

## Sue Katz Transcript

Meirit Cohen: So, I'm going to start by asking you: do you consent to being recorded and having this possibly be put up on the JWA website in some form?

Sue Katz: Which website?

MC: Jewish Women's Archive.

SK: Yes. Okay.

MC: Can you tell me a bit about your childhood in Pittsburgh and your family of origin?

SK: Yes, I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, which I left as fast as I could at seventeen. My parents were first generation, that is to say, their parents were immigrants, and all of them, the grandparents and my parents, lived in Pittsburgh. My grandmothers both died when my respective parents were toddlers; my grandfathers both died when I was 10.

Pittsburgh had been a great industrial city of steel mills, coal mines, and labor unions. As I grew up, the city was dying, due in great part to overseas steel replacing American steel. So, it was a very sad town. But it was fairly sizable. It had about 650,000 residents. I went to a high school that was very mixed. About a third Black, a third Jewish, and a third Catholic, and there was a lot of social conflict. It was a pretty rough school, a lot of fighting, a lot of tracking based on class and ethnicity.

As for my family life, it wasn't really very happy. The only person who was an ally for me was my father. I grew up in the '50s and was in high school in the early '60s, so at that time, working-class fathers did not parent. They worked, they came home, and anything that you wanted to talk to them about, they'd say, "Ask your mother." My mother didn't care for me and was a very difficult person.

MC: Do you have any siblings?

SK: I had an older brother, three years older, who got polio during the whole polio crisis right before the vaccine became available. In fact, my class was one of the very first to receive the vaccine. My brother died right before the pandemic. Like a month or two before the pandemic, he dropped dead, which was a little disconcerting, because he's only three years older than me. He wasn't in great shape and didn't take care of himself.

MC: This was in 2020?

SK: Yes, I guess. Yes. Right before. I think February. Going to his funeral was the last trip I took before we got locked down, so I believe it was February.

MC: What did you want to be when you grew up and why?

SK: I sort of wanted to be an athlete, and I ended up in my first career being a professional athlete. But sports options were highly limited for women at that time, and the restrictions on women's sports pissed me off. They ruined the games. Take basketball. Even though I wasn't tall, I loved playing the game with friends in the neighborhood. With basketball, you're supposed to have five players per team running all over the court. But in what they called "Girls Basketball," you had six people on a team. The floor was divided in half, and you were either a defender or a shooter, and you couldn't cross the line the whole game. You could only dribble three times because the "scientists" believed at that time that more dribbling could shake up the ovaries and cause infertility. That was the same justification they used to keep women out of marathon races. Bullshit. In addition, I think I probably always wanted to be a writer, and I always have been. I never made a living from it, but I've been writing all my life and publishing since the late 1960s.

MC: Has your interest in writing changed over the years in the different genres?

SK: When I started out, it was mostly political writing: essays, leaflets, white papers, stuff like that. I think my first piece that I published was in an anti-Vietnam War newsletter. But my first piece that really was widely read and widely reproduced was something that I wrote at the beginning of the lesbian liberation movement in 1970. The piece continues to live on. Just this week, I lectured at Harvard on that piece, which they study in a class on the history of American activism. I didn't so much as lecture as I was on Zoom, and I answered questions. There were about sixty students with a lot of questions.

Although my writing started with journalism, with essays, with polemics, with political writing, since about 2000, I've been writing a lot of fiction. I've had stories printed in a range of publications, and my three most recent books were all fiction.

MC: Do you enjoy writing [fiction] more than you did your political writing?

SK: I love writing. Just give me an assignment, and I'm a happy bunny. Yes, I did journalism and reviews for many, many years. But publishers can be a pain in the ass. I don't like to work with institutions, and the whole world of publishing seems to always be one step behind the rest of society. It's a very sluggish industry. I just lost the patience to do it, especially as the industry contracted and consolidated, and they got rid of so many professional editors. Until the pandemic, I was a dance reviewer, which I've done for about forty years. Originally, it was a way to use my writing skills and my lifelong interest in dance to get great seats for free to see any dance performance I wanted. I'm a dancer myself. I never went back to reviewing after the pandemic.

MC: Let's talk about your education. Why did you decide to go to Boston University for college, and what was your experience like there?

SK: I decided to come to New England because the summer between my junior and senior year in high school, I received a full scholarship to a very posh private prep school called Phillips Exeter Academy. At the time, Exeter was pretty much all white and

definitely all men during the academic year; they didn't accept women at that time. This was 1964, the summer of '64. Since it was also the period when the Civil Rights Movement was growing and was getting a lot of attention, they gave out six scholarships to working-class Blacks and six scholarships to working-class whites. I got one of those scholarships, so I got to see New England. I mean, that experience was a whole story in and of itself. Nasty story, nasty people. It was my first introduction to the ruling class, and I can't say that it was a very positive experience. But there were wonderful things about it, because rich people save the best stuff for themselves. It was the first time I ever heard a cello player, and it was a teacher of mine. He was sitting ten feet away from me. It was transcendent.

Anyway, I had seen New England. I thought New England was great, and I thought Boston would be good. So, I applied to Boston University. I had a full scholarship from the state of Pennsylvania, so I could go anywhere, and I didn't want to go to one of those ruling-class schools. BU was urban, and Boston struck me as a big city and really amazing – museums and all like that. I mean, now, after having lived in London, I think of it as rather provincial and small. But then it was the world. I had a great experience at BU. It was absolutely everything an education should be, mainly because it was revolutionary times. I learned so much on the streets. We were fighting the war in Vietnam, we were fighting racism, we were fighting for civil rights. Then, at the end, the Women's Movement started, so for me it was a very revolutionary period in my life. Plus, I got a fabulous education. I had gone to a pretty tough high school in Pittsburgh, so I was introduced to the wider world of knowledge, from classical music to philosophy to physics to Marxism. There were no books in my house growing up, although my parents did take me to the library when I asked. But Boston University opened the intellectual world to me. I had some wonderful teachers. I'll always be grateful for that. My experience really grounded me.

And it gave me my first boost into writing. My first college paper came back from our musicologist professor, Dr. Roye Wates, with the comment: “Girl, you sure can write!” It was one of the best moments of my life.

MC: In a social sense, how did BU compare to your undergraduate or high school education?

SK: Well, I met my “forever” people. Within the first few weeks, I met folks who today are still among my best friends. I met people from all over the place, unlike my high school. The students were also into learning; that was different.

When I got the full scholarship, I was relieved to know I'd finally get out of Pittsburgh, which had been a pretty traumatic place for me. I still had to work to pay for room and board throughout college. But you could swing it in those days; today you can't. The minimum wage has hardly budged in all these decades.

I was so relieved and thought, “Oh, I'm going to go away, and I'm going to be an adult, and I'm going to make my own decisions. I'm going to have my own life.” Then I got to BU in September 1965, and found out about all the restrictions imposed on women students. For example, women were expelled from BU for wearing pants on campus, even in the common rooms of our (segregated) dorms. Women had a ten o'clock weekday curfew and a twelve o'clock weekend curfew, unless you had a note from a relative, which, of course, we became very good at writing for each other. The limitations on women were outrageous, but by the next year or so, everything changed. I think they even opened co-ed dorms. That was a period of change. But when I first got there, it was very restrictive.

MC: Was that change with women's rights and civil rights something that the students accepted willingly? Or was that different from the older generation of professors and faculty?

SK: It was a different atmosphere in the country in those days, and a lot of people identified with radical movements. It was also kind of the beginning of the hippie period. So, if you weren't into radical politics, you could be into a radical lifestyle and smoke a lot of weed and read a lot of poetry and groove at love-ins and whatnot. I mean, I was never a hippie because I was always trying to organize the hippies into radical politics, but some of my best friends were. It was a period of experimentation with a lot of drugs. I was super lucky to end up in college at that time in that revolutionary environment. We never had a graduation, and we hardly had any finals. When there were finals, people would just set off the fire alarms. So, there wouldn't be any finals. There wasn't a graduation because they were afraid of demonstrations and disruptions. They had the graduation fifty years later, and I didn't go, and I'm sorry I didn't; it would have been interesting.

MC: It must have been fairly recent?

SK: I've never gone to any graduation. Well, I did my high school graduation.

MC: If you feel comfortable, can you share your coming-out experience?

SK: I was in my junior year of high school. At the start of the semester, a new girl walked into the class. I must have been fifteen. I saw her, and she saw me, and it was love at first sight, not that we knew what that was. We became lovers, and we were lovers junior year and senior year. But we didn't use that word. We didn't know it. We called it best friends who had sleepovers. But our sleep-overs were a little bit more fun than the average sleep-over. We knew what we were doing was terribly wrong and that we had to be very, very careful and quiet and not talk about it. We never told anybody. Then we got caught by my nasty mother during one of our sleep-overs. In those days, it was illegal. It was officially considered a mental health disorder. You could be punished with electroshock, incarceration in a mental hospital, or incarceration in jail. Terrible, terrible things could happen to you. Those particular things didn't happen to us, but it was pretty

dire and horrible. I never saw her again for many, many, many, many years, until like my fortieth high school reunion, or fiftieth, or I don't know, one of them. You lose track of time.

MC: Did she eventually come out in her public life?

SK: No, but I know she got married. But I mean, we had a conversation.

MC: She married a man?

SK: When I first got to Boston, she wanted us to resume our relationship. But I was so freaked out. I was positively homophobic. I was having a hard enough time being a hick from Pittsburgh in Boston with all these rich kids. I couldn't take an additional outsider thing. So I didn't see her, but I did sneak in some uncommitted play with other women.

MC: When did you officially come out in your public sphere?

SK: With the movement. I was on the ground floor of the movement. I was in one of the very first lesbian collectives in Boston. I mean, the minute we could, as soon as Stonewall happened, and there was language – we didn't have language before Stonewall – it gave our feelings meaning. There had been no such thing as “come out.” We didn't have that word. We didn't have “closet.” We didn't have any of that. But we created language the same way that feminists created language, like the word “sexism.” I was out at the first march there ever was in Boston. I was right there, tripping on acid.

MC: Was your coming-out story a common one? Was it that painful for a lot of people?

SK: Those were the days of the raids of the bars. That's what Stonewall was about: people sick of having their bar raided and people dragged off and their names printed in the newspaper. That was the thing. You would get dragged down to the police station, and then your name would be published in the police blotter part of the newspaper, and

then you would lose your job, you'd lose your husband or wife, you'd lose your kids. If you were renting, you'd be thrown out of your apartment. You were considered to either be a sinner going to hell, mentally deficient, or criminal. It depends who the person was, whose gaze you were in, but yes, you could get in a lot of trouble. Horrible. Of course, there was a lot of violence on the street as well. Not that that's really stopped ever. It's now aimed more, I think, at trans women of color, but I got threatened many a time. I was a baby butch. People would say to me, "Are you a girl or boy?" I'd say, "What, are you doing a survey? None of your fucking business." Then, there were a lot of aggressions, a lot of threats, a lot of assaults. It was terrible. But the queer movement, just like the Women's Movement had done, changed so much for us. It didn't stop the violence, though. There seem to be violent, hate-filled men in every generation.

MC: What role did spirituality and/or Judaism play in your sexuality in that sphere?

SK: Well, luckily, I'm an atheist. One day, one day only, I went to Sunday school in a bus. I get bus sick if I'm sitting in the back. So, I vomited the whole way, vomited the whole way back, and decided that if there was a God, that God didn't want me vomiting all the way to Sunday school and back. So I just left it at that. So, I had one Sunday school class in my whole life. I'm not spiritual. I'm not religious. I'm a Jew, and when people say, "What kind of Jew are you?" I say, "I'm a culinary Jew," because I like to eat my way through the holidays. But spirituality plays no role in my life at all. I'm political. That's how I see the world, not as a spiritual person.

MC: What inspired you to become an activist? Specifically, in your involvement in women's liberation and gay rights.

SK: When I was in high school, Freedom Summer happened in 1964. That was when college kids went down south to register Black people to vote during the Civil Rights Movement. I was too young. So one of my best friends and I, a guy named Addison, started a civil rights group in Pittsburgh for teenagers. It was still Jim Crow times. For my

generation, the Civil Rights Movement is where we all learned politics, learned hope, learned solidarity, learned love, learned fury and rage. I mean, I feel like I pretty much learned much of what has since guided my life from the Civil Rights Movement. It was an admirable and sophisticated movement. So that was my introduction to politics. That was my first political involvement. We high schoolers ran into a lot of resistance in Pittsburgh, which was a very segregated town. Not as segregated as Boston, but a pretty segregated town, as many of the northern cities were.

Movements happen because of real circumstances and real changes in society. So the Women's Movement sprang up, seemingly at once, all over the country: rural, urban, north, south. One of the most active places, for example, was Iowa City. They put out a literary magazine that was fabulous. The time had come, perhaps because the '60s was a time of economic growth and women wanted a piece of that. When I was first looking for work, you searched among the newspaper for ads for jobs – there was obviously no internet. The newspaper ads were divided between men and women – "Help Wanted: Men," and "Help Wanted: Women." The women's jobs were all as you can imagine: clerical, teachers, babysitters, something with children, something assisting men at something. Those are the options that you had. In the end, I had to create my first career out of air, as many of us did.

MC: That's really admirable. So, you've answered this a lot. What world or national events have significantly influenced your life?

SK: Well, I think I more or less answered that because the Civil Rights Movement was the biggest thing. There were a lot of assassinations when I was young, a lot of assassinations: President Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. Che Guevara. They had a big impact, I guess. The Vietnam War, this unjust war, terrible war, had a big impact as well.

MC: What accomplishments in your career, or in your life in general, are you most proud of?

SK: My first career was as a martial arts master. I was one of the first women in the country to get a black belt in Taekwondo. In California, I opened a women's gym – I don't know if it was the first, but very close to it – in California in the mid-1970s. I'm a very literal person: neither poetic nor spiritual. So I called my gym, Every Woman Can Kick Ass Institute.

Then I moved to Israel, and I lived in Israel for fourteen years, and I opened a Taekwondo gym there that welcomed everybody. It welcomed women (who weren't welcome in the other gyms), welcomed Palestinians (who weren't welcome in the other gyms). Eventually, also children – only after the six-year-old children of my town demanded that I let them in the gym, and embarrassed me and my reluctance by proving they could be disciplined and fabulous. I learned a lot about Israeli society from my students, and I became very active in the anti-Occupation movement once my Hebrew was good enough to participate.

So that gym, which I retired from in '90, or '91, is still going. It's still called the Institute of Sue Katz, and they still bow to a picture of me that was taken when I was thirty-two, flying off a rock with a kick. So that's pretty fabulous. I credit the students of my students, of my students, of my students. I don't know how many generations have passed, and I don't keep an eye on it, but I know it's there. So, being a successful martial arts master, owner of a gym, and head instructor, in those days, that was great.

I went through hell to get my black belt. The men would break my bones on purpose. I had two or three broken bones just in my green belt. They would say, "We're now going to break your bones," and then they would break my bones. If I would have slept with them, it might have been different. But the combination of being the first woman in the gym and a dyke just didn't go over very well. But my master was very devoted to me.

He's dead. He tried to look after me, and I became his most successful student, because I had this big gym. I had two gyms in Israel, actually.

MC: You showed them.

SK: Yes, I guess I did.

MC: Did you miss the martial arts once you retired from it in 1991?

Being a martial arts master with a championship institute was my coolest career. Then, when I retired from the martial arts, having been used to being very physical. I was like, "Oh, God, now what?" Then I found the queer partner dancing scene, which was just beginning. So, it was my new source of endorphins. But I approached it very similarly to how I approached martial arts, in which you have to be very dedicated and practice daily with sharp focus. That's how it was in the martial arts, and that's how I was about dancing. So, it was physical. It was my workout. It was my community. And over many years of struggle, same-sex couples can now compete on the international level in "regular" competitions. We did that!

MC: Was there a specific genre of dance within partner dance that you enjoyed the most?

SK: Well, we did ballroom and Latin, which is comprised of ten dances: five classic ballroom and five they call Latin. Rumba was my favorite of those ten dances. It's a very sexy dance. It's a very communicative dance. It's a very teasing dance. Yes. No. Yes. Maybe. It's that kind of communication.

But now in the States, I'm devoted to the single dance of West Coast Swing. It's a slow and smooth, groovy dance. In Boston, we have almost daily opportunities to dance in different clubs, but the population is mostly college students.

MC: So, I was going to ask, how does West Coast Swing compare to other types of swing dance?

SK: Traditionally, it's the smoothest version, along with Hand Dancing, which is mainly done in Black dance communities and is similar to West Coast. During the pandemic, a new generation became enthralled with West Coast Swing and changed the dance a lot, spreading their version through social media, especially TikTok. But the main thing is that it's rhythmic, musical, and very smooth.

For the first decade or so in the States, I ran into a lot of friction. I've always been a partner dance leader; I don't follow, I lead. The Boston scene was awfully backward, and I put up with a lot of insults, but things have lightened up since then. I didn't dance at all during the pandemic. The younger people did. I have tried to go back, but now I'm into my 70s, and it is tougher to retain the figures and steps.

MC: Dancing is like muscle memory, like riding a bike.

SK: I hope you're right. I hope you're right.

MC: What did you do professionally when you moved to London?

SK: That was my second career. I worked in a very big British nonprofit throughout the 1990s, and I was a middle manager. I was assistant director. I developed a program of international, transnational volunteerism for young people, from age, I think, eighteen to thirty-five. It was a model that was picked up by the European Union. Myself and my counterpart from Italy developed that program for the European Union called European Voluntary Service, which is still going, funded to millions of dollars, and many thousands of kids get to go to another country, immerse themselves in the life and language by taking up a full-time volunteer position. These jobs were always with social care projects, which demanded a lot of responsibility from these volunteers. It might entail living with a person who needs help being independent, or facilitating for a student who is a

quadriplegic and wants to go to college, and needs help to take their notes and get ready for school. Maybe they'd work with kids or elders or families, in institutions, schools, or homes. We had eight hundred different placement venues in England. So, I would travel the world setting up contracts and then checking on the contracts. Of course, I would set up the biggest contracts for the places I wanted to visit the most. Italy, yes, it was my biggest contract. But I went all over Europe. I went to Peru, South Korea, and Kenya, and it was all paid for by work. I had traveled very little in life, and that was an incredible opportunity.

MC: Was traveling a big part of your identity, or something that was really important to you?

SK: Well, I loved it. It was a treat. I loved traveling by myself. I loved traveling for business because we were a charity and nonprofit. All my contracts were with nonprofits in the other countries. So, I would meet groovy people. I wasn't doing business with idiots. I was doing business with really kind people who were committed to social justice in their own country. So, traveling alone, I would meet these people, they'd invite me home for dinner, where I'd see what life was like. I always stayed a couple days extra for myself, took vacation days. Or really, what I did was plan all my meetings for Friday, so that in Europe in the '90s, you had to stay Saturday night in order to get the cheap flight rate. So then I'd have the weekend to myself to be a tourist. I wouldn't say it was my identity. It was my job. My identity has always been as a writer and an activist. My business card has always said: "wordsmith and rebel."

MC: So, in what spaces have you felt the most comfortable being a Jewish and queer woman?

SK: In Boston now, I belong to a group with a very long name – I didn't name it, it was named before I got to Boston – called Jewish Women for Justice in Israel-Palestine. We're a small, tight group of women, mostly around my age, and most of us also work

with other groups around justice for Palestine. But when I lived in Israel, we had a group called Tel Aviv Women in White during the war in Lebanon, which was 1982, in which we demonstrated against the Israeli incursion into Lebanon. Then, when the first Intifada started, we formed Women in Black, which still exists and which spread all over the world, and even was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. We had one slogan: End the Occupation! In Israel, we had demonstrations every Friday afternoon. It started in Jerusalem, then we formed one in Tel Aviv, and the women in Haifa formed one. Pretty soon, there were, I think, a couple dozen demonstrations simultaneously around Israel, in the cities and the farming communities. There still are probably about half a dozen of them in Israel. Women in Black has spread globally to different movements and whatnot. I have friends in London whose weekly Women in Black standouts call for an end to the Genocide in Gaza by Israel.

MC: Was the group, Women in Black, mostly religious women, non-religious women, or a mix?

SK: Non-religious. I think there were probably religious women involved as well, but I think primarily non-religious, which is called, in Israel, secular. In Israel, you're either a secular Jew or you're an orthodox Jew, and that's it. There isn't this sort of Conservative or Reform, all of those.

MC: So, what was the biggest thing you did in Israel besides martial arts and these activist groups? Or is that basically the big thing?

SK: Yes, those were the two big aspects of my life. I mean, I was involved with the feminist movement there – very involved. But we were mostly working against the Occupation because that's all you can do when you're in Israel. You can't really get into anything else because that's the dominant contradiction of society. It's a major crime being done in your name. So, you have to speak up.

MC: So, in all the places that you've lived, how have you felt their acceptance and attitudes towards queer identities have compared?

SK: Well, in America, we created the movement, and when we created the movement, I was outrageously loudly out. I was in my early twenties. I was right up in everybody's face. I was militant in every situation, whether it was the grocery store or a demonstration. In Israel, I was in the closet, again. I had to go back into the closet, particularly because I worked with children. I was famous. I was the first woman black belt in Israel, and the first woman gym owner in Israel. I was on TV all the time. I had a column in the newspaper. I was well known. The town that I lived in gave me a big town bomb shelter for my gym, which is still in the same place. I wouldn't have gotten any of that if I had been out. So, I was very much in the closet. The gay scene was miserably in the closet. Many, many gay men and lesbians married each other so that they would have coverage. It's called being a beard for each other. So, I was in the closet the whole time I was there. That's fourteen years; it was brutal.

Then, when I lived in London, I determined, from the day I got there, that I would be one hundred percent out everywhere, in every situation again, and I was not going to go back in the closet. London is a very easy place to be different because it is such a hodgepodge of people from around the world of every sort, the result of Britain's ugly colonial history. I would've been nervous to ride a bus in a suit and tie in America at that time. I'd have been scared to do that in Israel. But in London, nobody would notice me, because there'd inevitably be a goth, a Renaissance freak, someone with dozens of tattoos and piercings, all sorts. I wouldn't stand out. London is very ecumenical in that sense.

However, there's a lot of antisemitism in England. I had a lot of run-ins around antisemitism there because they have a very nasty history. Shortly after I got there, they were doing an excavation in Norwich, in the north of England, and they found a group

grave with the bodies of at least 17 Jews, most of them kids. And then there was King Edward I's 1290 Edict of Expulsion, which ordered all Jews to leave the realm. They weren't allowed in again until the mid-17th century. England's got a shoddy history of all sorts of colonialism and discrimination. Yes, I ran into a lot of crap while I was there, including in the workplace. The executive director of our honored charity was grossly racist and antisemitic.

MC: So, it was easier to be gay than it was to be Jewish?

SK: Yes. Interesting. Well put. In London, yes.

MC: It's kind of the opposite everywhere else. So, you have a blog called "Consenting Adult." Can you tell me about it, like what it is, and its evolution and conception?

SK: I don't even know exactly when I started that blog – probably around 2004. But as soon as there were blog platforms with templates, I started blogging. I was doing a lot of journalism at the time, and I wanted a place where I didn't have to get an okay from the editor; I didn't have to put up with editors telling me to tone down my language or change my attitude. I wanted to write what I wanted to write. The blog gave me that opportunity. I had every piece edited. I have a person who edits all my stuff before it is published, so it's not just sloppy ole anything going up there. But yes, I loved having this platform that I control. This is the wonderful thing about social media: the age of the Internet has opened up a plethora of new options to writers. The things I write have often been too radical for many publications. So Consenting Adult gave me a way to rant, rave, and say whatever the hell I wanted to say. I love that.

However, once Facebook launched, I became a Facebook addict, which I am to this day, and it's the biggest time waster I've ever had in my life. But I post a great deal because it's so much easier to upload to Facebook than to a blog, which needs to be formatted and illustrated. The process is complicated and difficult and time-consuming, whereas

Facebook is instantaneous. It's just a very easy tool to use. So, I fear that since I got on Facebook, which I did very early, I have neglected my blog, posting much less frequently. [Postscript: Since this interview, Typepad has suddenly shut down, gone black, and taken with it decades of my blogged writing.]

MC: Have the topics that you've written about changed significantly, or are they still within the same –?

SK: I have always blogged a lot of reviews: of dance, books, films, TV, art exhibits. I also have furious responses to offensive or annoying things I run into in daily life. Of course, political rants underpin my worldview, but Facebook is a more appropriate place for bursts of fury. And for reactions to current events.

I have always avoided Twitter, but have dipped my toe in Instagram. I do worry about how much time I spend scrolling on Facebook – and on TikTok – time better spent on writing and reading.

But I'm most proud of my books. I have two collections of short stories and one novel about a woman who's eighty-four, moves to senior housing, and falls in love. This woman is a widow – straight, grandmother, etc. – and she meets a dyke who is seventy-nine, and they fall in love and get stoned and do it. I mean, it's more complex than that. But it shows a bit about life in senior housing, which is a whole thing in and of itself. So, that's my novel. The other two books are short stories, my favorite genre to read and write.

MC: Are the short stories also fiction? Or are they based on [reality]?

SK: All fiction.

MC: How would you describe the Jewish Lesbian Gang?

SK: Okay, you're taking me back to the early 1970s. The Jewish Lesbian Gang was a small group in San Francisco. But first, I should explain why my story shifts to California.

I was a member of one of the first lesbian collectives in Boston, which was comprised of working-class dykes. But people would challenge me – and only me — in the collective, and say, “Well, you're not working-class, how could you be working-class?” and I'd be like, “Why are you challenging me?” A woman who many years later became the head of the Women's Studies Department at Boston University, Diane Balser, said to me, “They're challenging you because you're Jewish and they've bought into the antisemitic notion that every Jew is rich.” That really blew my mind because I had thought very little up to that point about being Jewish; it wasn't a big part of my identity. I was an atheist and a socialist. But after Diane said that, I started exploring more about being Jewish and the role of Jews in American society, and more. Soon after, due to the hostility we faced in the Boston women's movement around issues of class, we decided to all relocate to San Francisco, together with our girlfriends and a few middle-class supporters. I'm not sure when that was: either '72 or '73.

Once we settled there, the Jewish women in our circle started reading about the Holocaust, about radical immigrant Jewish women in the States, about Jewish life in Europe. Three of us decided to form a singing group called The Jewish Lesbian Gang. In those days, the movement was very full of life. When a movement group would have a fundraiser or a rally, we'd be invited to go and sing. We mostly sang original radical songs that I wrote. I'm not a singer, but I did the “boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.” Like the bass in Doo Wop – my favorite kind of music. The two other women were fabulous singers, and they would harmonize. The movement was so big and varied in those days that we performed a lot. So while the Jewish Lesbian gang didn't have a political action arm, we studied together, and did a lot of self and community education.

MC: You said that your recent work is focusing on LGBTQ elders. Can you talk about that, the issues around it, and how it's happening now?

SK: I've published two books of short stories and one novel – and the main characters are inevitably elders, and often queer elders. My next book, comprised of stories I wrote during the pandemic, is a more eclectic mix. The thing about LGBTQ elders is that we often have very different circumstances from the greater population. We are four times less likely to have children, and are often alienated from our bio families because of their homophobia. But 80% of care is provided by family members. The lucky ones among us have formed chosen families, but for the men, their generation and close friends were decimated by HIV/AIDS. We're twice as likely to be single and to live alone. We are often afraid to be "out" at work, senior centers, elder housing, and with medical people, and so we experience greater ill health and poverty. Many of us are old enough to have been in the closet when homosexuality was illegal and a mental health condition, and now we fear having to return to the closet as we become more vulnerable. All of these challenges are greatly amplified for elders of color, trans elders, immigrants, older queer prisoners, and elders with disabilities.

One of our biggest fears is that when we need help in our homes, or we're in a nursing home or hospital, the strangers taking care of us think that we're sinful and perverse people. We recognize this dangerous situation. That's when we head back to the closet, even though we were the pioneers who created the queer movement. Yes, I write stories about situations like that. So, there's a lot of work to be done.

So, part of what I do is lecture to young college kids, such as social work students who may end up working with elders and who need to know about the problems we face. And part of the work I do around this demographic is about building community. I'm an active supporter of Flashback, a vibrant Boston organization for LGBTQ elders of color. I'm on the board of a group called Rally, which organizes social events for older lesbians, as a

way to counter isolation. [The leadership of Rally aged out – two died – and so the group has closed down.]

MC: What else is being done besides what you do, lecturing and stuff?

SK: Other groups have gone from facility to facility and do trainings on how to be welcoming to LGBTQ people. So, it could be nursing homes, assisted living, independent living, or it could be senior centers in town. You have a senior center in town, but it has no rainbow sticker up. All their activities are family-oriented. They don't celebrate Pride. It's not welcoming.

So they're taught to change their intake forms, to have a non-discrimination policy, and to make sure to be open about being a safe space for LGBTQ clients. There is a national organization called SAGE, which not only provides services but also works on legislation and does important research.

MC: That's really important. I think that's all the questions. Okay. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about that I didn't ask about?

SK: I think you asked about just about everything. I would say one thing. One of the things that we try to raise as frequently as possible is that we need an intergenerational movement, and that young people have got to start building alliances with us. We try all the time. Because it's really very important that we don't get erased. Young queers just look at us and think we look like their grandparents, and they're not particularly interested. But if there's a gay movement, it needs to include all ages of people, including us pioneers. Moreover, as things become more repressive, we know a lot that would be useful to young people, not the least how to hide your sexuality when you're under threat.

MC: Really important. I was gonna ask about how you see the modern-day gay movement, and how it's been much more inclusive in society. How do you think that affects gay elders?

SK: I think you're asking the wrong person. I was not a fan of switching from a liberation movement to a rights movement. I was not a fan of putting resources into demanding inclusion in the military. After all, ours is an imperialist military that generally does bad things wherever it goes. I mean, obviously, if gay people want to be in the army, they should be able to be in the army. Another issue was the fight for marriage equality. I mean, marriage is such a failed institution; half of all American marriages end in actual divorce, and you can imagine how many miserable people are in miserable marriages because they can't afford to divorce. Marriage is also all about property. In fact, the case that came to the Supreme Court was a result of the unfair tax burden one wealthy queer had to pay because she couldn't marry her wealthy partner. I think our priorities could well go elsewhere. Like, say, to fighting for housing for homeless queer youth who have been thrown out of their homes and are living on the streets. And for that matter, safe, affordable housing for queer elders. We should be worrying about the racism and segregation in the gay movement, learning from the elders of color. So, my priorities are different than what the mainstream priorities have been.

MC: Well, I would think that you're the perfect person to ask, because you know what needs to be changed, and you know where that priority should go.

SK: A lot of us do.

MC: Yes, I guess that's the difference between how you look at issues for the greater population or for the people that it affects?

SK: Indeed.

MC: Thank you for all this so much.

SK: You're welcome.