



# Aviva Kempner Transcript

Deborah Ross: I want to start with your birth. You were born in Berlin. Talk about the circumstances of that, and your parents' background.

Aviva Kempner: Right. I am technically the first American war baby born in Berlin. I am not the first Jewish child born in Berlin, but I'm pretty sure I'm the first American, and the reason I'm an American is my dad was in the U.S. military, with the military government. He was originally from Lithuania. He'd come here as an immigrant.

DR: Do you know the year that he came?

AK: In the 20's. He was born in Ponovitch. He came to America from Kovno. So he came here and once he got his citizenship, he enlisted in WWII in the U.S. army and went to the Pacific. He said he enlisted to fight the Nazis, and they sent him to the Pacific. He wrote journalistic articles in the military, including a column, "How to Write Yiddish to Your Bubbe". I have a copy of that, or I had a copy of that. In any event, and after World War II ended, because he spoke Yiddish, and Hebrew and Lithuanian, and Russian, they sent him to work with the military government in Berlin. He got there, he must have gotten there in '45, you know, after. While he was there he continued to write journalistic articles. He was the features editor for I think, U.S. Observer, or Stars and Stripes, one of those. And he covered the story about a brother and a sister being reunited in Berlin. And that was my mother and my uncle.

My mother, whose maiden name was Helen, or Hanka Ciesla, was in Berlin because she being blond and green-eyed had passed with two other girls as a Polish Catholic in Germany. They got false papers and went from Sosnovitch to Germany, near Stuttgart, and worked in a labor camp as Polish workers.



DR: How old was she during this time?

AK: Oh, in her teens. And she was liberated by Americans, thank God, because I recently saw a movie about how the Russians treated the women right after the liberation of Germany. And she was taken by an army tank to Berlin where she worked as a translator for UNRA, United Nations, and looked for relatives. Unfortunately, her parents and sister died in Auschwitz, and only her brother survived. That was the story my dad wrote about the brother and sister being reunited. And the dashing soldier met the Holocaust survivor, and they married and we lived in Berlin, I believe for about a year and a half, and then we moved to Munich where my dad worked. He resigned and worked for—I'll remember it in a minute—it's not HIAS, it's the Joint Distribution [Committee].

DR: Did your parents speak about their wartime experiences, your mother especially when you were growing up?

AK: By the way, my father's mother was also murdered by the Nazis. And then we moved to Detroit. I think when I was around three and a half, around 1950. I grew up in a home where, especially during the Jewish holidays, my mother was very upset, but she did not talk about the experiences. She hid them from us per se.

DR: When you say she was very upset...

AK: At the holidays, the Jewish holidays, she was missing her family. I had no grandparents on either side. My grandfather on my dad's side had died of cancer when he was young. So it was just a matter of sort of knowing you're a child of Holocaust survivors, without knowing any details. As a matter of fact, we protected her from watching any movies, but I was totally obsessed, especially with the issue of resistance. Actually, I realized the first time I found out really about the Holocaust I was reading Exodus when I was thirteen, vacationing at Northport at my cousins' summer home, and I can remember reading the stories about Dov and Keren and it was like a great



revelation. It's sort of interesting because years later you would hear about Russian Jewry learning about being Jewish reading Exodus by Leon Uris and I totally identified with that aspect of it, their experience.

DR: So the story of the resistance was what spoke to you out of that experience?

AK: Well, Exodus was a much broader thing. Then I also went to Israel when I was sixteen and was exposed to things like Yad v'Shem, the relatives that had survived. I heard a little bit more about my mother's family. That was basically her relatives, but I was also seeing my dad's relatives. He has a sister that went in the 20's to Israel. But I think for me it was this fascination when I was in high school to read anything I could, more popular culture, again Leon Uris, Mila 18, I kept on rereading that. I remember in high school we had a book in high school English that I talked about called The Wall by John Hersey, which is a much better version, a fictionalized version of what was happening during the war, and I was watching, I was talking about it, and I remember the teacher saying, What was the dramatic moment in the book? I raised my hand, I said, Well, when they realized they were going to all end up in Treblinka. But at that point I really hadn't made that connection that it had happened to my grandparents.

DR: At that time, there wasn't a lot of literature, or information even available, really for a young curious person.

AK: Well, there weren't Holocaust museums, or classes on it. We were just reading. I mean it's not a coincidence there was more fiction literature, and between Exodus and The Wall, that exposed me to the Holocaust. But I also remember really clearly, you know, my mother would speak to my uncle in Polish, so I knew they were Polish, you know, European. And she would cry a lot. I mean, there were always pictures of her mother and her father that she would pray to. So you knew about the losses, and they were especially heightened on the holidays. My parents were divorced when I was thirteen, so I sort of heard more about it from my dad, telling me what he knew. But I



remember a profound thing that happened to me in college. I was at the University of Michigan, and we'd have to check what year this was, but Pawnbroker had been an incredible film to me. It's really about how a survivor lives with his life years later. And Rod Stieger was up for an Oscar versus Lee Marvin in Cat Ballou. And I remember when Lee Marvin got it, and Rod Stieger didn't and I was crying in my college dorm. I was absolutely devastated because I felt like, maybe we could say, my side, you know, what I identified with, wasn't getting it. Plus he was totally brilliant in that movie.

DR: Do you think that the typical story if there is one, of second generation Holocaust survivors' children, adds a certain seriousness, or weightiness to one's life, and do you feel that in your own life?

AK: I think several things happened. I think in a lot of survivors' families you either hear so much ad nauseum, sort of the Maus story. I think my friend Mindy [Wiesel] heard a lot. Or else there's this need to protect and not talk about. So I think I had more of the latter. In some ways it might have been, I don't know if the word's 'easier', but it's, you know the combination of me being an immigrant, and coming here and having people make fun of my English when I first came to Detroit. And then, I was also the child of divorced parents, so that was another, no one was getting divorced back then. And then also a survivor's family. So sort of three things that sort of put me apart, and I always felt, even though I didn't have the languages, you know, more European. Of course my brother was born in the States, so maybe he didn't have that.

DR: Even though you came to the United States just as a little girl, you still felt like you were living the immigrant experience?

AK: It's more a psychological immigrant experience. I'm still not good on pronouncing a lot, some words, so it's still maybe a leftover, but I still identify with anyone who's an immigrant. You know, people who work for me, I always ask people, Where are you from? Being an immigrant is part of my story. And I remember there was someone in my



class, in high school, and I often think about her, a French girl, and she had an accent. Now she had come much later, she'd come when we were in high school, and I always wonder what happened to her. And I always felt a little guilty I wasn't nicer to her. Isn't that funny?

DR: Did your parents feel like immigrants?

AK: I didn't hear their accents. But apparently my mother definitely had an accent. It's funny, I hear my uncle's accent. And my dad was also European. He used Yiddish a lot. When they were still married, they would speak Yiddish so we wouldn't understand. Foreign languages were something in the home. My mother was very funny in terms of when she served food. When it was a certain group of people, she would call it gehacte leber, with others it was pate. Or crepes Suzettes, or blintzes. So there was always this sort of, what you present to people, and I think another interesting thing is my mother, an she remarried a year after my parents' divorce a professor, but amongst their best friends were other Holocaust survivors, intellectuals, psychiatrists, it just happened to be a propensity of shrinks. Maybe because Sterba was in Detroit. So I always heard a lot of Polish being spoken and people debating, you know, sort of intellectual issues, so there's just something about the atmosphere. Also my mother, I'm a big collector of art, but I got that from my mother.

DR: Your mother was an artist?

AK: When my brother and I went off to school, she started painting, but she was always just decorating very nicely, so I think there was always a sense of my parents are European, and I was brought up by my father so there was a poverty program. And if the Jews have suffered the most, the thought of losses during the Holocaust, but then the blacks and the Armenians. There was always an affinity with Armenians, and also African-Americans. I'm a little young to have been in the Civil Rights Movement, but growing up in Detroit I always lived in integrated neighborhoods and went to integrated



high schools, so I always I think, especially in college, you know reading The Autobiography of Malcolm X identifying a lot with black struggles, and the anti-war movement.

DR: In your childhood you were exposed to the quilt of America. Your whole childhood kind of reflected this patchwork of American life, with the melting pot writ small in Detroit, all the different things you were exposed to.

AK: Well, you know it was sort of a mixed bag because on one hand I went to an all-city high school called Cast Tech, which really influenced me. It was a school that developed a science and arts program in response to the Sputnik, which is kind of interesting because we were bringing this up about, you know, being ahead in science. So it was very intellectually,...I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood. I should have gone to a more local school, which was Mumford, which was the Jewish school, but my parents decided to send me to travel every day to go to this all-city special program. In that I was exposed to a lot more people, you know diversity, that's the word today. And it's where I read books like The Wall. Also in high school I got involved in Democratic politics.

DR: What part of your identity was Jewish?

AK: Well, when it says race I always want to check "Jewish". It's a very strong identity, especially through my father. Who's a Jew? As I call it, the Bubbe Alert, to get involved in that game. But I also thought that's a strong affinity you have with other minorities, that's a part of being Jewish. It's justice. The high holidays, I did not go to Sunday school, just one year, it just didn't work. And because my parents were divorced there wasn't ...my mother wasn't. She prayed all the time, especially to her parents but going to services was not her big thing, as well as my stepfather. But it was all about being very proud, ethnically Jewish. And it was about being intellectual and political. I think, you know, the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of justice I think are the biggest definitions for me being Jewish.



DR: Is that still true today?

AK: Yes. You know in college I got very involved in the college newspaper. I got very involved in covering the anti-war movement, and through that, being part of it. I went off and worked on RFK's national campaign. And what's interesting about working for RFK, it was my first funeral because I never had any grandparents, and I could never work on national politics for years after that. But it was all about politics changing the world. Then, I was an undergrad in psychology, and then I got a masters in urban planning when I didn't get into law school. And again, it was, you know, to change the cities.

And going to New Mexico was a profound experience. I went to VISTA in New Mexico.

DR: After college?

AK: Right. It's sort of my Peace Corps experience. People kept coming up and said, Mexico. But anyhow, it was the first time I was away from Michigan, because I had gone to the University of Michigan. I also got exposed very much to Native American affairs and issues, as well as Chicano. And it was the height of the Native American movement. As a matter of fact, I've just co-written a script about an activist I knew at that time who was killed in a shoot-out for unfortunately taking justice in his own hands. What I realized is that urban planning wasn't getting the results I wanted to do to change the world, so that's why I came to Washington in '73 to go to law school.

DR: You spent your time in law school?

AK: I was two years in VISTA. In VISTA, I did a lot of work community organizing with model cities, and trying to change what was happening on the Indian reservations, and the Chicano neighborhoods. So it was all activism. I mean that's sort of my college years, my post urban planning years. And then I came here to go to Antioch School of Law.



So in September '73 I got in to Antioch College of Law, which was an activist law school. And I had considered being there in New Mexico to go to Chile because I was very interested in this whole thing about a successful socialist democracy. So I got into law school and I came here in September '73, and that's when the coup happened. So then I got very involved in human rights issues. That's my human rights years. When I was going to Antioch, which was very good timing because there was an immigration clinic. I could help get people parole visas. I went to a lot of demonstrations, I got to know a lot of Latin Americans, either from the Chile, Argentina movement; the El Salvador movement, I was very involved with the early human rights Latin American groups. And I think what was happening always with me, if it wasn't one cause it was another. If I saw, you know, a liberal Jewish person to get involved in.

DR: To me it looks like a tikkun olam, repairing the world. Is it a conscious Jewish thing?

AK: Right. Because it's all back from my father saying, We can't just be for ourselves, we have got to be for others. We suffer. I think for me the Pinochet regime was like Nazis, because of the kind of repression they did, killing people, and also the Argentinean generals. And you know maybe Germans being hidden down there. I would have tried to do something during World War II, let me do it now. So I got very involved in the Latin American movement. I knew Orlando Letelier very well, the ambassador who was murdered. And that was, you know, I was doing a lot of work around that time. To this day some of my closest friends are from that period.

DR: You must remember that day when he was killed.

AK: I lived right by that circle. And I was very involved in planning the funeral, and I am still very good friends with the sons. Or two of the sons. The ones who live in LA I always see. And with Isabel whenever she comes here.

DR: How did you end up becoming a filmmaker with this background?





AK: Then I was running an immigration clinic. I graduated from law school and I started working for an immigration law firm. Which goes to this thing about immigrants. It's something that is a total, to this day, people working on my house now, guy from Albania, the Guatemalan, everyone. I always ask, Where are you from? What's your experience? And again, I think it's personal identification, as well as I find people from different parts of the world fascinating. So I'm working as an immigration lawyer, and I also had spent a summer doing Native American law. So it was sort of both things. And in the summer of '76 my dad was supposed to come to my, and my brother's law school graduations, and he suddenly came down with leukemia. And he died, the morning or the afternoon we got there. Now I should mention that in '73 my dad made aliyah to Israel. And I had visited him every year, and so there was always a strong Zionist push in my family.

DR: In his retirement years, he made aliyah?

AK: Exactly.

DR: Did he talk about that decision?

AK: Well, it was always, he wanted, after World War II and from Europe, he wanted to go to Israel, but my mother, her brother had already gone to the States. And she was a little nervous about war still. But he always wanted to go to Israel, so he was fulfilling a dream and he spoke Hebrew fluently. By that time, I mean almost every year we had gone to visit Israel, you know so, I grew up, unfortunately, not with the language, but always a big push about Israel. So my father died, I came...

DR: In Israel?

AK: Israel. So we buried my dad, and at age 30, for me, I lost my father. In some ways it instilled with me the most Jewish pride. So I don't think that's a coincidence.

DR: Explain that.



AK: Well, it was always just about proud about being Jewish, but it means that you should be empathetic for others. To the point of being chauvinistic, you know who's Jewish, it's just one of these...

DR: Do you believe there's such a thing as a Jewish soul?

AK: A Jewish soul. Yeah.

DR: It sounds like maybe you think your father had one.

AK: Well, my mother did too. I mean between my three parents, to me being Jewish is to be intellectual, and political, and care for the world. And have an artistic eye, you know.

DR: Spiritual?

AK: I have to say my mother was the most spiritual. Neither of my fathers. I'm ...I'll explain to you after I finished Partisans, what I did later. But spiritual is less a factor in being Jewish for me. So I came back that summer and studied for the bar, and my heart wasn't in it. And I did not pass. I started working for the immigration law firm. And then I went and studied it again. And I did not pass. I liked doing immigration law, although it was interesting the first day I was given something, it was to represent the Moonies, and I told them I couldn't do it. So again, this was a political thing. So when I could no longer, I couldn't practice immigration law because I didn't pass the bar, I started doing a lot of Native American rights research and working in that world. And then I worked for the National Tribal Chairmen's Association. And then there was another association of Native Americans that I worked on, different issues. And I was still trying to find myself because it was pretty devastating that I hadn't passed the bar. And then I started doing a little business law.

Then I went home in '79 to Detroit. I mean I was continuing to live here, I was living here. I decided to go home for Thanksgiving, and I picked up a book that my mother and



stepfather had gotten, because they had hosted this writer, Lucjan Dobroszycki, and it's called Image Before My Eyes. It was a book of, a photo essay book of Polish Jewry between the wars. And I went bananas over it. I started looking at it, and I was just thinking, This is how our relatives were, and this and that. And I went home. That next month and I had decided. I reread Mila 18, and I decided at that point. Now I have to back up. I had worked doing a lot of events for human rights issues, including film events, and a lot of my friends were filmmakers.

DR: You mean organizing events?

AK: Yes, sort of my first producing. By then I had already worked with the Iranian student movement. And I went home and I decided that I'm going to make a film about Jews fighting Nazis.

DR: Did you know anything about making a film?

AK: Only what I saw my friends do. And I had raised some money for one film on the Shah. Or the downfall of the Shah.

DR: Out of the blue?

AK: Well, yes and no. I mean this is my rap in life.

DR: It sounds a little impulsive.

AK: I always said Elijah hit me with a...Well, I think it was another two things that happened in that time. I had seen Roots on TV and I was totally, totally engaged with Roots. And feeling, you know and read about the whole Roots thing. And I also had seen Holocaust on TV. You know, the five episodes. And I think those two mini-series had a profound effect on me. Now it was time to do my Roots. The book, and those two things. You know, this is actually a speech I sometimes give about what got me going on my



filmmaking. I also had the uncle that survived Auschwitz that was very wealthy that gave me the initial money. I went to him and I said, This is what I want to do and he said I'll support it.

Now this is the b'shert things that happened. It was Image Before My Eyes, the book that got me going, right? So I started asking friends. I have a very good friend, Susanna Styron, William Styron's daughter, and he said, well, you know, this filmmaker Josh Waletzky just finished a film called Image Before My Eyes, so it was the film based on the book. And then I have a good friend, Barbara Kopple, even to this day, I had met in Cuba, and she had used Josh as a sound editor. So I contacted Josh, and I met with him, and I said, Would you make this film with me? So I decided I'm going to be a producer, I'm going to make a film about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and Josh agreed. Because I said, Listen, we've got to make a film about this youth that you made. The premise of Image Before My Eyes was there was a very high culture Jewish community between the wars, mostly in the cities. It wasn't shtetl life. It was political.

DR: In Poland?

AK: In Poland. He agreed, and then we started researching. And it turns out that summer I went again to Israel and I went to the head of Yad v'Shem, and I'm talking to Itzhak Arad, and he hands me his book called, Ghetto in Flames. He says, This is what you should make a film about because the first column of resistance came out of Vilna. So I emailed, no email then, I wrote Josh, and I said, you know, I don't think it should be Warsaw any more, because a lot of these survivors are alive. And I went and saw Abba Kovner, his wife, Vitka Kempner, Chaika Grossman, Hruska Korshak, and...

DR: Who were all living at the time?

AK: That was the big thing.

DR: You're related in some way?



AK: No, it's a total coincidence. My last name's really Pokempner. My dad dropped the 'Po'. It's a total coincidence.

DR: How did they respond to you?

AK: They were really interested because no one had come to them. It's ironic because what's his name writes an article, the guy who did Defiance, Zwick, last year, or the year before, and says, I decided there was never a movie on Jewish resistance, he said, It's gotta be done. And I'm thinking when the article came out, thirty years ago, I decided. I think it has to do with this total fantasy of fighting Nazis. And I had been doing it for years through my political work. Fighting fascists that took over in countries. Then the time was to come home now. So it was seeing that Image Before My Eyes, and having an unresolved career, and I decided. But I had always grown up watching films, loving films, and I learned from working with Josh.

DR: It sounds like you had a pretty strong motivator to tell this story.

AK: And the great thing about this story of the ghetto, it wasn't about who fought what gun, you know, how many shots, but it was more about the moral dilemmas of fighting the Nazis. Originally I thought the question was, why didn't Jews fight back? You know a lot of survivors, or children of survivors, ask themselves. I think really the question is, how could they? We didn't have a nation, we didn't have a standing army. And I think more than anything I think that's what Partisans of Vilna does. And the film was finished 25 years ago this September. I'm trying to get some action on having it come out a lot.

DR: When you talk about the moral dilemmas of fighting the Nazis explain what you mean by that.

AK: Well, it was everything from, you know, you could get your fellow Jew in trouble, you could get your family member in trouble. You know it was mostly political youth, those who were involved in trying to get Jews to fight. The profound thing I read one day was



Itzhak Zuckerman, who was part of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising who survived the war, and years later with his wife Zivia Lubetkin, I think it is, started Lochamei ha-Ghettiot, the ghetto fighters kibbutz, said that, he said at a Resistance conference, "I was on the kibbutz, with my child, I realized that if I had been married with a child, I would not have joined the Resistance." There's such family orientation in Jewish homes that oftentimes you wouldn't sacrifice being with your family. It's not a coincidence this is a mostly Jewish view. So I put together a major proposal and NEH funded it. Talk about beginning luck. Well, Josh Waletzky already had gotten money for Image Before My Eyes, so there's a track record. And quite frankly, no one had done it. And we got the major consultants, you know, Elie Wiesel was one of the readers on that proposal.

DR: You've said that your mission in life is to make films...

AK: ...about under-known Jewish heroes. So, you know it's interesting, because my friend asked me last night if I could have made the film we saw, Biutiful, about the underclass in Barcelona, this one with Javier Bardem, I can't do it. For me, and I always say this, once I've been able to articulate it, that my family, as well as well as my people have been so devastated by war and fascism, that I need to make the stories that are uplifting. Or to tell the stories of our heroes. So the next generations can have those along as well as the devastation.

DR: Have you shown Partisans in Vilna, or in Eastern Europe?

AK: In 1990 there was a Jewish Film Festival in Moscow, and then I took the film to Vilna, and I took the film to Kovno.

DR: What was the response?

AK: It was very positive.

DR: Any Jews remaining?



AK: Yes.

DR: Do you see yourself as a mentor for other young filmmakers?

AK: Yes, but before I get to that let me tell you how each film came about. So while I'm making Partisans of Vilna, this underlying question for me is why didn't American Jews help more? I remember one thing my mother said after the war, no one asked her what happened to her. You know I think there's a little complex among people who came here afterwards.

DR: You mean no one asked her...

AK: ...about her experiences. I don't think it's a coincidence that among her closest friends were other Holocaust survivors because it was something, even without talking about it that they understood each other's stories. And they made new family members out of that. So that was a sort of underlying thing. I remember one of my college friends talking with her father while I was making Partisans of Vilna, who was a real leftie, said to me, You know we were worried about antisemitism here. So I'm in LA opening up Partisans of Vilna, and I heard that Hank Greenberg died. And that was a great revelation, that was going to be next. That was going to be the American Jewish experience. Now you have to understand that every Yom Kippur my dad would talk. Every Yom Kippur my dad would talk about Hank Greenberg when we were growing up in Detroit, how he didn't play on Yom Kippur. And I always thought he was part of Kol Nidre.

DR: You always thought he was part of Kol Nidre?

AK: I always thought he was part of Kol Nidre because going to services. I always think that the first film in a way was for my mother even though she wasn't so much in the Resistance. Although passing as a Polish Catholic in Germany as far as I'm concerned...



DR: She was alive when the film came out?

AK: Oh, yeah, she was alive. My mother just died three years ago. My dad never saw any of my films. My dad never saw any of my films.

DR: That must be a big regret.

AK: Yes, it's a big regret, but he's the inspiration. So my mother passing as a Polish Catholic to me was resistance. So she is in a way one of my heroines.

DR: How did she respond to your films?

AK: When I first decided to make it she was very negative. What? Those are my stories, I don't want you to deal with it. It's too difficult. Very, very proud of me after. Not so much the struggle. Well, parts of .....Hank took me thirteen years. But I decided it was, A, my love story to Detroit, unfortunately the first dead city in America. I cannot imagine what it meant to go to work every day and have people yelling at you because you're Jewish. You know, he was a real hero here, and...

DR: Are you saying that he used to go to work every day...

AK: I'm talking about Hank Greenberg. They would yell all these antisemitic things.

DR: From the stands.

AK: Yes, and also I want to counter stereotypes. So the first one is that Jews never fought back. That's the stereotype. And the other is that all Jewish men are nebbishes. That's not the Jewish man hero I grew up with. Hank Greenberg was this larger than life hero, so you know, it's not all the Woody Allen nebbish-y thing. So I wanted to do that too. And I'm a big fan of Diner, and one of the things that Diner is sort of this fan adulation of their heroes. So to me I was getting, you know humor is a big thing. I think that's what I tried to do. Partisans is a little different, but I tried to do laughter and tears,





that's the Jewish experience. What I forgot to say is right after Partisans I did start going to shul, and I went back for an adult bat mitzvah.

DR: In Washington?

AK: Right, at Fabrangen. Norman Shure, so I think that was my one spiritual time.

DR: Meaningful?

AK: Yes. No, it was very meaningful. I was totally terrified about speaking Hebrew, but I think it also made me realize that ultimately I'm an atheist, you know, because of the Holocaust. I mean I respect, my best friend in the world is very, is conservadox, very observant. Actually, Eva Fogelman, who they should be interviewing for the Archive.

You know my two best friends in the world are children of survivors, one of which, Annette Insdorf has written about Holocaust films, and Eva Fogelman has written about rescuers, and each is a child of survivors. So I think I've continued my mother's tradition of being best friends with people who sort of share the experiences. I'm also very close to Mindy and Miriam Nathan. My closest friends are children of survivors. We just understand.

DR: Commonalities?

AK: Yes. And have done something with it. I mean sort of the creative response. You know that from Mindy's interview. It took me years to do Hank. So I'm sitting there and I'm thinking, you know, I go to all these festivals, with my films, we should have one here. So I started the Jewish Film Festival here. And luckily Arna saw the vision, with Miriam.

DR: Arna?

AK: Meyer Mickelson. It was the thought that, you know, that Jewish films are an important vehicle for discussion, for viewing.



DR: I wanted to ask you if you think that this is part of the Jewish tradition, the storytelling part, the stories in the Bible, and the Talmud, or the authors who have added so much to what they call the Jewish bookshelf. Do you think film plays a part in that?

AK: Absolutely. It's also very much an immigrant experience. By the way, there's a new film on Shalom Aleichem that is so wonderful. So anyhow, I started the Jewish Film Festival, still doing Hank. And thinking I need to get Hank done, so I quit the festival, and it took me ten, like eight more years to do the film.

DR: Why did it take so long?

AK: Money. Raising the money is, you know.

DR: The life of a documentary filmmaker is financially precarious, is it not?

AK: Absolutely.

DR: How do you deal with that uncertainty?

AK: Well, when I was making Hank, I used to sit down her and pray to this artwork here, [gesturing to portrait of Hank Greenberg] and say, to my father, I'm doing this to honor you, I'm doing this to honor you, I've got to tell this story.

DR: It sounds like you're your mother praying to her parents.

AK: Absolutely. You've just got to convince people. And there are so many years I didn't even pay myself. It's just crazy, you know.

DR: Is there anything Jewish about baseball?

AK: [laughter]. Yes, I think it's a more intellectual game, the way you keep the statistics, and it's a quieter game. Football, I just roll my eyes at football. It's so brutal.



DR: And it's the quintessential American sport, Mom, baseball and apple pie.

AK: Right, and it's one way immigrants learn to be American. Jews and non-Jews themselves.

DR: And your dad maybe had that experience in his life?

AK: Absolutely. That's why I say the Hank Greenberg was my dad's story.

DR: Is that where your love of baseball come from, from your father?

AK: Oh, absolutely. He used to take my brother and me to games. So then I was wondering about what to do next. Hank came out and it was an incredible success, more overwhelming than I ever believed.

DR: Won many awards.

AK: You name it, it won it. Except for the Oscar nomination, or award.

DR: How does it feel to receive the recognition for your work?

AK: Well, first of all I have a great commercial release. I'm happy because it gives my under-known heroes their time in the sun. So that's it. And all those years of hard work would be really awful if, you know...

DR: Do you feel maternal about your characters and your films?

AK: Yes, each one of them are my kids. So then I'm trying to figure out what to do next, and there's an American Film Institute program for women directing, which I applied to, and you had to come with a script. In 2000, when I was putting Hank out, I was trying to do everything I could to make sure Gore won, going around talking, and I knew Lieberman. So I decided to write a little script called, Today I Vote for my Joey, which is a tragic-comedy about how the Jews mistakenly voted on the butterfly ballot.



DR: In Florida.

AK: In Florida. So that's my 20 minute film, and my one foray into feature filmmaking. It's a fun tragic film, but because it's a short, it's now on the Molly DVD. It hasn't gone anywhere. But it's my way, it's the catharsis of getting that one out. And at that point Lieberman was a real hero, especially to the Jewish community.

DR: Perhaps not so under-known.

AK: Yes, correct. But it doesn't fit that as much as the Jewish hero thing. And then I was looking to see what to do next, and about seven years ago, or eight years ago, I went to a show called Jews Entertaining America at the Jewish Museum in New York. And in it they recreated the Goldberg's living room. And I just knew at that point I had to do a film on Gertrude Berg because she had written, produced, starred, in the first sit-com. She had a media empire. She's like Oprah. And she also did a kind of mother that wasn't the horrible stereotype, nagging mother, Jewish mother, but one that was in control, and caring. So again, it was the under-known Jewish hero, or heroine in this case. As I called it, the most famous woman in America you never heard of.

DR: The Oprah of her time?

AK: Exactly. And sort of break the stereotype of when a woman writes her own role. And the great irony and tragedy is that her own mother was mentally ill, and yet she developed this whole persona. So again, fundraising again. And the film a year and a half ago was another great critical success. Maybe not as many awards, but still in the 90's in terms of Rotten Tomatoes. And also a great commercial success. You really don't make the money because you spend so much, but both docs have made over a million, which is unheard of. There's only one other woman I heard of that has two films that has made over a million, so I'm proud of that, although trying to collect the money from people is horrible, horrible, horrible business, I cannot tell you.



So then I was looking what else to do. You know I still want to continue these under-known Jewish heroes. So now this great story that, well, someone came to me that he wanted me to do, and then he died, and then I heard Julian Bond talk about him, and that's Julius Rosenwald.

DR: No one knows about him.

AK: You want to hear obscure! It's just amazing. So I've been doing it off and on for three or four years, and again, money is the big issue.

DR: What is his story?

AK: He is the head of Sears. He was given a book by Paul Sachs, of Goldman Sachs, to read, about Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery. And this is a guy, influenced by his rabbi in Chicago. It's like the personification of tikkun olam. He gave away 62 million dollars, a lot of it to African Americans. Involved in Y's, in housing, 5500 schools in the south, they wouldn't have had schooling otherwise. They wouldn't have had schooling otherwise.

DR: For African-American communities?

AK: Right. And the Rosenwald Fund grants to all the great thinkers, black thinkers. I mean he defined black intellectualism, or he supported it. Sort of a black McArthur. So this is what I'm working on now. I'm very excited about it because to me black-Jewish relations has been a very important issue. Now the only thing is, again, this is getting a little tiring, raising the money.

I would also love to make a film on Samuel Gompers, great labor union leader. Totally forgotten, people also don't know that he was Jewish, and also the labor movement is getting maligned a lot now.



DR: Do you consider yourself, or have you ever thought about, whether you are a Jewish documentary filmmaker, a woman documentary filmmaker, a feminist, or any of the above?

AK: I consider myself a Jewish documentary filmmaker. My feminism is more in being involved in women and film in town. Sometimes I blog for Women in Hollywood about the dearth of women, especially for women in the feature field. You know we do, we were much more successful in the documentary world. Half the docs that come out are made by women. That's not true in the feature field. That's just, I mean to have ten films, two of which were made by women, in the Oscar category, but no female directors. You know I'm afraid that the woman who made Hurt Locker, it may be another hundred years before we win.

DR: Is it just the way the system is structured?

AK: Yes, well, it's an all-boys club, they keep on perpetuating, it's just five per cent. It's a total glass ceiling.

DR: What's Washington, D.C. like for a filmmaker as opposed to say, Hollywood?

AK: Well I don't live there. Well I lived there in making my little, Today I Vote for My Joey. The strongest film community is Women in Film. We're strength by numbers, it's a great networking organization. There's a lot of documentary filmmakers my age that I'm very close to, a great support system. You know, there's PBS here, there's Discovery here, there's National Archives, you know a lot of the research can be done here.

DR: I asked you earlier if you considered yourself a role model for the next generation of women filmmakers.

AK: Oh, yes, people come up to me. I try to have interns a lot, so they come, so they can go through the system.



DR: Do you encourage young women who want to be filmmakers?

AK: Absolutely. Except for the producing part. I mean you just have to have a thick skin, yeah.

DR: Your house is very eclectic. It looks like a lot of folk art, some works that your mother has done...

AK: Well I always grew up surrounded by beauty, way before my mother became an artist, an abstract expressionist artist, with a one woman show at the Detroit Institute of Art, shows in New York. She always had a lot of lively artistic things. I think my palette, the colors I'm attracted to are very much Europe. It's probably what I grew up with living in Germany, growing up in Germany. People say, Oh, your house is like a museum. I say, No, this is how people live.

DR: A lot of this is what we would call folk art.

AK: Folk art, I also have a whole Judaica collection. Photography collection. It's just things that, I love being surrounded by beauty.

DR: It's eclectic.

AK: Eclectic.

DR: Like you.

AK: [laughter] I also, I say my brother has stocks, and I have artwork. That's my stocks, though I probably would never sell it. But when I wake up in the morning I love looking at my prints, my mother's paintings when I come down the steps. This is what I want to look at.



DR: Aviva, you look so intimately at other people's lives, what have you learned by examining their lives?

AK: Hmm, that's a good question. Well, talent has a lot to do with it. For Partisans it was just I think these young youth were already politically organized, already had stepped away from being so close, that bond with their family, and just had this vision. I think all my characters had vision. For Partisans, it was the Nazis intended to kill everyone. They actually read that from an Armenian example and 40 days of Masadak, and what had happened to the Armenians, and they said, we've got to do something, we've got to organize. For Hank Greenberg it was this raw talent, this strong drive to keep on going, and not let anything bother him. For Gertrude Berg, you know it was this vision about family sit-com, you know a story about her family, or how she perceived how her ideal family would be, would work. And, it did, because it was a time of immigrants. Julius Rosenwald felt this responsibility of helping others because he had done so well. That you don't just make money, but you give it away. Sixty-two million dollars in your whole lifetime.

I have also have co-written a script about this Native American activist, Larry Casuse, who at the height of Wounded Knee had tried so much to change political conditions in New Mexico and the town he was from, Gallup, that he went and kidnapped the mayor of Gallup, and someone I knew, and I had no idea he was doing it. I'd been helping him with his political work, and sort of this profile of someone gone astray, but yet it was to help his people.

I mean I think for each one of them they were at the right time or the right place to make a difference but always with a vision, you know, a symbol of I guess Jews. I guess Vitka said it, to choose how to die, not let the Nazis kill you but to fight. To at least be free Jews. For Hank it was, you know, I have as much right as anyone to use my brawn, to do well, I have to honor my religion. Yes, I know I'm a hero but I'm also a damn good





baseball player. And for Gertrude Berg it was this vision of what was entertainment? Which has lived on and no one gave her credit for the first Emmy, the first sit-com, and they keep on going. For Julius Rosenwald it's I can do very well in business, but I need to help others. This is what my rabbi has taught me, this is what I should do. And I think these are all the lessons. These are people I'd like to know.

DR: It sounds like your stories inspire others, and also inspire you.

AK: Yes, right. No, I have to have someone who...I think that's true. You know, inspiring stories are true to form. Although I do have some dramatic scripts that go a little the other way, but still inspiring.

DR: Anything you'd like to add?

AK: You know, in terms of, even though I haven't been quote, unquote, spent a lot of time in the feminist movement, I consider my feminism very important in terms of being just a ground-breaker, the work I'm doing, and that any time I see that I think there's sexism, especially in filmmaking, I do try to point it out, but I'm very grateful to the Women's Archives for putting together. I was touched when they contacted me about my mother's archive to put stuff about her. And also I think what's important, just on a broader basis, that unless we seize the past we can't go to the future. Each one of my quote, unquote heroes, or heroines, gives us lessons for the future.

DR: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]