Dina Rosenfeld Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8th, 2015. I'm here with Dina Rosenfeld at the Meet Me at Sinai Day of Learning at B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. We're going to conduct an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Dina Rosenfeld: Yes.

JG: Okay. So, as we were just saying, JWA is interested in the ways in which feminism has changed the Jewish community and the public and private lives of Jewish women and men over the past several decades. So let's start with my asking you if you could tell us a little about when and where you were born and where you grew up.

DR: I was born in 1949 in Bistrita, Romania.

JG: Would you mind saying that again?

DR: Sure. I was born in 1949 in Bistrita, Romania, and my mother and I immigrated to the United States in 1960. I grew up in Borough Park, which is an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood. Both my parents are Holocaust survivors, and large parts of my family were killed, including four half brothers and sisters, in the Holocaust. So we were deeply entrenched in that world.

JG: Yes, indeed. Can you describe, briefly, your family and their attitude towards and involvement in Jewish life when you were growing up, given all of this?

DR: Well, my father was (Rosha Khal?), which is the head of the small Jewish community in Bistrita. From the age of two until around three and a half, he was arrested for being (Rosha Khal?). This was under the Stalin era. So that was direct Jewish

involvement, to say the least. Then, by the time I was the age of five, he died in Romania. So he's buried there. My mother and I then, in 1958, moved to Israel. And then, from Israel, we moved here in 1960 because she had siblings both in Israel and in the United States.

JG: Do you remember coming here?

DR: Of course. I was eleven.

JG: Oh, you were eleven by the time that happened. So, what was your family's involvement, your mother and yours, in Jewish life when you were in that stage growing up and then when you came here?

DR: My parents were not Hasidic or very, very Orthodox. They were, I guess, identified as Orthodox, but there weren't those kinds of classifications in Romania. But coming here, we then belonged to a shtiebel, which was part of the Satmar Hasidic sect. They were pretty awful. What I mean by awful is not the fact that there wasn't equal rights for women because who expected that in those days? But their worldview was such that they sort of blamed my mother for – that the reason my father died suddenly was because she didn't get proper (shelita?) in terms of her first husband, who was killed in the Holocaust, and she didn't get proper – having a shoe thrown at her from his brother who lived in America as a result. That's the kind of statement that the Satmars would make, which really endeared them to me as you could well imagine.

JG: And you were, how old during this period?

DR: Ten, eleven, twelve.

JG. Ten, eleven – into your early teens?

DR: Yeah. I was just so turned off to them. They did make me – from the shtiebel, they made me leave once because my skirt was too short. It wasn't like we were there every Shabbos, but we were there for all the holidays, and this Bistritzer Rebbe was from our town. So we had close personal ties to them, so that's why we ended up in a place like that.

JG: I see. What happened with your mother's involvement over the years?

DR: Well, my mother, I think, was very – given what she at that point has been through, which is two husbands, one child who was killed, she was a very broken woman who had just tried very hard to protect me, basically. She tried to keep up appearances. And in that neighborhood, everybody was Orthodox. But she really very much allowed me to do my thing because I think she, in her soul, didn't feel like she was really part of that very oppressive – both religiously and also sort of interpersonally and communally, a very oppressive system.

JG: Yeah. So when would you say you first became aware of gender and that gender matters to you as a Jew?

DR: Well, the fact that I was behind a mechitza, that was the least of my problems being in a Satmar Hasidic sort of place. I think that my awakening around feminism was the same as everybody of my generation, probably in college and starting to go to women's consciousness-raising groups.

JG: Where did you go to college?

DR: To Brooklyn College as any poor immigrant kid would go. I made so much money going to Brooklyn College because it was free. We were so poor that I got so many [scholarships?]. So it was like a money making proposition. So, Brooklyn College was just really a continuation of high school because you lived at home, and it was all the same circle of people. But there was a beginning of all of that for me. You see, I was not

really connected to the larger American Jewish community until I met somebody at Brooklyn College who told me about Camp Ramah. Camp Ramah, for people like Judith [Rosenbaum] and her mother [Paula Hyman] and that crowd, was part of their lives. For me, it was an enormous awakening.

JG: So you went? You actually went?

DR: I never went as a kid. I could never afford that, but I went as a counselor, and that was tremendous.

JG: When you were in college?

DR: Yeah. My eyes were literally popping out of my head, both theoretically and [in] every possible way. I just didn't see a life like that. My life was so much in the immigrant community. In terms of what secular Jewish life looked like was –

JG: Can you remember some of the things you saw and experienced during those summers at Camp Ramah? You were in your late teens, you're saying, or maybe your early twenties?

DR: Yeah, probably eighteen, nineteen, because, of course, you were supposed to always condense everything. You'd go to summer school and graduate early. Go to summer school and graduate early. A lot of it really had to do with psychosocial issues more than religious issues. People invited me home. I never saw suburban homes before. I never understood why people would complain about the fruit not being good enough until I went to their homes, where everything was picture-perfect. That's just not where I came from. So the whole thing was – I came from immigrant stock, which is a very different stock in terms of the way we see the world. So, for me, I think the first part was just waking up to that. I said, “Oh, this is what it looks like.” Interestingly enough, I was never attracted to materialism despite that. It was never, “They have it. I don't. I can have anything I want if I just choose to. Big deal.” You would be surprised almost

that it wouldn’t be an enormous attraction, and it just wasn't. But in terms of feminism and women's things, it really had to do with the American awakening, women's awakening, Our Bodies, Ourselves, etc. What happened was that through Camp Ramah, I then got to know people who were in the New York Havurah or were beginning the New York Havurah. So I was in the second year of the New York Havurah in 1971. That was, of course, a complete game-changer.

JG: Tell me about that.

DR: That was pretty amazing because it started out with having all these notions about egalitarianism theoretically but not in terms of real life. So, what would happen – I'll give you a few a-ha moments. I think the most important a-ha moment for our purposes here is my first aliyah was probably when Sharon Sperling was being named—which was David Sperling, who teaches at the seminary – his daughter, who’s by now probably forty-five or something like that. So the biggest a-ha moment which is relevant to this was Martha Ackelsberg, and I were in the New York Havurah, and, at that time, her husband, David. This was before Judith joined – Judith Plaskow. We were in services, Shabbat morning services, which we didn't have every Shabbos, but we were in Shabbat morning services. And a guy who I'm not going to name because he would be so proud that I just don't want to have his name associated with it, but one of our lofty academics from the seminary talked about the imagery of Tehillim and the imagery of prayers and how it was just like the semen and the sperm and on and on about something. Martha and I are sitting there completely disgusted, saying, “Even in the interpretation, you have to make it totally male? It's not bad enough that the actual text is totally male; your interpretation on top of it has to be even more male than the actual?” As I said, I don't want to give him credit because he would be way too proud [of] that.

So, she and I went into another room and began talking about this. That was the beginning of Ezrat Nashim, basically, where we said there has to be other ways of

approaching a male liturgy that explains at least – we didn't have, of course, Judith's book, and we didn't have Judith's thinking, which she talked – I don't know if you heard her d'var Torah yesterday, which was really quite excellent, definitely, for the files. She talked about the fact that the first time God speaks to Moses, and then Moses interprets it any which way he wants. So why not us? So, Martha's and my perspective was now, why did we end up interpreting it in the most male way possible? So we started Ezrat Nashim. It was really a combination of both political and spiritual. The first couple of years, when we were really active and building it, it was usually around both. How do you storm the seminary and make changes, but also how do we discover what are we going to do once we storm? To what degree can you interpret tradition and still have it be the Jewish tradition? How much can it change? How much can it bend in order to be still recognized as the Jewish tradition that we're connected to, which [we're] all Jewish feminists? But as I said, we were a little bit – not that we were so special; we were at the right place at the right time with the right forces sort of around us.

JG: Tell me a little bit more about Ezrat Nashim in those early, very formative moments.

DR: Well, the earliest time, was basically women – a few not, but almost all the women were from the New York Havurah. So, of course, it was Martha and myself, and a few other people were sort of brought in, like Leora Fishman and Betty Braun. Paula and Stan were already in the New York Havurah.

JG: Paula?

DR: So, of course, Paula became a very active and wonderful, as you could well imagine, member. I'm trying to remember. Arlene Agus was a very important part of it also. She's the one who really popularized the Rosh Chodesh service as a women's unique – and has written a lot, and that was her contribution – and Liz Koltun. So what happened was, as I said, we saw it since – I wasn't, but the rest of the group were really children of the Conservative movement, including especially Martha, Paula, and all these

women who really grew up through not just Camp Ramah and Conservative synagogues, but also have gone to Prozdor, have belonged to Hillels at their various, very upper-class campuses, which I had no access to. What I heard about them sounded good, but Brooklyn College, you know – hey, free education. So they all had exposure. So what they were revolting – I was revolting against something theoretical since it was not really my movement. But it was theirs, and I figured it was as close as I can get to something that made sense. So the initial political movement had to do with really sort of confronting the Jewish Theological Seminary about its lack of acceptance of women, lack of women being counted in the minyan, [and] having leadership roles. That's where we had that very famous trip to the Concord [Resort Hotel in the Catskills], which I'm sure you might have –

JG: Well, tell us about it.

DR: Yeah, it was pretty great. It was two cars worth because it was very memorable. We stayed up there somewhere in the Catskills. I don't remember where we stayed, but it was some kind of a camp type of place. The only reason it's so memorable, the fact that we had two cars, is because it was really icy and snowy. It was winter. One of the cars spun out of control, but there was nobody else on the highway. Otherwise, we would have – the entire feminist movement, God forbid, could have been wiped out. I mean, we did a full 360. Martha was one of the drivers. I don't remember who was the other, but it was two cars. And we were just like, “Whoa.” So when we got to the seminary – this was the convention for rabbis. When we got there, we had services. I have this wonderful image of Leora Fishman wearing tefillin, which was pretty unheard of at that point in time. We kind of stormed the big group because that was the style at that time. If you see injustice, then what you're supposed to do is you're supposed to storm the place and take the microphone. So, that's what we did. We had various speeches ready for that convention. It was at the Concord. May its memory be a blessing. So we stormed it. I was not one of the speakers. It was probably the more articulate ones,

which were probably Paula and Martha. My guess is that it probably was one of those two or maybe both because they were, as they are now – well, as they were with Paula – incredibly articulate. The best story from that whole period is, in those days, all the wives had things like a fashion show, a show for hats to wear in synagogue, and a sisterhood. That was what the wives did while the men did the important sort of –

JG: The Rebbetzins.

DR: Yeah. While the men did the important things of the day. So the part that was – Mrs. Lieberman was then the chancellor. She looks at all of us, and she comes to the microphone. I don't remember how it came about exactly, but she publicly declares – we thought she was a much older stately woman who everybody respected [and] that she was going to be saying, “You little upstart good-for-nothings,” whatever. Instead, she says, "What took you so long?" How fabulous. Talk about an unbelievable click moment. That was really, by far, the most memorable political event.

JG: What do you remember about the men's responses and reactions?

DR: I think it really was not as negative as anybody expected it to be, in all honesty, and in all fairness. In other words, these were the leaders. A lot of this is social opposition. I don't think that enough was studied in the Halakhah to see what the barriers are. It was just like, “Huh? Women? What are you thinking?” Feminism, not wearing bras, and whatever the notions were in those days – although I really and truly think it's wonderful not to wear a bra. It’s a side note. Truly. But it was not that negative. I know the story would sound better if it was that negative. Also, the other thing that we were doing, which I think is important to remember, is that we were trying to work on ourselves. We were not knowledgeable enough to really figure out how we weave in these waters of spirituality, of religious observance, of religious responsibility, without knowing enough. So, fortunately, we had these teachers. For example, Judith Hauptman, who was even then a Talmud professor at the seminary. She was teaching Talmud to us, and we would

talk about different ways of prayers and how do you make it more – in other words, we had to do a lot of – there was no script to follow.

JG: Well, what was that like for you to be studying with Judith Hauptman, for instance?

DR: Judith, I knew very well. She lived down the block from me, growing up in Borough Park. So it was a familiar thing. The whole thing was – once again, you have to understand. Well, you're more or less my generation, so probably it's not that hard to understand. As my rabbi – not my rabbi, but the rabbi of the synagogue where I'm in a minyan now – I wanted to bring a wise aging group to the place, and we were talking about what it would look like. He said, "Look, you baby boomers have always set the agenda. So why wouldn't you set the agenda on how you want to age, or at least the way you hope to age?" Because obviously, none of us can write that script for ourselves. So I think that, in some ways, we had unbelievable chutzpah. But we also were just extremely entitled. Entitled because of the fact that this was the antiwar movement and we were stopping Vietnam. People were listening to us who shouldn't be listening to us, frankly. In other words, we had a lot of power through maybe chutzpah and a little bit of [inaudible], but really, a lot of chutzpah. The general tenor of the time was such that we thought we were hot stuff and we were worthy of being listened to in our early twenties. When you think about it, that's pretty amazing for that to happen. So it had to be the right confluence of political and sort of personal times.

JG: What was it like for you given your background all the way back to your childhood, but the whole involvement with the Hasidic sect, etc., to then be experimenting with participation in different kinds of rituals that women had been excluded from during this time? What did that feel like to you?

DR: Well, just to go back for a moment in terms of the personal. Obviously, I had a very complicated background with a mother who tried her best but who was enormously depressed throughout [and] who invested everything in me. I was it. I was the

replacement for four children because my father had three also. So I was an extremely good adjuster. So I have always gone with the flow. Like my husband, a psychiatrist, always says, “If we only understood why you're so normal, I think we would know a lot more about you.” It doesn't have to do with anything good about me. It just has to do with being always a good adjuster. So it's something – seems like it doesn't create enormous discordance for me. When I went home and spent Shabbat with my mother, and we would even occasionally go to the Satmar shtiebel, I would just dress appropriately [and] not say anything about what I was doing. I mean, there's no way of influencing them, and they’re not going to influence me. So, in other words, I did not find discordance with who I was. As time went on, I saw no reason to ever go into a synagogue with a mechitza unless I was respecting somebody for a funeral or for a bar mitzvah or something like that because of the fact that this existed, the whole havurah movement, where I was of equal value, and so on. There was just absolutely no reason to go back.

JG: Do you remember your experiences, the first times of having an aliyah, putting on a tallit?

DR: Yeah. Well, I do not put on a tallis, but I certainly remember the first aliyah. It was 1971, as I said, at a baby naming for Sharon Sperling.

JG: What was that like for you?

DR: Well, it was pretty unusual. One of the things I struggled with was what to do about being called to the Torah because my father was a Cohen, and, of course, the havurah movement did not believe in having the cast of different aliyot based on that kind of patriarchal rank. But I felt like, gee, if I was getting an aliyah, then maybe he should be mentioned because it was a very proud and important part of his background and all the Rosenfelds are kohanim. I always remember them not going into funerals, not doing all of that. So what do you honor of that? It's very hard to figure out what you honor of that.

JG: Yeah. What do you consider the most important accomplishments of Jewish feminism standing today, looking back on it?

DR: I mean, without question, women's participation in religious services and Jewish life in general. I care less about who's in charge of a federation, frankly, than having equity in religious life. And the fact that girls growing up literally do not know – as a matter of fact, it was very lovely because a couple of years ago, we had a program at the JCC where both Paula and Judith participated. It was a recollection of Ezrat Nashim, and they both talked about it, which was very nice. I think it was the last time I saw Paula in such a public place.

JG: What do you consider the most pressing unfinished business of Jewish feminism?

DR: I'm very impressed with every place we have already been because even Orthodox communities have been so deeply affected by feminism. I have friends who are teaching in Maharat and all of this. I think it's really, truly wonderful. The thing that makes me a little bit sad sometimes is when I look at young women, and I mean like the twenties and thirties. I just still feel that they're at such a disadvantage from the young men about the enormous split between being enormously successful professionally and having all access, but personally, still being very weighed down by being women and the disadvantages in the heterosexual relationship mating game, in the desperation to have children before their biological clock runs out. So I see a lot of young women being very – I mean, they may have everything accessible to them in terms of professional stuff, but personally, I see a lot of bad stuff that I'm very unhappy with. In some ways, no better, except that now you have to do everything. Now the expectation is that you do everything.

JG: Yeah. And in the Jewish realm, in particular?

DR: In the Jewish realm, it's the same thing [but] worse because I think in the Jewish community, our desire and our need to procreate and our desire to create a Jewish family is even stronger than it is in the secular world. So I just see a lot of – because my daughter is thirty-five, my son is twenty-seven, and I see the pressures of the women in this community. I'm really sad about it because I feel that there's been so little progress.

JG: So what do you see as the most important next steps in advancing gender equality in Judaism and Jewish life? Which are perhaps related, but two different things, also.

DR: Well, in terms of the organized Jewish community, to be honest with you, I care a little bit less about that than I care about the interpersonal. But if I would have to take – I think that symbolically it would be important to have more Jewish women leaders in the community. There has not been a leader in either the Reform movement or the Conservative movement. I mean, a real leader in terms of women. Even when Paula and Anne Lerner and some of the others at the seminary – they're sidebars; they were not the main thing. Same thing in terms of federations. I mean, we've seen all the studies, and I think – what is it? – fifteen percent or so are women in terms of – so I think that those are important symbolic statements for young women coming up the ranks and trying to sort of figure out who they are and how far they can go within the system. So I think those are very definitely next steps. But also, as I said, I think, communally, we really have to address the difficulty that these young women are having in trying to figure out who they are and how to fulfill themselves with these conflicting – yes, you want them to work at the highest level, but then how on earth are they going to have relationships and children, which is not a question for men. It is just not a question. What's the problem with a man being enormously successful and having a wife and children? That's not a Jewish issue. It's a much larger women's issue. As I said, it just strikes harder for Jews because it's such an important imperative.

JG: Right. What about within Judaism as a religion? What are the next frontiers? Where are we still needing to be working hard?

DR: Well, to be honest with you, I don't know. But the one thing that I can say is that I think all the concern about where the next generation of Jews are going to be is, it's a well-placed concern. Everywhere I go, people look like me, and they don't look like my kids. There are groups that are my kids' age.

JG: What do you mean by that? They look like you, but not like your kids?

DR: Age-wise.

JG: Everywhere you go in the Jewish community, you mean?

DR: Now, I do believe, and the reason that I'm involved in this wise aging thing, and I'm going to start, is because just because there are so many of us that were committed doesn't mean that we shouldn't be serviced. You know what I mean? Sometimes you feel like, let's put all the money in the twenty-somethings, so they make appropriate Jewish mate choices, but all of us need to be addressed. I think that the question is more and more, which I think happened very much during my early youth, is the breakdown of the synagogue into smaller communities that can be much more intimate and much more connected. I think that that trend is going to continue. I think it's an important one because that's the way people function. People don't function in mega churches.

JG: What about the issues around God-language and sort of theological issues, standing where we are now and looking ahead?

DR: To be honest with you, I have very little – me and God don't really communicate all that much. The only interpretation of God that – I mean, my life would not portray that, given how I have lived my life, but the one definition of spirituality and God that has ever

made sense to me was Rachel Cowan's, her saying, “God couldn't be everywhere, so he or she sent all of us to do the work.” That makes sense to me. I can relate to that. I feel like I try to do the work, but I don't feel I relate to the ultimate being. So, as I said, that makes sense to me.

JG: Can you reflect for a minute on how the broader feminist movement impacted you personally and your involvement with Jewish feminism?

DR: What was the first part of that?

JG: How the broader feminist movement impacted that.

DR: I think it was all about it. I think that Martha and I were in feminist health collectives before we started Ezrat Nashim. We were in consciousness-raising groups before we started Ezrat Nashim. So, in other words, I think those were enormous influences.

JG: What were you taking from those experiences, if you can try and articulate it?

DR: Well, I mean just the most simple thing, which was the fact that equity and the fact that there is every possible reason for us to be asking for, or sometimes demanding, full participation and rejecting the second-class citizenship that we had.

JG: How would you define feminism for yourself today? What does it mean to be a feminist?

DR: Well, to be honest with you, I very rarely even think about it because I'm just so comfortable. Well, of course, I'm a feminist. What is the question here? My daughter, I'm sure, feels the same, and my son feels the same, and my husband. It's like water. I'm Jewish. I'm a feminist. It’s like one of those characterizations. But I think in terms of – I don't think about it at all, but if I had to define it, it would be to be concerned about having equity of possibility of expression, understanding of self, for women. It was very

interesting because just this week, I asked that question, which normally I don't go around asking. But at the School of Social Work at New York University, there was a table that was set up by student groups who wanted to start – one of them wanted to start this feminist group. So I went over to her, and I said, “What do you mean?” In a highly women's profession that believes in social justice and where the majority of clients are women, what exactly are you –? I was just curious. I told her that I was a second-wave feminist and I totally support whatever it is. I just want to know what the definition is. This is not a confrontation; it's a joining in of wanting to understand. And it was cute. She was twenty-one, twenty-two, and talked about how they want to do all kinds of things for women in need, and they want to do all these different women's projects – pregnant teens and older this. Great. In other words, for me, it's just existentially me.

JG: Is there anything else you'd like to add since our time is coming to an end?

DR: Sure. Well, I think the only interesting thing is what is the next generation going to be fighting. My daughter wrote an article in this book, this compilation of books by – what was her name? – [Rabbi Debra] Orenstein. It was a rabbi – New Jewish Rituals. She had two articles in it. One was becoming a bat mitzvah, and the other one was about getting your menstruation. So she was, at that time – this was twenty years ago, at least. It was very interesting because in “becoming a bat mitzvah,” she said, “What struggles do I have to fight? My mother and my Aunt Martha…”. Martha is her honorary aunt. “They fought all these battles, so what's there for me?” So I think that's a very interesting question. I don't think they've come up with that many – what does it mean? But as I said, that's an interesting struggle and question of what space did we make for them?

JG: Indeed. I agree. And I am definitely of the same generation as you. So thank you so, so much.

DR: You’re very welcome.

JG: We really, really appreciate it.

DR: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]