Judith Wright Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: Okay. Today is July 25, 2000. I am sitting here right on the water in Gloucester, Massachusetts, with Judy Wright, and the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. Let me just check that and make sure we – [recording paused] So I think I talked to you a little bit about the kind of interviews that I'm doing and the way that we're trying to organize this project. So most of the – it's not a full life history. Most of the questions are going to be about your activism in the Civil Rights Movement, but I want to find out a little bit about your family background and some about your Jewish identity as well, whether or not you see that as being connected. So maybe you could just start by telling me a little bit about your childhood, where and when you were born, and your family.

Judy Wright: I was born in 1939, and I have one brother who is a year older than I am, and I was brought up in Newton, Massachusetts. My father was a jeweler. He was in the jewelry business at the time. My mother was pretty much just a homemaker – I shouldn't say "just" – but she did stay home most of the time, although she did some volunteer work. They're both very interested in children, and she volunteered a lot at Children's Hospital. For a short time, she had a job, a part-time job doing eye screening for children in the Boston school system. I went to Newton – I went to public school. What else would you like to know? Maybe you could help me with it.

JR: Did you have grandparents and family who lived in the area?

JW: Yes. All my grandparents lived in the area. My mother's parents came over from – all of my grandparents came over from what they always refer to as the old country. My mother's father, who actually started the business that my dad worked in, came over from a part of Poland that used to be part of Russia or vice versa. I think he maybe came over

from the part of Russia that used to be part of Poland. And my grandmother's parents on my mother's side came from Russia. I'm a little bit more vague about where my father's parents came from. I know my – they always spoke of my grandmother coming from California, but I think she actually came over here as a very young girl and lived in California as she was growing up. And my father's father, I'm not really sure about. But they all lived in the area, and we spent a lot of time with them. My mother's mother was a very interesting woman. She was very much a political activist, very left-wing.

JR: What kind of causes did she help?

JW: Anything for equality of people – Spanish Civil War. She was, what you might have called back, then a fellow traveler. My grandfather, on the other hand – her husband – was a Republican, so it was a very, you might say, challenging marriage for both of them. She wanted to give away all his money to causes he didn't believe in, so it was difficult for them. He was a very wonderful man. He was very sweet, but politically, they were radically different, and politics was a very big part of her life. It wasn't just an issue that was there here and there. It was always there.

JR: Was it probably something that your family talked about much?

JW: A little bit. I don't remember that it was like a constant source of conversation. But it was clear that my parents were both liberal. They didn't discuss it a lot, but there was no question about it. It wasn't a big deal at our house.

JR: Did your grandmother talk about her politics at all?

JW: I don't know how much she talked about it because she was investigated by McCarthy. It was a big topic of conversation in our house during those years because all

those hearings were on TV. And you, I'm sure, read about it. You're too young to have lived through it. But it was when I was in junior high or high school that that was happening. I remember it very, very clearly, and how proud my family was of her, that nobody felt anything, any kind of embarrassment or shame, she was – what she was doing was just fine and standing up for herself was something to be proud of. So that might have kind of affected my thinking that my family was so liberal.

JR: You said you had a brother, right?

JW: Yes.

JR: Did he also become an activist?

JW: Not at that age, but he is very much an activist now. He's actually taken over the family business, and he has become very well off financially, and he's incredibly generous with the money that he has. And he's been very involved in Jewish politics in support of Israel. It's a very, very big part of – his wife's name is Linda, and his name is Michael – it's a very, very big part of their lives to support causes that they believe in, and their Jewish identity is very much a part of them, and a part of what they support. Not that they don't support other things, but they support things very thoughtfully. They look into them and find out which organizations they'd like to support, and which are really doing a good job, and that's what they support. They also support a lot of things that have to do with children.

JR: So they inherited that cause, in some ways, from your parents?

JW: Yes, and on their own, too. They're both really great people. But back then, when I was active in the Civil Rights movement, my brother had – that wasn't part of his life at that time.

JR: What was your family's Jewish life like?

JW: We went to temple on the High Holidays. That was pretty much it. My brother was bar mitzvahed. I was not because it was very unusual for girls to have a bat mitzvah at that time, and we weren't that religious.

JR: What synagogue did you belong to?

JW: Temple Israel in Boston. So I remember going to temple on the High Holidays and getting all dressed up. I never really got involved in it. In fact, I remember thinking things like, why am I getting – why do I have to get all dressed up and wear white gloves and shiny shoes? What difference does that make? When I was really young, you know, I would judge things by that, like, "This is just foolishness. If there's a God, he or she doesn't care if I'm dressed up or not." [laughter] But culturally, although we didn't go to temple a lot – I mean, most of my parents' friends were Jewish, and we lived in a community where there were a lot of Jewish people. I have friends that were and friends that weren't Jewish. But I never thought a lot about it because I was very comfortable in the community that I was in. It wasn't like we were the only Jewish people or anything. It was just part of our lives. I went to Sunday School until I was confirmed when I was fifteen.

JR: Did you like it?

JW: No.

JR: [inaudible: overlapping voices]

JW: I actually, toward the end – you know how kids are. They want to be out playing with their friends. But towards the end, I remember when Rabbi Gittelsohn was there, and he taught some classes, and I loved his classes – because he talked about religion in a way that I could understand, and it didn't have to do with some fantasy God in the sky. It had to do with nature, and that's what made more sense to me. So, it was nice to hear the head of our temple talking about God in a way that I could digest.

JR: And in what ways, would you say, did your family's cultural Judaism manifested itself? In what ways were you aware of it?

JW: Just going to temple on the High Holidays, and they hung out with the Jewish crowd. Really nothing more than that. When my brother got married to Linda, she was a much more traditional Jewish person, and he thinks that she got him involved in Jewish things, and then he got even more interested than she was. They step-laddered over each other, and so they became very, very involved, and I think because of them, my parents became more involved. So, in the later years of my parent's lives, long after I had left home, they became much more involved in Jewishness. Their Jewish identity became more important to them than it seemed that it was when I was growing up. Maybe it was, and they didn't talk about it as much, but it seemed like my brother, his wife, and my parents all kind of went along the road of a much heavier Jewish identity. Whereas I married somebody who is not Jewish, and my Jewish identity is not a big part of my life. I don't deny it. I'm happy with it, but it doesn't define my life like it does my brother's and Linda's, or my parents, even.

JR: Are there ways in which you practice Judaism now at all?

JW: Not really.

JR: And did your family have any relationship to Israel?

JW: Oh, well, let me go back to that last question. Yes, when I think about it a little more. We always celebrate the Jewish holidays as a family, always together. We got together with my parents before they died for years, every High Holiday, and over Passover, and on all kinds of holidays like that. We would gather as a family to have dinner together, and we'd have the Seder and all that. And now, with my parents gone, we still do that with my brother. But to me, it's more of a family thing. It's an occasion for a family gathering, and not so much that I feel a need, as a Jew, to celebrate these

things.

JR: You mentioned that your brother is involved in Israeli politics kinds of issues. Was Israel at all talked about in your family growing up?

JW: Well, I remember clearly the day that, in my Sunday School class, when they said, “Today is the day Israel is becoming a state,” the teachers saying, “It’s a day you’ll always remember.” And I do. I remember that, and I’m sure at that time, my parents must have talked about it, but I don’t remember the conversations. Later on, when they all got more involved, Israel was a big topic of conversation, but not when I was growing up.

JR: Actually, I just heard on the radio on the way here that the talks just ended.

JW: And with no results?

JR: No results.

JW: What a sad thing.

JR: Yeah. Oy. Anyway, Let’s move into talking about how you got involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

JW: Well, I was a senior in college at the time that these sit-ins were occurring in the South, and I read about them and thought about them a lot, and I was really excited about it. I was excited because it was a good thing to be happening, but I was also just fascinated and enthralled with these students that were doing something like that because it seemed like it was exciting and important. You know how life can seem sometimes, especially when you grew up in the '50s; it seemed like it was very nice, but you want something to grab onto and something that would have some importance. At least, that's how I felt. And I mean, I had such a wonderful, wonderful family, and yet I

always longed for some real purpose. Our life was – we weren't really, really wealthy, but we didn't have any real financial problems. And life went along, and I was longing for a kind of romance, and I don't mean, like, with a guy, but just like romance in my life, or excitement. I have to admit, honestly, that was a part of it. I think if most people were honest, it's always a part of it because you could be as – have as much conviction as I did about the rightness of the Civil Rights Movement, and go to the NAACP and lick stamps, and contribute what you could, or you could go down South and get yourself in a mess of trouble. I think the difference is not so much that I had more courage but that I was wanting something. I wanted to do that. So it was a combination of things: wanting the excitement and thinking it was a really good thing to do.

JR: Was your campus very political?

JW: No.

JR: Where were you at school?

JW: Smith College. I mean, there was a political faction there, I'm sure, but I wasn't part of it.

JR: Were there people talking about civil rights on campus?

JW: A little bit, yeah. There was some talk about it. But I wasn't really that involved in politics. It's just that something about this, the rightness of it, was so clear-cut. It was so horrible, what was going on, and there were these brave young people that were trying to start a whole movement to make a change that just caught me totally.

JR: So, how did you end up going down there, then?

JW: I went to New York. I just decided to do it. I decided I'm going to graduate – finish school and graduate, and then I'm going to go down there. And so, after graduation, I

went to New York to the CORE office – the CORE standing for Congress of Racial Equality, which was James Farmer's group. I went to the CORE office and talked to them about whether they still needed people to go South on the Freedom Rides. They were still wanting people to do it. I remember that conversation clearly because one of the people I was talking to said, "Oh, how do you think you'd stand up to being in jail?" And I said, "Oh, fine." [laughter] I had no idea. "I'm fine. It'll be fine. Don't worry. I can do this." So, basically, I signed up, and then I went home and packed my clothes and went back and went.

JR: Were your parents supportive?

JW: Yes, they were. They were really supportive. They tried like hell to convince me not to go because they were worried about me, as any parent would be. It wasn't anything about the politics of it, but if my kids were to want to go do something right where I thought they were going to land in jail in the Deep South where people would hate them, I would have fought, too, and I totally understand that position. Once they realized that they weren't going to convince me not to go, they had to turn around, and they were very, very supportive. They never made me feel like they disapproved of what I was doing, you know. So, yes, they were very supportive.

JR: So, tell me a little bit about your experience when you went.

JW: I took a bus from the – because somebody who might listen to this tape might not have the background on this – after the sit-ins began, there was a whole movement called Freedom Rides, the purpose of which was to desegregate the bus stations all along the main routes in the South. Though it may seem like a rather insignificant thing, it's one of those stands that you make to start to break down a law. So, I took a bus to Atlanta, Georgia, and got on a bus with a racially mixed group, and we traveled from Atlanta to Meridian – no, that was later – to Jackson, Mississippi, and every time the bus stopped, we would go in the waiting rooms. We'd go into the White waiting room as a

mixed group and stand around. And when we got to Jackson, Mississippi – it's funny as I'm saying that – I can't remember how many times we got out of the bus. The stop that I remember is Jackson, Mississippi, because that was the end of the road for us. We all knew, and we felt, when we bought tickets for that bus ride, we were buying a ticket to go to jail. We knew exactly what was going to happen because it had happened before. You get out of the bus. You go into the bus station as a mixed group, and the sheriff comes along and asks you to leave, and you refuse to leave, and then you get arrested and go to jail, which is exactly what happened.

JR: How many people were in the group?

JW: I would guess there're about seven or eight – I don't remember exactly. There was a trial, and it was a given that we'd be guilty of the misdemeanor, disturbing the peace. The jury was probably out for two minutes at the most. And everybody was sentenced to forty days in jail.

JR: Where had you been up until the trial? Also, in jail?

JW: I think maybe – I'm not sure, though. They might have had the trial right away. I just can't remember. But the reason – they sentenced everyone to forty days, and everybody appealed. And the whole idea was to appeal – no, we didn't appeal yet – sorry. The idea was to stay in jail for thirty-nine days and then appeal because, in Mississippi, you had forty days to appeal your case, and if you didn't appeal within forty days, you couldn't appeal at all. So, we wanted to fill the jails because that's what was going to catch the attention of the country and focus everybody's feelings on needing to do something to change the situation. So, you stayed in jail for thirty-nine days and then appealed out. That's what everyone did. We were first sent to the city jail and then later

on sent to Parchman State Penitentiary to the Maximum-Security Unit. But the reason they put us in maximum security was basically because they had to protect us from the other prisoners because, by that time, we were not the first group of Freedom Riders. By that time, there were many people in jail, and if the white prisoners in the jails who were not Freedom Riders got hold of us, it wouldn't have been a pretty sight because they were very, very angry. They had to protect us from being beaten.

JR: Were the white and Black Riders separated?

JW: Yes. Men and women separated, and then within that, the black and white people were separated. And it was a pretty horrible experience, and that's why I was laughing when I said, "Can you go to jail?" and I said, "Oh, sure."

JR: What was that like?

JW: The jailors. Having lived such a protected and easy life, I had never really come into contact with masochism before. But this was really it. They loved to torture people. I don't mean they took out whips or anything, but in every way that they could think of, they made life really hard for us. It was very frightening. I have asthma, and I needed – I had this atomizer, and they took it away from me, and they said that I was a drug addict. They wouldn't let me see a prison doctor. They said, "The doctor is away on vacation for two weeks," whereas, in fact, there was a whole prison hospital there. And finally, after two weeks – and I was not breathing easily, the doctor came, and he looked at the medication, and he looked at me, and he said, "Oh, it's fine, she can have this." Then they left it in my cell. Then the jailer came back and took the medication away from me again. The woman in the cell next to me had a miscarriage, while the guard just stood outside the cell door and kind of smirked and leered at her. They were very, very nasty people. I'm not saying I – by no means, saying Southerners are nasty people. I'm saying that the guards in that jail were really awful. We were allowed out of our cells once a week for a shower.

JR: Were you in a cell with other women?

JW: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It was just like you see in the movies. It was like a long line of cells against one wall in a corridor. And there were one or two, or sometimes three, people in each cell. They were very, very small. They were half the size of this porch. And so, part of the time, I was by myself, but I was within talking range. You could talk down the line of cells. And in fact, we used to organize all kinds of things to pass the time. I remember different people would sing. There were a lot of women that have really nice voices, and we would organize what we called our radio program, so we would go down the line, and every cell had to contribute something, a story or a song. We'd do a lot of stuff to pass the time.

JR: Did you get along well with the other women who were –?

JW: Yes. Everybody was real easy. It was a time of really high spirits and a lot of bravery. A lot of brave things happened in that jail.

JR: Did they treat the Black and white women – or Black and white Riders differently?

JW: I think that they did on certain occasions, especially the men. But I think they had a lot of contempt for the white women, as they probably thought we were being led down the wrong path. I think that in that particular situation, it was hard to see the difference, but I know that they've – in most situations, it would have been very different. I'm trying to think – I'm sure I have a zillion other things to say about that experience. There was a lot of singing. All those songs you always hear. They were a big part of everything. Everybody's hopes were really high that we were really going to make a huge difference. In fact, in retrospect, it did. There are times when I think – and I think a lot of the white people that were involved in it feel like our efforts were a little misplaced. It should have been – at least from the Black people's point of view, it should have been the Black people that did all this. Instead of having white people come in from other areas and

organize and be part of what was organizing it. But on the other hand, I'm not sure that it would have caught the attention of the country in the same way if there hadn't been white people involved. And that was the purpose at that point.

JR: When you were in the jail, were you aware of what was going on outside?

JW: No. We had no idea. We never saw newspapers. We were only allowed a Bible, and we never got news of anything.

JR: Were you in touch with your family?

JW: I can't remember if I got letters from them. I know I wrote to them. Everything was very censored. I don't know how long it took my letters to get to them. But I know that I wrote, and I kept a diary, although we're not supposed to have writing paper or anything. But somehow or another, I got a hold of some kind of paper and did keep a diary of all the time that I was there, which was subsequently lost. [laughter]

JR: What a shame.

JW: Yeah, it was a shame. But when I got home, my mother – I had stuffed it in the hem of a skirt to get it out when I left. And my mother didn't know that, and she put it in the wash. She felt terrible. She felt so bad. [laughter]

JR: It's just one of those things.

JW: Yeah.

JR: So, what happened when you got out of jail?

JW: I came back home, and I went to graduate school. I had already been enrolled at Boston University to become a speech therapist. I spent a year getting that degree, and during that year, I also worked on – I think it was that year that I worked on the big march on Washington, where Martin Luther King gave his very famous “I Have a Dream" speech. It was either that year or the year after.

JR: I think it would have had to have been the year after because that was in 1963.

JW: Yeah, okay, so I had been in the South. When I first went, it was 1961 in the summer.

JR: I forgot to ask, what happened to your appeal, lawsuit?

JW: Well, I never went back to jail. I guess it must have been – I just don’t remember clearly. Isn’t that awful? But it must have been decided in – it had to have been in our favor because I never had to go back. I do remember going back south, taking a bus back south for a trial, another trial. So I guess they just – they probably wanted us out of there. But anyway, I did help organize the March on Washington, the Boston contingent of it, and that was a really exciting thing to do. I remember standing so close to the front when Martin Luther King gave that speech, and never realizing what a famous speech it was going to be. It’s like you hear people – hearing Abraham Lincoln give the Gettysburg Address, and not really getting it, that is going down in history. But I was very close to him, and I did know it was a wonderful speech. So that was a really good experience to have, too. And then I worked – I got married in 1964, and my husband and I – his name is Sib – immediately after our honeymoon, we headed back south. We went to Meridian, Mississippi. We had actually wanted to go into the Peace Corps, and he got in, but I didn't because of my asthma. So this was kind of like our Peace Corps thing at home. We went back south –

JR: Had he been involved in Civil Rights work before?

JW: No, no. But anyway, we went to Meridian, Mississippi, which is where those three boys were killed. They had been working in a Freedom school there, and they were killed over the summer, and we went in the fall to basically take their place. So, another scary thing for our poor parents. But you know how you feel so invulnerable at that age, and so, we stayed.

JR: So, you didn't feel scared when you were there?

JW: Most of the time not. We were so naïve. I mean, I should have been less naïve. For instance, we flew down there, got off the plane, got in a taxi, and said, "Please take us to the COFO office," [laughter] Congress of Federated Organizations, which was a combination of CORE and SNCC. I thought about it afterward, like, who knows who that cab driver could have been? I mean, they all hated us. This was the very town where they had murdered three boys a couple months before because they were hanging out at the COFO office. But we just did that. And we spent the year helping people to register to vote, doing some sit-ins, doing kind of grassroots organization thing; usually, more women in the Black community were the leaders. The women and the ministers were the ones that basically did it, and that was the year that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was getting organized, and we worked on that. We lived with a wonderful Black family, a woman named Johnnie Ruth and her husband, who was a minister. It was very risky of them to have us live with them. There were so many brave people there. I mean, in those days, risky didn't mean maybe you get – maybe somebody wouldn't buy your goods. It means you could get really, really hurt. And they had a baby, and yet they invited us to share their home with them. I don't know where I'm going here. [laughter]

JR: What was your relationship like with the local Black community?

JW: Fine. We had a great time with them. We were friendly with James Chaney's family, which was still very involved in the Civil Rights Movement. There was a sister, Barbara, and then James Chaney's younger son, Ben, and Fannie Lee Chaney, the

mother. I remember going over there for fried chicken a lot. And things were good between us and the Black people that we knew, which were mostly the people that were trying to organize against segregation. On the other hand, we didn't know any white people except for our co-workers. Other white people would have nothing to do with us.

JR: Were your co-workers mostly white?

JW: [inaudible] They were, I would say, fifty/fifty, local Black people, and white people from other parts of the country, and a few Black people from other parts of the country. We did once have dinner with a white family, and it happened because they were relatives of a friend of ours that we knew in Massachusetts, and she had called them. They invited us to dinner, and in order to have dinner with them, we had to take a bus out of town and wait in an anonymous place for them to come pick us up. They took us to their house. We had dinner. We had a really nice evening with them, and then, they had to sneak us back into town without anybody knowing who we were, so nobody in their neighborhood would know who they had taken into the house. They were basically trying to protect their children. He was in some kind of business in Mississippi. They didn't believe in segregation, and I was very, very struck that they stayed there because they couldn't teach their children what they believed because they were so afraid that if their children spoke up in school – they were too young to understand what you could and couldn't talk about – if they ever said anything in school about how their parents felt, they could get beaten up. So they lived this life where they were not in favor of the system, but they couldn't talk about it within their family in order to keep everyone safe. I understand they had a business there, and his life was there. I just thought, what a comment on the way people have to live. Very, very sad. They were great people. So that was our one dinner, our one social contact with the white southern community.

JR: How did whites and Blacks get along within the group of organizers?

JW: Fine. I didn't see any problems there. There were probably more problems between men and women than between Blacks and whites.

JR: What were the issues between men and women?

JW: Well, it's just that the women –

JR: That was going to be my next question I had.

JW: Yeah. [laughter] Just that the Women's Movement hadn't hit yet, and – although I didn't – no personal experience there. I didn't see this a lot, but I know it exists in pockets – in some pockets more than in others – where the women were underlings. In fact, a lot of people believe that the Women's Movement came a lot out of the Civil Rights Movement because people realized that we were all down there together, working on the same thing, and yet the women did not have the same respect and power that the men had. There wasn't any real bitterness where I was. Everything seemed pretty equal, but that wasn't true everywhere.

JR: Were you aware of that issue at the time?

JW: No, I didn't even –

JR: That that was going on?

JW: No, because it wasn't really happening a lot with us.

JR: Interesting.

JW: But I know it happened. I know it was –

JR: Did you hear about it from other people?

JW: I heard about it from other people, and you read about it. But just in our particular office, it never really came up. Or maybe it did come up, and maybe I was just so used to being a woman in the world at that time that I didn't even notice it that much, and other women noticed it more. Maybe that's what was going on. It just never seemed like something I noticed a lot.

JR: So, what was your work like during the year there?

JW: We would go out and talk to people about registering to vote, try to encourage them. We had a Freedom School where the junior high and high school kids would come after school, and we'd teach them about Black history and pride and have them write what they thought about Martin Luther King's speech and what their dream was. I remember that assignment well. Everybody wrote their own "I Have a Dream" speeches. We talked to them about Black literature and poetry and just kind of hung out with them. It was a good thing. That was, I think, the most major activity. We did some sit-ins. We did some picket lines. I got arrested several times that year. So did my husband. Every single time I saw the police coming, all I wanted to do was run and hide. I was so scared. But nobody else would run and hide. [laughter] And if you're on a picket line and nobody else is running and hiding, you can't bring yourself to do it. Sometimes I wonder if everybody wants to run and hide when they're in a situation where you're about to be arrested, and you've been in that jail before, and you know what it's like. But we all stuck it out.

JR: Strength in numbers, I guess.

JW: Yeah, it really was, exactly. Strength in numbers.

JR: Did you have to spend much time in jail again?

JW: I did go to jail two or three times that year, but it was never anywhere near the six weeks. The most, I think, was overnight one night, which was actually the scariest time I ever spent in jail. From a picket line, they had room for white men, Black men, and Black

women in the county jail but no room for white women, and I was the only white woman on the picket line, so I was left in the Meridian City Jail in the police station by myself. I was terrified. One of the policemen in Meridian was one of the murderers. All night long, people came to my cell and yelled at me obscenities, accused me of obscene, horrible things. At first, I tried to talk to them and to explain really why I was there, what my thinking was on the matter – that's the non-violent thing to do, to teach. But I got nowhere, and eventually, I just turned my back to the cell door and didn't respond to anything anybody said to me. But it was a horrible night. Part of the reason – aside from all that going on, part of the reason it was horrible is that I had no idea how long I would be in jail, and I was alone. So I fantasized that this could go on for a long time, and I knew if they let any other white prisoners in, I could get beaten up. As it turned out, luckily, the next day, a Civil Rights lawyer came flying through town and got us all out, so I never even had to stay a second night. My husband got arrested in Philadelphia, Mississippi, which is a bad county. That's where those boys were murdered. Luckily, I wasn't with him because if I had known, I would have totally freaked out. But he said they took him into a diner, or a bar or a restaurant or something. The police just brought him in there, and they brought him up to the guy behind the counter, who took his arm and cleared the counter and said, "Okay, court's in session."

JR: My God.

JW: And who knows what could have happened? But they did let him go. Jail was not a big part of that year's experience if you think about the time involved. To spend a day or two in jail here or there was not much. It was mostly just working with the people there. One of the things that happened that was really interesting, from a historical point of view, is that we went to New Orleans to the meeting of the Mississippi Democratic Party when they were organizing.

JR: Was it the regular party or the Freedom party?

JW: Freedom party. I guess I didn't say that. Stokely Carmichael was there, and Fannie Lou Hamer, and all those people. Everything had to be decided by consensus. So, it was an endless, endless meeting. And in the middle of it, somebody got up – I can't remember who it was – it might have been Stokely Carmichael – and announced that Malcolm X had just been assassinated. And I heard Malcolm X speak many times. He was based in Boston for a long time. He was a wonderful speaker, and I really thought he was terrific. I say that being aware of many people's view that he was very antisemitic. That may have been true during part of his life. I don't think it was true for his whole life. I think he changed, and I think that he offered a tremendous vote to the Black community. I had never heard of him being antisemitic, and all the times that I had heard him speak – that doesn't mean I don't believe he ever said antisemitic things. But anyway, I thought, on the whole, he was really a very positive figure for the Black community.

JR: What did you admire about him?

JW: I think he was incredibly intelligent. I think he provided a focus for Black people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and be proud of themselves. He had a lot of very young followers, young men and women. I think he was a really good influence. So, when I heard that he had been assassinated, I just felt terrible, and what I noticed was it seemed as if nobody really cared a lot at that meeting, which was very interesting. I think that the whole focus in the South, then, was so overwhelmingly non-violent, and more people thought of him as a violent man, although I never really thought of him that way. So, it was like another world. They announced it, and then they just went right on with the meeting. It's not like, "We'll have five minutes of silence," or "Isn't this terrible?" They just announced it and then went on with the meeting.

JR: Interesting. That's really interesting.

JW: Yeah, it is interesting, isn't it?

JR: Yeah. Were you aware of the growing push for Black power within the movement at that point? Or was that more happening the following year?

JW: It must have been starting. But when we went back to – when we got back to Boston after that year, my husband went to law school. I think part of the reason he went to law school was because he saw how the lawyers were the only ones that could make change and had power. So he went into law school wanting to make a difference. He ended up being a public defender in Philadelphia. We were there for five years. He represented and helped a lot of the Black Panthers. So, it was more, at that point in my life, that we were thinking about the whole Black Power thing than when I was in Mississippi.

JR: Yeah, I guess that year was still a little bit early. Someone else I was talking to, who was in the South in ’66, was saying that by the end of that summer, it was clear that there was not going to be a place for a white to work in the South in that way anymore.

JW: Yeah. Right.

JR: But I guess he left in ‘65. The end of ‘65.

JW: Yeah, we went in ’64, in September or October, just after the Freedom Summer, and we stayed a year, so yeah, we were probably – it wasn’t hitting that hard yet.

JR: What – [recording paused]

JW: Well, one challenge for me was to stay brave – although you asked me before if I was scared a lot. I wasn’t scared every day, but it was a big challenge for me. I don’t like being in danger. And I say that knowing full well that probably most people don’t. But some people kind of get off on it, but I don’t. I just hate it. I have a stomachache, and I’m scared, and who needs it? So, for me to stay brave in the situations where I had to was a big challenge. I think it’s a challenge for a white northerner to go south and not

– and just fit in. It wasn't my culture. There was a feeling [of], "Who were these people they had lived with –?" And I come down from this really easy life and think I can help – to try to deal with those kinds of feelings all the time. So, I remember my husband's saying was – we go into a sit-in, into a restaurant, or a diner or something where we're going to sit at the counter and not get served because we're with the Black people. And it's kind of – not a happy adventure, but in a way, it's kind of an adventure. It's terribly important, and we're all aware of that. But then, when you think about the Black people going in there with us and what it means to them, what it means to us is nothing compared to that. We're just trying to do something good, and they've lived with the rejection their whole lives, and what that does to their ability to lead a good life. They want to give things to their children, be safe and have their dreams come true, and all those things. And it wasn't the same for us. And so, to be aware of that all the time and deal with it as best we could was a challenge.

JR: Did people talk about that openly?

JW: Not a lot, but I think it was an undercurrent even before the Black Power movement. It was just an obvious undercurrent. On the other hand, they could be incredibly grateful that we were there because they knew what it meant, and so they would be very friendly and open to us and accepting because we had made the effort to come there and try to help with the situation. Those two different kinds of feelings, I think. Some of it would be the younger people would be more likely to feel, to question whether they should be doing it themselves. But it wasn't like a big Black Power current, you know.

JR: What were the most rewarding things for you?

JW: I think just generally. From two points of view – one, personally, it was just a wonderful experience. It was just a wonderful thing to participate in, in many ways. I just can't tell you the high spirits, knowing that you were participating in this really important time, and you were doing it with people you felt really close to, and you'd kind of bonded

over these things you were doing. It was just a real high, the whole thing. In fact, a lot of people came back – it didn't happen to me, but a lot of people came back from the Civil Rights Movement in the South, and they just couldn't get their lives together afterward because nothing quite compared. So, it was really personally rewarding, just a great experience. Then from the point of view of what got done, on the whole, I felt really great to be part of it for what it accomplished, even though I had my doubts, in retrospect, about how many white people should have been there. We all questioned that. Even though things didn't really change fast, the fact was that they did change, and that was a piece of what made the change, just getting that going and raising people's consciousness.

JR: Did you stay in touch with any of the people that you worked with?

JW: For a while, I did, but I lost contact with them now. There was one woman down there who ended up living in Newton, and so she and I were friends for a long time. But now she's moved far away. A couple of the high school students from the South that we had gotten to know while in Freedom School came up here. One of them went to school here for a long time. So, we kept contact, but it kind of petered out after a while.

JR: How would you say that your experiences in the Civil Rights Movement affected you in terms of your own development?

JW: A good question. [laughter] Well, to skirt the question a little, I stayed involved in politics for a long time, and then when I had children, I realized that I would never put myself on the line like that again, at least not until they were grown up. I couldn't imagine being in the lucky position where I didn't have to. I couldn't imagine choosing to put myself in danger when my children were young.

JR: How many children do you have?

JW: Two. And so, I stayed out of politics for a long time, and I always felt guilty. I still think about having done something that involved me twenty out of twenty-four hours a day for so long. I mean, it was full-time. It wasn't just like eight hours a day; it was like you were always on the job. Then to go to where you're just living in your safe little house, and bringing up your little family, and not involved in politics very much, made me feel guilty. Although when I got home – there were the years of the Vietnam War, and I did a lot around that. I did anti-draft counseling – they called it not anti-draft counseling – helping people figure out how to stay away from it. I went to demonstrations and did all that. The short-term effect was that I always wanted to – I had just had it in my blood to be deeply involved in stuff like that, and there was the Vietnam War and the Women's Movement. I was involved in both of those things very deeply. They used to have these women's consciousness-raising groups, and I'd be at those, and I had ads in the paper – "If any woman wants to be part of a consciousness-raising group, call me" – and I would collect names and then put people together. So, I guess after I first said I wasn't that involved afterward, I actually was for a number of years, but nothing dangerous.

JR: Did you stay involved in race politics?

JW: I did some work, but I think it kind of switched over to the Vietnam War and the Women's Movement. Then it kind of petered out for many years. And even now, I don't feel like I'm that involved in politics, and, except for this interview, which I agreed to do, I very seldom talk about this. The reason I don't talk about it is because I feel so awkward about not being involved in much of anything political now, and talking about this past that I have makes it seem that I should be more than I am. [laughter]

JR: I don't think that's true. I mean, I can understand feeling – not because I think you should feel that way, but I can understand how people –

JW: People always admired what I did, which is one reason why I always take care to say I loved adventure. It wasn't like I was a better person or a more devoted person or

anything like that. When I first came back from the first trip that I took to Mississippi before I was married, I was very much in demand as a speaker because that was just as things were really taking off. Though I hated public speaking, I had spoken so often publicly that I went from rehearsing practically in front of a mirror every word I was going to say, trying to memorize it, to driving someplace where I was going to speak and thinking on the way over, “Well, what do I say tonight?” I got very comfortable with it because I did it a lot. And I felt for a while – I was written up in the Boston papers – there was a lot of stuff about me – “A nice Jewish girl from Newton goes to jail” kind of stuff. People recognized me on the street, and I was very uncomfortable. I felt like people didn’t know me for who I was anymore. They knew me for something I had done, and that set up a whole response reaction in them that really didn’t have a lot to do with me as an individual. I felt like I was relating to people through that screen always, which, I'm sure, is just a millionth of what happens to people that become famous. I can understand what – just from that little bit of experience, what it’s like to not have people relate to you as yourself anymore. I went through a period like that for about a year, and I found it really uncomfortable, and I didn’t want it anymore. I forget what question you asked that made me say that.

JR: We were talking about what political involvements you have after your –

[inaudible]

JW: Oh, yeah.

JR: – about not feeling uncomfortable about –

JW: About talking about this. So after that year, I just didn’t talk about it a lot. During that year, I did, and then I stopped because the admiration – people’s misconception about why people do this, you know, thinking that I was something so special, really was uncomfortable. It was also why I felt so guilty about not continuing always to be that

involved because people thought that about me.

JR: I think people have different concerns, different things they focus on in a different period that sort of make up a whole life.

JW: That's true.

JR: It's not necessarily always sort of follow through in that –

JW: No.

JR: – constant kind of way.

JW: I agree. So then, the only other political stuff I've done in my life is I have been working until last May for the AIDS Action Committee for years, for, like, ten years.

JR: That's very political.

JW: It's very political, I know. And I absolutely loved that job. It was really a great thing for me in many ways.

JR: What were you doing with that?

JW: I started out being office manager for the AIDS Walk, and that was just so great. It reminded me of the high spirits of the Civil Rights Movement, the whole thing around the Walk. Have you ever done that walk?

JR: Yeah.

JW: It's a great thing.

JR: I've only done it in New York, actually. I haven't done it in Boston. I did it in New York twice.

JW: Yeah. So I did that for a number of years, and then I kind of got into fundraising there, which wasn't as much fun. [laughter] Well, the Walk is fundraising, but other kinds of fundraising that didn't have to do with that particular event. I did that for a number of years, and then this summer, I just took the summer off, and I don't know if I'm going to go back. I'm kind of dry there. So, right now, I don't have any plans for what I'm going to do.

JR: I'd love to hear more about your involvement in the Women's Movement.

JW: Well, I got married at a time when most women – I would say, with a few exceptions, just wanted to get married and be their husband's wife and have kids – didn't really plan careers for themselves. It just wasn't the way somebody like me – who, at that time, was pretty just plain, middle-class, straight person – thought. So, what happened was all of us got married, we had our kids, the Women's Movement hit. We already had kids, we already had established ways that we fit into a family life, and suddenly, we began to think differently, and we began to talk about it to other women and be resentful of the roles that we had and the limits of the roles that we had. We began to think about other things we wanted, and how we didn't really want to be the person who took all the clothes to the cleaners, and took care of the kids, and cooked all the meals while our husbands went out and did what they needed to do. Not that our husbands weren't wonderful people, but there weren't equal possibilities. So, I think that's why a lot of divorces began. It all started to happen during those years. Women ended up feeling really angry because if you get married, and you both are in a certain place, and you both have a career and you're both expecting to have a career, you join forces together, and you work toward these things happening. But if you're already married, and everything's already established, and then one of you is like pushing the bag to get out, and that changes everything within the family, there's a lot of stress. That's what happened. There was a lot of stress in the marriages back then, a lot of anger. The husbands were angry because the wives were angry at them, and the wives wanted other things. Not

everybody, but it happened a lot. That's when the earliest parts of the Women's Movement that I remember were these support groups, where women would just get together and talk about their lives, what they'd like, and how they were trying to deal with making changes. It was really helpful. Some of them, I think, were just "dump-on-men" sessions. But a lot of it was much more than that. It was, "How can we approach this? What do we want?" "What is my dream, really? What would I really like to happen outside of my love for my family?" So, that's most of the stuff that I remember, people struggling to go back to school, struggling to get a job that paid well – all the things that everyone knows about the Women's Movement. A lot of stuff about birth control, even. Birth control wasn't so readily available back then; not so legal. Couldn't get abortions. I just realized all those things were part of my life. And nowadays, I think that people are so much luckier, both men and women because they both have more possibilities. Men, if they want to, can be less career-driven. They can share that and not have the whole burden on them. Because of the way things were, men had a huge burden. Men had to be responsible for all of that. They just had a different set of problems than women did. But men have changed a lot, I think. It's much more rare now for men to have the same attitudes that men had back then. I mean, sometimes they do. Some men do. But a lot of the men back then just never thought to think differently. Once these things started to happen, they began to think differently. It was a real struggle, a much more personal struggle than anything else. And it was interesting. I don't know if you know about my mother's tape.

JR: Was she one of the 'Women Whose Lives Span the Century' country tapes?

JW: Yes.

JR: I haven't seen the transcript, actually.

JW: Yeah, well, it was interesting to me that when I listened to my mother's tape, these issues didn't come up.

JR: Issues of family expectations and men –

JW: Well, issues of –

JR: – and women.

JW: Issues of the Women's Movement because certainly, the Women's Movement hit when I was twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. So she was twenty-five years older than me. It was a big part of her life, too. But it wasn't – in fact, I think I heard that in a lot of those transcripts – it was never mentioned. Maybe it was because those women were a little older when it hit and it wasn't going to change their lives. But it just seemed so enormous to me, such a huge overturning of things. It was interesting that the generation ahead of me, although they may have greeted it with gratitude, it just didn't change their lives that much.

JR: Yeah, well, from the reading that I've done, it seems that because it was such a generational kind of movement, there was a lot of miscommunication or just a lack of the same language among your mother's generation and your generation and that it – some of the stuff I read suggests, also, that a lot of the older women felt, in some ways, defensive, because they felt like their children were rejecting the life that –

JW: Yes.

JR: – they were fighting against the life that they had lived in some way.

JW: I remember one conversation I had with my mother about this. When I went to Philadelphia, I would write to her; I would address the letters I wrote to her as Bernie Frieze. If I wrote to my father, I probably wrote Bernice and Phillip Frieze or Phillip and Bernice Frieze. And she once said to me she didn't like that, that she wanted to be addressed as Mrs. Phillip Frieze. But then, to her, not saying Mrs. Phillip Frieze showed disrespect for her husband, that she loved him, and she respected him, and she was

proud of being his wife. I would say, “I know you love and respect him, and you’re proud of being his wife, but you’re also yourself. When I address you as Bernie Frieze on an envelope, I’m not saying anything bad about Dad; I’m just writing to you.” But that was very hard for her. She didn’t like it at all. She felt like it was really – she made that really clear.

JR: That is so interesting.

JW: It is, isn’t it?

JR: Yeah. I had cut my time, but when people call and ask for Mrs. David

Andorsky and so –

JW: It’s not you. [laughter]

JR: Right, it’s not me. It’s not even my name.

JW: Well, I kind of took my – I did take my husband’s last name. I wouldn’t have thought otherwise. So I am Judy Wright, and I’m not Judy Frieze, and after all these years, I think of myself as Judy Wright. But I can’t stand it when somebody addresses an envelope to Mrs. Francis Wright. I said, “That’s my husband’s name.” Not his formal name. We don't call him that. I don't like it; it's just not me. So, I totally understand how you feel, and it’s hard for me to – I mean, I understand that it just comes from a whole different culture, that my mother felt the way she did. But it was so hard for that generation to push past that thing where if you stood for yourself, it meant you didn’t stand for your husband. I believe it has nothing to do with how much you love and respect your husband. But to the older women, it was different.

JR: That’s really interesting. I hadn’t really heard that exact kind of story before. Let’s see, what other questions did I have for you? How do you think your contribution to your

work has affected other people?

JW: To people that I know or people that I don't know?

JR: Both, I mean, either one.

JW: I don’t think I can say much more than, you know, I was a cog in a wheel in the South, and you know, all those cogs together made a really big difference. I can’t think of anything more to say about that question.

JR: Have you had any role models?

JW: My grandmother, I guess, my mother’s mother. Although I didn’t think of her as a role model, it certainly provided some history in my family of that kind of thing. In terms of people I don’t know that weren’t – I think I was really affected by Martin Luther King. I was enthralled reading of him and who he was from the time I first heard of him. This is a funny one. When I was in high school, I read Exodus. Did you ever read that book?

JR: No. But I’ve read about it.

JW: I think there was something about reading that book, about the founding of Israel, beginning of the whole battles early on, and how devoted everyone was to what they were doing, how their life, the meaning of their life grew out of this thing that they believed in. It wasn’t what I chose as the path I wanted to take, but I remember – and this is harking back to my saying my family life was, I felt, so ordinary, and I was longing for more meaning in my life – that book, when I read it, really got to me. I don’t think you call a book a role model, but I was always intrigued by somebody whose life had a meaning beyond their own life.

JR: Have your children been involved in some of the same kinds of political things that you’ve been involved in?

JW: Not really. They're both pretty liberal thinkers, but they haven't really been involved in political stuff.

JR: Did you talk about – did you and your husband share with them your experiences in the movement?

JW: They know about it. But not a lot. I mean, I didn't not talk about it, but they never really questioned me that carefully. I bet they will someday, though.

JR: I'm trying to see if there's anything else here that I haven't gone through… I think that's basically the questions that I had. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to tell me, though?

JW: I can't think of anything right off the bat, but maybe I will, and then we can get back to this after lunch [laughter] or something.

JR: Okay. Terrific. Well, thank you so much.

JW: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]