do that. And I don't regret the amount of time and love and work that I put into my children, because my children are wonderful. They're wonderful people, and my daughter's already wonderful and my son just needs to mature a little bit more (laughs). He's getting there. They have good values and good politics. My son is maybe a little more entrapped by consumerism than I would like, but maybe he'll outgrow it. It's very true of most of his peers as well. And I love them.

I think having a marriage is — I mean, for me, there's only so many hours in a day. You want to have a relationship, you want to do right by your kids. You want to do political work. You want to write. You can't do all that. Not in any one day, or week, or month, or year. And sooner or later, something is sacrificed, because you can't — nobody has that much energy. And I have a very high energy level, more than many, but even so — and I think that the things that were sacrificed were the marriages. I think, partly because my parents didn't have a very real marriage, that I never had an idea how to really have that kind of full and secure and reliable relationship. Or maybe just that the guys I picked were not capable of it. I think that that's part of it, certainly. Myra always says, "The guys you picked," like there was so much choice. So I ended up being a single mother for long periods.

WEIGAND: So how did you balance those things?

TAX: With difficulty (laughs). Not well. Never having enough money, you know, working insane hours so that I could get everything done and still spend time with my kids, and still not getting as much done as I wanted. But I work very efficiently when I work. I get a lot more done in an hour

28:00

than some people. And I think it's taken a toll on me physically. I'm sick a lot. I mean, I have this immune disorder, which my doctor now thinks it's from the TB shot I got when I was an infant, which permanently jangled my immune system. So I'm always getting something or other, and my arthritis gets out of control a lot. But I'm still here. I'm still working. I'm still doing stuff. And I plan to keep on.

I think that the careers that I've chosen to combine are very difficult to combine. Being an activist and being a writer don't combine well, and they don't, either of them, combine well with being a single mother. Well, writer isn't so bad. You can do that and be a single mother, once the kid's in school. But, you know, I spent some years just writing. I'm too active. I don't like it. I don't like being isolated all the time. And on the other hand, I have a lot of things I still want to write that I can't do if I only do activism. And how to combine them in such a way that you can actually survive economically is a real issue that I have not yet resolved. It's always being re-resolved, each year and each month.

When I first came to New York in the 1970s, Herb Gutman, who was a big-shot historian, was on the original board of the MacArthur fellowships. He said to me at a party, "You're just the kind of person who should get a MacArthur fellowship, but you never will, because you're not an academic. You have to be an academic." And then, some years later, a friend of mine, Roz Petchesky, got a MacArthur fellowship. She's an academic. She told me at some point that she had tried to nominate me a couple of times but they said they wanted younger people. They thought, you know, my work was behind me. People my age didn't do productive work and this was, like, ten years ago. Since then I've done a lot of productive work. It's always something.

And the kind of movement work I've done is, because of my politics, not the kind that gets you awards or fellowships or anything. It's too obscure, and it's too on the edge. And I'm also not somebody who does a lot of self-publicizing, so that's just who I am. Now that *New York* magazine writer who came to the original Boston Women's Liberation movement conference made an indelible impression on me. And my — is this —

WEIGAND: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I know feminists have said so many different things about motherhood, for example. You know, you have Shulamith Firestone on the one hand talking about —

TAX: I don't think she ever had kids.

WEIGAND: — babies in bottles or whatever it was.

TAX: I don't think she ever had kids. I mean, in that period, during the Bread and Roses period, very few people had kids that I knew, and they were very pissed off at the rest of us most of the time, because we didn't understand. And later, when I was — after I moved to New York, when

Corey was two and three, and I was very, very active, starting CARASA [Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse], and nobody else had kids, I was very pissed off with them, because they were just useless, you know. They were wanting me to do things all the time, and they would never be any help. They would never offer to babysit or anything. There was one woman, Barbara Zeluck, an old Trot, who would always call me just when I was making dinner for Corey, and I would say, “This is the time I don’t want you to call me because I” —she’d say, “Well, I just have one question.” And then she would go on for a half hour, every day, because she wanted me to be engaged with her. And there were all these people with their own neurotic needs who were completely — and she had a trust fund, anyway. But that’s one of the great benefits of having a phone machine, although I’m not really disciplined. I always pick it up anyway (laughs).

WEIGAND: Well, I wanted to talk to you about CARASA. I don’t know if you want to try to talk about that now or if this would be a good time to –

33:15

TAX: I think tomorrow. How many hours do we have tomorrow? What time is your train?

WEIGAND: Well, my train is at 3:00, so–

TAX: So you need an hour to get there.

WEIGAND: Probably.

TAX: Are you going to go back to the hotel?

WEIGAND: After we talk tomorrow? No, I don’t think so. I don’t have much with me, so–

TAX: So you’re coming here at–

WEIGAND: Whenever is good for you.

TAX: If you come here at 10:00, we should be able to get through it all. I mean, at the level of detail we’re doing. We may get done long before. I mean, there’s CARASA, there’s PEN – [BREAK]

WEIGAND: So you’ve written — it’s in 1977 when Henry Hyde does his bad work that you see the proper time to begin an organization like CARASA.

TAX: Well, when I came to New York, the first thing I did was I said, “I need a women’s group.” So, I started hunting up people I knew. A lot of them were in women’s groups already. There was one that Ann and Ros were both in that had been going on since 1968 or 1969 or something. But there

were a bunch of people, mostly on the Upper West Side, and a couple of whom I'd known from Bread and Roses, who wanted to do one, and so we started having a weekly group and that was enormously — it was mostly a support group. I mean, we talked about women's things and politics of the day and so on. It really helped me. It really helped me get through a very difficult transition. So those were a new set of people I knew and they knew people and I knew the people that I'd known from before, so I knew a lot of people in New York.

So one night, in 1977, Ros Baxandall called me and said she was having a meeting at her house to discuss what to do about the Hyde Amendment and about abortion rights. So I went down there and it was a bunch of people from her women's group — Ellen Willis, Ann was there, Bonnie Bellow, Gwenda Blaire. I can't remember — anyway, a lot of downtown people. Not too many. More on the radical feminist side, although not all. We started talking and we had a disagreement that came down between Ellen Willis and me. Ellen Willis was saying, "Abortion is about sex. We have to keep bringing that up, that's it's about sexual liberation and our sexual rights and that's why we need abortions and why we need freedom of choice. It's not just because, you know, people might have unwanted children or anything like that. It's about sex."

And I said, "We can't isolate abortion from other reproductive rights and other things that women need. It's a mistake to single out abortion, and make it our single issue. We have to link it with at least one other issue that will get us to the kind of the kind of women's movement that we want, if we want to build a women's movement that is not all white and not all middle class. We cannot just single out abortion. We have to link it with something like sterilization abuse." So we disagreed.

And then the lights went out — because it turned out that that was the night of the Great Blackout of 1977, and we were all stuck on the — I think Ros was on the twelfth floor of this apartment building in Washington Square. So we had to get down the stairs. That was just the end. I mean, the meeting was now resolved. It was thereafter called the Blackout Group. Maybe it met one more time and the disagreement came up more fully the second meeting, but it started at that meeting, certainly.

I don't remember how early the lights went out. So we went down the stairs and I managed to share a cab with somebody home. We were fortunate enough to get a cab because the subways weren't running. And I climbed seven flights of stairs to my house where I'd left Corey with this babysitter who was not real good. She was an Appalachian woman and was living in a welfare hotel, but she was the best I could find, and she had not had a clue about what was happening. She said, "The lights went out in this apartment." And I said, "It's a blackout." She somehow had broken the toilet, because she kept flushing it because she said the lights went out or something. Anyway, so, we got that straightened out. She went home, and we proceeded to deal with the blackout.

Anyway, the next thing — I think this group met again, and even gave itself a name — FEAG, Feminist Emergency Action Group. But I didn't

feel good about group because it was mostly these downtown writers who I never thought of as being very real about what they did about politics. And then I got invited to, or somebody organized a big broad coalition meeting — all the women's groups in New York — to talk about the Hyde Amendment and what to do about it. Lots of people were there I didn't know, and NOW was there, and NARAL was there and it was in a church, a couple hundred people. They were talking about what to do and various proposals were put forward, mostly of a fairly moderate kind, and a lot of aimless discussion, and these people didn't get along with each other that well. NOW New York was always quite obnoxious to everybody else. They were being quite obnoxious, and they always acted like they were the cheese.

And at some point, I got up and said what I had said before, about how I thought the key thing was to try to use this to build a different kind of women's movement and to reach out, and that the key issue was to couple it with sterilization abuse, and I knew there was already a group working about that, although I didn't know them and I hoped some of them were there. They were. This was a group that had been set up by Helen Rodriguez and various other people called CESA — the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse — that had done very good exposé-type work about the rate of sterilizations at Lincoln Hospital and so on.

So some of them were at the meeting and they came up to me afterwards. They had no idea who I was, of course. I was just new to New York. But then we had a meeting and so, slowly, over the process of the next months, these different groups came together and, you know, FEAG basically dissolved and some of them went into CARASA, some of them didn't. And we formed CARASA. CARASA was a combination of the people who were had been at Ros's house and the people from CESA, and various other new people who just wanted to work on the issue. And NOW and NARAL didn't want to work on sterilization abuse. They thought it was better just to work on abortion and, in fact, NARAL at that point was still, you know, taking out ads in the *New York Times* saying, you know, "If we don't have abortion rights, the welfare roles will rise and there will be too many welfare babies," and da da da da da. Awful stuff.

And so CARASA started meeting. We elected a steering committee. I was one of the co-chairs with a woman named Becky Statton, and various other people were on the steering committee: Karen Stamm from CESA and Ros. Ros was active and then she went away for the summer. This was always a class divide in the women's movement in New York, the people who have summer houses and the people who don't. So those of us who stayed here worked through the summer and tried to figure out what to do and started growing the organization. It took us a long time to figure out what to do. And we never did, you know, succeed in building a different base for the women's movement. CARASA remained almost all white. But I think we started getting people to think about it in a different way and to think more strategically.

WEIGAND: Can you talk about some of the high points and the low points of your time with them?

TAX: I'm trying to remember. We did some legislative work around sterilization. The regulations were being reformulated and we sent people in and had an impact on that. That was probably the thing we did that had the most impact, you know, and we continued. And also just coupling these two things. We started having a lot of influence. I mean, we had an impact on the way people were thinking. We did a great big demonstration at NYU when John Califano got an honorary degree from the law school, a big protest demonstration. That got press although, in general, we had a terrible time getting press. In fact, reporters told us, "Our editors say, don't cover demonstrations any more. They say the women's movement's over." And so they just wouldn't cover. And only when the Right to Lifers came out would they cover it, when they could make it an opposing thing. We didn't pay that much attention to press. We weren't that good at press.

But we did a lot of speaking things. We had a regular newsletter that came out. I used to write an editorial for it once a month. We developed a structure with committees that was pretty democratic. There were a lot of good people. We had an outreach committee that never really figured out what they were doing, and there was some of that anti-leadership thing. That was mostly younger kids who were just graduating college. I said, "You want to do it, do it." Some of them have gone on to do good things. They grew up a bit.

We had an impact beyond our numbers. We also started — one of the things that I did was speak a lot. And I went and spoke in Buffalo and they started a chapter there, and I went to Boston. They wanted to start one but they couldn't agree because some of them were Marxist and some of them were socialists and they couldn't get it together and I was supposed to go up there and mediate but it was impossible. They were too sectarian (laughs).

And then there was an International Day of Action we did a demonstration on. And then there was this thing called Abortion Rights Action Week, which was in 1979. That was not initiated by us, but by the mainstream groups who were — oh, what happened was they got very freaked. This was after, or it must have been during the Ford [Administration], I can't remember — god, my memory's really gone. It was meant to be a big national coalition to organize actions in various cities on the same day. And the anti-natalist groups were in it as well as us, including the Association for Voluntary Sterilization [AVS], which was one of our enemies, and Planned Parenthood was very much on the fence about sterilization. I mean, they were pushing sterilization in some places, certainly in some countries, but even some places in the U.S.

So a lot of what we did was we tracked this stuff and there were a couple of people who had been in CESA who were just very good at this kind of research. These people — they were just dedicated to tracking these people. Karen Stamm, especially, and she would always be bringing

in stories about the horrible things Planned Parenthood was about to do, some of which may have been totally exaggerated, so we would put these out and say, you can't do this.

And we were putting out a line that says women should have reproductive rights. They should be able to choose when they have children. They should have the services necessary to support their desire to have children, the health care that's necessary, and they should be able to abort a fetus if they do not want a child and it should be up to them. So it was grounded in all kinds of economics stuff rather than in the cultural stuff and the stuff about sex. Sometimes we talked about sex but not that much, because we were really interested in putting — it just seemed too '60s. Although we did — certainly we would defend it.

So there was this big coalition and they wanted us to be in it. And we said, One of the planks has to be against sterilization or we just won't be in it. They really wanted us in it. There were some of the groups, that, they really liked us, especially Fran Kissling from Catholics for a Free Choice, and the National Abortion Federation liked us. And NARAL and the anti-natalist people hated us. There was this guy from AVS — you know these Washington lobbyist types. We had to go down to Washington to have this argument. And we argued and they did it. They adopted it.

So, I mean, I think at that point, the way at least some of them thought about it really started to change. I mean, NARAL stopped doing those ads that we found objectionable. They started really understanding that they couldn't just appeal to this upper crust of white middle-class people if they wanted to get over. So that was a real achievement. And we started a national organization called the Reproductive Rights National Network, R2N2, which Marilyn Katz became head of in Chicago, and which, you know, started other groups and coordinated stuff in the Midwest and did coordination for this national campaign. So she and I did most of this work with the Abortion Rights Action week.

After that, I pretty much left CARASA. There's some people who stay with an organization from birth till death. I wanted to write a book and then I thought, You can't go, you can't go. I said, "Look, you know, this organization is strong enough. It doesn't need me, and if it does need me, it'd better learn how not to, because I have to leave." So I left when I got this book contract. So, I left around 1980, 1981, just because I wanted to write full time. And I finished *The Rising of the Women and Rivington Street*.

WEIGAND: OK. The stuff that I have to ask you about now sort of gets into a new territory.

TAX: OK. So maybe we should stop then.

WEIGAND: OK.

END DVD 3

DVD 4 June 12, 2004

WEIGAND: So, here we are, Kate Weigand and Meredith Tax on day two. When we finished up yesterday, you were talking about CARASA and I think we sort of reached an ending point with that.

TAX: Unless you have questions. I don't remember anything. CARASA was important.

WEIGAND: Yeah, it sounds like it really was.

TAX: It was, like, the first reproductive rights organization, and it was a model for many others, and it was also — it was pretty well run as an organization, pretty democratic. We managed to get a structure that was representative without being bureaucratic or top-down, and I learned some of the lessons of the earlier women's movement's organizations, like Bread and Roses and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union work. The structures didn't — well, Bread and Roses didn't have any, you know?

WEIGAND: Well, that's interesting. So you felt by then, like —

TAX: I felt like I understood things about how an organization had to be built — that it had to be representative but there also had to be people who were willing to take charge and be in a position of leadership even if they took flack for it, because otherwise things just wouldn't get done. That was also less of a problem at this stage than it had been earlier. Other people had learned the same lessons.

WEIGAND: Right, and were further away from that whole model of the '60s.

TAX: Right. I mean, also a lot of the stuff at Bread and Roses — the anti-leadership stuff — came from a justified reaction against a model of leadership in SDS. It was extremely oppressive to almost everybody. There would be a few honchos going around, strutting all over the place, and everybody else would have to kiss their ass.

WEIGAND: Right. And you said, I think, that it remained pretty much all white?

TAX: Yeah. There were a few Latina women who had some association with it, but that was it. There was a significant black women's movement at that time but they didn't want to work on these issues. And there was a lot of mistrust, which was continually being regenerated by organizations like NOW. And a lot of the women — or some of them, anyway, like Barbara Omalade, who was one of the ones I knew best and who I got to know at that time, who was in an organization called the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, you know, she had worked at the Ms. Foundation, she had had a lot of experience with the white women's movement and most of it

had been bad. “We don’t want to work in abortion. We have kids, you know, we have a lot of economic issues. We have other things we have to work in our community.” This was a time of women trying to assert themselves more, in New York anyway, within the African American community, women who were feminists, and working inside of Black United Front organizations to try to have a feminist voice and that was what they were doing. So, we had good relations but they didn’t want to work with us, because they didn’t want to work on our issues.

The Latina women were more interested in sterilization abuse because they had suffered from it in a more clearly charted way. So there were always a few Latina women in CESA and their founder, Helen Rodriguez-Trias was a Latina. And so that was good. But mostly, we decided — and I mean, this was one of things I learned in my Chicago days — you don’t wait for black people or Latin people or something to say what black people and Latin people need. If it’s right, you say it. You’re not disqualified from saying it. You have to stick up for what everybody needs. And that’s the basic approach I’ve used ever since. I think it’s correct. And also you don’t wait for black people or Latin people to challenge racism. If there’s racism, it’s the job of white people to deal with it. And it’s amazing to me how many people in the women’s movement still do not understand this.

WEIGAND: Yeah. When you say you learned it in Chicago, you mean you learned it in the work — the wage work you did there?

TAX: Yeah, the wage work and the work in the communist movement and the work with — I worked with a lot of black and Latin people in Chicago, the majority often, and also studied those questions very hard, questions about nationalism. I saw how they worked together inside of a larger progressive movement, and how it’s the obligation of whites to fight racism. That was something that the communist movement was always very strong about, much stronger than most, because there was no guilt.

I mean, in the women’s movement — to me the main obstacle to people in the women’s movement I know taking the kind of stand I do is, first of all, they’re always worried about if everybody doesn’t like them and, second, they feel guilty so then they get nervous. So then they start acting weird, and when they’re with black women they just act weird. You know, they don’t act like they do when they’re with their friends. They act uncomfortable and self-conscious and they put their foot in their mouth, because they’ve got this thing in their head. So that they’re not, you know, dealing with it.

But it’s also because of lack of contact. You know, because the society was so segregated during the time we were growing up, especially. I think it’s somewhat less so now. But I, you know, spent years, those years in Chicago, I often was the only white person in a situation and so I just learned how to talk to people and deal with them as individuals and not see them as black people. And I think that was one of the formative

experiences in my life and why I'm not sorry I did that, even though it was painful, a lot of it, especially the personal stuff with my marriage. And you know, I was treated, ugh. But, as my friend Myra often said at the time, "It's a good thing that your friends will never get state power because they would probably kill you."

WEIGAND:

Can you say something about — I mean, I'm struck that you were active in various levels with the women's movement in Boston and then in Chicago and then in New York, and certainly the women's movement took different forms in some of those years, and you've talked a little bit about some of the differences. But can you talk a little more about sort of the major differences that you noticed, sort of, in style or in content?

7:00

TAX:

Well, the Chicago Women's Liberation Union was a very good organization. It was big, but it wasn't very broad based. I mean, I think there was one black person in it, but it was big, and it was certainly as big as Bread and Roses, or roughly the same size, anyway. But it was much more organized. The people who started it, who were a collective of women from the University of Chicago, were pretty clear about the need for training, and the need for organization, and not buying into the no-leader stuff. So they set up a steering committee and they had different work groups and committees that would elect people to the steering committee. And they had the same kind of trouble anybody in the women's movement had about dealing with real differences, you know, but they had at least some structure in which they could try to work things out. And they did decent work.

At the period I was in it, I was on the left end of most of that stuff, and it was also a period in which there were these different communist groups who were all trying to make an impact on the women's movement as well as the labor movement and everything else they were doing. And the group that I was in, the October League, was at odds with this other group called the Revolutionary Union, which also had people in the Women's Union, and they were having a big fight about the ERA, which the October League said we should support and the Revolutionary Union said it was bad because it was bad for working women, da da da da.

WEIGAND:

Using that same rationale —

TAX:

— the same argument from the Woman's Party and the people in the 1940s. Those arguments continued through — that, you know, what we needed was economic rights, real rights. What were these legal things? And neither group had a clue, of course, about how strong the opposition was, or paid any attention to any of that kind of stuff in Congress. But they fought about it a lot in the women's movement. And after I left — I left the Chicago Women's Liberation Union pretty much, after I had my baby. I really couldn't do anything anymore. I was very isolated and I just had to

do my job and I was a single mother, I didn't have any time. And then I left Chicago.

But after I left Chicago, I think that fight got very nasty and destroyed the Women's Union, or so I've heard. But I really don't know any of the details because I was no longer there. And it involved another group, too. And, you know, different [left] groups recruit. The women in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union were very progressive and they were very open to leftwing ideas, so this was a period in which these groups were growing, and they recruited, this one or that one, one group or another, and then they fought. And I think the Women's Union probably wouldn't have lasted anyway. None of the other organizations did, but the people in the Union blamed these groups, for their demise. They had a pretty good — I thought that it was a good organization. It had a good open style and you could have political discussions in a way that was a little less crazy. I mean, the times were less crazy, also.

And also, in Boston, because there's so many schools and so many students, you have a very strong counterculture. You could have hundreds and hundreds of people in the same room and they would all be more or less leftwing kids. This was not true in Chicago. Chicago's a working-class city and the left — the sort of countercultural left — was pretty small and geographically limited to a couple of communities. And, you know, they didn't have the kind of big demonstrations against the war that we had. The Women's Union didn't do any demonstrations until the one that I organized with Caren and Diane. It just wasn't the same kind of strong left environment.

And New York — oy, I didn't want to come. I mean, I never wanted to do political work in New York. I could see from a distance it was just going to be so difficult, because factionalism of every kind has always been very strong in New York, in the women's movement and in every movement, because there's so many people. You can have a split about anything and you'll still have some people. I mean, in the Midwest, you don't have that kind of luxury. You may have differences of opinion with the other fifteen people who are on the progressive left, but you know, you can't split about them because there wouldn't be anybody left. And here, you know, anything — and the arrogance and the doctrinaire stuff.

Some of the early people in the women's movement were very problematic but then, you know, it became clear after a while that some of them were really crazy (laughs). You know, it wasn't just bad style, they were actually completely unable to work with anybody. And so that shut down after a while, some of those people just sort of vanished into whatever place they went.

But the other thing that was true in New York, which was not true anywhere else, was this is media central, so that you have the media stars, the anointed leaders of the feminist movement who were chosen or chose to play that role fairly early on and had by this time began, become very much nationally known.

WEIGAND: Like Steinem.

TAX: Like Gloria and Betty Friedan, and you know — I never worked closely with any of them but I certainly know them. And at the time I was working in CARASA, we couldn't get press for anything. We were not — we hadn't made those kind of career choices and also, the media wasn't interested in the women's movement anymore. They had decided it was over. And I think really they didn't get interested in it again until, well, they got interested in abortion when the Right to Lifers came along, because then that was something that was dramatic, and they were interested in the gay movement when Act-Up started, because that made them interested in demonstrations again for a while. But basically, the editors of those papers don't like that kind of stuff. So we always had trouble getting our views out, and we weren't very good at it. We didn't really know how. I hadn't studied it, didn't know how to do it.

And CARASA — CARASA went through a period when — I mean, and the other difference was, in *Bread and Roses*, it was assumed that everybody would do everything as a volunteer, because you could, and none of us had much money, but we didn't need much money, and we were all either students or semi-students or had recently been students. It never even occurred to us in *Bread and Roses* that we needed to have an office until about the third year, and it was very difficult. I mean, my phone number was one of the ones that went out nationally as — my home phone — as the *Bread and Roses* contact. And oh my god, it just never stopped ringing. It was horrible. But it never — you know, we never thought of having a staff. We just didn't think like that.

And in Chicago, they had a staff. It was not very big and it was very poorly paid, and they had an office that was quite big, big enough to do graphics stuff and it had big meetings, and that was very nice. And so, when CARASA came, when we started doing CARASA, that seemed to be a transition we needed to make, when we could figure out how to get some money. By that time, it was the late '70s and you couldn't do everything as a volunteer anymore. It wasn't possible to live on \$2,500 a year and so we had to learn how to raise money. And we eventually did. I learned — I started learning how to write grants among others, and we raised a little money — not enough to pay anybody full-time, or give them a decent salary — but that was pretty much after I left.

WEIGAND: So that group had an office, too?

TAX: For a while. I don't think it lasted too long, but there were a couple of people who are still around who were part-time staff or one thing or another. CARASA lasted for a while after I left, thank god. I don't have to feel guilty about that, at least. I needed to write full time in the late '70s, I guess. I'm trying to remember. I think I got the book contract for *Rivington Street* in 1979, or maybe it was 1980. Probably it was 1980, and I needed to write two books on the advance for *Rivington Street*, because I

needed to rewrite *The Rising of the Women*, and so I did that. So I really had to just stop doing everything else and get that done. It's amazing. All I have to do is get up and get the books and I can see what the copyright date is. *Rivington Street* was 1982, so probably I stopped doing CARASA sometime in the middle of 1979. I don't want to get ahead of myself.

WEIGAND:

Can you talk a little bit about ways that feminism influenced the way you raised your daughter? I'm assuming that it did.

17:00

TAX:

Yeah, it must've. I mean, well, first of all, she had an example of somebody who was doing political work as her main thing, you know, and who was not a typical housewife in any sense. She had to go back and forth to visit her father in Chicago, because we didn't have a very good divorce agreement. I didn't have a good lawyer. That was hard on her. I never really understood what went on out there very well, but it was not good. It was not good for her, and they didn't understand her. Her stepmother wasn't nice to her. That was all very hard. But, I mean, from the time from she was little, I always raised her to, you know, assume she could do anything she wanted to do.

And also, I named her Corey, which is neither a girl's name or a boy's name, or both. I was living in this very working-class neighborhood in Chicago and I got only yellow layette. You could get Carter's layette pink, blue, or yellow, and I got yellow. And people used to stop me on the street and say, Oh, what a cute baby. Is it a girl or a boy? And I used to say, "What difference does it make?" or "It's a baby." And they would go, But is it a boy or a girl, because they had to know how to act. If it was boy, they would go, Hey, Champ, you know. If it was a girl, they'd go, Aren't you a sweet little girl, you know. So I wouldn't tell them.

I don't think that influenced Corey, because she was too little to remember, but I just wanted her to be as strong and free as she could. She was a very smart kid, and very capable in lots of ways. She'd build things. She was good. She had some trouble with other girls, with other kids. She didn't quite get the signals of how little girls should behave and sometimes she got picked on. She's too sensitive, that was what it was. She would start to cry and they'd be on her. It took a while for her to — and I wasn't much help with that because I didn't have any idea of what to do. I really didn't know. And there's a lot of bullying that goes on among girls as well as boys. I really didn't know what to do.

But she, you know, she did well and she's gay. What she does now is she runs, or she supervises a couple hundred people who run hotlines for battered women and domestic violence and stuff like that. I don't really know how I raised her except that I was never — I mean, she thinks I always made too much of a fuss about her weight. She has different ideas than I do about that. And about health, you know, body image and stuff. She's in a different generation and she was at [University of California] Santa Cruz, so I'm sure she got some ideas that I consider crazy (laughs). We just don't talk about it. But I'm real proud of her.

And I've also raised my son — I mean, I've had great difficulty raising my son to be a feminist because he's totally enraptured by rap culture. He, and my daughter, too, have always — his friends are almost all black and Latins. He went through the public school system and those are his friends, and he's had the same friends now he did in primary school. And they aren't actually as sexist — I don't think he's actually that sexist. That's just the way he talks. You know, and it's probably parody. He calls me Woman. He says, "Woman, where's my breakfast?" It's like, joking. But I think he's pretty nice to his girlfriend, I hope.

He's got a lot of macho issues, but I did what I could. I mean, you can't defeat the whole culture by yourself. We had a discussion, once, where he said men were better than women. I said, "How can you say that, Eli, after all you've seen here in this house?" He said, "I don't mean in this house, just in the rest of the world." I guess he meant, basically, they were better positioned, you know. They got more. They were luckier. True. Ooh, but he also, you know, conflated that with them being superior in some way. So, that struggle is still not finished. But I've done my best. And he certainly isn't racist. And neither is my daughter. He's not political. Eli's not interested in politics except, you know, on the personal level, I guess. Maybe he will be when he gets older.

WEIGAND: So, it's in the late '70s that you start to write full-time and — oh, I know what I was going to ask you. I forgot something. I know you've written a couple of things, maybe, about daycare issues and reorganizing —

TAX: No, not daycare. I was active in starting an alternative school. It was very difficult and didn't end up working out. It was just when my son was starting kindergarten and we had this started by the time he was in second grade, so that was in — he's 19 now. Let's see, he started kindergarten a year late, so he was six. He was born in 1984, so this was 1992 or 1993. Eli has a learning disability. He's dyslexic, and he was — I was very sick when I was pregnant. I had toxemia and I almost died. I mean, I was very sick, and he was born early, and was very low birth weight, and I think that may be why he has dyslexia but I don't know.

Anyway, I tried to find a school that would teach him with — what the schools here were using was Whole Language in a very dogmatic way, and I wanted a school that would be able to teach him that, but also phonics, and teach him just in a way he could learn. And I thought we would, after looking at the ones that existed, you know — I put him in a little alternative program in a public school called 166. There was a little sort of thing inside it called West Side Community School, but it wasn't a school, it was just a kindergarten class and a first grade. And it was a teacher who wanted to start a school but didn't really have what it took to do it. It takes a lot of drive and a lot of courage, and work. And this was a period in which there were some of these alternative schools starting on the Debby Meier model. Central Park East was already well established and there were a couple of others starting.

At an earlier period when my daughter was young, there had been a little alternative gifted school starting and I had a friend who was involved in that. My daughter actually got in but we decided to keep her in the regular school. But Eli could never have gotten in. I mean, Eli tested very low. He's very smart, but he just couldn't do certain kinds of testing. So, I put him into this thing [at P.S. 166] and then I and a couple of other parents tried to make it become more of a real school and we eventually succeeded because partly, it wouldn't have been necessary except that the school we were in was run by this horrible principal who was really very authoritarian. He lined up girls and boys by height and had temper tantrums. I think he was an alcoholic. And so we wanted to get away from him.

We wanted to have a school in which the parents had considerable input. And this was Norma and Dorcas, a Latin woman and a black woman, and me who were the main parents who started this, and we put in an enormous amount of work, but the teachers weren't strong enough. They weren't. Julie Diamond, the main teacher, was very wedded to Whole Language and so were the other people that she chose. They all came out of Bank Street. And the kids, they did fine in kindergarten and first grade, but then they couldn't learn how to read, a lot of them. Because of the school's alternative nature, it also attracted a lot of parents whose kids were going to have that kind of problem. And so we had a bunch of kids who were not learning how to read. And the parents — we had fights with the teachers. The teachers wouldn't deal with it. They said that there was something wrong with our kids. There was nothing wrong with them, you know.

Eli, meanwhile, was becoming a juvenile delinquent because they couldn't control the kids, and there was a lot of instability. The school was just not well led. It was too small. I got him out of there in the fifth grade. I got him into the middle school that his sister had gone to, after which he calmed down and learned how to do a lot of stuff. And he knew how to read by then, but I had gotten him a lot of outside help because they never did teach him, and he still never learned how to do a lot of the basic math. But that wasn't just the school. He had a real problem with that. But that took a lot of time and it was very exhausting and difficult.

The teachers, you know, turned on the school and tried to destroy it. It was really ugly, very ugly. They were just as dogmatic about this stuff as people who were on the left. I mean, in fact, Julie was a leftwing person. It was exactly the same. Whole Language was like their religion and it was totally bullshit. I mean, it worked very well for kids who would have learned how to read anyway, you know, because of their environment and because they were natural readers. There's a very good book about this called *Other People's Children* about Whole Language and black people and how it works, you know. It's a class thing that it works for. They just wouldn't see it. So that was the main thing I did in the school system.

WEIGAND: It's activist work in its own way.

TAX: Oh, yeah. It was wonderful. I loved working with those people. I loved the other parents, you know, and it was also a way to keep contact with regular people after I started writing and just was hanging out with writers or intellectuals the rest of the time. I missed having a regular connection with working-class people. But it was impossible to sustain it. It was just taking too much out of everybody. And the kids were not really benefiting the way they needed to.

WEIGAND: Maybe we should talk about this question now, about where the women's movement has gone since the time of the mass movement. I actually had this set up to ask you if you knew about Barbara Epstein's argument about the women's movement ending up going into the academy and becoming isolated from regular people and becoming too esoteric.

29:15

TAX: Well, I think that's true. It's not just her argument. I mean, I was in it 20 years ago.

WEIGAND: Yeah, I mean, she wrote an article about it.

TAX: Uh-hm. I haven't seen it. I mean, there are two questions. One is what kind of jobs people in the women's movement got, and the second is how they did them? Academic jobs are reasonable jobs for people who are intellectuals to get. There aren't too many other kinds of jobs. And there are ways to do women's studies that connect it with practice, and that make the university a resource for the community. And there are some people in the women's movement who have done that. It tends not to happen at elite institutions. It tends to happen much more on the state college level, city college level, community college level, where you're dealing with people who have multiple needs and you have to — if you're any kind of a decent human being, you can't go into the realms of theory and leave life behind.

But these are not the people who shaped women's studies as a discipline. I mean, although they probably are in the majority of the people who actually practice it, and I think those people who have kept their connection with the community are doing very solid and good work. Their students go on and they start battered women's shelters and they do all kinds of other kind of political work, and I think it's due to women's studies, in part, that there is this whole network of services for women who have different kinds of issues that didn't exist, you know, when we started the women's movement.

But the women who have become academic stars and have shaped the discipline of women's studies, who are influenced by post-structuralism, deliberately departed from practice. In New York, this began at a conference that was organized by Jessica Benjamin, who was a very well-known psychologist, a shrink and a theorist. This was around, it must have been 1978, because it was right around the same time as that Califano

demonstration I told you about it at NYU. And this was a big conference at NYU called In Honor of Simone de Beauvoir, and they raised money to bring over a bunch of these French women. This was right when CARASA was starting and getting strong and I wanted to announce that we were having this demonstration to all these people there. I didn't know Jessica at that time, but Muriel Diment, who was one of the people working in CARASA, was also working on the conference, so I said, "Muriel, you have to get this done." And she said, "Jessica won't let me. She won't let us have anything to do with practice. She says this has to be only about theory." And I said, "We have to have this announcement. You've got to figure out what to do." So in the end, she got up and she made the announcement. Jessica just about killed her.

So it was like a deliberate thing that, you know, practice was — I don't get it. I never did get it. It always seemed to me totally nuts. Why would you want to separate theory from practice? How can you possibly have good theory unless it grows out of practice and feeds back into it? What kind of theory is it? What is it about? And indeed, what *is* it about? But I, you know, I have stayed away from it. I haven't made a study of it. I can't critique it from a position of somebody who deeply respects it and understand both its weaknesses and its strengths, because to me, I've seen it mainly as a sort of plague that messed up a lot of the women's movements and stuff that I cared about. And when I say — I mean, theory, as grand theory that is divorced from practice, deriving from French post-structuralism.

And it has been particularly pernicious in English departments, and to some degree, in women's studies. I mean, I have friends in women's studies who are in sociology or something, or who used to be in women's studies and say, "I don't go near it anymore. I just stay in my sociology department. I can't deal with those people." And they have a lot to answer for in terms of mis-educating a generation of women who don't know their ass from a hole in the ground, because they've never done anything. They've been taught to have contempt for that, and to think that only, you know, the free play — whatever it is that they do matters. So I have strong and violent views on that. But they don't make any difference, because I'm not in the academy, so it doesn't matter what I think.

But I don't think that's the whole women's movement. There's also a substantial women's health movement, which has done a huge amount of work and made a substantial difference in the way certain diseases are cared for and the way women approach their own bodies. It's built some institutions, mostly abortion clinics, and fought a very difficult fight against much more powerful enemies than we ever imagined we would have, in terms of their organization and funding.

And then there are the women's organizations. There's NOW, there's the Feminist Majority, there's more different single-issue organizations and think tanks. And I think what's happened to them is part of what's happened to American life in general, you know, and it's just part of the character of this period. There are two things. One is that — I learned this

from an Indian woman who came over here. I met her at a party and we were talking about the women's movement, and I said, "What do you think of the women's movement here?" And she said, "Well, it's very corporate, isn't it?" And I've thought a lot about that since, and it is. This is how these organizations behave. They behave like corporate entities. They have hierarchical structures. They have an image that they market. They are in competition with other women's organizations that have images that they market for a larger market share, and it's really how they think. They compete with each other instead of collaborating. And I think the ones that are run out of Washington — I mean, this is not always true at the local level. Like, when you're talking about NOW in Washington, that's what you're talking about. When you're talking about NOW in Erie, Pennsylvania, it's not going to be like that. But the national organizations are the ones who create the national image and then shape the movement. The Feminist Majority is exactly like that also.

And you see what happens when they try to work together or build coalitions — which is, they can't do it. They don't have any idea how to do it and they don't really want to do it. They want to have the appearance of doing it. They want to have a large demonstration, but they also want to be the only name associated with it. We had that trouble with NOW in CARASA and I've seen it many times since, you know. That they cannot reach out if that means that they have to share the credit. And you can't build a movement that way. A corporation can't build a movement. But, you know, if the movement was there, they wouldn't be able to act that way, either. So it's a chicken-egg thing.

When we did Abortion Rights Action Week, like I was telling you yesterday, during the middle of this organizing, which was a pretty broad coalition and took about six months, NOW decided — and NOW was not part of this coalition, everybody else was. The Feminist Majority didn't exist then. But NOW wouldn't. They said, We don't work in coalitions. And they decided they were going to make a separate peace with the Right to Lifers. They were approached by them to negotiate. And everybody said, "You can't do this." And they said, "Well, we're going to do it." And they went and they had this secret meeting with whoever was the head of the Right to Life people at that time, and they thought they were going to be able to negotiate and get them to beg. Instead, what they got was, they got this jar with a fetus in it thrown at them. We were so, "Ha!" It was disgusting of them to do that.

It's this kind of arrogance that people get when they're in these offices in Washington and they just think that they know everything and they can do whatever they want and they don't have to be accountable to anybody. Or if they do, then it's just that they're accountable to their shareholders, their organization. It's very, very corporate, the American women's movement. And this is not true of all women's movements. This is something that's particular to American life, and which we try to export as much as we can but fortunately it doesn't — it's not so easy to adapt it

everywhere. And it's a real deformation, I think, in the women's movement here.

So that's — between that and the ebbing of the movement as a mass movement, and the problems with women's studies, you have a problem, a leadership problem, basically. So what you have is you have young women, like some of the ones I've worked with who come in, and they're looking for a women's movement, especially young women of color. They're not going to join these organizations. First of all, they're almost all white, and they're too corporate. These young women don't want to be in that kind of entity.

And, you know, the women of my age who were in the other part of the women's movement, the more leftwing part of the movement, have not built any organizations that anybody can join. So these kids get out of university and they're looking for something and there ain't nothing to find. And I think it's a real failure on the part of my people as well. But on the other hand, we had no money. People had to get jobs. They had kids, you know. People had their individual life decisions.

I haven't built anything that I can say people can join. I mean, Women's WORLD is not something you can even find to join very easily, and it's for writers, anyway. But I do think this job remains to be done. We need mass organizations that have a different political character and that are not so corporate, although, you know, when you get a lot of people inside one of these organizations, even one of these corporate ones, they can be pretty powerful. A lot of young people, they can make quite a statement. And this big march that just happened, this abortion march, was wonderful. I couldn't go. I couldn't walk well enough, but it looked wonderful, and people said it was. So, you know, at least we were capable of doing that. Maybe something else is going to happen. If there's a period of upsurge, probably something will happen, a general upsurge, there usually is something that happens to women during such a period.

WEIGAND: Do you want to talk about PEN and all the PEN stuff?

TAX: I think I should talk about my writing a little bit.

WEIGAND: OK.

TAX: I had this contract for a book from McGraw-Hill in 1969 or 1970. And then I went and did all this other political stuff. I had written part of it, about half of it, but when I decided to go to Chicago and work in factories, I couldn't do any writing then. And I was supposed to turn in the book. The editor, Joyce Johnson, kept saying, "Oh, it didn't matter. Just take as long as you want." So, I had *The Rising of the Women* about two-thirds done, and parts of it had been circulating in manuscript since I was in Boston. There was the chapter on the Lawrence strike and a chapter on the shirtwaist strike that were circulating in typescript all over the country. Barbara Wertheimer ended up using a lot of it in her book without

crediting me. And other people did, too. And it was my own stupidity, because of my own decisions, or whatever you want to call them, I didn't do anything to protect myself. I could have published them. I mean, she gave me a footnote and I went and met her when I came to New York. She said, "I couldn't find you. I didn't know what to do." So she clearly felt nervous about something.

But anyway, so there was all this stuff that was out there and it sort of got — it just became part of the culture without people really knowing where it came from. The analysis I did of the shirtwaist strike was, at that point, it was a class analysis. Nobody else was doing that. So when I got kicked out of the October League, I decided one of the things I had to do was finish my book. And I tried to work on it as I was working as a nurse's aide and a single mother. It was very hard to find time to write. I used to wake up in the middle of the night and write for a couple of hours and go back to sleep and then go to work. And I got most of it done. And then I moved to New York and I had to find jobs and I couldn't write and I was doing CARASA. The first job I had was a legal secretary, and I got adjusted to New York, and then I got a job as an assistant editor of the Columbia alumni magazine. That was such an easy job. I could do it and still have a lot of time left for CARASA. So then when I came home and before I went to bed, I could do a little writing. But then I got laid off from there because they noticed I was doing so much other stuff I wasn't supposed to be doing, even though they didn't give me that much work.

And then I had a couple of adjunct teaching jobs, and then I got this book contract. But in the meantime, I finally finished *The Rising of the Women* in 1977. And, you know, I went to Joyce Johnson and she said I had to get all the — this was in a period where you still had to get permission letters for everything, which you don't anymore. They've changed the fair-use thing. I spent that summer writing permission letters, and then that fall, I said, "All right. It's all done. Here it is." She said, "Well, I'm leaving McGraw-Hill. I'm going to" — wherever else she was going, Dial, I think, "and I'm not taking the book with me." She said, "I had somebody read it for me, a labor historian, and he said this is much too Marxist-Leninist and we shouldn't print it." Like she hadn't read it herself or something? So then Ros [Baxandall] told me it was Joyce's boyfriend, Stanley Aronowitz, who had read it. She had been in an off-and-on relationship with him for many years. So, I've always kept that in mind about Stanley.

But anyway, she dumped the book. And McGraw-Hill sent me a letter saying they wanted their five-thousand-dollar advance back, at least if I sold it to somebody else. I couldn't have given them 50 dollars. So I really didn't know what to do. I thought the book was dead. I didn't have an agent at that point. I called different editors who were supposed to be interested in progressive books. They said, Well, we have a women's book already. One of them said, We have a women's book already — we can't do your book. Another one said, Well, you know, people here, we all think the women's movement is dead and we don't think there's going to be any

market for books about women's history. This was in 1977, showing how much the publishing industry knows about the world. So I didn't know what to do.

WEIGAND: It must have been really discouraging.

TAX: It was very discouraging. I was particularly pissed off because Joyce had made me write all those letters. I wasted a huge amount of time. I was very pissed off about Stanley, because, you know, it seems to me that even though the book is somewhat Marxist-Leninist in its language and approach, so what? You know, maybe McGraw-Hill wasn't the right press for it. That's probably true.

And then I was in this women's group, this support group, and one of the people in it, Kris Glenn, said, "I know a literary agent, Meredith. Why don't you try to write a novel. Write a proposal for a novel, and I'll show it to her." So I took some of the stuff from *The Rising of the Women* and started thinking about it in terms of a novel, also the shirtwaist strike, because I always thought that would make a good novel, and wrote a proposal. I didn't really know how to write a proposal. I just wrote what I felt the story should be. It turned out not to be the way most people write proposals, but anyway. And Kris showed it to her friend, Harriet Wasserman, who said it was the best proposal she had ever seen, and she took it on and she sold it to Harvey Ginsberg, who was then at Harper & Row, for \$50,000, which was — this was in 1979, I think — it was a big advance for an unwritten first novel.

So all of a sudden, I had enough money. I didn't have to work these adjunct jobs or be a secretary and I just wanted to finish *The Rising of the Women*. So I went over it all again, and I still worried about whether I could sell it, but I had already talked to another agent that I met and he said, "Look, if McGraw Hill turned you down and you get somebody else to — you're going to work on it a little anyway, you're going to rewrite." He said, "It's a different book. They can't possibly get their five thousand dollars back, because they proved that the book that they turned down was unpublishable. They said it was unpublishable. So if this book is publishable by somebody else, you don't have a problem." And, you know, he said, "Also, they're not going to take you to court for five thousand dollars."

So, Monthly Review Press wanted to publish it. So I used the advance from *Rivington Street* first to finish *The Rising of the Women*, which I reconceptualized because I had found some new stuff about the Illinois Women's Alliance that I'd been carrying around for years but I hadn't had time to really read, because it was in microfilm. So I did that. And that book, you know, was treated respectfully, and people liked it. Monthly Review's not exactly a ball of fire in terms of getting any book distributed or publicized, but I kept sending it to the *Times* myself and eventually the *Times* reviewed it. It was only the second book by Monthly Review that

they had ever reviewed (laughs). I think nobody else had ever kept sending it. I sent them about four.

And the only really bad review it got was from this woman who I had been in a history group with who didn't like me, who said, "Oh, all this stuff is old by now." And she knew it had been going around and around for years. It was just really mean. And then I worked on *Rivington Street*, and *Rivington Street*, you know, wasn't a bestseller in the way bestsellers are today, because this was 1982, but it sold well. It was a book-club book, and it was in paperbacks in the airports and stuff.

And then I got a contract to write the next one, and then a problem arose, which was that they wanted it in two years. And I had by then met my second husband and gotten married and I wanted to have a baby, and I knew I was going to get sick again and I knew it was going to be a hard thing. And I said, "I can't give you this book in two years. I can give it to you in four years." But the way the publishing industry was already working then, they liked to have regular product. Harvey thought that, you know, thought it was really irresponsible of me to want to have a baby. He said something like that to my agent. So I signed saying I would get it done in two years but I said, "You know, I'm not really going to do this." And they put in an extra five thousand dollars for an incentive if I got it done in two years, like that was more important than having a baby. I couldn't believe he even thought that, you know.

So I didn't get it done until 1987 because Eli was born. It came out in 1988 so I must have turned it in in 1987, in the fall. Eli was hard. I was really, really sick and I didn't get better after I had the baby. I was just so exhausted all the time. I felt like I was walking under water. And it turned out — I couldn't get this diagnosed for some time — that I had become hypothyroid. Either I was before, or I had become during the pregnancy, because sometimes that happens when you have a hormonal jump. It screws up your hormones. I think I probably always was, because I always had a tendency to be cold, gain weight, be sluggish, and it just was never diagnosed — because I come from that part of the country where a lot of the people have thyroid disease. But anyway, so once I got that diagnosed, I was much better and I could start, I was much more productive, but that took a couple of years.

So I didn't get it in until 1987, and he hated it. It was exactly the same as the outline I had given him, but it was a different time. Reagan was elected, and the whole country seemed to be moving to the right, and William Morrow, the publishing house that published both these books, had just been bought by Hearst and he was probably worried about his own job. He was also a closeted gay guy and I think somebody he cared about had died, and he wasn't dealing with it in any kind of open way because he was so closeted. I only knew he was gay because I knew somebody who lived in his building. My agent didn't know. But he was horrible. He said there was nothing in the book. He didn't know what to do with it. My agent went to him and said, "Let us have it back. We'll buy it back from you. We'll sell it to somebody else and buy it back." He

wouldn't let it go and he wouldn't push it inside the company either. And by that time, you know, it was a big conglomerate. You had to sell your books to the sales force. You had to push them, and he didn't do it.

I think it was probably the subject matter. It was about the Communist Party. He didn't even come to the book party. Other people in the publishing company came to me and said, "We don't understand what's going on. This is terrible." And, I mean, it had already had a paperback sale. It came out in paperback, but they never printed very many copies in hard cover. And it didn't get a book-club adoption. That was the other thing, because the Literary Guild that had bought the first one had also just been bought Morrow Bertelsmann and they weren't buying anything. They didn't know what they were doing. They were all in flux. So it was just very bad timing. It came out and the pub date was in September or October. It actually came out in August, and it got a very good review in the *New York Times* on January 1st, but by that time, there were no more books. You know, the books were long gone from the stores. They don't keep them more than six weeks. It hadn't gotten any reviews except in the trade media. So nobody ever heard about it. A lot of people who loved *Rivington Street* never even heard that there was a sequel called *Union Square*.

It was a terrible disappointment to me because I really liked that book. It was also devastating in terms of my career because I had had a flop, in terms of any sales records. That made it much, much harder to sell other books, in any commercial way, and to make money from them. I mean, during that period, in the '80s, I was living on my writing. I mean, I was doing very well in terms of most people, because I was getting these big advances, and I was married so we had two salaries, even though my husband was not very good with money. But that all changed after *Union Square*. So anyway, so, that's just background to PEN. You want me to go on with PEN now or do you want to talk more about the writing.

WEIGAND: Well?

TAX: Isn't the tape about to run out?

WEIGAND: Oh yeah, it is.

END DVD 4

## DVD 5

TAX: When I wrote *Rivington Street*, when I thought about *Rivington Street*, I thought, Well, this is an experiment. We'll see whether you, you know, can put new wine in old bottles, whether you can take the form of this, you know, family saga, which is, like, *Evergreen* or various millions of Jewish family saga novels, and put a new kind of content into it, and still have people want to read it. And it worked. So then, I thought, Well, now we'll try something a little more daring. We'll see if we can take the same form, the same family saga, and put political content that is considerably more challenging and difficult for Americans because it's going to be about the '30s and Communist Party. And it's not only about that; it's also got a lot of other stuff in it about the fashion industry and Zionism and a lot of other stuff. But I wanted to see if it would work. And I will never know, because the publishing house didn't give it the same kind of treatment it gave the first one.

And I think also there was another factor that I wasn't seeing when I made this original plan. I wasn't anticipating the Reagan revolution. But the other thing I didn't understand is that people want young heroines. I think that was one of the reasons that *Rivington Street* was so popular is that it was about a very hopeful period in American life, but also the heroines were young, and it was about romance. There is certainly romance in the second book and love stories and so on, but the people are middle aged who are the main characters, and that doesn't appeal to young readers in the same way that it appeals to middle-aged readers, although middle-aged readers like it. But, so that was something that I didn't understand.

The other thing is I realized how deeply sexist everything is, the culture is, which I knew before but I realized it with renewed pain by the way they treated these books. These books are very serious political books, certainly as serious as anything written by, you know, Ed Doctorow or any of the guys who write political novels. They were never treated as political books. Nobody ever used that framework of reference about them. Even occasionally when they were reviewed by men, they didn't talk about them that way. They talked about them as family sagas, or beach books, or airplane books, or summer reading, because they were about women. And I realized that it wasn't even because I was a woman, it was because the characters were women, because the agency in the book is held by women, for the most part, even though there are men characters who are substantial. And they can't take it seriously for that reason, because they don't take women as having agency in any serious way. So that it got very good reviews but they were not the kind of reviews I had hoped for, because they didn't deal with what the books really were. I mean, I'm lucky I got any, on the other hand. You know, plenty of people don't. So I have to keep that in perspective. But the whole thing was a very mixed experience for me.

And I also felt really weird because all of a sudden I had money and I was successful and nobody else that I knew had done this, and it made some people treat me different or weird. I didn't like that. And a lot of people, on the other hand, never realized that I was the same person who wrote the book. I mean, you would think, it's not a name that's very common, but people are very dumb, sometimes. Oh, are you — you write? You know. Often, also, a lot of people in the movement don't read stuff, you know, they just do whatever they do — especially guys.

So the people who know my writing often don't know about my activism and vice versa. And because I've always split my life between them so much, I've never done as much in either in as a consistent way as somebody who had only done one. So that's made it harder to build a career and to make a living—but anyway. So, you want to get onto PEN now, or do you have more?

WEIGAND: Could you talk more about what it was like to not have had much money and then suddenly to have this \$50,000 advance?

TAX: I didn't know — it was wonderful. It was wonderful. It was wonderful. I could take — I mean, I was so poor. I mean, when I came to New York, I was earning \$12,000 a year and I had this baby. I was just above the line where you're eligible for daycare, for welfare. The people I knew all had much more money than that. They were all academics. And it was hard. I bought all Corey's clothes secondhand. I bought a lot of my clothes secondhand. I didn't go to restaurants. I didn't take cabs. Sometimes I would have to walk home, you know? They didn't have metro cards in those days. Carfare was high.

So life was hard and medical expenses were very, very difficult. I mean, when we first moved to the city Corey got a nose infection. She'd put a piece of paper up her nose and we had to go to the hospital twice and she had to have it taken out. Fortunately, her grandfather worked in Montefiore and he took care of it, but he was furious and he said how irresponsible I was not to have insurance. I didn't have a job. Everybody was always blaming me. And my parents had money, you know, but they didn't help at all. My mother finally — actually, that's not true. When I moved to New York, I couldn't have put Corey in daycare — which meant I couldn't have worked — unless my mother had paid for it. I put her in a little Montessori school and my mother sent me checks for this every month, together with letters that said how I had ruined her life and caused her to have an ulcer and I was never going to amount to anything. I had never finished anything I started. I was a failure and I was a terrible person. So, I mean, the letters were so awful that I could barely stand to open them to get the checks out, but I needed the checks, so Corey was able to go to this Montessori school, which was a very nice school, Morningside Montessori, where my son also went.

So that was very hard and I was, you know, always in trouble. Then, all of a sudden, I had enough money to live on, and I kept it a secret. I was

afraid to talk about it. I was afraid that it would somehow be swept away, and then when the book came out, you know, I had to talk. People — it was fine, you know. But I never felt economically secure and I wasn't, as it turned out. That's always been a very difficult thing for me, because, I could have been, you know. It was because of choices — I could have been an academic. I could've finished my Ph.D. I could've been heading for retirement now with a nice pension, probably be a distinguished professor someplace or other. But it wasn't what I wanted to do.

I always chose to do what I wanted to do, which I also framed in terms of what was politically important to do but it was what I wanted to do. So some people would just see that as being selfish, or irresponsible. In fact, that's how my family saw it. I did redeem myself in the eyes of my family by writing *Rivington Street*. So they started liking me again after that, because I was again in the middle class. I had managed to redeem myself and use my brains, make something of my education, et cetera. My second husband was a college professor, Marshall Berman, and they liked that. They didn't like him that much. They didn't like my first husband, either, but they liked that I had enough money.

But making enough money is almost impossible as a writer, unless you're very lucky. I mean, what do you have to do? And again, this is something I theoretically could have done if I was a different kind of person. What they wanted me to do was write a book every two years and essentially write the same book over and over, as many do, so that I would become a brand name and produce a regular product that would come out at predictable intervals and they could put it into their schedule and it would all be like a business. I didn't want to do it. I could've, theoretically. I mean, I don't actually think I could've, I think it would have driven me crazy. I didn't want to make myself into a commodity. I mean, my writing was always something that I wanted to have it to be the way I wanted it to be, you know, not shaped by the demands of the market, although I always hoped that I would somehow fit in with the demands of the market and be able to make enough money to live on, or even make a lot of money, as one dreams.

After *Union Square* came out — I didn't want the title to be *Union Square*. They chose that title. They wanted — Harvey wanted — this was supposed to be a trilogy. I was supposed to write a third one. They wanted it to be three places so that it would look like a trilogy. I wanted the title to be *The Bright Future*. But anyway, and in England, they retitled it *Passionate Women*. But somebody from the paperback house that published it, from Avon, took me out to lunch after *Union Square* came out to give me advice. And she said, "For your next book, you either have to drop the Jewish stuff or drop the politics. You can't do both. It's not gonna work. If you want to write a book that makes money, the public can handle one or the other. So you just choose which one you want to do." And I really didn't know what to make of that. I mean, I didn't know how to do that.

And I've thought about it a lot. What do you do to make money, to write a book to make money? In fact, the book that I've just finished that's now going around to different publishers, one would think would make money, but I have the feeling it's not going to, because this is a book that's about the Exodus, a novel about the Exodus. And you know, *The Red Tent* made a lot of money, although it didn't make a lot of money at first. It made a lot of money also because of the way she marketed it. It took it a year to start getting onto the charts. But now they all have that in their minds, so I thought they would see this. But in fact, this book is not like *The Red Tent* at all. It's a much more difficult book and much more political and much more demanding of the reader. And a couple of other people had the idea of writing books, so now, the market is being flooded with quasi-*Red Tents* and so the main reaction I'm getting so far from the publishers is, "This isn't the way we expected it to be." So I have a feeling it will end up at a smaller press with less money, but we'll see.

WEIGAND: So you like writing full time?

TAX: I like writing. I don't like writing full time because I get too antsy being isolated in the house. It's fine to write full time if you have something else that draws you into social contact with people, but I don't in any predictable way. So then, I always end up doing politics because I get antsy or lonesome and then I don't have time to write. So it's, you know, it's back and forth. But I think I have to spend a lot of time in the next 20 years writing because there are a lot of books that I still want to write and I don't have all the time in the world. So I'm thinking about what I'm going to write next.

WEIGAND: So, now do you want to talk about PEN?

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TAX: All right.

WEIGAND: I talked to Miriam Schneir some about the whole PEN conference where Norman Mailer failed to include many women on the program –

TAX: It wasn't really him, but –

WEIGAND: – it might be nice to kind of get your take on the whole thing.

TAX: But that's where it started, in 1986. First of all, PEN is an international organization of writers. It was started right after World War I and it was very influenced by World War I, and it was meant, by creating cultural unity across boundaries, to put an end to war. So it was very idealistic. And every year it had a congress. It had, at that point, two a year, in one country or another where there are PEN centers, and there are PEN centers all over Europe, and there are a few scattered around the third world, not that many. Many of them are ones that were started between the two wars.

They go back a long way, and are not necessarily ideal. So, the one in New York was very good and was doing very important freedom of expression work, as does the one in London, which is the head office of International PEN.

And in 1986 — they have these yearly conferences in different places, and in 1986, they decided New York would do it — and Norman was president during that time, and Norman is a genius at fundraising and publicity. So he decided this was going to be the biggest, the best, the da da da da — everything that had ever happened in the history of the world — and he was going to bring all the best writers in the world and he's going to make headlines all over the place and he was going to rake in a million dollars to do it.

PEN America Center had never done anything on this scale before. It was not particularly equipped to do it. Norman was the front man. He was the one who raised the money, but he was not the one who made the decisions about who got invited to the conference or not. He made some decisions, but mostly it was a committee made up of people who were the PEN activists, who had been there before Norman. The president is only there for two years. And Faith Sale and Kirk Sale, and Donald Barthelme. Grace Paley was one of them, although she was away that year — she didn't work on the congress. Oh, I don't know who all, who they all were. And so that there was a group of people who picked the speakers for this conference, and many of that group were women. I didn't know this at the time. I didn't know anything. I was a PEN member because Alix Shulman asked me to become a member after my second book was published, which was a children's book called *Families*. I became eligible and so I joined. I never went to a meeting. It wasn't interesting to me. It just looked like a whole bunch of downtown people. And I didn't have time.

The conference — the congress, as it was called — looked very interesting because the *Times* said it was going to have the best writers in the world and it was going to be this big thing and I was able to go because I was a member and it was only for members. So I thought, Well, yeah. I wanted to hear Gunter Grass; I wanted to hear Hans Magnus. And so I went. It was huge. It was in two hotels, the Essex House and the one next door to it. It had these big assemblies in the ballroom and different seminar rooms, which were never big enough. I had, by then, had my baby, so I couldn't get away all the time but I went to some things.

And after I had been there two days, it started being inescapable that all the speakers were men. All the best writers in the world seemed to be men. I counted: out of 120 speakers, 17 were women, and that included chairs of panels and translators. So there were, like, none. So I went up to Grace and I said "What? There are no women." And she said, "You're not the only person who's noticed that. People are really upset. We have to do something." So she did. We sat down during this plenary and she raised her hand, and they called on her because she was a very well-known writer. And so she started, "I just want to say, some people here are upset because there aren't enough women speakers, so we're going to have a

meeting in this room tomorrow at 12.” The room was the Essex House ballroom. “Anybody who wants to talk about this should come.” And then, so I thought, all right. And she had to go off to something and couldn’t even talk. She was in a million things. And I went home.

And she called me that night and said, “Meredith, I’ve done something terrible. I forgot that I was supposed to be in a press conference at noon tomorrow. You’re going to have to chair the meeting.” I’d never even been to a PEN meeting in my life, and I was very much younger and less well-known. And I was terrified, but I had to do it. So I stayed up all night, trying to figure out what to do, and you know, wrote a little speech, you know, wrote some beginning principles of unity just for a draft. And I got up and there were 200 people there.

WEIGAND: And were they all women? Or were there men?

TAX: They were almost all women. And I didn’t know who most of them were. They all knew each other. I didn’t know them. They didn’t know me and I said, “Look, I’m sorry. Grace called me last night and said I should do this, and I know you don’t know me and I’ve done stuff in the women’s movement, but you don’t know me. But if somebody else wants to chair this, they should come up here.” Nobody did. So I said, “Here’s what I drafted. Let’s work on it anyway.” Then a couple of people came up to the stage and they started helping draft, Joann Leedom-Ackerman and Erica Duncan, who now lives on Long Island, who used to run a salon. They took notes and Martha Lear, who used to work at the *Times*, was there.

And Grace had said we should exclude the press, so we chased the press out. Martha didn’t agree with that. But, I said, “Well, Grace said I have to do this so I have to do this.” And it was true. I didn’t want to. I didn’t know what was going to happen. So I didn’t necessarily want the raggedy deliberations all over the paper. And then, so we were having a very good discussion. We decided we should draw up a basic protest document. We were drafting it and decided to that we would demand that we could speak at the plenary, and get a pledge that this should never happen again, that PEN had made a commitment and it should never happen again.

Then Betty Friedan came in. Martha had called — somebody had called her. So she raced down there. She was a PEN member. She’d never been to a meeting either. And she came to the front and she started giving this big, you know, charge-up speech. She’s a very good speaker. Got everybody charged up. She did forget who she was talking to every now and then and say, “Women of NOW.” It was pretty old — just sort of your basic rabble-raising speech about fight them on the beaches, sort of all-purpose.

Then Martha came up to me and she said, “Meredith, the *Times* wants to come down. I called the *Times* and told them what was going on. If we let them come they’ll say Betty organized the meeting and it will get on the front page. They love Betty.” I told her to do it. And so, she called

them, and when they came, she came up to me and I said, “The *Times* is here. Now, Betty, come on. Give your speech again. The *Times* is here.” So she did it, and we got on the front page of the *Times*. And the photographer, Sarah Krulwich, framed all of the pictures so that I was in all them even though they were all so bad. She gave me some afterwards.

Anyway, so, we were on the front page of the *Times* and then we had elected three people to be our spokespeople: Cynthia MacDonald, Margaret Atwood, and Grace. And they made a group presentation for the plenary and that got in the papers, too, and you know, it was a big deal.

Norman, of course, distinguished himself by acting like a complete idiot and started attacking us in the plenary. It was all right. I mean, it just made him look bad. And finally, his friend Gay Talese came up behind him and said, “Stop.” (laughs) He said, “My friend who’s better than I am at this sort of thing says I should shut up.”

So I felt like, you know, we have to continue this in some way. So Grace and I called a meeting, I think it was at Grace’s house, of people who had been at the first meeting who wanted to do something, who were actually based in New York. Faith Sale wanted to come. She had been one of the people who planned the speakers. And I said — and she was a friend of Grace’s. I said I didn’t think it was appropriate. This was just the first meeting. Plus, we really wanted to talk about what would happen next, not about what had happened. She never forgave me or Grace for that. She became a principal obstacle to getting anything done. In fact, many of the obstacles were women who had worked on the congress and felt personally hurt and messed up, conflicted. Maybe they regretted some of the choices they made.

24:30

Norman told the press, “Well, we tried to get other women, but this wasn’t for just any writers. This was just for intellectuals and there weren’t any women intellectuals except Susan Sontag.” And Susan didn’t say anything — an opportunity missed to contradict that. He also said, you know, “We invited other people but they didn’t come.” It was the usual kind of thing they say: We tried to get other people. Well, how hard did they try? They didn’t. The fact is they didn’t know who to ask. They didn’t read women’s writing. They weren’t interested. And that was true of the people on the committee. And it was also true that the most famous writers in the world were not for the most part women and we all know why, you know. And it was their own bad research and bad politics that shaped it the way it was.

So we decided that we wanted to have a committee that would draw attention to the achievements of women writers so that they would not have the excuse of being so ignorant, and that we would also defend women who were censored, and so on. But mostly, in the PEN American Center Women’s Committee, which Grace and I co-chaired, the emphasis was on doing events and public things that would celebrate women’s work.

I was interested in the internal politics of PEN, and there was an election coming up. The way PEN works is the way a lot of organizations

work: they have a nominating committee every year that puts up a slate. Nobody comes to the annual meeting. Everybody votes for the slate. And that was the way it was in 1986. But we decided to run an alternate slate. The reason we did this was they had a nominating committee, which was some of the same people that had organized the congress, and they didn't put a single person from the Women's Committee on their slate. I thought, you know, we had this enormous meeting of 200 people, we had a real democratic upsurge in the organization. They should recognize this and to see that this is something that's a strength for the organization, instead of trying to trash us. I was really pissed off.

So we picked four people to run for the board and just added to the other slate. I said I wouldn't do it because I knew they would say I just wanted to get on the board and I wasn't that famous. Well, even some of the other people who were picked weren't that famous either but they had been in PEN longer. I hadn't been in PEN that long. So I stayed in the back and we nominated four other people — I don't remember who, but they were all people who had all been around who were in the committee.

And then, all we had to do to nominate an alternate slate was have a certain number of signatures, not that many, but we did it. That was easy — got it in on time. Then Norman got pissed off because he was the outgoing president and, as such, he had made some suggestions of people to be nominated to the board by the nominating committee and they hadn't taken any of his suggestions. You know, they were being very arrogant and silly in general. So he got very pissed off. And he added his own alternate slate and got some other people to back him. He took ours and added four other names onto it. And the four names were somebody who had written a biography of him (laughs), somebody who was his cousin, and a nice woman who was head of the Writers in Prison Committee and somebody else, I don't remember. It was very much about him.

And so there were three slates. And the executive director of PEN called me, Karen Kennerly, and she said would I withdraw our slate in favor of Norman's to make it more clear, since he had taken all of our names anyway, and then there would be only two slates. I was really on the spot. I didn't know what to do. I said, "I wish I could help you but, you know, we decided this democratically at a meeting and we're not going to have another meeting before the election. I can't do it. I'm not empowered to do this." I probably could've if I'd wanted to. I just didn't want to.

So, the meeting came up. And these are meetings that normally nobody came to. And there were so many people there, they couldn't all fit in the door. They were lined up outside, standing everywhere, a couple hundred people in this rather small room. And so somebody had to present each slate. So the nominating committee got up and presented its slate and said, We picked these people because they're the people we think are the best and we don't think anything else is needed and we don't think anybody else should be added. They clearly represented a clique of people who'd been running everything. It was transparent. And I said, "The Women's Committee is new. It represents a real force for democracy and change and

we think that this force should be integrated into the board and not excluded.”

Then Norman said, “Usually a president gets to put people on the board, but they didn’t listen to me, so I put these people on board.” And then he said, he looked at me and said, “Meredith, will you withdraw your slate now in favor of mine since I included all your people?” And I was standing at the front. I could see everybody’s faces. And I could see how they were feeling, and I said, “Norman, it’s not necessary for me to tell people how to vote. People can decide what they want to do for themselves. They should just vote their conscience and pick whichever slate they think is best.” He had a different idea of how politics works than the women’s movement. So he thought I was like a party whip or something, releasing my votes (laughs). In fact, I was just telling people, “I know what you’re gonna do: do it.”

So the vote was our slate, the middle slate, by twice as many votes as the other two put together. That was a real triumph. Norman totally lost it. He started ranting. He started ranting about Geraldine Ferraro and Walter Mondale and how she had sunk him because she was a woman and she had all these bad contacts (laughs), just ranting and ranting. He left. He stayed on the board for another year, but he was very disgruntled. And so were the other groups. So then the Women’s Committee was on the board, and then the next year I got put on the board.

And meanwhile, the Women’s Committee was very good at the events and we also fought a lot in PEN to open it up and democratize it and have it not be so cliquey. It wasn’t easy because it was all very confusing and people are always scared to take risks about their own reputations and also, a lot of writers don’t have very good political skills, or social skills. They don’t really know how to do this stuff. But our committee was real good for a couple of years. And Grace moved to Vermont in the middle of all of this, so I had to do it alone.

It became very burdensome because I was now on the board and I was running this committee, and there were people who had volunteered to do events, but we also had this monthly committee meeting and nobody else would ever take charge. So it got to be all these people who sort of didn’t have anything else to do, who were old, retired, or else who were failed writers, or saw themselves as failed writers and who came because they had a grievance of some kind. Some came because they wanted more attention, and the people who were competent didn’t come to the meetings, they just did the events, and the committee got to be very burdensome.

Eventually I said I didn’t want to chair the committee anymore, and Sybil Claibourne took it over. She was very good. She was a friend of Grace’s from the War Resisters’ League and she was very experienced. But she then got cancer about a year into it, and she died. She couldn’t do it anymore. And then after that it sort of fell apart, because the people who were running PEN, the director and so on, didn’t see anybody else who

were coming to all these meetings that was competent to head the committee. And that was my feeling also.

And I wouldn't do it anymore because I was by then vice president of PEN. I was doing a huge amount of other work for PEN. But meanwhile, we managed to change the bylaws so they were more open. There was a Gay Writers' Committee got started, and an Open Book Committee, which was basically to advocate for writers of color, got started and really opened things up. And we got a lot of new people on the board, but they didn't take any old people off the board.

Each year, it was about the nominating committee and people were always scared to take people off, and you know, they wanted their names even if they never came. They wanted to be able to use the names of famous people so the board got bigger and bigger and more unwieldy. And the people who had been the clique that was running it when this all started were still all on the board, and some of them really hated anything that came from me. So there was always some struggle.

But I became a vice president and in 1989 this meant I was sent to one of these international congresses, which was in Maastricht, and I went there and thought, Well, let's see if there's a need for an international women's committee. Our women's committee is doing very well. And when I got there — PEN is a complicated organization. Like many international organizations, it's supposed to be free of politics and not have any state influence and it's actually, you know, a sort of parody of state relations. Many of the PEN centers, especially at this point, the ones in Eastern Europe and Asia were absolutely funded by the governments. And also the Scandinavian centers were absolutely totally funded by the governments. They just acted as representatives of their governments to the degree their governments were interested. Often, their governments were not very interested, but, in some cases, like China and Korea, they were very interested. The Scandinavians were also very interested, but also very progressive. And so there were always struggles.

There were basically two factions in international PEN. One was the freedom-to-write people, whose main interest was in having PEN defend censored writers, no matter who was censoring them, and that often included places where there were PEN centers — like Korea, say. This was before there was a democratic transition in Korea. South Korea was very dictatorial at that point. And there were a lot of writers in prison in South Korea. And the South Korean PEN Center wouldn't do anything to defend them because they were in bed with the government. So there were conflicts between the freedom-to-write centers, we called them the "good" centers, and essentially the centers that wanted PEN to be there as an international forum of some kind where they could — they wanted to be able to travel and visit, a nice thing for them. We called them the — a lot of them were Francophone — we called them *le* PEN Club, because the head of International PEN, Alexandre Bloch, was one of them. He was very solicitous of the PEN club centers.

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And this notion of PEN is — it's basically a cold war notion. The whole thing was very cold war, a model of cultural exchange that is meaningless, that has no content, that is just a formal shell for whatever is really going on. And during the cold war, what was really going on was the cold war. This was sort of the cold war's ebbing. And some of this was conflicts around authoritarian versus somewhat democratic governments in relation to writers, and some of it was just people who just wanted to travel and get out, you know. There were a lot of conflicts.

But also, Alex ran PEN in a very autocratic way. He didn't want any committees to be powerful. He had resisted the formation of the Writers in Prison committee and fought it and kept trying to cut its funding but they were too strong and he certainly didn't want to let anybody else become strong. And he certainly didn't want me. He remembered me from 1986 and here I was trying to start a Women's Committee in International PEN after I had made this terrible scandal and they didn't want a Women's Committee. They didn't want any democratic upsurge, they being mostly French and English elderly men, veterans of World War II, very shaped by the cold war, and utterly not interested in current politics — not involved in third world, contemptuous of the third world, contemptuous of women, very European.

So I just started feeling things out. I went to that congress, and I went to another congress the same year in Canada, which was very good. The Canadian Center had pledged to make their congress very open and democratic and learn the lessons from what was not done in New York. And they did. So that was a great place to organize, and we hoped that at that congress, which was in the fall of 1989, that we would be able to start a Women's Committee in International PEN, but it was too soon. There was much too much opposition, and the most powerful centers were opposed, and the Canadians, half of them were opposed. Half of them wanted to have it but they wanted to have it be in Canada so one of them could run it because they hated the United States and they didn't want me to run it. So it was a mess. And in the end, we decided to wait. We announced that we were forming a network and we would work toward the formation of a Women Writers' Committee, but we saw that it was premature. People got up and they said things like they didn't see why we needed a committee, there were plenty of women there, da da da da.

The other problem was that I didn't have any money. I couldn't go to congresses unless somebody paid my way. And the American Center had paid my way to Maastricht and Canada, but the woman who was the head, the director of PEN American Center, Karen Kennerly, well, she wasn't opposed to the Women's Committee, she wasn't opposed to anything that made PEN more interesting and drew people, but she also wanted to totally run everything and she didn't like having other women around. She was the kind of woman who really wants to be a girl surrounded by guys. She had sexual relations with a lot of the guys, you know. That was one of the ways she enjoyed her job. Fortunately this isn't going to be published because I'm sure some of the things that I would say would be libelous.

She saw it as her, you know — everybody said whoever was the president of PEN sort of got her as part of the job, you know.

And they were always guys, although Susan Sontag was president at one point. I don't think that was the arrangement with her, but they were friends. And then Larry McMurdy became president and she thought this was going to happen with him and it didn't. In fact, he and I became very good friends, so she hated me because of that, and she also just didn't like having women around. She didn't like — she wanted to be the only woman, especially, you know, in the center of everything, and to be able to play these guys off against one another, and I would mess up the dynamics.

So she didn't want to pay my way to these congresses, so I didn't go to the next one. And then the next one, maybe the next one after that got cancelled, and then the next one was in 1991 in Vienna. Again, the committee was coming up for a vote and I had to go. Larry wasn't president by then anyway, so that was out of the way. I don't remember who was. Anyway, so I went to Vienna, and the committee was going to come up for a vote then, and there was a lot of this maneuvering, political lobbying. We had a group that went out and just kept lobbying and trying to get them to vote for us.

And the English Center — see, the office of the International PEN is in London. Alexandre Bloch, this French guy, ran everything. He was based in Paris but he would come back and forth to the office in London, and he was an ex-UNESCO bureaucrat, you know, a great maneuverer and manipulator. A lot of these centers were under his personal sway. They were friends of his or else he found them money at one time or another. He was the one who got grants from UNESCO for these different meetings. He would throw bones and he would be able to decide who got paid for by London and stuff. So he controlled a lot of votes and he didn't want there to be a committee.

And the French Center didn't want one. The German Center wasn't interested, although there was a woman from the German Center who wanted it. I don't remember how they voted. They wanted us to stay. The English Center didn't like me. On the other hand, they didn't want to come out against it because it was the right thing to do and they were one of the Freedom-to-Write Centers and most of the Freedom-to-Write Centers, you know, the Scandinavians and Americans and Canadians were in favor of it. And so, they tried to bargain, using this guy, Peter Day, who actually functioned as Alex's secretary for most of the time. He's a gay guy who liked to present himself as a feminist, but he was very much in Alex's pocket. And also the English Center was run by grumpy old people who really didn't like feminists. He came and he came and tried to bargain with me and he said, "You can have the vote of the English Center if you will agree that the committee will never attack or question the conduct of any of the member centers about women."

WEIGAND: What's the point, then?

TAX:

Forget it, forget it. I said, “No way.” And the president, Ronnie Howard, was the president of English PEN. He was against the committee. Paula Giddings, who was there helping me, was wonderful, and I sat at lunch with him and tried to persuade him. And he said the reason he didn’t want a committee was because if you’re going to have one, the next thing you know, you would have a homosexual committee and the next thing you know, you would have a something-else committee, and the character of PEN was to bring everybody together. Paula said, “Ronnie, if it brought everybody together, people wouldn’t feel the need for a committee. People have not all been brought together.” I told him how many votes we got and I said, “Ronnie, we’re going to get this, you know, so you and your Center can either be on the wrong side or the right side, but there’s a train coming toward you. You should either get on it or get out of the way.” (laughs) And he supported us after that. I think he saw it was inevitable. He also just liked — he liked it. He is a playwright. He likes drama, and he likes women.

So we had the vote, and we won by a huge majority. The French voted against us. The English ended up voting for us. The Japanese voted against us. I don’t remember who all. I gave a speech before the vote. I had to give a speech to try to persuade them. And I said, you know, “Some centers have expressed alarm about how we would criticize their conduct.” And I said, “What are you afraid of? What can we you do? We don’t have a standing army to do anything to you. I mean, the worst thing we could do is say to you at congress is, ‘Do you have any woman on your board yet?’ And after a while, maybe you’ll get the idea that if you put a woman on your board, then you’ll have somebody to do all the work.” (laughs) So they loved that. They thought I was the best speaker they had ever heard. And it passed by a huge majority.

But Alex, the director, still didn’t like it at all. He thought I was unsuitable. I mean, his idea of what women should be is very well dressed, elegant, European. Any American would have been unsuitable for anything. I’m not particularly elegant or well dressed. I mean, I can get it together at points, but I’m not thin and tall, and I don’t defer to men. I treat men and women pretty much the same way. And he really was used to women who either he could sleep with or who would be his secretaries, or his maids. Those were really the only roles he saw for women, and I didn’t fit any fit into any of them. He didn’t have any idea how to talk to me. He just did not know what to do. He hated it because [he is] somebody who wanted always to be in control. And I wasn’t particularly — I was very nice to him, but it was just who I was, you know. And also the American thing.

So he was always scheming against the committee and trying to get me removed from the chair, first by trying to get somebody else who was — who told me all about it, a woman from the Flemish Center, Monika Van Paemel, who was very elegant. He tried to get her — he kept sending her

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messages, promising her anything if she would just get me removed from the chair, take over in some way. She showed them to me.

And then there was a German woman, Karin Clark. Her center wasn't really in favor of the committee, but she wanted to be on the committee, and I had — she had just moved back to Germany from London. She was looking for a job, and the first project we adopted was to have some sort of informational meeting at the Frankfurt Book Fair, which I think in retrospect was a mistake. I'd never been to a Frankfurt Book Fair and I didn't realize how big they were and how anything we did would be likely to get lost. But on our way back from Vienna, Paula and I stopped in UNESCO, and UNESCO was International PEN's main funder. Paula knew somebody who was in a part of UNESCO — a different part of UNESCO ordinarily funded PEN. It was the Decade for Cultural Development — they have all these special things that go on for a decade. This was about cultural development. This was an American black woman, and she said she would get us some money for our meeting at the Frankfurt Book Fair, and she said, "Here's how you do it. You know, basically, all I can give is travel grants, so a lot of the money has to go to this actual project but you can use it for your travel to congresses, because that's where you do the planning." And she made that very clear. So that took care of that problem. I was a little worried about how I was going to be going to congresses because of the director of PEN American Center.

But it turned out that I had made a terrible mistake in going to UNESCO in terms of Alex, because Alex said it was a rule that nobody was allowed to go to UNESCO but him. I thought he'd be happy that here we got \$20,000 extra dollars for the PEN budget and he didn't have to do anything, because it was just all me. He hated it because he didn't want any money coming into PEN from people he couldn't control. He would rather have it be poor and not have any resources and not have any people doing anything. He really was angry about that. And he kept saying I was unsuitable. I always broke the rules. I didn't know what the rules were.

And then I tried to have a board for the committee so there would be people from different countries. It wouldn't just be me. He said committees weren't allowed to have boards. It was against the rules. I said, "Where's the rule book? Show me the book." He said to me, "It's not a rule. It's our tradition" — you know. We had terrible fights over it. Peter Day, who was the English center's representative on the committee, was always after me and then this German woman, Karin Clark, also became like a representative and he got her on his side. I don't know what he promised her. And she was the person who was in charge of this project, and I had already promised her a lot of the UNESCO money to run it, although she also raised a lot of money in Germany. So that was a problem.

And there were also a lot of political differences in the committee. A lot of the women on the committee were not really feminists. They might have been sort of soft feminists but they hadn't given it much thought. They wanted something to happen. They thought it was nice, and it was

exciting, but I was interested in exploring the connections between gender and censorship and they weren't. And this German woman started opposing everything I wanted to do. That was, oh, in 1991.

The next meeting was in Barcelona. There were a couple every year at that point. By then Alex had already started some of this stuff to get me out of the chair. Then we came together because there was a feminist book fair in Amsterdam and I went over there using some of this travel grant money to tell people about the committee and meet other people, and this German woman, Karin Clark, came, and Monika came, because it was in her backyard. Monika told me about all this stuff Alex had been doing at that point and said, "The next congress is going to be in Brazil. That means a lot of the people who are supporters of the committee are not going to be there because they can't afford to go. Be careful. They're going to try to get you out of the chair then. They might try to destroy the committee, because they might have enough votes to do that." So I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't even get people in my center to talk to me about it. Karen Kennerly wouldn't even talk to me about it. So I really went into this alone, and when I got there, Peter Day — oh, and Karin Clark and I had had a disagreement about the budget for the Frankfurt Book Fair. She wasn't coming to Rio because of money. And I was using some of the UNESCO money to pay my way to Brazil, and I planned to use it to pay my way to other congresses and she wanted to use it all for her budget. She said I shouldn't use any of it because I would jeopardize the grant. Peter had told her that I couldn't use any of it for congress travel expenses and I said, "They told me I could use it for congress traveling expenses." She said, "No, you have to approve my budget that doesn't give you any money for that."

And then Peter Day and this woman from Swedish PEN, Ana Valdes, wanted to meet with me first thing. She was not very much in the inner circle of Swedish PEN. She was a Uruguayan immigrant who had sort of gotten herself onto the board of the committee. She wanted to work, and so on, but turned out to be very crazy. But they had to meet with me first thing. So Peter said, "You have to approve Karin's budget. Otherwise, I will make sure that there is enough of a fight in the committee so that your report is not accepted by the assembly. And if that happens, you know, the future of the committee will be up for grabs. You may not have a committee."

I didn't know what to do. I needed the money to go to the congresses. I didn't know where else I was going to get it. I didn't have a job then. I was living in a very hand-to-mouth way, mostly dependent upon the generosity of a friend who was trying to help me because I had already left my husband. I agreed. I didn't think I had any choice because I really knew that I might lose in the assembly. So we had a pretty inconsequential meeting. Karin made a report by proxy and everybody accepted it. And then Alex came up to me immediately after and said, "Did they accept your report?" and I said, "Of course. Why wouldn't they?" And that was

the end of that, except also at this meeting, you see, the next congress was planned to be in Dubrovnik, but the war in Yugoslavia had already broken out and Dubrovnik was actually being shelled as we met in Brazil. And a number of centers, including my center, didn't want to go to Dubrovnik, not just because they didn't want to be shelled, but because they thought they would be taking sides in a civil war. And while the Serbs were unquestionably horrible aggressors, the Croats weren't so great either. And we didn't want to be in the position of endorsing one or the other.

And there had been PEN centers in each of the different Yugoslav republics before, because countries are allowed to have five and they had slightly different cultures. The Slovenian language is somewhat different, and there was one in Zagreb and one in Belgrade and one in Montenegro. Well, they were all fighting each other, and it was awful. And so we started raising just small objections — my center did — to having this congress in Dubrovnik, because it was six months away. We didn't really know what was going to happen. But if the war continued we said we would have to look into the free expression issues in Croatia. Some women writers, the Scandinavians said, were being attacked.

And what happened is, that the head of the Croatian center, a little shit named Slobodan P. Novak, who was a nationalist — that's why he was the head of the center. I mean Tudjman, the head of the Croatian government, was also a member of the Croatian PEN center, because he was a minor poet. That center was full of nationalists, and so Novak went back and he gave a press conference, when he got back to Zagreb, and said the congress was being put in jeopardy by women writers in foreign press about how there wasn't freedom of speech.

So that was like unleashing these dogs to go after the women writers in question. They were made the subject of the big press assault under the name of "the five Croatian witches." They were Slavenka Drakulič, Dubravka Ugresič, Rada Ivčković, Jelena Lovrič, and Vesna Kesič. They weren't a group at all. Some of them had actually never done anything in the foreign press. Dubravka and Slavenka had written things in the foreign press that were satirical about Croatian nationalists, and Slavenka had written an article about rape, some of the rapes that were going on, where instead of saying these were Serbs raping Muslims and Croat women, she talked about men raping women in war, you know. This soon became a big thing, became a big thing that divided the Croatian women's movement as well, which line you took. Were these crimes against the nation? Or were these crimes against women?

WEIGAND: We're running out of time here.

END DVD 5

## DVD 6

TAX: We were talking about Yugoslavia.

WEIGAND: All the complications in PEN.

TAX: Right. And what happened — I started talking about the “five Croatian witches.” So what happened is, that they became the subject of a big press campaign, the kind that in communist countries used to be called “trial by public opinion,” where the press would whip up sentiment against them. And only two of them were even people who had published abroad, Slavenka and Dubravka. Jelena Lovrič was not liked by the government because she had been writing articles exposing corruption. Vesna was a feminist who had worked in the feminist movement, and Rada was also a feminist who had worked in the feminist movement and also her father had been one of the *nomenclatura* [Communist Party elite], so they didn’t like her. These were all — the nationalists were all guys who had been on the outs until after Tito died and they were sort of pariahs themselves and now they were very much in power and chasing down the children of old enemies.

And three of them ended up being driven out of the country. Dubravka really had a hard time. She was a professor at the University of Zagreb of Russian language and linguistics, and she was doing a dictionary of the Russian avant-garde with her professor. He stopped talking to her. Nobody would talk to her. They printed her phone number in the paper with, in one of the papers, with the saying, “She likes sex. Give her a call.” People knew her address and she used to get threatening calls constantly, all around the clock. And it was very — and Rada was also — they didn’t like her because she was married to a Serb. Serbs and Croats had been citizens of the same country two years before, and now it was no longer permissible for them to have any contact.

So what happened is, one of them, Rada, came to New York and I met with her through a friend who knew her, because there’s another organization called the Network of East-West Women and she came and she was staying with Anne, or was at her house for breakfast and I was eager to meet her and so she told me all about this and I got into contact with all of the witches except — oh, with three of them, with Vesna and Dubravka and Rada, and we started trying to figure out what we could do to defend them. And this was also during a period in which there was increasing debate about whether to hold this congress in Dubrovnik. I weighed in as much as I could and fed information to my center, though I must say nobody was very interested in it. The director said, “This is the Women’s Committee. This has nothing to do with us.” And they were doing their own plotting. It was because the woman who was the director never wanted to include me in anything.

So I had raised a little money by then from different foundations and individual donors and I had some money for translation, and I put together

a booklet — this was Vesna Kesič's idea — that translated all the attacks on them, and some of their responses, and made them into a little pamphlet and circulated them, at least around the Women's Committee. So I was very out there opposing having a congress in Dubrovnik and I was getting people in the Women's Committee worked up about it because of the mistreatment of women. I was saying if they do a congress, we should have another meeting somewhere else to defend these women and to bring women together. I was doing all this very openly, by fax. There was no email yet, but I was faxing everybody on the committee, and so that included Peter Day.

Peter Day was totally on Alex's wavelength and he, by then, had also decided I was a danger to the organization. He started calling me and sending me faxes and saying I had to resign as chair of the committee. I was ruining the organization, I was a danger to everything, and really harassing me. I mean, I would wake up in the morning and read these horrible faxes. Monika happened to be here for something and I showed them to her and she said, "Who does he think he is? What right does he have to do this? He's not even a woman." So, at her suggestion, I faxed Ronnie Harwood, who was still president of the English PEN Center, a copy of this and I said, you know, "This is your center's representative to the Women's Committee. This is the way he's writing. Are you going to do something about it?" So Ronnie made him get off the committee.

And then, his friends, Karin, this German woman, and Ana, this Swedish woman from Uruguay, who were on my board — although my board technically didn't exist since Alex said we couldn't have a board — I planned a board meeting, because the Dubrovnik conference ended up by being called off. So we had this board meeting instead with whoever could come. And the two of them came. I said Karin could use Frankfurt money and she brought herself, and Ana had money, and they came to try to get the board to make me resign, because of the way I treated Peter Day. I mean, it was awful. It was all this intrigue, and it was constant. We were trying to defend women and this was the response. And the whole thing had been cooked up by Alex and it was horrible. They were really driving me crazy. Of course, they didn't get anywhere with the Women Writers' Committee board — the board was not in Alex's pocket. They thought Karin and Ana were off the wall, and so Karin and Ana went away without getting anything they wanted.

And then came a congress at Santiago de Compostela. By this time, I was really starting to wonder if the committee was going to work, because there were so many things to be done, and it was so difficult to do anything when I was fighting for my life all the time. Also, Alex wouldn't let me send out grant proposals. He wouldn't sign off on them because he didn't want us to have any money, and so I could only raise money through PEN American Center. I went down and met with a guy named Bob Crane, who was the head of the Joyce Mertz Gilmore Foundation at the time, because Ninotchka Rosca had a connection to him and she hoped we could get some money for the committee.

He said, "You should think about becoming an independent organization. Then you could raise money on your own. It wouldn't have to go through PEN." He said, "As long as you're part of PEN, nobody's going to give you any money because they all think PEN has money, why would they give it to you? If PEN has money, why shouldn't PEN support you? And if it goes to PEN, you won't necessarily get it. So if you want to set up your own organization, you know, then come back to us." We did ultimately do that and they didn't give us any money, but it was a very helpful discussion.

So, next came this conference in Santiago de Compostela, because the congress in Dubrovnik hadn't happened. They actually ended up having a fake, without an assembly, but most people didn't go and they couldn't actually make any decisions. But at Santiago de Compostela, they decided it was time to get rid of me. There was no election scheduled. We had drafted bylaws. We said there was a term of three years and at the original Canadian meeting where we set up a network, we said that the chair would rotate, that there would be a term of three years and it was renewable. And I was ending, nearing the end of my second year. I was sort of in the middle of my second year. Karin Clark and Ana Valdez started calling round to all these centers saying I had to be forced out because I was ruining the committee and I was unsuitable. They didn't go into any details, but Ana wanted to run for chair. She didn't tell the Swedish PEN Center anything about this. They only found out when they got to the congress.

I didn't know anything about this until I got to the congress, either. That's right. And meanwhile, my center had been having a secret meeting with all these other good centers, but I wasn't included in that because I wasn't a representative of my center, I was just the chair of an international committee. So I came to Santiago de Compostela with this big documentation of the way they had been persecuting these women and they hadn't even had it at the secret meeting. It was so bad, the way they treated me. This Women's Writers' Committee was really important in bringing in all these new people but it was as though it was something so negligible or even a threat. They said that because I was a committee chair, I was part of the administration. I said, "How can you say that? You know Alex hates me." "Well, still. We don't want to set any precedents." Karin didn't want me around.

Anyway, so we had this meeting and they were going all around saying there had to be this election. And Karen Kennerly, the director of my center, and Monika from the Flemish Center, and Gabi Gleichman of the Swedish Center said, What the hell is going on here? They were totally freaked out. They said, We can't let them have this election. How do we know you would win? I said, "I think I would win it." Well, you don't know, and anyway, it would be such a scandal. It will take the whole meeting. Nobody will talk about anything else. You won't get anything done at the meeting. We have to have secret negotiations.

That's how they always do things at PEN, you know. Never anything out in the open. So Monika and Gabi and Karen went up and negotiated with these two creeps and they agreed that I would step down at the end of my term, which I had already said that I would. I was thinking, I have to do something else. I wasn't completely sure. I wanted to see how things went. But if things kept going the way they were going now, I didn't want to keep doing this. It was too difficult. I couldn't do the things I wanted to get done. But, still, even though I had only a year left to go, they made this fuss.

It was all Alex, and I think Karin's ambition and Ana's, because Ana was very corrupt and she was later kicked out of the Swedish Center for things she did about money, raising money in their name without telling them and things like that. She had her own little NGO she used to funnel money. She and Karin had this arrangement. They would be the chair together after they got rid of me, and Karen would actually do all the work and Ana would travel. Ana could barely speak English, and the two languages at International PEN were French and English. Karin was not a good speaker, either. I mean, neither of them were particularly impressive individuals.

So I was furious. And I also felt I'd been betrayed by my center to some degree, that they should have stuck up for me and said, Let's have an election — although I could also see that it might indeed derail the committee, so I wasn't completely clear. But I was furious with them. We had a committee meeting. It didn't come up. Everybody knew this thing was simmering under the surface. Nobody knew what had happened. Everything was done in secret. It's not the way I like to do things. I announced that we would have an election at the next meeting.

And they made me sign this piece of paper saying I would — they got Peter Day, who's a lawyer, to draw up this contract thing — step down and not run for another three years or something. And they — Josephine, who was the head of the English Center — got up in the assembly and waved it around saying, We've gotten her to agree — as though everybody in the assembly were, you know, against me. It was just so awful. It was so awful. And again, it was this clique of Europeans who thought they could run everything and they could run everything in secret and could pick the people they wanted, do it the way they wanted. They had no accountability, no democracy. It was all Alex. He was at the root of all of it, although the English Center was pretty bad, too.

So after that, I started making some — we came back and we started incorporating Women's WORLD. And PEN American Center agreed to let us funnel money through them during the interim period. And Paula Giddings and Ninotchka Rosca and I incorporated it. And this time, I wanted to set up a proper board and really have a program that emphasized gender-based censorship so I didn't have to fight about what we were supposed to be doing all the time. I was still in PEN and this was also the time the Taslima Nasrin case started. It started in the fall of 1993 — is that right? No, it started in the spring of '93. This congress was in the

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spring of '93. It started shortly after that. Taslima Nasrin is a Bangladeshi writer, a feminist of the kind that is not part of the feminist movement, but very much concerned with the condition of women. She was known mostly, at this point, as a poet and as a newspaper columnist. She wrote a regular weekly column for one of the big newspapers in Dhaka, which was a lot about the conditions of women. She wrote exposés of incest and rape and the sexual harassment of girls. Nobody else wrote about anything like that in Bangladesh, which is a very puritanical society, and so she had a large public of women who thought she was wonderful. And she was doing very important things.

And then the Ayodah Mosque was destroyed in India by fanatical Hindus and, in response, in Bangladesh, there was rioting by Muslims against Hindus. And she, although not a Hindu herself, had friends who were and knew about it. The government tried to hush it all up and say it wasn't happening. And so she wrote a sort of documentary novel about this, called *Lajja*, that came out that spring and was immediately banned by the government. Her passport was taken away because of a passport infringement. She listed her job as one thing — she had two jobs — she listed one and they said she should have put the other one. She was technically a government employee, because she worked in a hospital as an anesthesiologist, and government employees are not allowed to leave the country without permission, so she put “writer” on her passport instead of anesthesiologist, so they took away her passport.

At the same time that happened, she was put under death threat by an obscure religious group in the countryside in Sylhet, called the Council of Soldiers of Islam, for her writing in general, as someone who defamed Islam. This was only in the countryside and it wasn't a terrible threat to her but the government was not protecting her. They took away her passport.

The first we heard about any of this was just a little feed in the AP wire about a Bangladeshi writer being put under death threat. The London office sent it to me and said, “Can you find out anything about this? Do you want to do anything about it?” And so I found Bangladeshi people through the women's movement who knew about her and got me in touch with the major human rights women's organization in Bangladesh which knew all about it. I started corresponding with her. I got her fax number from Hameeda Hossein, who was doing a lot of the exposés.

What was happening — we didn't understand this at the time — is that in Bangladesh, in the countryside, there are a lot of workers, especially from Sylhet, who were going to Saudi Arabia to do migrant labor and then coming back, not only with their wages but with Wahabiism. So there were these fanatical people. In Bangladesh, although the majority are Muslims, it split off from Pakistan to begin with because it didn't want to be an Islamic nation. It wanted to be a modern secular nation. But it was becoming increasingly Islamist. There were two main parties in Bangladesh. One, the major nationalist party, the BNP, was becoming

much more Islamic and they had just changed the constitution to make Bangladesh an Islamic state.

Everything in Bangladesh goes back to the War of Partition. So the leaders of both parties, the Nationalist Party and the Awami League, were both the children of leaders who had been assassinated by the other party. They were both women. It was very ethnically and religiously tense. But it had previously had the ideal of being a secular country and there were still a lot of people around to believe that, including Taslima. So we started a campaign in PEN, mostly the Women Writers' Committee, and I did it internationally, a petition that she get back her passport and so on. And I went to the State Department and asked them to get involved in it and did all the stuff you do. And she got her passport back. It worked. And she was invited to Paris to a human rights conference and then she stopped back in Calcutta on the way back to Bangladesh. And Calcutta is a Bengali-speaking region. None of her work had yet been translated into English.

A newspaper there did an interview with her about her views in general. And Taslima is a very militant secularist. She's against all religion, particularly Islam, and she doesn't know a lot about Islam, she only knows a lot about Bangladeshi Islam, and that from her experience growing up, not from study. Anyway, so she gave an interview where she was quoted as saying the Koran needed to be revised to be a modern document. And all hell broke loose. And then she said no, that wasn't what she had said. She'd been misquoted. She hadn't said the Koran should be revised. There was no point in revising the Koran. It was out of time, like the Bible. It was just so ancient that there was no point in paying any attention to it at all. What needed to be revised was the Shariot law, which was monstrously unfair to women.

So then, people in Bangladesh said her correction was worse than what she said originally, and all hell broke loose. The people in the government responded to pressure by indicting her for defaming the religious feelings of the population. She was put under a death threat, not just by this group in the countryside, but by the major Islamic party in the country, Jamat. Crowds started marching in the street, shaking Islamist nooses. They were really ready to kill her.

She went underground. I lost contact. I had been in regular contact with her by fax. She didn't tell me she was going to do this. And some people in PEN got very disgusted. They said, Here we just saved her and now look, we'll have to do it all over again." So I was the one who was put in charge of the case, my center, because nobody else — they were furious. And I worked mostly with people in London and Sweden on it. And I did a huge amount of work on the case and I was just so worried about her. She sent me a couple of faxes. She wasn't supposed to call. She was underground, you know. The phones were tapped and the people that she was underground with were people who were human rights people who were likely to be observed. And she wasn't supposed to call anybody.

So finally, she sent one fax to me, which she wasn't supposed to do,

from underground, saying, “Meredith, you have to save me. Get me a visa to the United States. I have to get out of here. I’m going to be killed. If they put me in jail, I’ll be killed in jail. I know I will. They all want to kill me. I don’t know what to do. Please help me.” I was beside myself. I was so worried. I couldn’t sleep, you know?

I happened to be going to a meeting at the UN the next day. The Center for Women’s Global Leadership was having its annual thing where they produce their findings from their institute for the year, their training institute. Charlotte Bunch was speaking. So I drew up a petition and I enclosed this letter to me and I said, “Please, petition the Bangladeshi government to withdraw its indictment so that she can come up from underground.” And I also sent this around to all the women’s committees in PEN centers, and they all started sending around this petition. I don’t know who did this. There were a lot of people. I had this passed around at this meeting full of international people at the UN who had come to hear Charlotte.

The next morning, the letter appeared in the major paper in Dhaka. And my name was then all over this. And I started getting phone calls all the time from all over the world about what was happening to Taslima and I had no idea what was happening to her. I had to negotiate with the Bangladeshi ambassador to the UN. We had a meeting. I was way in over my head. He wanted to get involved. He wanted to see if we could solve — he was an awful man who had already gotten in trouble. He’d been sued by his maid whom he had gotten pregnant. There was a lot of sexual harassment by these foreign employees of the UN. He called me up at two in the morning asking if I wanted to meet him for a drink — you know, that kind of thing. And I kept calling the State Department. They said they were doing everything they could. The Swedes were very involved in it.

Eventually, we were coordinating between Gabi Gleichman in Sweden, Sara Wyatt, who was the head Writers in Prison staff person in London, and me, and the lawyers in Bangladesh. And also, there’s a 13-hour time difference. It was very hard. And the faxes kept — their electricity’s always going off so you can’t get a fax through. I couldn’t find out what was going on. We were trying to figure out what the best strategy was. How could we get her out of the country? Would it be possible for her to sneak out of the country? Did she want to leave the country? Her lawyers didn’t want her to leave the country. They wanted her to stay and fight, you know?

Finally, then, Gabi Gleichman, who was very problematic because — he was the editor of a newspaper called *Expressions* in Sweden — he loved this story. He was a newspaper man, and he was also working with a guy named Giles from *Reporters Sans Frontieres* in Paris. These guys had a very different approach to what should be done about this than the women did, and they kept wanting more and more headlines in a way that I thought showed real lack of an understanding that they had to separate their personal interests as journalists from what was good for Taslima. This all came to a head when Gabi was involved in work with Rushdie,

Salman Rushdie, who was still under a *fatwa* from Iran, at that time, and still under police protection. Gabi and Giles got Rushdie to issue a statement in support of Taslima and had it all over the European newspapers.

Well, this was the last thing in the world that Taslima needed. I mean, she had enough trouble by herself without being associated with Salman Rushdie. Sarah and I and the other staff people were furious, and Siobhan, the staff person here, yelled at Salman for doing it. She called him up and he asked if PEN was trying to censor him in its own organization. At that point, I said to myself, "This is the other reason we need Women's WORLD, is because I cannot do this kind of high-risk work and try to protect people when I have to deal with a loose cannon like this who goes off and does things."

And then Gabi and Giles were going to go to Bangladesh and rescue her. I mean, neither of them could speak Bangla. They didn't know anything about how to get around the country. It was the stupidest, stupidest thing you could imagine. So we all went nuts about that, you know, but we couldn't stop them from doing anything. They could do whatever they wanted.

Then, finally, we got her out. The Swedish ambassador came and Gabi didn't come, although he told everybody he did, and people all around the world still think he rescued her — crazy, awful man. Through various means she was gotten into Sweden and received asylum there. She still can't go back to Bangladesh. She tried to go back when her mother was dying and they had riots all over again. I've remained in touch with her. She's part of the Women's WORLD network, although she's very much a lone wolf. She doesn't really march to any drum but her own. And her primary thing is really secularism, more than women, although she sees [those as] very connected because she thinks that religion is the principal cause of women's problems. She's now being censored all over again for her memoirs. But that's a whole other story.

Anyway, so, these two cases — the five Croatian witches and the Taslima case — made me feel like I couldn't do the kind of defense work I want to in PEN without all these other people getting in the way. They added fuel to my desire to have an independent organization. So we had our first board meeting, which we could only do by — we didn't have any money, you know? International board meetings are phenomenally expensive. So there was a UN meeting to celebrate Literacy Day or something, and they decided that year they would do it on women and asked me for some names. So I was able to get a couple of people on that. It turns out not all the right people, but some people. I wanted an international board. So I put together an international board and about half of them turned out to be really good. Some of the others dropped away.

And Women's WORLD was in business. We decided we would make our first project be something around gender-based censorship, and do it at the Beijing conference. This was in 1994 and, because the Ford Foundation was very interested in the Beijing conference, there was a little

window of opportunity so we could get in and get an initial grant from Ford to do something there. So we did. I didn't get a salary but I was able to get a little money. I mean, I was really living on handouts at that point. It was awful. I had no money at all.

We put together a pamphlet on gender-based censorship called *The Power of the Word: Gender, Censorship, and Women's Voice*. We did a couple of workshops at Beijing and we also tried to influence the women's program that came out of Beijing. This was very good, in many ways, but it didn't have anything about voice or censorship in it, and its only treatment of culture was negative. But we were too late. These negotiations had been going on for years. We couldn't really get in, and we didn't have enough people. It was just me, really, going to the UN, and Ninotchka did a little bit. She wasn't very consistent. And so we went to Beijing.

And after that, we were able to get money for a world conference at Bellagio. The Rockefeller Foundation helped us. And again, it was hard to find the right people, so we had about half the right people, but, you know, gradually, gradually, over the years, through trial and error, we built up a network of very good people, and began to adopt a policy, after we had done the initial analysis, of what were we going to do with it. We didn't just want to work up in the air and do this sort of general work, and we didn't want to work in relation to the UN, because that place drives me crazy. I certainly wasn't going to spend my life there — it's all about producing documents in legal language where all the states have to agree — you can't do anything that's very adventurous there.

So, we thought we should be trying to develop local work in different places around getting women's voices out, around gender, around censorship, because our definition of censorship was always much broader than that of the human rights community as a whole, which tends to only focus on legal censorship, or on things like death threats. We see censorship as a systemic thing affecting women, of which these are just the tip of the iceberg, and there are all these other informal mechanisms for keeping women from having a public voice that need to be identified and addressed.

Plenty of other people in the women's movement before us had dealt with questions of voice and talked about silencing, but nobody had done it in a human rights framework before, and it was our hope, it was our idea that, by taking silencing and moving it into gender-based censorship, that we would be able to find remedies and we would be able to get grants. It hasn't really worked out that way. This was right after the Human Rights Conference in Vienna when everybody was talking about human rights, but in fact, there are lots of big aggressive human rights organizations that eat up all the money.

And when women, when feminist organizations took up the concept of human rights and started talking about women's human rights, it was all in the context of violence against women. So women's human rights became defined as the right to personal security — nothing to do with censorship

or voice. They weren't interested in those issues and didn't see their importance. And we've had some influence over them, but we're very small and very badly funded, so we have not had the kind of influence yet that we need to have, and especially in this next period, I think. We've got to get much more visible. I'm going to stop here, I mean, so ask me something.

WEIGAND: Well, it seems to me that the thing about Women's WORLD is that it's an organization that sort of brings together all those things you're interested in over time.

32:25

TAX: Yeah. It grew very organically out of the stuff.

WEIGAND: It's writing and it's politics and it's –

TAX: It's anything we want it to be, actually.

WEIGAND: Right. I mean, it sort of has a little anti-capitalist streak in it, or maybe more than a little bit, and it's –

TAX: Well, we have problems with the way the publishing industry's constituted, certainly.

WEIGAND: I guess that's what I mean. And it's pro-democracy and pro-human rights and multicultural. Do you feel like you've found your niche, a place where you can do all the things that are important to you?

TAX: I feel like it's very difficult because of money. We have never had the kind of support we need to grow the organization. I was successful, until 9/11, at raising a substantial budget every year. But we decided early on that we wanted that budget to go into local projects, in Africa or Latin America or wherever. And although those projects, many of them, raise their own money, the early ones didn't, you know, the early pilot projects, and they weren't completely all successful, either. One of them turned out not to be really very good. So we had to learn from trial and error.

I didn't want to build up a big office and staff here like the other women's organizations that were started around the same time did that were mostly focusing on the UN, because I didn't want to run an office. I'm a writer, and I also didn't want to — I mean, it's so expensive to do anything here. I mean, to have a decent standard of living, somebody who is a staff person in New York, they have to earn 40 to \$50,000, at least; whereas in Latin America you only need 20 or \$30,000; in Asia, \$15,000. So, I mean, we could just make our money go — since most of the money was coming from here, it could go much farther in other places. But because we never built up a big apparatus here or even very many staff people — our biggest we had a consultant and another staff person and me, and somebody in Latin America — we never got the kind of visibility

we would have needed to become a major player that the donors would then give more money to. We always stayed fairly marginal.

And what happened with 9/11 is that the marginal organizations got driven down, and a lot of them are having trouble. Some of them have already closed. And it's become very difficult to raise this money now. Now, we're rethinking the whole strategy because I may have to go back to trying to make my money from writing or some combination of grants and writing. And we, you know, had hoped to find a home at some university, possibly Smith, but it doesn't look like that's going to happen. Again, nobody's willing to put the money into it. We may find someone, but we haven't yet. And so, it's all at risk because of financial stuff. So at this point, we're all voluntary. Nobody is being paid anymore.

WEIGAND: So, are you doing anything else now besides struggling along with Women's WORLD, which is a big thing?

35:45

TAX: Well, we're trying to rethink what to do next with Women's WORLD, and I've got this book that's going around, and I'm thinking what to write next, and so everything is sort of in flux at the moment. I'm trying to think how I'm going pay the rent for the next year.

WEIGAND: It must be nerve-wracking.

TAX: Yeah. It's difficult. It's a life I've chosen, but it's not an easy one, and I'm getting older, so I have to start to thinking about what I'm going to retire on eventually, and there certainly isn't anything there now. I keep hoping one of these books will make money, but who knows? We'll see.

WEIGAND: Well –

TAX: There's more to say about Women's WORLD — I don't know how much detail to go into about Women's WORLD. Or, you wanted to ask me other, more general questions?

WEIGAND: Well, I have some bigger questions, but I don't want to cut you off.

TAX: No, I don't have anything especially I want to say about Women's WORLD that I can think of at the moment. Let me just — am I on camera now? Yes, I think, the women's movement globally has some of the same problems as the women's movement here, but not exactly the same ones. It has problems in that its program has been very much shaped by the categories of donors. So that you have a number of organizations that work on reproductive rights, because there's money for that. There's some organizations that work on micro-enterprise and economic empowerment, because there's money for that. You have a number that do stuff about getting more women elected into office, because there's money for that. There isn't any money for the kind of stuff we do.

And there's a lot of money for the big human rights organizations, but they're not about women and they're not mostly interested in women. And the money for women's human rights goes to violence against women, and these are all fairly separate and bifurcated groups of people. And there are also people who do trafficking, they're more with the violence people and they have internal disagreements among themselves about how much to see women as victims and how much to say, it's OK for prostitutes to organize — you know, that kind of thing. So, you don't have anybody who's taking a holistic approach to things. That's one of the things Women's WORLD can do because we're writers. We're not working on a specific issue, and it's very important, I think, for the women's movement as a whole that we be able to do this and be able to develop our program and be stronger. It's very good people but I really don't know where we're going to find the resources we need to do this. I'm quite worried about it.

WEIGAND: Do you ever feel tempted to sort of settle for less, in the interest of being more financially secure?

TAX: Well, if I knew how, yeah (laughs). I mean, I'm too old to get many of the kinds of jobs I could have gotten 20 years ago. I'm looking at jobs, and if I get a job, Women's WORLD and the writing will have to take second place, because I have expenses I have to meet. I have a lot of medical expenses. So, we'll just see what happens. I mean, I've always managed to make these transitions and survived so far.

WEIGAND: Well, you seem like a person, from what I've heard in the last couple of days, who really has a sort of big view of the world and society and, you know, gender and economics and all these things and the need for systemic change, and like you've really been committed to working towards that all these years.

TAX: Yeah, but there're no rewards for that.

WEIGAND: Yeah.

TAX: And I would also like to find a way to train people. You know, and to — I don't want to teach in an academic environment, really, because those wouldn't be the people I should be teaching. But one of the things we've always wanted is to set up a training institute of some kind where we could teach writers how to be more effective as organizers and teach organizers how to write, which most of them don't know how to do. But, again, this is a question of having the resources. My son — part of this is also, I've been a single mother all this time and my son is now old enough so that he's not so much work. And my health has also been rather iffy the last couple of years, but I seem to be getting better now. I have an immune disorder which has manifested itself in various ways, most recently in arthritis that's so bad that I have hardly been able to walk during the

winters. But I've been doing acupuncture and it seems to be getting better very slowly, very, very slowly, I hope. I'm afraid to even say it. But I think that once those things are easier I'll have a little more time and energy to see what to — where to take this next. And of course, I've got this book that, you know, I'm hoping someone will buy soon, and we'll see what happens with that.

WEIGAND:

Can you talk about your Jewish identity and what that has meant to you at various times over your life, and the extent to which, if it does, it underlies the things you've done and things that are important to you?

41:30

TAX:

Actually, that's one of the other reasons I've had some difficulty getting my bearings in the last couple of years. I've spent a lot of time working on Middle East issues. I just felt I had to, because the situation was so bad since the beginning of the second *intifada*. I felt I had a responsibility, as a Jew, to see if there was any way to get through to American Jews to make them less paranoid and crazy, so that they would not support the Israeli government in the way that they do, its totally self-destructive and inhuman policies, and the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] as well. So, from the beginning of the second *intifada*, I started getting very active on questions of Middle East peace, which I had done before but not in a long time, and trying to figure out what to do.

Eventually I became part of a new organization that formed that was specifically trying to reach American Jews about this, called Brit Tzedek va Shalom, which stands for Alliance for Justice, Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace. And I was on the steering committee and board and so on and helped them raise money. I did that for about a year and a half, and went to vigils in Union Square, and between my health and the need to finish this book and Women's WORLD, eventually I had to pull back from that, because it was just too much for me.

So I sort of stopped doing that around November so I could finish this book. But I'm hoping this book will actually make a contribution to that discussion because what the novel does — the novel's about the Exodus, which is, in many ways, the first freedom narrative, liberation narrative, and it's also one that's very fundamental to Jews, celebrated every year, at the Seder. And the version that we learn of it, as children, the version most people know, is a very simple one of people who are enslaved and who, through God's help, become free and go into the Promised Land and take it. You never hear, in this simple version of the narrative, about the other issues that arise — about, for instance, what about the people who were already living in the Promised Land? What about the quarrels among the people who are proceeding there? I mean, this stuff is all in the Bible but it's not part of the Seder narrative.

I became very interested in those questions, partly because of concerns about the Middle East, and also about what happens to women. Now, women are not a very strong part of the narrative, although they're present in it more than in some other stories in the Bible, but the narrative itself is

clearly centered around the overthrow of one religious set of beliefs and customs by a new one, without the Bible ever talking about what the old one was.

Anywhere in the Bible to the degree the old Canaanite religion is discussed at all, it is by people, you know, hundreds and hundreds of years later who hated it and see it as a threat. It's the same way that the Christian monks who settled England describe the old religion of the people there. So we really don't know much about it. There is some recent work, archeological work mostly, which shows — and also some textual work by people like Rafael Patai — which shows that this old religion didn't go away. The reason that the Biblical prophets are constantly inveighing against it is because it's very much there, and it's coexisting with the Mosaic religion, and that there is, in fact, in the temple itself, a statue of Asherah. It's there for hundreds of years. And all over the place, they dig up these little female ritual statutes that they call Asherahs.

And so there was clearly another form of worship going on that was female worship. And so then, what was it like, you know? And how much do you buy into the picture of goddess worship that's been put out by some feminist archeologists as, you know, universally benign and peaceful. I mean, in fact, we don't know zip about it. We just don't know. And anybody can invent it to be anything they want. Yes, you can say that these people didn't make war. They didn't have the capacity to make war. Maybe they were too poor. There's many reasons possible. Or maybe it was because the social control that was exerted was exerted in other directions than military prominence.

So I started just thinking about all these things a lot and trying to answer questions in my mind about the Bible, like, Where did Moses' wife come from? And then I discovered the existence of another wife when I was doing research, that there was a first wife, who never made it into the Bible, but is still in some of the other sources, who was African, from the Sudan, which was, of course, the ancient kingdom of Kush. She's in the legends of the rabbis and in Josephus. And she clearly was left on the cutting-room floor, for whatever reason. But he had two wives. One was African, black, and one was a Midianite, whatever that is, probably some sort of Bedouin-type thing. And that stuff, those contradictions, never get explored in the Bible, except that Moses marries a Midianite, and then a few books later, they're making a war on Midian that's a war of extermination down to the last child — horrible atrocities. So all that's very fertile stuff to work with.

So I thought if I wrote a novel about that, the trick would be to make people go back to the early part of their mind, to their childhood, to where they first learned these versions of nationhood and people, and who you yourself are. These are very deep. There isn't any real way to question them on a rational level, but I thought maybe if you had a story that was a different story about the same stuff, it would get down into some of those deep places and open people up a little bit to seeing the story in a more complicated way. I don't know if it'll work or not.

First it's got to be published. And the publishers now are looking for, you know, bodice rippers or, you know, stories about the victimization of women and their continuance and bravery that the feminists will like. You know, goddess-type feminists are not necessarily going to like the way I do this, either, which is much more complicated than what they put out. So, we'll see what happens.

But a lot of my writing has been about Jews. I mean, all of my fiction has been about Jews. Not so much the political stuff, but some of it. It's very central to me, because it's what I am. It's what I grew up as. On the other hand, it's not all I am. I'm mostly American, also a woman. I'm not a nationalist. I'm not a Jewish nationalist, an American nationalist, or any other kind. I'm a feminist and a citizen of the world, and a diaspora Jew. It has never occurred to me to live in Israel. I would never. I like it here. Although there are things that bother me about being American, I think this is where my responsibilities are.

So, I don't know. In terms of Jewish identity, I don't think of myself as a Jewish feminist, because I think of myself as a feminist that's Jewish, but I've never been part of sort of the movement of redefining religious rituals and all that stuff, because I wasn't raised to be very religious. I was raised in a reformed temple where I was confirmed — not bat mitzvahed, but —

WEIGAND: So, would it be safe to say that for you, it's more of a cultural identity than a religious one? I don't even know if you can make those distinctions.

TAX: Right. I mean, they're all mixed together. I go to temple on the holidays. I do that stuff. I mean, I have some private system of beliefs. But, yeah, it's more cultural. It's more of a food and family traditions and stuff, but I think that this is — I mean, I think this is the way Judaism mostly has been for women. Women were not ever allowed to speak in the temple. They were hidden behind a curtain or a fence. And while I applaud the efforts of those who have tried to get up onto the pulpit and get out from behind the fences, it's like getting women into Congress or something. It's not necessarily something that I would particularly do because I don't spend that much time in temple that it matters to me. I mean, I would hate — I hate when I have to go to an orthodox temple and be behind a fence. Ugh. But I don't do that very often. It has never been a central part of my life, those communal observances and places.

I know some of those people and I like them all right, but I come much more out of the secular feminist movement, which was, however, in many cases there were a lot of Jews in it, so it was culturally Jewish. And because of the way women have always been treated within the Jewish community, there are a lot of reasons that Jewish women become feminists. There's a lot of barriers and injustice. And contradictions, you know — as in my own life. So on the one hand, you're encouraged to go to college and do as well as possible and be brilliant; on the other, nobody

will ever marry you and the only thing you're supposed to do is get married. So, you know, you're screwed.

WEIGAND: So would you say that there was something about being Jewish or having a Jewish identity that lay underneath the activism you did earlier on? I mean, you were just talking about the contradictions that produce feminists who are Jewish.

TAX: Well, I'm a person who's a product of my environment, like anybody else, so I come to it with everything that I am. Yeah, I think there's a reason there were a lot of Jews that became feminists. But on the other hand, there is a reason a lot of Christians became feminists, too. You can find this in almost any culture. So, those are the specific reasons for me. But I don't think about what I do now coming from that place, you know, in terms of doctrine or original community or anything. It's just that's how I became who I am.

WEIGAND: How about thinking back to some of your important feminist teachers or mentors. Are there people that you feel you learned a lot from or who were particularly influential?

54:20

TAX: You mean who I knew?

WEIGAND: Well, yeah.

TAX: As opposed to people I read books from?

WEIGAND: Or maybe people you read, too.

TAX: George Bernard Shaw, Louisa May Alcott, Mary McCarthy, Doris Lessing. In terms of people I knew, I've learned things from some of the black women I've worked with: Paula Giddings, Barbara Omalade, Pat McFadden, who's an African feminist that I work with a lot, Mariella Sala in Peru and Ritu Menon in India. I've learned a lot from those people. Those are at a fairly advanced age. I don't know who influenced me early on. We were all sort of mashed together, you know, we were all influencing each other, so I can't pick. I mean, I can pick out people who were my friends, but it's not exactly the same thing as a mentor, because I was in the generation that started the second wave, although there were older people in it, like Betty Friedan and so on, who were —

Oh, I forgot a wonderful story about Betty Friedan when I was talking about PEN. I should put that in now. You can switch it around when you do the transcript, maybe. After we had that meeting and had gotten on the front page of the *Times* and so on, I mean, Betty had not been active in PEN either, and we had had a couple of meetings of what became the PEN American Center Women's Committee, I got a call from Martha Lear saying Betty wanted to have a meeting at Martha's house to talk about the

PEN Women's Committee, and she wanted me and Grace to come. Grace didn't want to go, she didn't like Betty, but we did, we both went.

So we got there at Martha's house, and Martha was very apologetic when we got there. I knew immediately something was going to be bad, because she was so apologetic. "This isn't my idea. This isn't my" — And who was there? Judy Rossner and Gail Sheehey, East Side women that Betty had called together. And Betty immediately — she didn't even look at me. She just talked to Grace, you know. I was not her equal enough to even be noticed. I mean, I chaired the bloody meeting. She was there. But she couldn't remember my name.

And she started trying to convince us that what we should do was a giant spectacle, like the Town Hall debate, between Norman and Germaine Greer and herself. She wanted to debate Norman again. She wanted us to do a big meeting. She said, "This is way bigger than PEN. This is the first thing, you know, that women have done that's been on the front page of the *Times* in a long time. We can really start the women's movement up again. We'll have a Town Hall meeting and I'll debate Norman." (laughs) So, we said, Well, we've already been meeting as the Women's Committee, and we want to work within PEN. That's what we want to do. "Oh, you're letting a historic moment pass. You're dropping the ball. You could start the women's movement up again and you're not doing it."

So we just went away. (laughs) Grace was furious, yeah, and I felt like I could see why Betty has the reputation she does. I mean, she's very gifted, but I never wanted to see her again, and the next time I saw her, I ran. I mean, because I just felt so dissed.

WEIGAND: You're not the only person I've heard talk like this (laughter).

TAX: I know, I know. She has that reputation.

WEIGAND: Yeah. This tape is almost finished.

END DVD 6

## DVD 7

WEIGAND: This is a grand question about what you hope your legacy will be, or what do you see it as now, even though you're not dead yet?

TAX: Well, like I said, you know, I'm not ready to make my will yet, but (laughs) I'm planning to go on for some more years, hopefully 20, write a lot more books and do a lot more political work. I don't feel my job is finished and I don't feel like — I mean, I feel I've stood for certain principles but I don't feel like I've effectively communicated them. I feel like I haven't effectively found a way to communicate and teach people the things that I've learned, which are not so easy to teach, because it's more a way of working and a way of thinking that comes up in concrete circumstances. It's a product of all the different things I've done in my life, so that I can imagine developing a training program where you would do, you know, cases or practical things and examine those and I would be able to teach a certain kind of way of thinking, which is basically a combination of feminism and Marxism that thinks in terms of what groups or constituencies you're working with, what their interests are, but puts those in a broader context of what else is going on in the world and the country and stuff and tries to see patterns and, you know, does very concrete analysis, but in a broader way than most people in the women's movement do it — you know, taking more complicated things into account so you do a very complicated kind of factoring.

And I would like to be able to teach people that, so, I haven't yet found a vehicle to do that and maybe I can only do it by writing. I think I have to write more nonfiction, more stuff about the politics I've done, and political analysis and so on. There's — it's much more fun to write fiction. I'd like to do that more, too.

But the legacy? I don't think anybody will even remember me after I'm dead, frankly, so —

WEIGAND: Let me ask you this: do you think your vision for an ideal world has changed since you first became an activist, or have you been working for the same kind of vision all along?

TAX: Well, I think, yes and no. I think I'm much more conscious of gender and of gay stuff than I was when I started in the women's movement, because nobody was then, unless they were gay. I've become much clearer about how important that stuff is, how important its place in the women's movement and in change is. Although my own politics is still much more conventional than cultural, in some ways — much more rooted in economics and politics and macro-cultural stuff, rather than the internal cultural stuff — I think that I have become more despairing about relations between men and women than I was when I started out, when I still thought that, you know, these things were going to be an easy fix. I think

now that they take generations to fix, and that change for women is enormously slow.

And one of the things I worry about is that all of the achievements, including the writing, of my generation could just be wiped out as they have been often before in the past, of generations of women activists, and nobody will know about it, nobody will have kept a record. I mean, that's one reason I'm doing this. And nobody will understand what they could learn from it.

When I started doing political work in the late '60s, I had to go into archives and do oral histories to learn about the work that women of the previous generation or two had done, because there was no record of it. Nobody had written about it except one or two books. The books that were written by people at the time were out of print, and could only be found in university libraries, if at all. And that could easily happen again. And it could happen anywhere — here, too, which is one reason I felt it important to build a global network, you know, because maybe the ideas will stay somewhere if they get erased here, or we can keep them alive here for others if they're erased where they are. I feel like the world is in a state of enormous chaos and flux and things almost anywhere could get very bad. And they could get bad everywhere if climate change comes. I don't know how that will affect women, or learning of any kind. It might all be wiped out if we descend into a real situation where the whole species is fighting for its life.

And I despair about government. I mean, I never did have much interest or faith in government. I came to government through the lens of the Vietnam War, but it's just gotten worse and worse and worse. And the leadership class in every country — I don't know any country that has decent leadership. I mean, Mandela is almost — I mean, he's very old, and who else is there? I mean, there are one or two, one here, one there. A woman in Norway, you know. The political class seems to have lost whatever imagination or energy or capacity to actually help anybody that it had, ever, you know, and I don't see where it's being generated. I hope it will be generated somewhere.

My generation has mostly been sidelined. We haven't had the impact that we wanted. We stopped a war. We had the civil rights movement, but, you know, it all has to be done again and again and again. Necessity and task, and I don't see who is — I mean, I think there is political energy out there. There's a lot of young people who are interested in politics, but again, the generational thing of how one generation teaches another is very — it's not right. It's not in place. It's not the way it needs to be and it certainly isn't in the women's movement, either, partly because of the problems with women's studies that we were talking about, and the fact that theory has become so divorced from practice, that nobody is writing the kind of things that are very useful.

And in the women's movement, the scholars who do write about feminist practice tend to be more cheerleaders than analysts. And I don't think that's useful, either. They say, Women have achieved great things.

OK, you know, that's not what you need to know when you're starting. You need to know how to do things, what to do. Where do you start? How do you analyze things? How do you break down a problem and figure out how to insert yourself into a situation where all the forces against you are very powerful? How do you use the strength of a small movement as a lever to — where the strategic place to put the lever is? I don't know who is thinking about that stuff. I mean, that way of thinking is the legacy I would like to leave, but I don't know how to get it over. OK? You have any more?

WEIGAND: I don't have any more.

TAX: OK.

WEIGAND: OK, I guess we're done then.

TAX: We're done.

WEIGAND: OK.

END DVD 7

END INTERVIEW

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