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Judith Wolf Transcript

Judy Wolf: Is that your tape recorder?

Alexandra Kiosse: Yes. [laughter]. It's my phone, but there's a tape recorder on it.

JW: Wow.

AK: So this is Alexandra Kiosse, interviewing Judy Wolf in her home in Newton. Can I just jump in?

JW: Sure.

AK: Okay. So just the basics in the beginning. How would you describe yourself in terms of your Jewish identity? How important is that identity to you? And how have your feelings about being Jewish changed over time?

JW: Strong Jewish identity. Being Jewish has been an important part of my life. It’s been consistent, strong in the beginning, and strong now.

AK: Okay. How did Jewish cultural and religious values impact your experience and attitude towards marriage?

JW: Towards marriage?

AK: Yes.

JW: Repeat that question.

AK: How did your Jewish cultural and religious values impact your attitude towards marriage? Did you choose to marry someone who was Jewish?

JW: Who was Jewish? Yes. We kept a kosher home. Once we moved back to Boston, we became involved with the Jewish organizational life and joined a synagogue.

AK: This kind of a broad question, but how were you involved in the Soviet Jewry movement? What compelled you to get involved?

JW: That I can answer, first, to explain the structure and then in a personal way. Jewish women's organizations in New York organized an umbrella group. I was very, very active in the Women's Division of American Jewish Congress. [Editor's Note: The Women's Division was integrated into the American Jewish Congress in the mid-1970s.] They were assigned the task of the first Women's Plea for Soviet Jewry, which jump started the general community, these women's groups. I, as the chair of a committee of the national organization, was asked to be – by the American Jewish Congress Women's Division – I became the first chair of the Women's Plea for Soviet Jewry in Boston. So that was the direct thing. It was my job to organize, with representative Boston women's groups, events to popularize the plight of Soviet Jewry. On a personal level – look, I lived through World War II. In ’56, my husband and I were living in Canada, and I was involved in helping Hungarian refugees. It was a short window of opportunity when they were able to flee Hungary. I was involved in that. So, I've always been involved – my field is history – in an organizational life that goes back a very long time, say to the late ’50s, early ’60s. My focus of interest has always been helping Jewish communities in distress. If you know the history, there was a schism in the American Jewish community, a debate. The plight of Soviet Jews was clearly known. But there were some people who said we mustn't do anything; we'll make it worse if we do . And others who said that's ridiculous; it's so bad. There's nothing we’d do here that can make it worse, and silence is very bad. The American Jewish activities were really jump started by activities by Soviet dissidents in Moscow. Well, it was in Leningrad, the Leningrad Hijacking. [Editor's Note: Often referred to as the Dymshits–Kuznetsov aircraft hijacking affair, it was an unsuccessful attempt to take an empty civilian aircraft on 15 June 1970 by a

group of sixteen Soviet refuseniks in order to escape to the West.] There were students here, the Triple-S-J [Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry], that publicly fought on behalf of Soviet Jewry. The organized Jewish world came in much more slowly. The women's groups were really at the forefront of the organized Jewry.

AK: So, I guess a follow-up to that is, what was the role of women in the movement? How would you say this role was different from the role of men? How was it a unique role?

JW: That's a great question. It was unique. The role of women was very pertinent. The structure of the Jewish community locally and nationally, you have individual Jewish organizations: the [American Jewish] Committee, the ADL [Anti-Defamation League], then the [American Jewish] Congress, the National Council of Jewish Women. You have the CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies], which is the funding element – nationally, it's the [Jewish] Federation. Politically, socially, legislatively, you have the JCRC [Jewish Community Relations Council], and nationally, it has a counterpart, the NCSJ [National Coalition Supporting Soviet Jewry]– no, the NCSJ is my organization, Soviet Jewry organization. You had the counterpart, national counterpart [of the JCRC], and I've forgotten the initials. Jackie Levine was the national chair of women's organizations on behalf of Soviet Jews. She was the then president of the American Jewish Congress Women's Division. Women literally pushed, and we did things – we pushed from the ground up. We were willing to do those small things to highlight the plight of Soviet Jews, which the men really weren't willing to do. At that time, there was no woman head of any national organization, not director and not chair. So, the women had the worst and the best of both worlds. The worst was they weren't where they should have been. The best was they had the flexibility and freedom to move. I think women were extraordinarily instrumental. I can tell you the different things I did in Boston that were replicated by women all over the country. Well, and I think in Russia, too. Everybody's heard of Ida Nudel, but there was Sylva Zalmanson, Avital Sharansky. Women played a pivotal role.

AK: Can you talk about some of these things that you did in Boston?

JW: Okay, and I wrote it down. One, I was the, as I told you, the chair of the first Women's Plea for Soviet Jewry. That means we designed public events and speakers and distributed material to our own members and to the world at large to help Soviet Jews. I think in 1970, Eduard Kuznetsov and other people hijacked a Soviet plane in Leningrad, and they were arrested. His wife's name was Sylva Zalmanson. Working with the American Jewish Congress Women's Division – not the general division, yet – the Women's Division, I phoned prosecutor Rudenko on behalf – Governor [Francis] Sargent was away. [Editor's Note: Roman Rudenko was the prosecutor of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1944 to 1953; known for acting as the Soviet Chief Prosecutor at the main trial of the major Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg Trials. I think it was with Lieutenant Governor [Donald] Dwight. I asked him to phone on behalf of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and he put in a call to Rudenko speaking on behalf of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. While he was talking, I was on the line with the Women's Division in New York. We were coming up with suggestions and coordinating, but Dwight really did it. I believe that's the name of the Lieutenant Governor. I was chair of the Jewish Community Relations Council, World Jewelry, and then Soviet Jewry. So, I was involved on that level in New York. Nationally, I was involved as chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Women's Division. A national conference of Soviet Jewry was formed when the Jewish community realized that it took an organized national effort, and I was a member of the National Conference and officer and continued with them to this day. The National Conference became Post-Soviet Jewry, and now it advocates for Eurasian Jewry. I'll tell you some of the other things. Okay. Working with the American Jewish Congress Women's Division, I got the Mass Attorney General to circulate a letter nationally to all state attorney generals, to Rudenko, on behalf of Kuznetsov [who] was given a death sentence, and his wife, Sylva Zalmanson imprisonment. So, we got all the attorney generals nationally to protest the death sentence to Rudenko. And then, when she was freed, Sylva Zalmanson protested

outside the UN [United Nations]. On behalf of the American Jewish Congress Women's Division – long name – I was with a group of people joining her at the UN Plaza. We marched. We marched in Boston, pushing baby carriages sometimes, on behalf of Soviet Jewry. When there were events – and this was problematic because some people thought the idea was wrong, and some liked it. But then, through the Jewish Community Relations Council, we distributed pro-Soviet Jewish literature at events involving Soviet people. So, at hockey games, for example, that kind of thing. Then, when Ronald Reagan was president, he and Secretary [George] Shultz were going to Moscow to meet – probably was [Leonid] Brezhnev, but I wouldn't swear to it. My husband and I joined with other people from the NCSJ, and we went to Helsinki and we marched on behalf of Soviet Jews. We also met with Shultz in Finland. Do you know Helsinki?

AK: Yes.

JW: Okay. So you know there's a mall going to the harbor, a grassy park leading from the harbor to the other part of the city. So, we marched down towards the harbor. The Finns were sympathetic, and it got very good coverage. The main thrust was to call public attention, to pressure our government here to pressure the Russians. I think the largest number of people permitted to go was under Richard Nixon, I do believe. Again, public pressure. As the popular pressure began to increase, you had people like Scoop Jackson, Senator Jackson, speaking out on behalf of Soviet Jews. So, it was like throwing a pebble into water. Have you done that? You skim the water, and the rings keep increasing. That's what it was. I think there were other things. Oh, okay. Besides the marches, we asked people to have a fifth matzah, a matzah of freedom, or a fourth matzah – I guess a fourth matzah – on the Seders. We encouraged the synagogues to talk about it at the holidays and on Shabbos. We talked to various groups. The whole basic theme was to have a drumbeat that kept reminding the world.

AK: What about the Kehillah project in Ukraine?

JW: How do you know about that?

AK: That was on the Jewish Women Archive's website.

JW: Okay, so I was one of three people – Betsy Gidwitz, (Simon Clafeld?), and I went to Dnepropetrovsk, which is about six hours – then a six-hour bus ride from Kyiv. I was, at that time, the chairperson at the NCSJ of their cultural commission, and Nate Geller of the NCSJ got a phone call from Shmuel Kaminezki: "You're sending people to Kyiv and Leningrad? Why not to us? We need you." So Nate called, and the three of us went to [Dnepropetrovsk]. That was the first Boston trip. As a result of that first trip and the clear need and the pleasure of working with Rabbi [Shmuel] and Chanie Kaminezki, Boston started a Kehillah project, which was like a sister city project with Dnepropetrovsk. It happens that my first grandchild and granddaughter has cerebral palsy. So when I went, her mother, Sue, said to me, "What are they doing for children with disabilities in Dnepropetrovsk?" Not only were they not doing anything, but Sue and I found out that if the state had their wish, the government institutionalized children. Children who may have had severe problems, but also children with minor problems, who would have been medically helped here. Some brave mothers kept the children at home. It was the mothers because often the fathers left. So, it was the mothers and their mothers, the grandmothers, who cared for these children. Sue and I, working with people at Dnepropetrovsk, who became our – to the staff – very close friends. We established the ERC, an Educational Resource Center, to help children with disabilities, and it's going to this day and is better than fifteen years old. There are children – there's a videotape of the Kehillah Project, which you must have seen.

AK: I don't think so.

JW: Bob Gordon commissioned – Bob and Doris – and you hear mothers talk about what the Resource Center meant to them. I think I have a CD[2] – I know I do – which I'll get to you somehow. The point is that we were giving mothers a chance to socialize with

other mothers. We were giving children who literally were kept hidden away because of the community ridicule – a chance to have fun and develop educationally to the extent that they were able to. Some of these families live on the fifth floor, and I don't have to tell you that Soviet apartments did not have elevators. So, we were able to get vans – were gifts of the CJP Women's Division, and we were able to bring the children to the center. So really, until my husband took ill about six years ago, I was going to Dnepropetrovsk about twice a year. Sue the same. I was involved with the Resource Center and other community activities in Dnepropetrovsk. I considered it a miracle. The Soviet Union internally collapsed, and a Jewish community, Jewish communal life, which had been banned, was flourishing. That's my definition of a miracle. I was at the first Commemoration of Babi Yar in Kyiv; there's another one coming up this September. [Editor's Note: Babi Yar, a ravine in Kyiv, was the site of massacres carried out by Nazi German forces against the Jews of Kyiv.] Also, we went to Moscow to meet with American officials, thanking them, encouraging them for their support, and to Leningrad for fun.

AK: Are there any stories from the women you worked with or with the kids that stood out to you or any specific events?

JW: Yes. We brought materials because, in the beginning, they had literally nothing. So first, I want to tell you – and we brought duffel bags of stuff for the Resource Center. We had to take two cars, one station wagon loaded with the duffel bags, and then my husband drove Sue and me. KLM [Royal Dutch Airlines] did not charge a fee. They said we're doing God's work. “We’ll transport the stuff for free.” We got a letter from Senator Ted Kennedy. You know who he –?

AK: Yes.

JW: Okay. Saying that we were doing work that he agreed with and would we be shown every courtesy? We came into Kyiv. I'm sure you know this, coming from that part of the

world. Depending on the mood and the personality of the officer and the guard who interviewed you, you could have an easy time of it or a very unpleasant time of it. We were given a rough time by this junior officer, and we showed him the letter from Kennedy. The senior officer, because of Kennedy's letter, let us pass through. There were problems. We obviously didn't want to pay taxes on humanitarian gifts. So, that could be a hassle. A wonderful story. Quilters – Jews and Christians – made quilts for each of the children in the Resource Center. We brought in duffel bags of fifty quilts. We couldn't leave them in a hotel in Kyiv because we were warned they'd be stolen. So, we left them in the synagogue, and then, when we were picked up and driven to Dnep, we brought the quilts. Here's a story that I will never forget. At that time, we were in the Resource Center, we had a room, and the [inaudible] had a Jewish Community Center. There were mothers and children. The children saw the quilts, and they were gorgeous – they are gorgeous. They just hugged them and wrapped themselves in it. One little boy said, "This is the first present I've ever received." We're talking a level of poverty that most people don't know here, where one mother told me, "I don't take my child to the market because I can't buy the things she sees and wants to eat." The women that we worked with were indescribable, loving, hospitable, and caring. When I was invited, for example, to homes, it was the custom to have a lot of food and tea and cakes on the table. The reason I'm telling you this is these people did not really have the money; the welcome to us was at the expense of money that they would have for food. There was a little girl with cerebral palsy who was knocked down by a car. The driver of the car tried to say it was the girl's fault, which was ridiculous. She was hospitalized. We provided the medicine, and we had a pediatrician here on the phone with the pediatrician in the hospital, helping to guide the medical care of the little girl who, thank God, was healed and was able to come back. If you know Soviet hospitals, at that time, even though medicine was supposed to be free, you had to pay for the medicines, the sheets, and the doctors. We did that through the Resource Center. The Kaminezkis are very gracious. Friday night we used to have dinner at their house and then Saturday go to the shul. We

met people who grabbed us just because we were there, and we came, and we cared. They could not get over the fact that we cared. I remember speaking my – I understand Yiddish and speak poorly – speaking, so to speak, Yiddish with a woman who had tears in her eyes because she was speaking Yiddish to an American. Amazing. At the first Babi Yar meeting – it was an official event run by the Ukrainian government – Bob and I, and a few people, let's say a delegation, [inaudible] twelve of us – [telephone rings] we'll let it go – were at the [telephone rings] – I'll get that. That's my daughter. Excuse me. [Recording paused.] [The commemoration of] Babi Yar was a very stirring event. Who wrote the poem "Babi Yar?" I've forgotten his name. [Editor's Note: "Babi Yar" was written by Yevgeni Yevtushenko.] That poem was read. But the Prime Minister, I think, of Ukraine spoke. His words were chilling. He said, "We expect Jews, we Jews, to be a bridge to help Ukraine." The implication was we had better come through if we wanted Ukrainian Jews to have a decent time of it. I can't quote his exact words. But it was a double-edged welcome. But also there, a woman wept and said in Yiddish, which my husband understood very, very well – spoke very well – "To think that I'm alive to see this day." Babi Yar was the scene of a massacre. So, it was an extraordinary – and that was part of the Kehillah experience. That's why I'm telling you about it. On the early trips, we would stop in Kyiv and make connections. We linked the ERC – (Soros?) had a foundation that helped train teachers. We then linked the ERC with Gordon College in Haifa. To this day, there are video conferences between Dnepropetrovsk and Haifa. I saw children grow from little children to teenagers. Children from the ERC were actually admitted to their public schools, which I want to tell you is amazing. Because remember, these were kids who were considered cast-offs. We came to know one another. That's the importance of going often, to get to know and trust. That we weren't just in there for a minute, and then we'll forget you.

AK: Were you involved in any other social movements? Did you see the movement for Soviet Jewry as related to other social movements at the time?

JW: I was involved in other social movements on behalf of women's rights. Very, very active in helping Jews in Arab lands who were having a horrific time of it, both through my chairmanship in the JCRC in Boston and through my chairmanship in New York. I'll flip your question a little bit. You had a group of women who, by and large, were stay-at-home-moms. We're talking quite a time back when it was not common for women to work unless they wanted to be teachers, nurses, or social workers. There were very limited fields. So you had a huge number of college-educated women who turned their education and their energy into organizational work helping others. So we were part of that general spirit. We were also, as a group, politically active. So you had all these forces coming together. There were other things. The Arabs were hijacking planes. Jews were separated from non-Jews on the plane. I personally was with – Bob and a pair of friends were involved – going to the airport, and petitioning there to help release the Jewish hostages. So, that was part of the world or the world of Jewish women whose backgrounds were similar to mine.

AK: Did you associate particular Jewish values with the work that you did?

JW: Look, I think the expression *tikkun olam* is overused and abused. [Editor's Note: *Tikkun Olam* means "repair the world." It's often conflated with social justice.] The intrinsic Jewish values, say, in *Pirkei Avot,* or take Hillel, "If I am not for others, who am I?" or – I'm misquoting it – Hillel's directive to care for yourself, but also to care for others. [Editor's Note: *Pirkei Avot*'s "Ethics of the Fathers" is a collection of ethical and moral maxims from Rabbinic traditions.] In *Pirkei Avot,* it says it's necessary to make a beginning – and again, I'm paraphrasing – even if you can't bring a project to conclusion. So, an intrinsic Jewish value is our responsibility to help others. That's my sense of what being Jewish means.

AK: Have you noticed any consequences in Eastern Europe caused by the discrimination of the Soviet Union? Basically, in more modern times, or after the collapse

of the Soviet Union?

JW: Well, sure, but you must know them as well as I. I forgot the interview. Organized religions were prohibited. I think there was a chief rabbi in Romania, but there certainly wasn't in – who was allowed to exist during Soviet times. So, take Ukraine, which I know best. It had no Jewish institutions; it had no Jewish structure. The beginning of Jewish life in Kyiv was led by Rabbi Bleich, who's the Chief Rabbi of Kyiv in Ukraine. In Dnepropetrovsk, it was encouraged by Shmuel Kaminezki, and he did two things. He not only encouraged Jewish life but, let's say, he shared things with the general community. So, he was building goodwill for Jews. The Resource Center, for example, is open to non-Jewish children. We will not turn [a child away]. If a child comes and is willing to help celebrate the Jewish holidays and understands it's a Jewish project, absolutely welcome. No question asked. My theory is it's enough to have these disabilities. We don't give any kind of litmus test. So, gradually, there was the rebuilding of the Jewish community. There were a couple of problems. One, you didn't have a young Jewish leadership; they had to be found and developed and encouraged. Rabbi Kaminezki did that. Zelig Brez, whose name may have come up, would be an example of someone who was very young and became involved with the Jewish community. [Editor's Note: Zelig Brez became the director of the Dnepropetrovsk Jewish Community.] The other thing is that in the beginning, excuse me, there was the joint – the Jewish Agency and the Israeli consulate [inaudible], but that was helped from the top down. It took time to encourage and develop the help from the bottom up so that the inhabitants, the local people, the Jewish people were given the say over their own future and destiny. That was a consequence. That's a change that we're seeing today. You still have very active International Jewish groups. But you have more and more self-direction by the community. In the Resource Center, one of the things we did was teach the mothers how to become advocates. Here's a story, you were in a culture … We were in a culture in which there was no initiative; uniformity was prized. For example, at a meeting of adults, they started the class, person after person after person stood up and said, “This

class is wonderful. Our teacher is terrific." They were not used to differing opinions. I remember one of the times that I spoke to the mothers. I gave a presentation; I said, "Does anybody have any questions?" No, they weren't used to it. So, I said, "Well, if I were you, these are some of the questions I would ask." They were not used to the freedom of thought and expression that we know here. At least in the Resource Center, we taught advocacy in small groups, and we let the mothers know they have rights. I don't know if I answered that question.

AK: What social issues feel most pressing to you now, maybe within the Jewish community?

JW: Within the Jewish community? I will answer that. Look, I'm a history major. My field, my Ph.D., was in Middle Eastern History. As a hobby, for as long as I can remember as an adult, wherever we were, I stopped in college campus bookstores just to see what was being recommended for Middle Eastern Studies. I have a big concern about the hostility towards Israel, towards Zionism, which is a euphemism for towards Jews, that you find on college campuses and in a great many areas of Europe. I don't think the organized Jewish community is telling the other story of Israel. It's not just about war and borders. They're less active now, but the kibbutz movement would be a natural for kids interested in farming – I mean, non-Jews. There is Israeli culture, Israeli art, Israeli music. It's the fact that Israelis helped in Southeast Asia when there was that terrible tragedy of flooding. They've helped countries in Africa. Those stories are not being told, and they're not known by the bulk of Jewish students. So, when they come to college, they're totally unprepared to understand, to interpret, to question some of the intense anti-Israel bias that's floating around. I think that the organized Jewish community had better wake up. I'm not saying proselytize, and I'm not saying indoctrinate, but at least let the honest facts be known and encourage that kind of knowledge being given to kids in whatever ways are appropriate. You have, in Massachusetts, an enormous number of colleges. You have one Israeli consul, one vice-

consul. They cannot possibly service all the students. The Jewish community is not using its creativity, its ability, and its funds to do it. A great thing are the trips, the two-week trips; those are marvelous, but there needs to be more done on a continuing basis. Locally, my God, I think this is the most frightening election I have ever experienced. I've never heard the levels of hatred, the lack of [community]. I'm worried. It's obvious I'm not a Republican. [laughter] I am worried by the demagoguery of a major political party. I'm terribly worried. I'm worried by the isolationism that you're hearing from Donald Trump. Look, I was at a meeting of the NCSEJ [National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, formerly known as the National Council for Soviet Jewry], and I was sitting next to the ambassador from Latvia. He told me, speaking for Latvia and the other Baltic countries, they are petrified that if Trump is elected, it will end American support. I think it's outrageous to treat NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] as something that should be shut down or, more or less, shift American responsibility to European countries. I believe that working together is a way of maintaining peace. I'm also troubled by the growth of right-wing parties in Europe. I think it's a very frightening time. We don't see statesmen. Maybe Angela Merkel stands out. We don't see statesmen. And we need them desperately.

AK: My last question is, what do you wish people would understand about the Soviet Jewry movement that isn't clear in history books?

JW: Well, first of all, in American history books, it's not taught. You understand I was in college – I graduated in 1954. I was a history major. I tell you, not until I was in graduate school and took a course in Southern history did I know the full depth of the lynchings and the persecution. The Soviet Jewry movement is not discussed in American history books, nor do I think it's given the credit, along with other things, to help [Mikhail] Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Socialist Republic. By the way, my concerns today are not only women's rights; it's minority rights in this country. We still have a long way to go to get rid of prejudice and get rid of economic inequality. I don't believe in

group attacks. It's not Wall Street *per se*. It's the failure of the American Congress to pass legislation restricting some of the excesses of Wall Street. I don't believe in demonizing groups. I think we haven't, as a people, learned the lessons of history. When you hear of the demonizing of groups – it's horrendous. Horrendous. I don't think I believe in political correctness, either. I think that becomes an excuse for white-washing things one wishes to white-wash and not discussing things one wishes not to discuss. I do believe in public discourse.

AK: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me or anything you'd like to add?

JW: I can't think of anything. Seems to me I talked too much.

AK: [laughter] No, that was great.

JW: I'd be happy to give you some artifacts. It will take me a little while. I have pictures of the Finnish – the rally in Finland. I have, if I still kept them, a lot of pictures of the early years in Dnepropetrovsk. I picked material about the Resource Center. So, if you're interested in any of that –?

AK: Sure. Yes, that’d be great.

JW: I'll be in touch. By the way, it wasn't all gloomy. We had we had fun. We laughed and had fun with the Americans going and with the people there. I didn't want to give the impression it was gloomy.

AK: Okay, thank you so much.

JW: Oh, my pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]