

Roz Garber Transcript

JUDITH ROSENBAUM: Today is July 26th, 2000, and I am sitting here in Brookline, Massachusetts with Roz Garber at the Hadassah office, and this interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. OK, so I think the best place to start is if you can just tell me a little bit about your childhood, when and where you were born, all that kind of information.

ROZ GARBER: I was born in August 1950 in Toronto -- my parents are both Canadians -- and lived all of my life in Toronto until 1972, when I came to graduate school. I went to Brandeis, and the first day of class I sat down beside my future husband, and after we both got our MA's we got married and moved back to Toronto for four years.

JR: What did you get a master's in?

RG: Jewish education. I got my master's from the Hornstein program at Brandeis.

JR: Did you have a lot of other relatives when you were growing up who lived in the Toronto area, like grandparents or...?

RG: Yes, both sets of grandparents lived in Toronto, many aunts and uncles. Some moved to Ottawa, some moved to Atlanta, Georgia, so I have a huge extended family now in Atlanta, Georgia, but most of the family stayed around the Toronto area, and my immediate family is still all in Toronto. I'm the only one that left. It's very unusual for Canadian girls, especially at that time, to leave to go away to school, and I went with the disapproval of my parents and grandparents, even though I was going into Jewish education which they thought was a wonderful field. They were very disappointed that I had to leave Toronto to go to school.

JR: Why did you choose to leave?

RG: Well, there was no other option for getting a Masters. I had my BA in Jewish studies from the University of Toronto but there was no other option, so it was either New York, going to HC, or California, or getting, or Hornstein program at Brandeis.

JR: Did you have siblings? It sounds like you did.

RG: Yeah, I have a sister and a brother, and they're still in Toronto.

JR: Were your grandparents or parents immigrants, or were they, were they all born in North America?

RG: My maternal grandparents were born in Toronto, and my paternal grandparents were born in Poland and Russia, and they emigrated when they were young.

JR: Was your family active in the Jewish community?

RG: They were active. They were active in the Reform movement, very active in their Temple, and through the Temple active in the community.

JR: What were their jobs?

RG: My mother was a housewife, and my father was an obstetrician/gynecologist.

JR: So you would say you were middle class growing up?

RG: Yes, middle class, but very -- the Temple involvement was very important, and through the years my parents really pushed us, so that I was president of the youth group and was given many scholarships to go to Jewish summer camps in the States that were through the UAHC. So I went to Warwick, New York, I went to Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, I went to Great Barrington in Massachusetts, so I was from seventh grade through grade 13 -- that's what we have in Canada, in Toronto -- I was very active and went to, was

sent to all these camps, and I was also sent to Israel twice during that time period from the Temple.

JR: Was your family involved in Israel, in Zionist politics at the time?

RG: No.

JR: Were you the first person in your family to go?

RG: Yes, and after I went my parents did go, but I was, yes, I was the first.

JR: And what, how did your family celebrate Shabbat and holidays?

RG: We always had Shabbat dinner together. We always lit candles, said *Kiddush* and *Ha-Motzi*, and most often would go to Temple after dinner. On Shabbat, we would sometimes go to Temple. There was a period during my youth when the religious school met on Saturday, so that we would all automatically go to Temple, and that kind of changed over the years. We always went to Temple on the *chagim* and usually had a festive meal at home. We did not have a Sukkah. Our family -- and now we do; it's a very important part of our family lifestyle, but we did not have one then. So it was more of a Temple oriented celebration of holidays and Shabbat.

JR: How would you say your relationship to Judaism has changed over time?

RG: Well, since I met my husband I'm more, would identify with the Conservative movement.

JR: Is that the movement he grew up in?

RG: Yes, he grew up a Conservative at Mishkan Tefila. As soon as we were married, we started a kosher home and closely identified with the Conservative movement, Conservative synagogues here in the Boston area. Being in the field of Jewish education

when I was -- when we were first married, I worked in the Reform movement as a Jewish educator for four years in Toronto and eight years here in Boston, so that I was living a Conservative lifestyle and working as an educator in the Reform movement.

JR: Did that feel like a conflict or...?

RG: Not at all, it was fine, no problem. (laughter) Yeah, it was no problem, easy adjustment!

JR: How would you describe your family's politics growing up?

RG: Politics in terms of Israel or politics in terms of secular?

JR: Secular.

RG: Never discussed. We would -- it was never, ever discussed. It was not part of our family lifestyle. We would never discuss that. We lived in Canada, everything's wonderful! Never, ever discussed.

JR: How did you first get involved in the issue of Soviet Jewry?

RG: When I worked as the Director of Education at Temple Emmanuel in Toronto, my husband was the Director of the Hillel at York University, and that was one of the issues that the kids of the time were dealing with, and he was organizing hunger strikes, and I would join him, and we were, you know, gathering materials, supplies to send over to the Soviet Union, so that it was a kind of an automatic involvement. It was an important part of the curriculum that I was teaching to the children at the time, so it was just -- we were involved automatically because of our jobs.

JR: Was it an issue that you had been involved in before at all? Had you known about it?

RG: Well, we'd known about it as students, yes.

JR: Was your family interested in this issue, as well?

RG: Not at all. Not at all! (laughter) No, and then when I told them that we had been chosen to go on this trip, they couldn't understand it at all. They thought it was a very dangerous trip, which it was, but they couldn't understand why we would choose to do this.

JR: How did you explain it to them?

RG: Well, explaining the cause and the importance and the kinds of things that we would be doing, and I gave them worst case scenarios, if we were caught by the KGB what would happen to us, and tried to sort of make peace and appease their minds by, you know, just telling them the truth.

JR: Did it work?

RG: Yeah, yeah. I mean, they weren't pleased that we were going --

JR: Right.

RG: -- but...

JR: That's been a big theme in a lot of these interviews! (laughter)

RG: They couldn't stop us! You know, we were in our early 20s and this is what we were, you know, we were destined to do. So you know, it's the same thing now. My kids came to me -- I have a 23 year old now, and she came to me and said, you know, "I'm going on this really dangerous, wild trip, and this is why I'm going." Well, of course I'd be fearful for her but I don't think I'd stop her.

JR: Can you describe for me some of your experiences in the former Soviet Union?

RG: Well, our mission was to meet with Refuseniks, and to educate those that were considering becoming Refuseniks, or considering leaving. At that time, almost everyone who wanted to leave became a Refusenik in the '70s. We were given the names of Refuseniks to visit, and we were given a lot of supplies. We were given Hebrew/Russian dictionaries, we were given Hebrew/Russian books on Israel, maps, Hebrew/Russian maps of Israel, and when we were there one of our first, the first names that we had was Anatole Sharansky, who at the time was not famous, and we called him -- we were in Moscow -- called him, and he said he would meet us at the Synagogue, and identified, you know, described himself, we described ourselves, and we met, and we were with him several times. He was like our little personal tour guide through Moscow. He took us to Hebrew club meetings where young people, mostly young people, gathered to try to learn Hebrew, and to educate themselves on what Israel was like, and we came as sort of like the scholars in residence and helped them with their Hebrew classes and talked to them about Israel and told them about our experiences, 'cause we'd been several times, each of us, and tried to really empower them. At the same time, they would tell us about their life in Russia and how horrible it was and how they couldn't practice their Judaism, and they were just thirsting for knowledge and thirsting for our experiences and wanted to share our experiences. So, in Moscow we had a pretty positive experience, in that we met Anatole, we met Leopold Lunz, who later left and was in Israel, and other people who we met up with years later in Israel. We did not have such a positive experience in other cities. In Odessa, for example, we reached our contact, we met him, and he said he'd changed his mind and he didn't want to leave, and his goal was to tell us how wonderful life was in Russia. So, we were wondering if he was a spy and if he really wanted -- so we didn't talk to him too much, we didn't tell him too much, we listened. He took us to his home, we met his mother and his grandmother, and it was a weird situation, and we were frightened 'cause we weren't sure if, you know, he had changed his mind, if a name got changed. It just didn't seem right, so that was a very fearful time for us.

JR: Did you ever find out what the deal was with that, or just mysterious?

RG: No. Yeah. In Kishinev, we met with -- we made a phone call, we met with one family, and again, educated them, gave them hopes, gave them inspiration. The next night we were to meet with another family, so we had made an agreement to meet at a certain time at a certain place, and then there was a knock at our door at the hotel, and a man said, "We have tickets for you to go to the opera tonight." And I naively said, "Oh no, it's OK! We're not going to the opera, we're meeting a friend!" And he said, "No, you're not. You're going to the opera." And I said, "No, there must be some mistake." And then my husband's like, "Roz, back off," 'cause he clued in before I did that the KGB had caught on to us and we were going to be followed for the rest of the trip, and indeed we were in that we could not make anymore contacts, and whoever we made contact with, I don't know what happened to them. But we were escorted to the opera, and I really don't care for opera, but I went to the opera!

JR: Particularly in that kind of situation, I'm sure! (laughter)

RG: Right, there's no choice! So I went to the, we went to the opera, and then our whole itinerary was changed, and we were put on a train the next morning back to Moscow.

JR: By the KGB?

RG: Yeah, yeah. And we had been warned ahead of time that this could happen, that the worst that they could do to us -- because the Embassy knew our itinerary, so the first thing we did was go to the Embassy, the Canadian and American Embassy. The worst that could happen is they would separate us and we would have to have the same story, so we couldn't talk in our hotel rooms 'cause we knew that wasn't safe, so whenever we walked down the streets we would walk arm in arm like young lovers and make sure that like for the next 24 hours we knew what our stories were. We had to constantly share, "OK, so what if we're caught, and what are we going to say," and just to make sure our

stories were the same. As it turned out, we were never separated. We were questioned only by these like weird people that would show up at our door. Our train -- we were in this little private room; however, we were sharing it with a young man. We had no idea if we could trust him, so... And he was telling us how he wanted to leave but he wasn't Jewish and he needed to find a Jewish girl to marry so he could leave, like that was the only way out, and we didn't know if we could believe it, but we had to be cordial, we had to be polite, we had to listen to him, we had to offer like whatever silly advice we could offer just to get through this train ride. Because of our circumstances up to that moment, we had no idea if he was KGB, if we could trust him or not. The whole trip -- it was three weeks in Russia -- I was very tense. I think I lost 15 pounds in three weeks. I mean, I was just like... It was really, it was very, very scary. I would never do it again! When I got home, I said, "Never again would I do this," just because I kept fearing for my life. Then when we got home and we found out that Anatole was imprisoned, then he turns out to be this world famous sufferer, and now he's in Knesset, and just whoa! That's our little Anatole Sharansky, you know, he was our buddy!

JR: Was he imprisoned soon after your trip?

RG: Yeah.

JR: Who organized the trip?

RG: The Jewish Agency, and it was supposed to be a big secret. We were not to tell anyone who sent us at the time. I mean, 25 years later it's OK, but at the time we were not allowed to tell anyone, and what we told people was that we were being sent, but we couldn't say by whom because we were both leaders in the Jewish community, both activists in the Jewish community, and because we both have knowledge of Hebrew and we both had knowledge of Israel. I wish at the time that I'd had knowledge of Yiddish. I could've done a lot more and communicated a lot more. When we went to synagogue for Yom Kippur, of course, we were separated, and in the women's section the women were

dying to talk to me and I didn't know Yiddish, and these older ladies didn't know Hebrew, and it was sign language.

JR: Is your husband also a Jewish educator?

RG: He also received his degree in Jewish communal service. He is no longer working in the field of Jewish education; he's President of a company now. He took over his father's business. So he only worked officially as a professional for four years; then we came back to Boston and he went into his father's business, but he remained a very active volunteer and held many positions over the years, in our synagogue, in the community... And it was easy for him 'cause he had the skills. It was just very easy for him to do. In the last five years, six years I would say, he sort of stepped away from his role as a volunteer 'cause he's just been so involved. His parents both died within the last year, so he's been involved with sickness and dying and death, and now running a company.

JR: It's a lot!

RG: Yeah, he just can't do it, but he'll come back when he gets things straightened out.

JR: And what was the outcome of your trip? When you came back, were you doing sort of follow-up kinds of stuff?

RG: Oh, yeah. When we came back, first we gave a report to the Jewish agency about who we saw and what we learned, and the second part of our goal was to do a lot of speaking in the community, to tell people our story, to tell people what it was like there for Jews, what it was like. We had fabulous lives, and we were able to -- we both went on speaking tours and we talked about, you know, the plight of Soviet Jews and what it was like for us, what it was like to be a Refusenik, what it was like for this guy who was Jewish but didn't want to leave, why didn't he want to leave, what was he afraid of. So we spoke, each of us spoke many, many times.

JR: What kind of response did you get when you would speak?

RG: We had a lot of sad stories in our talks, so we would get a lot of emotional tears, an understanding of what it was like, and support. I mean, we were not fundraising at the time. We were educating and trying to, you know, make awareness -- I'm so tired, I'm sorry! (laughter) -- make people aware of what was going on in Russia, and I think that we accomplished those goals.

JR: And did you meet, did you say that you had met up again later on in Israel with some of these people? Like, were you able to maintain some kind of relationship with some of the people you'd met?

RG: Yes, yeah, and that was so exciting. It was so exciting to find out about their journeys out of Russia and what happened when they came into Israel, and the absorption process, and the success of their stories now, where they are now. We have not kept up now, we are not in touch with them anymore, but when we were in Toronto -- we went in '75 so that in '77, in '78 when we went to Israel with groups of kids, we would hook up with some of the young people that we met, but we've no longer maintained contact. And Sharansky we met when he came to Boston, but he didn't remember us at all! I'm sure he's met so many people, and spending all that time in prison did a number on his head, also. He did not remember us at all, and that was fine. I mean, we spent, what, three days out of his life, you know! To us it was major, but to him, he's taking another couple tourists around. But he didn't remember us.

JR: So were there a lot of groups like yours that the agency was sending?

RG: Yes, small groups, so it was, you know, two people, two people, one, you know... Because that was the only way that we could do work.

JR: And did the group sort of work together? Like, did you meet other people who had gone to kind of compare experiences?

RG: There's another couple from Toronto that went, but they went to another part of Russia. They were in Georgia, and we just knew that each other were being sent, but it wasn't a formal "let's get together and talk." We did informally share, "What was your experience? What were you afraid of? What kinds of obstacles did you meet? What successes?" It was totally informal. We were not asked to speak, and we just shared our report with the Jewish Agency.

JR: Do you have a copy of that report?

RG: No.

JR: (inaudible)?

RG: No. I wish I did.

JR: It's too bad! (laughter)

RG: I know! I will look to see if I have any... See, we didn't keep a diary.

JR: Right, that's always the problem with things that are a secret.

RG: I know, because we couldn't! It was all secret! Anything we had written down we had to throw out, we had to rip up in tiny, tiny, tiny pieces and get rid of. So we had no documents there. Then when we came back I think we went through a time of -- I know I was always looking over my shoulder. It really affected me emotionally for a little bit. It took me a while to get back into society, back into work, 'cause I was physically and emotionally drained.

JR: What would you say were the greatest challenges of your experience?

RG: Finding the Jewish people without being afraid. Even in Synagogue, again, because we had to be separated so I was more afraid, not knowing if the person beside

me was KGB or a real Jew, and not being able to be open if the person who sat beside me was friendly. You didn't know who to trust.

JR: What were the most rewarding parts of the experience?

RG: Seeing the smiles of Refuseniks when we gave them materials or when we gave them hope. Just being able to share our experiences with them. Meeting extended families and just seeing hope in their eyes. That, to me, that was the most rewarding.

JR: Did you have any trouble getting in and out with all the stuff you brought?

RG: Well, we were taught how to smuggle it in, so we, you know, had everything packed, everything was hidden, and we did have... I think our trick was -- I'm trying to remember -- our trick was that they would say, "Do you have any books?" And I'd say, "Oh, yes," and I'd have a couple of books at the top of my suitcase to show them. So I think that's the way we were able to smuggle, and they gave us instructions on how to do this. Going out, leaving, we weren't smuggling anything. We bought a few gifts. We had to! We had to play the role of tourists. We had to make sure that every day we were doing touristy things. We went to the ballet, which was my pleasure, we went to museums. We had to do the touristy things to show that we were there as tourists. That was our, you know, our cover so to speak, and then we'd go to the ballet, and then late at night we would meet with a family.

JR: And would you say that your experience in the Soviet Union changed your perception of the Jewish community and your role in it?

RG: Well, I think that I realize the importance of activism, the importance of if something is going wrong in another part of the world that we can make a difference. I mean, I've always been committed to working in the Jewish community. I still am after all these years. After I finished working as Principal in the schools, after I had my third baby I found it really difficult to work in the afternoons, so I worked in the mornings at the

Synagogue Council of Massachusetts for ten years before I came to Hadassah, and that gave me an opportunity to continue the kinds of work that I felt was important, that wasn't Soviet Jewry, but it was getting people involved in working on Christmas day with the hungry and the homeless, and my whole job there was making people aware of the Jewish community's role in working with the hungry and the homeless. I also felt it was really important to belong to a Synagogue, so my work there also included trying to increase membership recruitment, integration, and enrollment to the Synagogue. So I think it encouraged me as an individual to continue my role, my work in the Jewish community. Sometimes the agenda has changed, but it kind of all turns around because my youngest, who's almost 15, is really interested in the Nebenotrovsk project, and she really, really wants to go there and make a difference. I just visited her at camp on Sunday and she asked me about it again. So it's like, it's almost -- it's come back, you know! (laughter) That here's this kid 35 years later who wants to go back, who wants to go over to Russia and make a difference. So I don't know if it's inbred, if she just gained this genetically or just learned from us the importance of volunteering and doing something. It does make a difference. So I think the trip did have an impact on us; I mean, yes, I was frightened, and yes, I got sick from it, but it made a difference in knowing that we could make a difference.

JR: Right. So you have three children?

RG: I have three daughters. My oldest is 23, and she's graduated from Barnard and JTS and she's entering JTS Rabbinical School in the fall.

JR: I was actually at the graduation.

RG: You were?! Oh! And why were you there?

JR: My mom was getting an honorary degree.

RG: Who's your mom?

JR: (inaudible).

RG: Oh, sure. Yeah, it was beautiful.

JR: It was really nice.

RG: It was just beautiful. I was very happy to be there. I'd never been at a ceremony like that before, and look forward to being there again! I mean, she, my oldest daughter, was Regional President of USY, and so she followed along in our activism in her way. My middle child is, Shirah, is almost 19, and she's a second year student at BU, and this year is staffing USR on Wheels. Are you familiar with that program? So her bus is called the Mitzvah Bus, so everywhere they go they do a Mitzvah. She just called me this morning. They were in San Francisco, what was the Mitzvah, they cleaned up the beach. And she is very involved in social action, and was just dying to staff this bus and was so happy to get this job, and is sort of following along and doing her thing in Hillel, and very involved in working with the hungry and homeless and helping children read, and I mean, she's just like all over the place trying to find, really figure out what she's doing. I don't know what her life goal is going to be; it changes daily, you know, one day I'm a teacher, one day I'm a social worker, whatever, but she's very involved in the Jewish community, and also was a leader in USY. She was a Vice President, but her particular area of expertise is Tikkun Olam and social action. And then my youngest, who's 15, is going to be a sophomore at Brookline High, and I didn't think she was going to follow the footsteps of her sisters, but she seems to be doing that, but is finding her own little path and is just... Since she's been 10 years old has been talking about going to Nebenotrovsk, and for her bat mitzvah wanted toys in baskets as centerpieces as crafts, and she packaged all those up to send them over to children there. So I think the activism spark is different in each kid, but I think that they have it and they understand the value, and certainly the Jewish values.

JR: Did you and your husband talk about your trip to the Soviet Union with your kids?

RG: We never talked about it with them until last year. Yeah, we just didn't talk about it. I mean, we may have mentioned it, but we never really talked about details until it sort of all started coming up again with the Women Who Dared program, and I said, "Dave, oh, I've got to find my slides, I need pictures, I need this, I need that," so we had to go find stuff that we'd kind of buried away.

JR: Were they impressed?

RG: Oh yeah, oh yeah! And one daughter came, one out of three came, yeah.

JR: Tell me a little bit about your work at Hadassah.

RG: I am the Executive Director. I've been here -- this is my fifth year. Before I was Executive Director, I was a very active volunteer in Hadassah. When I worked at a Temple, I worked at Synagogue Council as a very active member of Hadassah, and working my way up the ladder of leadership, and one day one of the volunteers said, "Why don't you come work for us professionally instead of Synagogue Council," and that started a whole change. My work here, I do a lot of things, everything from administration to planning wonderful programs. You know, an example is the one that we did, the Women Who Dared with the Jewish Women's Archive, to awareness. I took a group of women to the State House in June, where we tried to push the Senators to pass the Genetic Privacy Act. We go into high schools and colleges with our Check It Out program, which is a breast cancer awareness program. So I'm like all over the place here with, you know, one minute writing a budget, another minute getting women, getting a group of women planning a fundraiser, the next hour planning a health awareness program, to trying to figure out what our, taking the national goals, the national agenda and trying to figure out how it fits into Boston, as well as getting Hadassah's name out in the community, so that I'll be constantly going to coalition meetings and working with other Jewish organizations in the area. So my defined day is different every day, and that makes the job really exciting!

JR: Right. And how would you say that your contributions have affected others?

RG: Contributions in terms of the...

JR: It could be either.

RG: Today or what we did...?

JR: Both.

RG: I mean, I guess I already spoke about, you know, the effect that we had, our trip had. On my contributions today, I think that in terms of the local Hadassah that I've made an impact here in keeping it afloat, in doing leadership development, in getting the name of Hadassah out there, and I think that my skills as a professional really help mold the organization, and I know I'm helping move it forward.

JR: Have you had any role models?

RG: I've had lots of role models. I mean, I've always said that Henrietta Szold is a role model, even before I was a professional here, as a woman who saw, who went to Palestine in the early 1900s, saw a need and did something about it. I really see her as a role model, but there are many national Hadassah leaders I see as role models that are just articulate women that, you know, also seem to try to get out there and speak about it and do something. And local role models, you know, colleagues in the community, Nancy Kaufman, Sheila Decter, Gail Reimer, I mean, I have a lot of people that I can look up to and I can go to for advice and I see as colleagues, and we share a lot.

JR: When you were younger, did you have any role models growing up?

RG: I did have a role model. His name was Heinz Warshauer, and he was the Director of Education at Holy Blossom Temple, and he's really the one that pushed me to enter the field of Jewish education. He was a very strange fellow. He was a Holocaust

survivor, and never let us forget it. He was very strict in Reform Jewish education, but wanted us to have everything, and really instilled not only the value of Jewish education but he instilled self-esteem in me. He didn't want me to get married. He wanted me to not have to worry about a husband. Like that's what I'm saying, it was really strange. So I went and I told him that I was engaged, and he said, "No, you shouldn't! You should devote all your time to Jewish education!" I'm like, "Yeah, well, I'll do both!" (laughter) So yeah, he was just, you know, strange guy, but I would see him as a role model.

JR: That's about the end of the questions that I have for you. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to tell me about?

RG: No, I don't think so. I mean, I think that the trip that I did in the '70s had a profound impact on my life. I think that as a teenager I had committed myself to Jewish education, and I'm really happy that my oldest kid is definitely on the path and also wants to get her Masters in Jewish education while she's at JTS, and that my other ones are following suit, and they all only need to bring me nice Jewish boys and then we'll be all set! (laughter)

JR: Great, well thank you so much for your time!

RG: Thank you!

JR: I appreciate it!

[END OF INTERVIEW]