Judy Somberg Transcript

JUDITH ROSENBAUM: Today is July 18th. I am sitting in Judy Somberg's house with her. And this interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. OK. So basically what I'm going to do is start with asking questions about your family background and your Jewish identity, and then we'll move on to the bulk of the material about your activism in El Salvador. So if you could start just by telling me briefly about your childhood, where and when you were born, or about your parents or grandparents?

JUDY SOMBERG: I was born in 1951 in New Jersey. My parents were middle class former activists themselves, I'd say at that point liberals. My father was a neurosurgeon and my mother was a biochemist and I was the youngest of three kids and had a very, very nice childhood that was very family-centered and centered around education. Fifties, typical '50s family, except with, I would say, a progressive bent to it.

JR: And a mom with a career, which wasn't probably typical at the time.

JS: Right. That's true. That's true.

JR: What were the causes that your parents were active in?

JS: Well, they were active during the war, before the war and during the war years. And sympathetic to the issues that the Communist Party was involved in. And I'd say really had a very progressive outlook until all the information about Stalin came out, and then became less enamored of the organized left.

JR: Were they members of the party or were they -- ?

JS: Not members, but involved with it somewhat.

JR: As a child did you know about the different kinds of political issues that they were involved in? Was it something that was talked about a lot in your family?

JS: I'd say I knew more about what they were currently involved in, which might be just local political candidates or Parent Teacher Association or being aware of the Civil Rights Movement, with the knowledge and the background that they had been more active in the past.

JR: Did they encourage you and your siblings to become activists, do you think?

JS: It's hard to say, because my siblings, my brother and sister, are not activists. So it's hard to figure out why one kid comes out one way and another kid another way. My sister is an educator, though, and my brother a cardiac surgeon, so we were clearly all influenced by our parents.

JR: That's been true in a lot of the interviews I've done, actually. It's very interesting. Not sure how to explain that.

JS: Right. Well, I think you take bits and pieces from each of your parents. And what parts you take from them can be really different. So I think I had a vision of my parents being activists. But actually when I went off to college and became very active, they kind of denied it, they more identified themselves as regular middle class people. And I think were almost surprised that I said that my activism came from them.

JR: Do you think that that's because the issues that you were involved in were different from the ones that they had been involved in?

JS: Well that's possible. I became active in high school around the war in Vietnam. And then went off to college in 1969 and immediately joined SDS. And I think it was a little overwhelming for people from my parents' generation. It seemed very unrelated to what their activism had been. Or at least for my parents. Maybe for others that wasn't so.

JR: Before we get into this story of how you became an activist, I just would like to ask a few questions about your Jewish background also and your family. How did your family identify, Jewishly?

JS: Well, we belonged to a Reform synagogue and I went to Sunday school, pretty much hated it. We only went to temple on the High Holidays. But it was very very much a part of our identity, being Jewish, and the cultural things around being Jewish, and eating Jewish food, and getting together and eating Jewish food.

JR: Did your parents speak Yiddish?

JS: They did. They didn't speak it with each other, they would speak it -- my father in particular would speak it with his parents. And they both understood Yiddish. Certainly now they would have trouble speaking it, but they still understand it.

JR: Were both of your parents born here?

JS: Yes, yes, but their parents were not.

JR: Did you participate in any other Jewish activities like summer camps or youth groups, those kinds of things?

JS: Through distant cousins, my brother went to Israel, when he was pretty young, when he was about 14, and worked on a kibbutz, and liked it a lot, I think in a social way. Pretty exotic thing for a 14-year-old to do back then. And when I was about 14 I went with -- I think I went with Zionists of America. But not because my family was Zionist, but that happened to be a group that was going at the right time with the right time schedule. And for me it was a very interesting trip, and I made a lifelong friend on that trip who herself became very Jewish and very Zionist, but I didn't take that away from the trip. To me it was more an interesting cultural experience and seeing another part of the world and seeing what I had heard about. But it did not make me feel like I wanted to be either

religious or to have particularly more involvement with Israel.

JR: Have you been back to Israel since then?

JS: I went back once, went on a trip with my parents. But a long, long time ago. My son has been and my daughter has been. Both. My parents have taken them on two separate trips. And my husband has not. And I would like to go, but I would go in a very different context now. I would go with the National Lawyers Guild on an investigation of human rights abuses. So it would be a very different trip. And we're actually talking about setting up a delegation now, there's a lot of interest in doing that.

But with regard to your question as to other Jewish activities I was involved in, I was also active in my temple youth group and folk danced with the national Reform youth group in New York – I don't remember the name now.

JR: Would you say that your relationship to Judaism has changed over time?

JS: Not really. My husband's Jewish, but we don't belong to a synagogue. We sent our children to Workmen's Circle Shule, which we thought was great. No God, no Zionism, a progressive bent. And even that for our kids was too structured, and too much forcing Judaism on them, and both of them really did not like it. Though I thought it was pretty neat. So I see the same pattern. In a sense whatever you offer your kids they reject, but I suspect they at the same time internalize some of it, and they identify as being Jewish,but are not religious at all.

After our children finished Shule (participating in the group bar/bat mitzvah for our elder, and dropping out in the final year for our younger) my husband and I have continued to be members of Workmen's Circle. We both enjoy catching up with old friends and participating with that community in a time of reflection and remembrance at our secular high holiday services. From time to time I consider putting some of my activist energies into that community, but I feel ambivalent about focusing my political work and my social

community in an exclusively Jewish group.

JR: How old are your kids?

JS: My daughter just turned 20 and my son's about to be 17.

JR: So how would you say that you first became an activist?

JS: In high school around the antiwar movement. We started a peace group at high school, and we even talked to some people from SDS down at Rutgers in Newark and we were going to form a high school chapter, but we really didn't know what it was about. But we were doing it anyway. And actually I was an activist before that. When I was in junior high I worked at a CORE freedom school in Newark that I just found with a friend. We took a bus and went down to Newark, worked there on Saturdays. But it was very very hard to be integrated into that. We were the only Whites there. And it was a really interesting experience, but they didn't really take us in. In some sense we were welcome, but we were 13-year-olds at the time, something like that. So it was a beginning, it was a beginning.

JR: Did you have a lot of friends who were interested in similar kinds of issues?

JS: I did. Because things were happening then. But of my high school friends I think I'm the only one who stuck with it. I go back to reunions and it seems that everyone has settled into suburbia, and they're all doctors, lawyers and businesspeople, all very “successful”, and not activists. But I always wonder about the people who are not there, what kind of interesting things are they doing?

JR: Yeah, it's definitely a self-selecting kind of thing.

JS: Yes, and everybody looks great, they're all skinny and they have the little black dresses. The kids are happy, everybody… So I don't know. But of the people I've kept in

touch with, my old boyfriend is an artist, and he was never an activist. That was his passion. He followed it.

JR: And then when you went to college you got involved in SDS?

JS: Right away.

JR: Where did you go to school?

JS: I went to MIT. The first week of school there were two different SDS meetings and I was very confused, I didn't know why there were two different SDSs. I went to the first one, and it was all these guys in suits and crew cuts and talking about organizing the working class, and it somehow didn't seem to be what my vision of SDS was. And then I went to the other meeting and it was -- and it was all guys, because MIT back then was guys,with long hair and talking about getting ROTC off campus and stopping Dow Chemical from recruiting. And I said, “Oh, this is what I'm interested in doing.” And I very quickly got involved with that.

JR: What kind of things were you involved in with SDS? What was your experience in it?

JS: Well, we were trying to do more than just end the war in Vietnam, we wanted to be “smashing the state” as well – radically changing society. I dropped out of school right at the beginning after I think a couple of months in school. We were marching in Washington and marching here in Boston and the focus was ending the war in Vietnam. And at the same time I was beginning to hear about the Women's Movement and going to meetings of women's activists as well.

JR: Were there any conflicts between your activism for Women's Movement and for SDS?

JS: I didn't think so. We certainly wanted to make things better in SDS, which of course was very dominated by men and particularly at MIT it was, but at the beginning I was one of the youngest ones. So it took a while to find my place and role. And then I joined Weathermen; that was when I dropped out of school. That was pretty short-lived because Weathermen was in the process of falling apart. A small group of people were going “underground” and I wasn’t interested in that. And then that spring was the student strike. I was already out of school at that time, but was very much involved with what was going on in the campuses. And then I went back to school the following fall and --

JR: How did you decide to go back to school?

JS: I think pretty early on I decided I wanted to go to law school. Participating in demonstrations, getting arrested several times, and seeing all these neat lawyers with long hair, running around. They would get to come to our cells and talk to us and tell us what was going on, , and go to the courtroom with us, and then get to talk to the judge, and it seemed like a really neat thing to do.

JR: Was there much overlap between membership in the different groups that you were part of?

JS: When you say different groups now you mean… I'm not great on memory of details of timing, so that over the years who I was involved with when --

JR: Well, I don't mean at the same time. I'm just wondering whether -- because in a lot of the reading that I've done it seems like there's all this emphasis on the tension between different kinds of groups that were ultimately working towards similar kinds of things but had different means of going about them.

JS: Well, definitely. There were the sects and the first SDS meeting I'd gone to was the Progressive Labor Party. And the other one was what we called Rosa Luxemburg SDS, our chapter, which was then affiliated with RYM 2 from the SDS split, but was not party-

affiliated the way that the PL people were. And then in those years the various party people came out. I can't remember the names of them. But it seemed to me the problem was that people were spending a lot of time in meetings and not accomplishing a whole lot. And I tried to focus on groups that were accomplishing more with less meeting time involved. Although some of the nature of the Women's Movement was meetings, was women getting their strength in meetings. So I feel like I almost -- I was sympathetic to that, but the big organization here, Bread and Roses, women's organization, I was not centrally involved, only because I didn't want to go to all the meetings… God, what did I do? I was involved in the Somerville Tenants Union early on when I was still in college. And what else? I have tons of files. I can't bear to throw the stuff out.

JR: You shouldn't.

JS: Yellowing in my basement but --

JR: You should give them to an archive.

JS: I know. Also, I have messy boxes of pretty much all of our local National Lawyers Guild files that about once every few months I go down through a box and I throw out junk and try to leave the better stuff and someday will call an archive, find somebody who will take it. I made a few phone calls a couple of years ago. They said, “Well, you really have to have money to pay people to go through it,” and the organization didn't want to do it. So I have them down there.

JR: Should talk to the Schlesinger, they might be interested.

JS: Who? Schlesinger?

JR: The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe. Its history library, and they have a lot of stuff on '60s radicalism and stuff.

JS: I was talking to -- does U Mass have an archive?

JR: I'm sure they do. Most libraries take stuff in.

JS: There was one that was interested in progressive -- maybe Northeastern was the other one I talked to? But I didn't pursue it. And then when I went to law school I got involved in the National Lawyers Guild, was involved in that for many years. Still am.

JR: So what kinds of work have you been doing with the National Lawyers Guild?

JS: Well, kinda depended what the issues of the day were. Oh God, trying to think back, what comes to mind are the current stuff that we're working on: saving legal services, judicial appointments. We had legal support for the whole antiglobalization movement.

JR: Do you feel like there's been real continuity in the kinds of issues that you've been involved with over the past however many years, 30 years?

JS: Yeah, I would say so. And the Central America, and particularly El Salvador, work I got involved in in the early '80s, continued.

JR: How did you come to those issues?

JS: Let's see. Nineteen eighty-four, my kids were -- was it 1984 the first time? They were like four and one. So I was working but I guess I felt like I'd been less active, and doing the little kids thing. And the National Lawyers Guild was organizing a delegation to El Salvador, at the height of the war years, to go to a human rights conference. I decided to go. And I'd do that, get up and go places. And my husband said, “If you disappear, I'm not going to get you. Because somebody's got to stay alive for the kids.” And I went, and it was just -- trying to think why I went. I think just El Salvador was in the news. And the Guild had the delegation, which just grabbed me at that moment. It was very very powerful, that experience for me. We were in a hotel and the Salvadorans who were

participating in this said they were risking their lives to be there. And at that point hundreds of people were being disappeared every month by the army. And there were presentations given about that and what was going on in El Salvador. And there were a lot of immigration lawyers who went because in the United States they were really the first ones who saw the effects of it here. Huge number of refugees. And then one of the issues for them was when their clients would be deported, because very few got political asylum here. They would then be met at the airport and disappeared right then upon their return. And I was amazed at the information that people had about that. We had a meeting with the US ambassador, and people were confronting him with that. And he said, “No, that doesn't happen.” And they were saying, “Yes, and we can give you the names of people who have been deported from the US.” We thought at that time there was a connection between the Salvadoran airlines tipping off the names of people who were deported to the Salvadoran authorities. And then it turned out to be true, our government had lied. And while we were at the conference we were also working. They were getting us to help translate papers and I must have studied some Spanish before that. Typing up papers and working through the night. And then the scariest thing was they asked the lawyers to switch bedrooms at the hotel rooms with the conveners of the conference, because they were afraid that the military was going to come into the hotel in the middle of the night. And so they wanted these US lawyers to be found. And --

JR: Must not have slept very well.

JS: Didn't sleep very well. That was a little scary. But that was the kind of thing that happened in El Salvador. They just came and took you away. And there was no judicial system to speak of. And they got away with that. And it was a time when members of the political parties in El Salvador were going into the countryside, because it was just too dangerous to live in the city. And there was information about the massacres then going on in the countryside, because what happened in the countryside is they had been completely bombed in the areas that had FMLN support. They were leaving, were in

hiding, were going to refugee camps in Honduras. The country was a mess. So that was very very engaging to say the least to go on that trip. And I think after that the only organization here working around El Salvador was CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. Then in 1986 my husband and I and our two kids went to Mexico for three months. We really wanted to just do something different and get away and live someplace else and study Spanish; and we went to Cuernavaca and studied Spanish. It was great. And while we were there my husband went to Nicaragua for a week or so with the Guardian -- a progressive newspaper – or maybe with TecNica , a US organization that was giving technical aid in Nicaragua. And I --

JR: What did he do?

JS: Well, he does lots of different things. I can't even remember what he was doing. He's been an electronic technician, a computer programmer, worked for US Windpower, a company that developed and built large windmills, and now he works in international development at Harvard. We have had disagreements about his work. Because I don't always think it's the most progressive approach to development that they take. And then I went back to El Salvador while we were in Mexico. I went with a church group because that was the only group I could find that was going. But on a human rights mission really. Meeting with people involved in human rights work. So that was in '86, and then when we came back -- somehow I hooked up with other people who were interested in doing work in El Salvador. We started the Cambridge El Salvador Sister City Project, which I've been involved with ever since.

JR: And have you been back to El Salvador since then?

JS: I have. Well, I first went back in '87. I think it was the trip that I talked about in the program.

JR: Can you tell me about that trip a little more?

JS: That time we went, it was very early on. I think we had only had one delegation at that time. The reason the Sister Cities were formed was that refugees in San Salvador wanted to go back to their villages that had been totally bombed out. They sought international support so that they could go back and say we are a civilian population living here, you can't bomb us away again. And they were very savvy, and at this point there were lots of Salvadorans living in the US. So there were connections to Salvadorans here to help organize support. And the support was around publicity, making the world know that we knew that there was a civilian population, talking to our legislators here, trying to end the military support to El Salvador. And then also creating a very personal sister relationship, a person-to-person connection, bringing people down from Cambridge and later when we were able to bring -- both during and after the war years -- Salvadorans up here. And there was also a material support component, raising money and in the early years we brought duffel bags of medical supplies. Books and clothing for kids. And very early on, the Salvadorans essentially walked back to the village from refugee camps. There were no roads. There was no electricity, no telephone. Although there had been all of that before the war. And it was a combat zone. The FMLN resided in that region. And the reality was these were civilians but their sons and fathers and daughters were FMLN members. That was the reality, although that wasn't how we portrayed it. We portrayed that these were civilians, which was true, and that they were neutral, which was not true. And what would happen is from time to time the army would go in. The Salvadoran army could not control the area, but they would march in and take over the repopulated towns -- there were only one or two at that time-- and declare control and terrorize the population and take a few people prisoners, and accuse them of being combatants. And then stay as long as they liked and then retreat. We got word very early on after this project had started that 11 villagers had been captured by the military. The way things worked in El Salvador in those years was if you were not entered into any court records, you disappeared, and there were places where the bodies would be found. In San Salvador there were areas where they just

deposited the bodies. In the countryside, wherever. And so the goal was not only to get people released but to make sure that there was a public record of who had been taken. And there were --

JR: How was that accomplished?

JS: Well we got together a group of six or seven of us. Some of the people, most of them were from California, who had -- I can't even remember their connections to the repopulation movement. And two of us from Cambridge went down with this delegation. There was a congressional aide on the delegation, an aide to Ron Dellums from California. And we got down to San Salvador. I later found some things we wrote. It sounded very calm and didn't accurately give the sense of what was going on. We tried to get information about what had happened and what happened to the people who had been captured and why, what the charges were. The charges were essentially about military items: a military-type shirt was found in somebody's house, and it was guilt by association essentially, because it was a civilian population living there. And we tried to get army permission to go up to the village and they wouldn't give us permission. So we went anyway. And you have to -- some of my different trips now meld in my mind. But essentially you drive in the middle of the night and you hope that they're asleep at the military checkpoints and you hide in the back of the car so they don't see you, you have a van full of people. When you get stopped at the checkpoints you say -- I think it was that trip, one of them -- just as we were leaving San Salvador, we got stopped, and they said, “Where are you going?” And we said, “We're going to the beach.” We were going north. The beach is south. And somehow that trip we had a priest with us. We had a priest. That helped. So the priests were -- the lay priests supported the FMLN and they were horribly killed and tortured and detained. But yet the population was Catholic. So, on a personal level, that appealed to many soldiers. Not to harm a priest. And so we eventually got through. And then we had to walk for miles and miles through the countryside. And got to the town. The army was there. And they pull out their guns and

say, “Stop,” and we stop. And they say, “We're holding you here ‘til we get our orders what to do.” And in the meantime the villagers were all coming down because we were on the outskirts of the town and since there was no jail or -- this is like shacks and nothing -- they couldn't really stop them from coming and talking to us. And at that point we were able to get histories of what had happened when the military had come in and taken these 11 people, get the names and their family members, what they had been accused of. And so we had a number of hours with them. And then eventually an order came from the provincial headquarters that they were going to take us out by helicopter. And they did that. And --

JR: How many people were you with?

JS: I think there were six of us who'd come. And that was a little scary. Going on this helicopter. And then they put us in the helicopter. Then we're waiting and they end up bringing a wounded soldier onto the helicopter. So at that point we knew there was fighting nearby. And we're in this open Huey gunship helicopter. I have a few pictures of it. Of course they said don't take pictures of us. And they put me, it's like this open bay. They had this bleeding soldier in the back. And some people were sitting there. I was sitting in the gunship in the seat on the outside with this machinegun. And we had to fly to the provincial capital. And that was the scariest thing. Because I don't remember now whether the FMLN, what their weapons were. But there was something, that they had ability to shoot down helicopters. And so I thought we would be shot by the FMLN at that point. They didn't know who was in the helicopter. But we made it OK and then we're at this provincial capital in the military headquarters with the colonel in charge of the area. And we had brought with us all these letters. This was our procedure. We would get letters from our congressmen that would say, “Please welcome this delegation of my constituents.” We would write these letters and say, “Please sign this,” so we would be protected. “My constituents who are coming down to…” whatever. And so we were in this room with this colonel. We were not free to leave. He didn't say, “You're under

arrest," but he said, "We have to wait 'til we get instructions from headquarters in San Salvador what we're going to do with you." And in those days I wasn't afraid. I was very naïve. Even though -- I somehow thought that Americans were protected, thought because we were Americans nothing could happen to us. And we had a very interesting conversation with this totally scary but concerned colonel who -- at that point we -- our projects -- were already sending down letters whenever we got word of disappearances and detentions. Hundreds of letters that we would fax them. We would get the numbers of these military headquarters. And so this guy said, "How do these people know who I am? Why have I gotten hundreds of faxes about these people in Las Flores, San Jose las Flores, who have been detained? How can this be?" And it was the first time I saw that what we were doing was effective. That he saw somehow that people were watching what was going on there. And then he showed us this movie of a confession of an FMLN combatant; it was the most bizarre thing.

JR: Did he think he was going to change your mind?

JS: He was trying to convince us. And he was waiting for orders from headquarters. And eventually he got orders to let us go.

JR: How long were you held for?

JS: We were held till the middle of the night. And at that point we were saying we wanted to see the records of where the people who had been taken from Las Flores were entered on the judicial records. In the middle of the night he actually took us down to -- I can't remember if it was the courthouse or the jail or the municipal center. And we pulled out the -- they pulled out the records and showed us where their names were entered in the records of having been detained. And that was also scary, driving through this provincial capital in the middle of the night. We're in his army jeep, and again with a gunman right next to us so that we don't get shot while we're with him. And then he let us go. Actually found us someplace to sleep in some school or something. And then we

went back to San Salvador the next day and then came back up again. I think it was a day later. After we went back to San Salvador we started calling the judge and the judicial office, and when we went up again they were released.

JR: Back to the village?

JS: Yeah, they were released while we were there. And we all went to the parish church where you kinda had to sneak in because the church people were -- it was already known that they were sympathetic to these villagers. Even so, everything was dangerous for them. So it was a big little celebration. Their relatives came down from the village and met up with them. They had been tortured. We took their stories, what had happened in jail. And that's it. Then the Army has your name and next time they go to Las Flores to do a sweep you're guilty for having previously been detained. But I don't think there was any further process from that. But the thing that makes me say that I was naive is when we were leaving -- I don't remember if it was while we were in San Salvador, or got to Miami, we found out that while we were in El Salvador Ben Linder in Nicaragua had been murdered by the Contras. And he -- I don't know if you know the story. He was an American living in Nicaragua working on a hydroelectric project. And he had been targeted by the Contras for working in this little village helping Sandinista supporters. I thought, “Just being an American does not protect you.” Although certainly nothing like what the Salvadorans faced. And then our project went on for years and years and we sent really tens and tens, maybe 50 or 100 delegations so far, to El Salvador -- medical people and teachers, and during the war years through '92. It was always the same thing. And then they started refusing entry to our project members. The other woman who I went with on that trip a year later or even less went down to El Salvador, was not let in the country. And so then we had to do campaigns against the prohibition from entering El Salvador.

JR: What kind of work was involved on this side, here?

JS: We would come back and do slide shows to church groups and school groups. And a lot of work in the schools, getting kids to write letters to the kids in the school thereonce they started up a school there. And doing presentations wherever we could. We would always meet with our congress people when we came back and tell them what happened. We would report to the city council, because we were an official project of Cambridge, although it was just an endorsement by the city. We would write articles. We had a newsletter for many years. Do fundraisers and workathons and benefit concerts and all sorts of things. And then when the war ended in '92 we kept up the project, but it was not as -- for years we had a half-time staff person for the project.

JR: I was going to say it sounds like a full-time job for everyone.

JS: Well, it was a big project. And now we don't have a staff person and it's much smaller, but we keep doing it. People have really long-term relationships with people in this village.

JR: That’s very nice.

JS: It's grown. There's electricity and roads and telephones there again.

JR: What kind of work does the project do now that the war is over? Obviously things must have changed somewhat in the kinds of work that the delegations were doing.

JS: Well, we did a lot in the past number of years in terms of advocating for their school. They had during the war years nothing from the government at all. And then after the war years they were beginning to rebuild the road. But the villagers really had to do their own fundraising. They got support not only from us, they had European sister cities. They built their school themselves without government money. They had their own teachers in the school. And then at some point the government said, “Well, we're going to come in and take over your school,” and then they had to fight against that, because what they wanted was to get their teachers certified. And for many years there has been

an ongoing process, which has not ended to this day, of getting teachers -- what's called ‘popular teachers’ -- certification to become teachers. Because what happens is that the government would send in teachers from San Salvador who just could not relate to this rural population. Wouldn't show up, would have assignments in villages in the countryside and not come. And so a lot of support around the schools. We supported a women's weaving cooperative. There's a women's baking cooperative. We've tried to give a lot of -- it's not just – [break in audio]

JR: Maybe just repeat that little sentence?

JS: Oh, that our project has been very focused on supporting the women in the community of Las Flores, because during the war years women were combatants. It's a little bit like what happened here in World War II. And then the war ends and they're told, “Okay, go back to the kitchen.” And very traditional patterns. And abuse of women, and so we have put some of our focus on that. Now we're focusing more on youth, bringing kids from here down and interacting with kids there, and their kids were born during the war years, and now have lived since '92 without the war, and some of the communal spirit that was in the village is being lost. There's beginning to be influence of gangs from the cities and drugs, which there *never* was during the war years. It was an alcohol-free village for many many years. That has ended. So there's a lot to do still in the relationship. It's been a great project. Really the people from here who've been involved are really interested, dedicated people. We've brought people up from the village and we've also worked with other groups-- with CISPES, and tours they've done of organizers in the maquilas, the factories and the free trade zones. Getting into those issues. So that's one thing I've worked on a few years, although I really spend a lot less time on it now than I did during the war years. I too am one of the people who do less around this project. And I last went to El Salvador I think two years ago. My daughter was -- I think when she was a senior in high school she went on a delegation with me. We had four high school kids. Maybe five or six adults, some teachers and some others.

JR: Have your kids picked up on these? Or your commitment to human rights, to sort of carry that on themselves?

JS: My daughter definitely yes. She's very political and she's working -- she's in college but she took a year of absence, a leave this year, and she's working in DC. At first she worked at a bookstore, because she always wanted to do that, and now she's working in a nonprofit, the Center for Community Change, on issues of transportation or lack of transportation in low income communities. And she's definitely a feminist. My son, he's still figuring it out, where he's at. I would say it's not his priority to be an activist. His priority is roller coasters. (laughs) He's a roller coaster fanatic. But he does things. One of our neighbors ropes him into working for a progressive candidate that I've done some work for. And he goes to student activism meetings at school. He's trying to figure out where he fits in with that.

JR: What would you say were the greatest challenges for you in doing this kind of work?

JS: Well, I would say the greatest -- I think anybody who's an activist is an activist ultimately for themselves, because it gives you a sense of satisfaction doing it. On top of that you make changes in the world. But ultimately you have to really want to be in this and enjoy doing it. But it's certainly frustrating when you hold a “report back” from your delegation and only a handful of people come to it. You say, “Why aren't there more people grabbed by this, involved in this, seeing what's going on? And why is it not growing?” I think that's always the challenge. I've been in it a long time, and you see changes, you see things happening, but it's never fast enough, it's never enough change. But it's really . . . . you just have to keep plugging at it. The Sister City thing, just the volume of work we did, the number of people who've heard about the project, we always had articles in the local newspaper about our delegations and the work of the project. But we would try to get articles in the *Boston Globe* or the *Herald* to get to a wider audience. And from time to time we *would* get a wider audience. And we had

many presentations that were small, but we had hundreds of them over the years. And you try to look at whether you've succeeded, and I have no doubt that in terms of the protection that we gave to the people in Las Flores, that it was very important work that we did, and they believe that too, the Salvadorans. And I think public pressure paid a role in ending the war in El Salvador. But yet there are many areas where the FMLN controls municipalities and has -- I don't know, maybe a third of the legislative seats now. But there has not been, I would say, immense social change in the country overall. There's been some, but still there are new challenges. There's this whole privatization mandated by the World Bank and the IMF and the public health system and the schools are being privatized in El Salvador, which maybe they're going to be more efficient, but there's going to be less access for poor people. So it's a constant struggle. You have to see it as a lifelong commitment. And I change what I get involved in. I love this really because you get attached to it, the people there and the people here who are working on it. But I do stuff in the schools here also. I do a lot of work with the National Lawyers Guild. I always say recently I have four projects I work on because I can't even keep track of the different things. Oh, I've been working on a living wage campaign in Cambridge, which was a really really great project. So for me I like to -- from time to time I hear of new things that I think are really great, important work to be done, and I take something up.

JR: Do you work on these things in your capacity as a lawyer or secondly?

JS: The living wage campaign I did as a lawyer. Well both as a lawyer and as an activist. But I helped draft the ordinance and was really a main negotiator with various city personnel over the terms of the ordinance that we eventually got passed. And that was an issue I had heard about at a National Lawyers Guild convention. I went to a convention and people from LA were talking about their campaign and the great things that they had done. I said, "Wow, this is really really an interesting thing to do and I want to do it," and came back to Cambridge and started talking to people. And maybe a year

later found people that were also interested in working on it. We started a campaign.

JR: Do you practice as a lawyer also?

JS: I do. I practice as a lawyer, although it varies. Maybe half to two-thirds time; really, all this activism stuff takes so much time. I do a variety. I do personal injury cases and for many years focused on representing lead-poisoned children. I still have a few of those cases. I also do family law, divorces. And I do residential real estate, which is people buying and selling houses. Which feels very unpolitical. But it's nice to have no conflict and just do the work and people pay you. And that's changed over the years. I would say when I first became a lawyer I did a lot of landlord-tenant work and representing tenants and tenant unions. And it's great work, but I just needed a change after a while and stopped doing that. And then got involved in divorces. And there were years when I did workers' compensation cases. And it's a bit unusual, the variety of things I do. But I like that changing focus every so often, doing something different.

JR: Seems like it will protect against burnout.

JS: Yeah. So I have an office upstairs. I see clients right here in this room. And for many years I had an office in Jamaica Plain. About six years ago I started working at home, which has been really great for me. Because it was right at the time when my kids were -- I wish I had done it when they were a little younger, -- in their middle school years, and so I could be around a little bit when they came home after school. And I collaborate with other lawyers on big cases, because it's hard to do it in a home office. Just these cases with volumes of paper and depositions.

JR: All that bureaucratic stuff.

JS: But it's great. It's really worked out for me, being a lawyer. Some of the work I do is political and some of it is not. I try not to be on the wrong side of a case, at least. Although you can't always predict that. Sometimes it turns out you're on the wrong side.

Then you try to help negotiate things rather than litigate it to the bitter end. You try to work it out. But it's been a good career for me.

JR: Has there ever been times when there's been conflicts between your activist work or your professional work and your family responsibilities?

JS: I wouldn't say *conflicts* -- there are conflicts in terms of time conflicts, but not conflicts with my family, because we're pretty accommodating of one another, and now my husband travels for work. I would travel, we'd travel together, and we've just always worked it out. And somehow we've been fortuitous a lot. When I've been really busy often it's been a time when he's been less busy. And there was a time when the kids were young when I definitely worked very long hours and he worked fewer hours. And I would say, "We better not separate, because you're going to get custody if we were to separate." And in retrospect I don't know if I would do it that way now. But somehow at the time it was the right thing to do. And then since I've been working at home I would say I'm the one who's more with the kids and he's taken advantage of that for him to work longer hours. But the political work definitely gets in the way of the moneymaking work, there's no doubt about that. But we've been fortunate that money has not been an issue. It would certainly have been a lot harder I'd say if money were an issue too, for me to do political work on my work time, which I do all the time.

JR: How do you think your contributions have affected others?

JS: Well, I try to be a model for young lawyers. We do a lot of projects with law students in the Lawyers Guild. For many years we've had a project we call the Street Law Clinic, which they actually started up whenwe lived in Nicaragua for a year, ten years ago. They started it while I was away. Came back and just saw it was such a great project where we develop these workshops on topics, landlord-tenant law, street law for kids, we did one on workers' rights. And we train law students to do these workshops. They're interactive workshops that we do in community centers and schools and halfway houses.

And then the lawyers supervise the students. They train the students and then go with the student, and then the students conduct the workshop.

JR: Like a clinic-type thing?

JS: Yeah, but the focus of it is not just teaching people about law but really what their legal rights are, as a way to empower people, to empower tenants to take action, and to empower kids not to be intimidated by the police. And it was really started after the -- what was his name, the guy who – Charles Stuart, who had killed his wife, but who picked a black man, Willie Bennett, out of a line-up and accused him of murdering his wife. This was when we were in Nicaragua, '89, '90, and caused a big big racial conflict in Boston as police were stopping random black men on the streets and rounding them up. And it was really a way for kids to do the stop-and-search workshop, for kids to learn what their rights are in relationship to the police. And so the question is my effect on people. I'd say so that's one thing I try to do, influence young people to themselves become activists. And then my effect is whatever the effect of our -- whatever the movement is trying to do at the time.

JR: What do you think has been most rewarding for you about the kind of work that you've been involved in?

JS: Well, really seeing the village of Las Flores grow, seeing it survive, and getting to know people from there, and really getting to know the people in the project itself here. And it's very satisfying when you do something and it works. Like our living wage campaign, really it was maybe a year and a half from start to getting the ordinance passed in Cambridge and then seeing that it's really being implemented somewhat. Probably more than in other cities where they've passed it. Wages went up for city workers to a minimum of $10 an hour, and now we're trying to focus on the other effects of it. But I think I was a little too *effective* in this project because part of the implementation of the ordinance is that there's a community advisory board appointed by

the city manager and although I was probably the most central person on this project, and prior to being on the community advisory board certainly had the most knowledge about this ordinance, I was not appointed to be on the committee, and it took them a year to appoint the community advisory board, because the city had to search so hard to find people who were not totally sympathetic to the purpose of the living wage. But the board members were very welcoming in the subsequent meetings. People who were there were glad to have my expertise, which is very quickly fading because I'm less involved in it, so I have to pull out the ordinance and read it and see what we said in that section and the other. But the living wage movement is just a great great movement, all over the country. And I think it's growing. It's really focusing on wage inequality and the issue that workers don't have the protections to organize or the economic clout to organize and there have to be other ways of doing it because till the unions in a way get back on their feet, which I think they're beginning to do, it's not just an issue for workers, it's an issue for the whole community that incomes at the top are going up and wages at the bottom are going down. So I pick my issues. I'm not in a political party because I don't see any now that have all the answers and are effective and are not just spending all their time on little meetings. So I get involved in issues that I think are going to really make a difference. I think I'm probably more conservative than I was when I was a student. I'm not ready for violent revolution anymore, but I'm certainly ready for major major economic revolution.

JR: How do you think your work has affected you in the way that you developed your own life?

JS: Well, everything, there's lots of little bits and pieces, and you meet people through different kinds of work that you do and become friends with or affect you or make you think about things differently. It's, I'd say for the most part, brought positive things out of the work that I've done. I would say that some of the work I've done in the public schools makes me the most cynical and feeling like change is not possible, and at a time in

Cambridge where we have a new superintendent and a new principal at the high school, I just hope things can change. But there're still old entrenched ways of doing things, entrenched people who have their little turf and see everything as a threat to how they do this. And so sometimes change is very slow. I think I'm going to -- my son's got one more year at the high school and then I'm signing off of involvement in schools, which I was *very, very* involved in for a long time.

JR: What kinds of projects in schools were you involved in?

JS: Well, at the high school I'm involved in a personnel committee, a parent and teacher personnel committee, working on personnel issues. And the one issue we have worked on for five or six years, making barely any progress, and it is this little thing, is to hire teachers earlier in the school year. What happens is we hire over the summer and you just -- people want to work in Cambridge, so sometimes it works out, but the way to hire is in April, May, when people are looking for jobs.

JR: So they have time to prepare to teach.

JS: Right, right.

JR: I teach and it takes a lot of work. Can't just show up.

JS: Yeah, yeah. So it's tough. We work on other issues too around getting -- when there's a teacher that's going to be out for a year, instead of hiring a one-year sub, to get someone a contract for a year, which gives them benefits. Issues around the hiring process. And I have faith that it will change, but it might not be all that dramatic while I'm involved in it. It's just surprising that some things can be so slow.

JR: Certain things that sometimes don't seem like they should be as contentious as other issues are.

JS: Right.

JR: Have you had any role models at any point in your life? You talked about certainly your own sense of trying to be a role model yourself.

JS: Well, at least in the Lawyers Guild now I'm kind of one of the older people in it. In our Sister City Project we have some really really great people who are peers of mine that I see as role models. Some people who are – well, we have two women who are organizers. Nancy Ryan is the head of Women's Commission in Cambridge and Cathy Hoffman, Peace Commission. And I don't know that I could do this stuff full-time. You get a respite, doing some legal work that may or may not be political. It's really interesting to see them do this full-time and what they do. And there's also a guy, Jim Wallace, who has been in this from the beginning. He came to it through his church, Old Cambridge Baptist Church. I was going to say very different perspective from me, because I don't see myself coming to this work as a Jewish person of faith. If anything I've felt like I've tried to bring my activism to the Judaism part. And he's just a total stalwart at this, and so calm and smart and has gone to El Salvador just -- when we can't get a delegation together he goes and just pulls it off. So it's been really really good people in that project.

JR: Just picking up on what you were just saying, in what ways have you tried to bring your activism to the Jewish part?

JS: Well, I would say my only formal involvement with the Jewish community is through Workmen's Circle. And I kind of kept saying, “Well, one of the things I want to do is really start a social action committee here.” But never really took that up. And since we have left it, other people went and did that, I'm so happy that they did. And I feel like that could have been something that I did that was another interest. And actually I'm getting sucked into this Middle East stuff through the Lawyers Guild, which again in a way is not a primary interest of mine, but we had an Israeli -- really an American woman who lives in

Israel now, is also Israeli, lawyer who litigates human rights cases, Palestinian human rights cases. And through -- golly, through I don't know, some phone call or e-mail, not even through the Lawyers Guild, she was coming on a speaking tour with a Palestinian woman, and I got connected, and I said, “Yes, I'll set up some things for them at law schools,” and set up a couple of speaking things. And then somehow e-mailed other people and people in Boston were interested in doing a delegation to the Middle East. The Lawyers Guild did one maybe 20 years ago focusing on house demolitions and land confiscation, and did a really substantial report. And it's been a very divisive issue in the Lawyers Guild. When the Guild first supported Palestinian rights, many people left the Lawyers Guild. Many Jews left the Lawyers Guild. But then it's kinda settled down and it's not an issue anymore. It's clear what -- not necessarily the specifics, but where the sentiments of people in the Lawyers Guild are. And so now there are other people across the country who want to take up the issue again, do a delegation, and have some workshops, and I don't know. So I'm getting sucked into it, but I feel like: do I really want to take on a whole other area, and really learn the background? And it is, but I also –

JR: It’s also an exciting time for this issue.

JS: I think it's a tough issue, and I don't see an answer, and people that I've been talking to feel very strongly that there's not a two-state solution, that is not the answer, and this woman who came, the American Jew, whose name is Pacheco, Allegra Pacheco, I think her father was Puerto Rican, and she was brought up -- she's really interesting, and she's going to be at the Bunting starting in September. Her mother was brought up Orthodox. And the presentation she did with this Palestinian woman just showing the map of -- this little dot and this little dot and this little dot, this is going to be the Palestinian West Bank. It's just -- it doesn't seem very viable. And the Jews, the Israelis being so right wing about this… I admire the people who have taken this on. And there's a group in Boston, Visions for Peace,, of Jews who are confronting this issue in the Jewish community. I think it's a tough one to take on.

JR: Is it similar or like B'Tselem or something like that in Israel?

JS: I think Allegra has worked with them. She's got her own office. And now I get e-mails with the names of all the groups and who's there, and I can't follow them all-- but I've heard that. So I don't know. We're very peripheral to Workmen's Circle. We go to the High Holiday services, people call them "observances". And we know -- I would say socially we know a lot of people there, and feel like almost it would have been a social choice to be more involved in that community as well as a political choice. Instead we're on the periphery of it because we have so many other things going on.

JR: I think I've covered most of my questions. Is there anything else that I haven't asked about that you'd like to tell me?

JS: I don't think so. I tried to dig up some materials.

JR: Yeah, I'd love to look at them.

JS: Yeah, I don't think there's anything else.

JR: Thank you so much for your time.

JS: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]