

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

CHAVA WEISSLER

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

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**A Project of the Jewish Studies Program
at the University of Pennsylvania**

Chava Weissler, 08/30/16

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Tuesday August 30, 2016. And I'm here with Chava Weissler at her home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History project. Chava, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Chava Weissler (CW): Absolutely.

JG: As you know, today we're going to explore your experiences in the late sixties and early seventies, and particularly your involvement in Fabranken, and the impact that the *havurah* has had on you personally, and beyond, in the larger Jewish community.

So I'd like to start by talking a bit about your personal and family background, and to flesh out a bit who you were at the time that you got involved first with Fabranken. So let's begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in 1947 in Washington, D.C.

CW: That's right.

JG: Tell us briefly about your family when you were growing up.

CW: Okay. Well, let's see. My parents were born, both of them, in New York City. (00:01:00) They were both scientists, but it having been the Depression, they were having a very hard getting jobs as scientists, and then when the Second World War started and the U.S. government needed scientists, first, my mother got a job at the National Bureau of Standards — she was a physicist, and then my father got a job, I think then, at the Naval Research Lab. He was a chemist. So they moved down to D.C., along with a lot of other professional Jewish families, thus separating, it's interesting, separating from their own families and staying out of all the family quarrels. [*laughs*]

JG: A good thing!

CW: They had, actually, a group of friends who were almost like my aunts and uncles growing up, other Jewish couples who had mostly moved down from New York.

JG: Was your mother unusual as a woman scientist in those years?

CW: Yes, she was. And in fact, as was the case with many women in those days, she only got a master's degree. (00:02:00) And she got her master's degree at Columbia, and her professors said, "You're a woman and a Jew. You'll never get a job." I mean, some of them were Jewish. Anyway, she was — her first job was as a secretary in a chemical

company. And my father was teaching science at a vocational junior high school. So they jumped at the chance to get these better jobs.

JG: And you have two younger brothers?

CW: That's right, I do — one of whom still lives with his family in the Washington, D.C. area. And the other of whom married and then later divorced a French woman. He's a mathematician, carrying on the family scientific tradition, and he lives in Paris, France and his son lives there too.

JG: What about grandparents?

CW: So, my father's parents were both from the Austro-Hungarian empire, although my grandfather said he was from Galicia — although (00:03:00) he said he was from Austria, he was from Galician Poland, Galicia. And in fact, I have not been in the town he was from, but I have driven past it: Dębica in Polish, Dembitz in Yiddish. And my grandmother was from Hungary. That grandfather — they all started out in the garment industry, I think, all four of my grandparents, but that grandfather had a real talent and he grew up to design and manufacture ladies' coats and suits. But my father's parents died when I was relatively young. They were influential in my Jewish development in two ways. One was that they were the Orthodox branch of the family, or the nominally Orthodox branch of the family. They were much more observant, they kept a kosher home. My mother's parents by the time I knew them were no longer keeping a kosher home. So I had that model, and one of my father's siblings, his older sister (00:04:00) also kept an Orthodox home, so that was where I saw that. And also, by dying when I was relatively young, my father said kaddish for each of them every day. He would sometimes take me — probably on the weekends, I can't imagine he took me in the mornings during the year, but I remember going with him to say kaddish [see addendum]. And being exposed to that very traditional sort of *davening*, which deeply attracted me — the mumble —

JG: Even as a young child.

CW: Even as a young child. I don't know if I put this in my pre-interview notes, but I felt drawn to Judaism as a young child. I felt like it was like having an ear for music, that is, an ear for ritual, or a soul for ritual. That is, I loved, especially, the old guys and that *davening*, and I thought, Will I ever be able to produce that liquid stream of syllables? (00:05:00) You know. And they seemed more authentic and sincere than the big Conservative shul we belonged to. Just to say briefly about my mother's parents, they were from the Russian empire. My grandmother was from Romny in the Ukraine. My

grandfather was in Kishinev; he actually lived through the Kishinev pogrom as a boy. He only told me about it once. This was when I was going to library school in New York and I asked him about it —

JG: So in your twenties.

CW: Yeah, and he broke down and wept when he told me the story. And I guess by that time, I knew about the Kishinev pogroms, so I hadn't known about it as a child. And he, although he had almost no formal schooling, became a bookkeeper. He was good at numbers, which my mother and one of my brothers inherited from him. (00:06:00) So, and I have to say also about my grandmother, she was perfectly happy to have girls. She said — my mother has an older sister — she said when my mother was born people came to console her that she hadn't had a son, and she said, "Don't be silly." Unlike my other grandmother, who had made — she had three boys and a girl who was the second child, and she made my aunt's life miserable her entire life because she wasn't a boy. So.

JG: So how would you describe the Jewish environment in your own home when you were growing up?

CW: We belonged to the big Conservative shul in Washington, D.C., which was Adas Israel, Connecticut and Porter streets. Most of my parents' friends, those aunts and uncles, as it were, belonged to Reform temples. That's where the intellectual (00:07:00) Jewish crowd belonged, but my father in particular wanted a more traditional kind of service and a more traditional atmosphere, even though I don't think my parents felt socially very well-accepted in Adas, as we called it. A lot of people in business there.

JG: Government?

CW: I guess there were some, there must have been some. Probably the government people were over at Temple Sinai, with Balfour Brickner, who was the big intellectual rabbi at the time. And we had the big, pompous service with the cantor and his long robes, and high hat, but we also had — it was a big congregation, so there was a children's service that met in the chapel on *Shabbat* morning, and a teen service, that met in another auditorium, and those were both influential in my life. But in my own family, we had what (00:08:00) you could call a Jewish *traif* home, that is, no pork or shellfish; we did mix milk and meat; we had super market meat, we didn't get kosher meat. And we had, starting from my very early childhood, we had Shabbat dinner every week. My mother lit candles, my father said kiddush, we had a special dinner. When we moved to the house I lived in after I was eleven, we had dinner in the dining room rather than in the kitchen the way we did the rest of the time. My parents liked to go to synagogue

something like once a month. We observed, in the house, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukah, and Pesach, but my father liked to go to shul on Sukkot in particular, which also became my favorite holiday.

JG: Why?

CW: I love the *sukkah*. I just love the being outside. I love (00:09:00) the connection to nature. I love the feeling that life is fragile. It's actually — a big blow moving here is that I can no longer have a *sukkah*. And I ate all my meals in the *sukkah* for decades, unless it was raining. And so — my parents viewed my Jewish involvement with a certain amount of wariness.

JG: When you were young?

CW: When I was young.

JG: What age are you talking about?

CW: From going to Camp Ramah when I was twelve and thirteen, when I wanted to keep kosher, when I *bentsched* out loud after lunch in junior high school, then in high school when I got involved in Habonim which was also very important for me. You know, they thought I was becoming a little — religious, not a Zionist fanatic, they didn't want me to move to Israel. (00:10:00) And even my grandfather, my mother's father, who tried to persuade other grandchildren to be more Jewish, said to me, "How did you get into all this Jewish observance?" He thought it was extreme.

JG: How did you?

CW: As I said, it drew me in from childhood. I just loved it. And — you know, various things influenced me, from going to daily minyan with my father to, yes, as I said, the children's service, where girls were allowed to lead things, to the teen service, where girls were no longer allowed to lead things. But where there was a nice *hevrah* and they served us a good lunch. I still remember the lunches, it was tuna salad sandwiches on bridge rolls, and potato chips. (00:11:00)

JG: What are bridge rolls?

CW: They're — they're white, sort of challah-type rolls, but they're shaped a little bit like a torpedo at both ends. And maybe they had egg salad sandwiches, too. Anyway, I

remember the sandwiches. I am into food. I also started trying to cook traditional Jewish things when I was already in high school. I would make *teiglach* for Rosh Hashanah.

JG: How did you know about those foods? Your grandmother?

CW: I guess, I mean my grandparents of course lived in New York. *Teiglach* I think we bought, in the Jewish deli, and then I thought, I could make this, and then I went to the Settlement Cookbook and I found a recipe for it. I liked to cook, early on. And so — and my mother, my mother had not known how to cook until she got married. And she was (00:12:00) a laboratory scientist, she learned how to cook from cookbooks following them like they were lab manuals, and so she taught me to measure extremely precisely. She says — you know, a little bit of this flour falls out, it gets — anyway, my mother, my father's mother was a very good cook, although she died when I was seven. She could also make stretch strudel, she was Hungarian, you know. But my mother's mother was a very good baker, and she made traditional Jewish things.

JG: You started to talk about the impact of camp —

CW: So, camp. Both Camp Ramah in Connecticut, for which the synagogue paid on scholarship for me to go — as they did for a lot of kids, for the whole summer. In those days, that was what you did. You did not go for part sessions. The whole summer, when I was twelve and thirteen, and then Habonim camp, the Baltimore and Washington kids together went to one camp near Annapolis in those days (00:13:00), Habonim Camp Moshava which has since moved, and so has Ramah in Connecticut, obviously, moved to Massachusetts a long time ago. But anyway, I went to Ramah — both of them had profound effects on me.

JG: So tell us about them.

CW: First of all, I did have the model of observant life at Ramah, although I did not feel —

JG: What year was this?

CW: Let's see, I was twelve and thirteen — '59-'60. And then I was '61, '62, '63 at Habonim camp, the last summer I was a *madrichah*. And I did not feel socially comfortable at Ramah, and I was, it was clear they were trying to make American Jews. Not Jews who wouldn't fit into American society (00:14:00) in any way. It was interesting.

JG: What do you mean by that?

CW: Well, perhaps it's my *later* contrast with Habonim where they were trying to make Israeli Jews out of us. Also, Habonim was much more politically radical in a variety of ways. We proudly called ourselves socialists. And at Ramah they had dances that were like American dances for the kids, with themes like Blue Moon, or whatever. And at Habonim camp, we had Israeli dancing. So there were a lot of ways. I could think about it and say more. But in any case, what was important to me at Ramah was the daily *davening* and the classes, the Hebrew, which, as I may have written, the first summer I was in the lowest Hebrew class. And I was so motivated (00:15:00) by it, because I felt I had — I'm pretty good at languages, and I felt I had broken the language barrier. That is, I could express myself in Hebrew, and that winter I bought myself grammar books, textbooks, books about Hebrew philology, and I taught myself Hebrew. And so I was in the second-highest class the next summer. So that's how I know Hebrew; I taught it to myself. I would not have had I not spent that summer at Ramah which pushed me, and the summer at Ramah that consolidated it. And then by that second summer we were studying *Pirkei Avot*, which also — you know, it's in Hebrew — it was a text with some challenge, but also showed how much Hebrew I knew, that I could study *Pirkei Avot* in Hebrew. And then I got involved in Habonim.

JG: Why the switch, why did you switch?

CW: Well, I think probably because (00:16:00) there were a couple of Hebrew school teachers who were involved in Habonim. They were two of the Cohen brothers. Ovadya Cohen was my Hebrew school teacher and Shlomo Cohen was another Hebrew school teacher at Adas, and they were part of the really strong Baltimore Jewish community. And they were — you know, the Baltimore and Washington Habonim groups went to the same camp. Partly, it appealed to me because it had — I didn't like USY, I didn't like the culture, I didn't like the kids. And this had a group, I remember, I was keeping a journal at the time, and I remember I came home from my first Habonim meeting and I wrote, "I really fit here." So it was kids who had a kind of political seriousness to them. Maybe a (00:17:00) greater intellectual seriousness to them. I don't really remember. But they felt they were part of a movement, they were idealistic, they were socialists, they were going to live on kibbutz.

JG: And did that appeal to you at that point?

CW: It did, it did. And they also had for summer camp — they had an excellent curriculum that came out of the World Zionist Organization. Or maybe — maybe the Ichud had, maybe the Israeli Mapai organization, I can't remember. But in any case, as I

think I wrote we had — one summer, I was there for all three summers of the curriculum, because it rotated, from Jewish history, Zionist history, and socialist history. So I read a lot of stuff — this was when I was in high school — I read a lot of stuff from all of *The Zionist Idea* by Arthur Hertzberg (00:18:00) when I was in high school. I learned a lot of history, and I also knew a lot of history because I had been interested in it, I had absorbed what I had gotten in Hebrew school, I think unlike the Dorothy Tessen books [see addendum], unlike most of my confreres. And, you know, I remember reading socialism, and all this kind of stuff. So I learned a great deal. There was not as much Hebrew there, but every day we learned a new Israeli song, a new Israeli dance, there were more Israelis at the camp, and also being exposed to the Baltimore kids was an important influence on me, because they were second-generation kids. The Washington kids were all third-generation kids. So they had immigrant parents who had come after the Holocaust, many of whom had been active in Zionist movements in Europe, and for whom it was a kind of living tradition. And they were — I went up, we would have a third seder (00:19:00) every year, a joint one, with the kids from Baltimore, and I remember going up, staying with my friend Trudy Litt whose parents were European, and seeing a different world [see addendum]. Friday night, during Pesach, all of her aunts and uncles were around the table, every man made kiddush on his own wine and little challot — little matzahs obviously, it was Pesach. The food was different, the decorum was different. Trudy would not let me help clear tables even when she and I were the only ones in the house; she said, “My mother would kill me if she knew I let a guest help.”

JG: Wow, interesting.

CW: Yeah, it was fascinating to me. I also stayed with another friend, Rochelle, whose family lived over the store. It was a different world classwise. People had accents, and I don't remember if I (00:20:00) mentioned this before or not, but another really big influence on me was the exhibit on the Lower East Side, *Portal to America*, or *Gateway to America*, which showed at the Smithsonian at the time, I guess, after I graduated from college.

JG: So that was when?

CW: I graduated from college in '67, I know because I spent my junior year in Israel, again a very big influence on me. I — in college I became Orthodox.

JG: Go back and just talk a little bit about how you decided to go to Brandeis.

CW: How did I decide to go to Brandeis? I didn't get into Radcliffe or Swarthmore. That's how I decided to go to Brandeis.

JG: The vagaries of life, yes.

CW: Yeah. I was crushed, not getting into Radcliffe or Swarthmore. My father was crushed. So I went to Brandeis. I was very happy at Brandeis. (00:21:00) And —

JG: And you said you became Orthodox and practiced there.

CW: I mean, it was easy to do. First of all, I did sign up for the kosher cafeteria line. And I — since I had this idea of authentic *davening* already from my youth, that's where I was likely to find it, was with the Orthodox kids for the High Holidays, and then you could sign up to eat in the sukkah which, I already loved Sukkot. And who signed up to eat in the *sukkah*? The Orthodox kids. So they were a *hevrah*, they took me in. I mean, I'd say that a theme of my life for many years was always being part of a — a powerful Jewish community, whatever it was. I was in Habonim in high school. I was Orthodox in college. Then, you know, after floundering around (00:22:00) for two years after college, I found Fabrangen. I was in the *havurah* movement for many years, and then wherever I went I was part of a *havurah* style minyan. So that the theme of being part of a community was very important to me, a Jewish community, and perhaps more important than being part of it than exactly what the details were. I know that it made my freshman year at Brandeis much easier than most freshmen because I had friends across all the classes, because I was in the Orthodox *hevrah*.

JG: And what did you major in there?

CW: Near Eastern and Judaic Studies.

JG: Was that just a given —?

CW: No, I flirted with physics for the while. But I didn't really have the preparation for physics. I had not been great at math in high school, my mother said, when I decided (00:23:00) not to take calculus my senior year of high school, she said, "Thank God, I won't have to get you through that, too." So I don't think I was really suited for physics, although there was a charismatic physics professor that I thought was wonderful, and I thought about it for a while. But — I came in intending to do Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, and I did it. I was interested — I took courses mainly in philosophy, Jewish philosophy, and Kabbalah, those were my interests. In high school, I'd also had this little flirtation with the aesthetic intensity of Catholicism; I wanted to be able to kneel before God, I was fascinated by all those saints with the mystical experiences, and I went looking for mystical experiences in Kabbalah, although the first day of class, my revered

professor, Alexander Altmann, *alav ha shalom*, said, “We’re doing the history of Jewish mysticism here, we’re not doing — no mystical experiences.” (00:24:00) And there was some piece of me that was very disappointed, but I immediately parroted the party line. And —

JG: So you said he was, Altmann was a very strong influence on you.

CW: Yes, he was, yes, he was.

JG: How so?

CW: Um —

JG: You did a thesis under him, among other things.

CW: Yes, I did, I did do a thesis under him. I — when you say of somebody, he was my teacher, I guess I would say, Altmann was my teacher. And as with other teachers, you have a complicated relationship. He had, sort of, expectations of me that I was not anxious to fulfill, or I felt too tangled up in. I guess one thing you need to know about me is that I have (00:25:00) always, since elementary school, been very bad at finishing assignments.

JG: I didn’t know that.

CW: Yeah — I will tell you, well, I don’t know, I guess it can’t matter anymore. Penn gave me a Ph.D. when I still had six incompletes. They just filled in the grades. I’m not going to lose a job now, because I’ve admitted that. I’m already retired! *[laughs]* So — I mean, and that was the case in elementary school, it was the case in high school. I had actually very mediocre grades in high school because I didn’t finish things. Great board scores, which is what got me into Brandeis. And — so I had trouble, you know, finishing the papers (00:26:00) I needed to do. I went for classes with exams because I was very good at exams. But in my major, I couldn’t do that. So I mean — I was supposed to be doing some complicated thesis for Altmann, and then he finally said to me, “Look, here’s a manuscript — translate and annotate it.” A medieval manuscript. So I did. That was a kind of finite task I could do.

JG: But what would you say you took away? He was your teacher, as you said.

CW: So, I guess what I took from him, although I also said to him once some years later, someone can be someone’s teacher without — you can be someone’s student without

being their disciple. Because he was somebody who loved philosophy, and I didn't love philosophy. He felt philosophy purified the mind. He was an old, German-Jewish scholar. (00:27:00) I was there for kabbalah, and he only taught — he didn't teach it in the way I really wanted it to be taught, but I learned a great deal from him. I studied *midrash* with him, I studied Kabbalah with him, I studied medieval philosophy. I did my text study with him. And he wanted me to go on and get a Ph.D. Part of the thing was, what did you do in 1967 when you wanted to become a Jewish Studies scholar? The next thing, after getting your B.A, was to go to JTS for five years and do the scholarly track in the rabbinical school, but as they say — in those days, I couldn't pass the physical! [*laughs*] So the question was, what was I supposed to do? And I guess he thought I should get a Ph.D. in Israel, which I did not do.

JG: That was his solution to this problem?

CW: Yeah. And I didn't do anything for a while. But I went to.. I did do my junior year in Israel where I studied Kabbalah and philosophy, and other things (00:28:00).

JG: Who did you study with there?

CW: Yosef Ben-Shlomo, I studied Cordovero [see addendum], I think, with him. I studied with Eli Schweid, *Shemonah Perakim l'Rambam* [see addendum], I studied with Shlomo Pines. I mean if you could say you study with him, he walks and he looks out the window. He says, "*u-v'chain!*" I took all my classes in Hebrew. Unlike most of my other American friends who took the English classes. And he just continues in mid-sentence wherever he left off at the last — Rivka Schatz, those were my main teachers there. But I didn't keep up with any of them. But I learned, again, a lot of texts. I studied Zohar with Rivka Schatz, Cordovero I guess with Yosef Ben-Shlomo, Rambam with Schweid, and sort of a history I guess of Jewish philosophy with Pines. (00:29:00) And I stopped being Orthodox part way through the year. Israeli Orthodoxy I guess was just too much for me. I had an Israeli roommate. I began to — well, I don't know, I'll leave that out. And being in Israel was very powerful for me. I was intent with the Habonim background on becoming an Israeli, and I also thought that — I also thought that the fact that I was miserably unhappy wasn't because I was an unhappy teenager who didn't get along with my parents and all that stuff, but because I was a Jew in exile. I had internalized the Zionist ideology I learned at Habonim, and I thought once I got to Israel all my problems would be gone. I would be a Jew at home! (00:30:00) And of course they just got worse. And I had a shattering year, my junior year in Israel. I was a complete emotional wreck by the end of it because I was trying to make myself into an Israeli. I had a pretty good imitation going, but you know, I could fool a lot of people. I remember, Ben Shlomo, when I came to get something signed by him at the end of the year, said I was, "*Ma? At*

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Amerikheit?” [see addendum] So — but, I had this whole ideology going, that I was coming back, a year later I was going to make aliyah. But I didn’t do it, and deep in my heart I didn’t want to do it, I wasn’t happy there. I didn’t feel at home there.

JG: Did you have that sense of community, or is that part of what was really lacking for you there? (00:31:00)

CW: Uh —

JG: That you mentioned a little while ago.

CW: I don’t think I did. And I — well, I had, I was very close friends with my Israeli roommate, I made friends with her family. I did not hang out with the American kids who mostly hung out with each other, because I was going to become an Israeli. I spoke nothing but Hebrew the whole time I was there. So, you know, I was dreaming in Hebrew. But I remember when my roommate from Brandeis who didn’t speak Hebrew came to visit me, I exploded into puns because I couldn’t make puns in Hebrew! [*laughs*] I think I once did, and I was so proud of myself, but you know, that was a level of Hebrew that was beyond me. And I did not go back to Israel for a long time. This was ‘65-’66 that I was there, so it was before ‘67.

JG: The year before.

CW: And it was actually — the Six Day War was (00:32:00) during my Senior Week at Brandeis. But my — so that I did in some ways love that pre-’67 Israel, the more modest Israel, the Israel before the conquest, the Israel where there was no TV, where most people didn’t have cars, when most people were cooking on two burners in the kitchen, you know. And doing their laundry in the bathtub.

[Break for lunch]

JG: You were saying that after college you spent a couple of years betwixt and between, it sounds like.

CW: Right.

JG: But then decided to go to library school.

CW: I couldn't figure out what I wanted to be, I kept waiting for the light to dawn that said, you're going to be a —! It didn't dawn. I said, I better learn a trade. So I went to library (00:33:00) school. I had been —

JG: In New York?

CW: At Columbia. Which has abolished its library school, the very first library school in our nation, founded by Melville Dewey himself. But in any case. I went to Columbia University Library school, '69-'70. And before I went up there — talking about the sixties — at some family party, I saw one of the New York cousins who was a New York City policeman. He said, "Columbia eh? They send me up there one more time, they're gonna have to give me a diploma!" Because this was the era of the protests, and indeed I wondered about meeting my cousin Ernie across the barricades. And in the spring of my year, at Columbia, '70, the spring of '69-'70 — was I there? — I think I was there '69-'70 — Kent State. And there was massive demonstrations which closed down Columbia. And we as librarians decided that what we (00:34:00) needed to do was collect ephemera. We went around collecting posters, handouts, flyers, all this kind of stuff, to document it. I guess one of the ways I've continued to think about documenting, you know — anyway, so —

JG: So this was a time of tremendous ferment, obviously, in general.

CW: Yes, it was. I was not very political. I went to the big demonstrations. I remember feeling disoriented as we all did during those days. I remember in the middle of the night, making myself a bowl of soup because soup was comforting. You know, I think I had the general sentiments of young people of my era, but I didn't — as I think I wrote, also — I wore the uniform, the Indian print dresses, the (00:35:00) boots, the whatever else, but I didn't — I was not active in a lot of political stuff. I was still searching for Jewish stuff. I lived a few blocks from the Jewish Theological Seminary. While I was in library school I worked in the Jewish Theological Seminary library part time. And — acquiring Judaica, that is not Hebraica, but Judaica. And Dr. Shmeltzer said, "I can tell you're Altmann's student." By what I bought! What I thought was important for a Jewish Studies library. And I occasionally *davened* at the JTS minyan, but I was not doing anything very Jewish, although I was friends at that time already with the Mowshowitzes, I don't know if you're interviewing them at all. Deborah and Solomon Mowshowitz. (00:36:00) I had known Deborah from Brandeis. And they were the founders of — God, I can't even remember what it's called [see addendum]. The alternative to Minyan M'at at Anshe Chesed. The more popular one, that was later. But they were very active in the *havurah* movement, they were a part of *Beit Havurah*, I don't know if you're trying to get any of those people.

JG: The New York Havurah? [see addendum]

CW: Yeah, yeah. So this was a little later, but, so they hadn't really started their things yet. I don't think while I was there I knew about the New York Havurah. I only found out about it — or maybe my parents sent me a clipping about it while I was still in New York; can't remember.

JG: What about the general American sort of youth counterculture — its music, sex, and rock and roll?

CW: Well, you know, I never did any drugs. Ever. Except I tried smoking hash once and nothing happened. [*laughs*] I mean, I have a lot of friends who did some drugs. I did have a certain amount of sex. I liked the music. I liked the sense — I participated in the general sense that we were a generation that was really going to change things. And that the problems of the world could be solved, which, alas, now that I'm older, I'm glad there are younger people who think that. That we could solve racism and sexism and — I mostly did it to the extent I did that stuff, I did it through Jewish avenues.

JG: Were you caught up in the anti-war —?

CW: I went to some demonstrations, you know. I wasn't a planning activist in any of those things. Fellow traveler, I don't know (00:38:00). I went to the things that people went to — I hated LBJ even though I now have greatly revised my opinion of him and wish we had not turned him out of office. But anyway, I chanted, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" in front of the White House. But I didn't organize any of these things. I went, sometimes.

JG: So let's turn now and focus on the period in which you became involved with the *havurah* movement. (00:39:00) So you were heading back to D.C.

CW: I got a job at the Library of Congress. JTS wanted to keep me, but they couldn't match the salary. And I think I was probably happy to be going back to Washington, where I'd grown up.

JG: Can you give me a sense of what your overall sense of self was, and particularly your sense of yourself Jewishly. You'd been through a lot of different stages at that point.

CW: That's right. That's right. And I was — I probably spent the year in New York, '69-'70, and the first six months I was in Washington, in the fall of 1970, (00:40:00)

searching for some satisfying Jewish alternative. I didn't really go to shul very often. I'm somebody who is a constant Shabbos shul-goer, and I have been for most of my life. And I had gone in college, and anyway, so during — I did not go I don't think very often, I think, in those years of interim. But I came back, and in New York, as I say, I occasionally went to *daven* at JTS, and there was nothing else I knew about actually. There weren't a lot of alternatives, and I had mixed feelings about JTS, and about whatever. It wasn't a community for me. I came back to D.C. and I also looked for (00:41:00) community. The place I went was [Keshet Israel] sort of the hip Orthodox shul at Twenty-eighth and N in Georgetown that what's his name, Lieberman, belongs to now. And all that stuff. But it was at a rather low point when I went, and it also didn't quite pull me in. Because I had been Orthodox, you know. But it was only when I heard about Fabrangon that I — I went to the second meeting, which was in February of 1971.

JG: February of 1971. So just when you were coming back to Washington —

CW: I'd been there for a number of months, I was living in my own apartment. During the interim years, I had lived with my parents out in the suburbs. And I don't recall how I heard about Fabrangon.

JG: So this was the period that this group of young people from Jews for Urban Justice (00:42:00), JUJ, were exploring the notion of starting some kind of a new community.

CW: Yes, yes. Wholistic Judaism was the —

JG: Wholistic Judaism.

CW: Spelled with a "W"!

JG: With a W, exactly. Havurat Shalom had been established in '68, the New York Havurah in '69.

CW: About which I was more or less ignorant at that time, but other people were not necessarily. And there was also David Schneyer came in from a Carlebach trip, sort of; he was influenced by Carlebach. So it's not just the *havurah* movement that was playing into all this stuff. The different movements were less, I think, clearly distinguished in those days.

JG: So what do you remember of that time that the idea was sort of starting to take shape for a new community?

CW: Well, I guess, first of all, I remember that I was in both (00:43:00) JUJ, Jews for Urban Justice, and also in Fabrangen, that the membership between the two of them in the early days was quite similar, quite an overlap, quite a heavy overlap. I don't remember any more of the early activities, which were which.

JG: But do you remember — just to go back a little bit, did you see this concept paper, “A New Jewish Community” that was circulating?

CW: No, I didn't. I don't recall that I did. Let me put it that way. What I do know is the way I thought about it was, we were funded by the Jewish community, we didn't have a federation, it was the —

JG: UJA.

CW: UJA. They put us in a house on Dupont Circle.

JG: They chose the place?

CW: I think so, or maybe we chose it and they paid for it. And their view was that — why Dupont Circle? Because that's where the Jewish hippies were. And they saw us as people who would (00:44:00) get the Jewish hippies to throw away their needles and start dancing the hora. This was their idea of what our function was, why they funded us. They wanted us to take those — probably, in their eyes, dangerous Jews — the ones who were disaffected, who were doing drugs, who were into the counterculture — and give them an attractive Jewish alternative.

JG: And Dupont Circle was just the place where they were hanging out?

CW: That was like the center of the counterculture in Washington at the time. And so —

JG: So they gave you, they gave \$15,000, a grant for six months.

CW: Right. And they took it away.

JG: After the six months.

CW: And they held a show trial.

JG: Do you have a sense of what the Washington, D.C. Jewish scene was at that point? And (00:45:00) the relationships between Jews for Urban Justice, this brand-new Fabrangen, and its relationship to the Jewish establishment?

CW: So, of course, I had grown up in Washington D.C. which not most people in Fabrangen had, so I had a long history; I knew people in a lot of different synagogues. I knew people who were in the Jewish establishment. I used to call them sometimes when I felt we were being persecuted. Harvey Ammerman, who was a neurosurgeon, who had been our across-the-street neighbor. I think that — the Jewish establishment was very unhappy with our political stances. I guess it was JUJ who did the notorious “This is the bus to Auschwitz” caper. Have you heard about that? Okay. They built a new JCC, which is the main JCC now; it’s out in Rockville, Maryland, in the suburbs. (00:46:00) And they had a bus, busses going — I was not there at this event. They had busses going from the downtown JCC on Sixteenth Street to take the community out from there to the new JCC. And some people in JUJ, because they were criticizing Jewish slumlords, held up posters that said, “This is the bus to Auschwitz,” meaning: “You horrible people. You’re just like the Nazis as slumlords!” We did other things — we stood in front of Adas Israel on Tisha B’Av with people actually — people at Adas actually thought it was just part of the Tisha B’Av observance it turns out, because people stood holding candles at the main entrance, which was also meant to protest something.

JG: And there were anti-Israel kinds of activities?

CW: Well, so (00:47:00) I do remember at one of the big demonstrations, there were activities construed as anti-Israel, as, you know, the difference. There was — I remember that JUJ identified as a non-Zionist organization.

JG: What did they mean by that, since they were —?

CW: I don’t really remember. I really am not good. I’m apologetic, I don’t remember all this stuff. But I do remember, that as we were at some big demonstration, people from the Radical Zionist Alliance, the RZA, approached us, like, oh, our friends! And the JUJ people turned away. But I don’t think that that was a universally held view in Fabrangen.

I think there were a variety of feelings about Israel in the group, in Fabrangen. (00:48:00) And I myself had had that horrible junior year, which did not necessarily make me an anti-Zionist. In fact, I think at that point I still hewed to a lot of the Zionist narrative. But there were a number of people there who had spent a fair amount of time in Israel. I was dating a guy who went to spend a year on a kibbutz while I was there. You know, so it was critical, but not nearly as critical as people are nowadays.

JG: And the UJA grant for Fabringen sounds like it came with some strings attached. Do you remember?

CW: Absolutely. I don't know if it was strings that were written in, or simply what they expected.

JG: For instance, I remember (00:49:00) reading that part of the agreement was that JUJ could have no meetings at Fabringen; that was one. Another was that Sharon Rose and Mike Tabor could not have any leadership roles within Fabringen. Those are the kinds of things I'm thinking of.

CW: I guess I did not remember that, although it certainly sounds familiar. In fact, JUJ met in people's houses.

JG: So did those — do you have memories of that causing tension between JUJ and Fabringen?

CW: What I'd say is that Sharon Rose went on to other things pretty fast. And Mike Tabor moved out to the country to raise sheep.

JG: And JUJ in fact was disbanded in the summer of '71, shortly after Fabringen was actually founded.

CW: That's right, that's right. So I guess the energy really shifted (00:50:00) to this more spiritual, somewhat less overtly political, or political in somewhat different directions. I remember Sharon — I didn't think Sharon was a very effective organizer. She tried to get a bunch of us stirred up over something, and she called us over to her house and said, "Look at this terrible cartoon, in off our backs? [see addendum], Isn't this Anti-Semitic or racist or something?" And I said, "No, not really." And she said, "Hmm. Well, they told me when they were telling people how to organize people, that I should get them all stirred up about something!" *[laughs]*

JG: You started to say there was some kind of rather incendiary meeting, though.

CW: There was, when they were trying to decide whether to renew our grant, the UJA. I don't know if you know, or know of, the Fenyvesi. Charlie Fenyvesi. He wrote for various papers, wrote a book, a memoir of his Jewish childhood in Hungary [see addendum]. Anyway they were early members. (00:51:00) He wrote for whatever the name of the B'nai B'rith monthly was — he might have been its editor at that time, and

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he wrote a scathing article about this, how it was like communist show trials in the middle of the night, and they were interrogating us about how many feet Sharon Rose had walked into the circle, or whatever.

JG: As they were trying to determine whether they were going to renew the grant, that's what this was about.

CW: Yes, that's right. It was about Sharon, it was about Zionism, it was about the slumlords, it was about all that stuff. So —

JG: So what happened?

CW: They didn't renew the grant. And we rented space someplace else, I don't know with what money. Excuse me.

JG: I just wanted to ask, before we totally move on to the beginning of Fabringen, (00:52:00) in this post first six months period, whether there were feelings in Fabringen that you remember, as all of this was unfolding, and what impact all this was having on the community.

CW: You mean about the controversy? I think we were outraged —

JG: This conflict with the establishment.

CW: We were outraged with the establishment. This was part of the sixties though, although it was the seventies. It was our job to be outraged at the establishment. *[laughs]* It was their job to be upset with us. There were all kinds of things. Again, this was a little later, but there was something called the Sunday Morning Lecture Series at Washington Hebrew, which was the biggest, oldest Reform congregation. And they actually, at some point during my time at Fabringen, they invited me to speak. I mean, there were riots.

JG: Riots because you were speaking?

CW: Among the audience. My parents had a screaming fight with their (00:53:00) friends on the steps.

JG: Why?

CW: Because Fabringen was considered to be so outrageous. My parents had fights on the steps of Adas Israel. My mother, I think, famously said, "I'm just trying to find a way

for her to meet somebody to marry!” [laughs] You know, so my parents defended it, but it was seen as a really dangerous organization by a lot of people in the Jewish establishment, and we were upset. I had worked at the Israeli Embassy for a year before I went to library school, ‘69-’70 [see addendum], and then actually we invited Yossi Ben Aharon, whom I knew from my work at the embassy, to speak at Fabringen about Israeli issues. He refused to say hello and acknowledge me. The Israeli ambassador (00:54:00) — or one of the high embassy officials — the Israeli Embassy was very opposed to us. It was right there in Washington. Sheldon Cohen was one of the leaders of the Jewish community, and he told this story about how — and he was a friend of my parents — he said, “The Israeli ambassador said, ‘Don’t support Fabringen; they’re a very bad organization!’” So there was pressure from the Israeli Embassy, too, to oppose us.

JG: I see. I want to go back to the very beginnings also. As the community was being established, how did the name Fabringen and “Fabringen Jewish Free Culture Center” —?

CW: Rob Agus picked it. Was it Jewish Free Culture Center? God, I don’t even remember.

JG: Fabringen Jewish Free Culture Center.

CW: Well, it’s now — I guess it’s been for long time — Fabringen Community, I think. But in any case. Rob Agus picked Fabringen. And he didn’t know any Yiddish, so he didn’t know it was *farbrangen*. And he named it after the (00:55:00) meeting of hasidim with the rebbe. That’s what a *farbrangen* is in Hasidism. Maybe only in Lubavitch Hasidism, I don’t really — I should know the answer to that, from a scholarly point of view, but in any case. I guess he had been to some hasidic gatherings and he found them so inspiring — and of course, Hasidism was one of the inspiring roots for the movement, that it was named after this joyous coming together of people in a hasidic community.

JG: To what extent — if at all — would you say that the founders of Fabringen had Havurat Shalom and the New York Havurah in mind as they were developing the idea? And was the fact that the word *havurah* was not included deliberate or not, in the name?

CW: I can’t answer, I’m sorry. Ask Rob. I (00:56:00) know that we pretty soon found out — well, the *Jewish Catalog* was important.

JG: Right, it came out in ‘73.

CW: And we began having, you know, the inter-*havurah* retreats, and all that, which built the sense of a movement. Did Rob know about, did Arthur, I don't know if Arthur knew, but Rob, maybe David Schneyer, did they know about these movements? I just don't even know. Certainly when Max came, he knew about them.

JG: So what was the vision for this community?

CW: Well, in fact, I just read my deathless prose about this which I wrote for several flyers, which was in that notebook. "Wholistic" was Rob's word; it was a big word — that it would be a whole way of life, that it would enable us to live our Judaism in the present, that it was egalitarian, (00:57:00) and this was in some ways really different from Havurat Shalom especially. It was from the get-go egalitarian for women and men. It was a basic principle. In fact, when we met Havurat Shalom people, we were shocked at how male it was. And so, gender egalitarianism. I would say that the community was very different when we had the house, and then afterwards. In the house, what we had —

JG: The house was the first six months? Okay.

CW: Six months. What you had then was, the main activity was Friday night; there was a potluck dinner, there was ecstatic dancing, and we brought in bands actually, to sixties music (00:58:00). Not Jewish music. I remember someone playing "All Along The Watchtower." And people would dance, and then we would have a potluck dinner, there would be more dancing, and for the very few people who wanted it there would be some kind of Ma'ariv *davening*. That was what Rob was into, Rob was very into *davening*. And we — I'm not sure in the house we did much on Shabbos morning at all, maybe a little. And we certainly did evolve those — what our Shabbos morning was mainly about for a long time was simply, as you probably already heard, reading the parashah aloud in English and stopping to discuss it whenever we had anything to discuss.

JG: I want to come back to this shortly and really focus on that.

CW: So the thing is, it was those evening meetings which were the heart of Fabrangen. And also classes, we had classes there. I taught, I taught Hebrew I think. I can't remember exactly what else. We had classes in Hebrew, in Siddur, in Talmud. (00:59:00) Yiddish, when Max came.

JG: Who was the target audience? Who was Fabrangen trying to reach? And I want to just, as we were mentioning Havurat Shalom, remind you that Havurat Shalom and the New York Havurah were membership organizations.

CW: That's right. And we were very proudly not a membership organization.

JG: Tell me about that.

CW: We were egalitarian in a number of ways. And unlike either Havurat Shalom, which was a rabbinical seminary to begin with, or the New York Havurah — I mean, my mother sent me some newspaper article about the New York Havurah at some point, I said I'd never qualify to get in. And I was a Jewish Studies major. I probably would have qualified to get in. But they were looking for people who were in graduate school about Judaism, or rabbinical school. We were — I don't, see I'm sorry, I don't remember a lot of this stuff. I don't remember how we targeted anybody (01:00:00), although we did. I mean, one of the flyers I wrote was, which I read, we had free High Holiday services.

JG: But the point, as I understand, of what you're saying, and what I read, is that it was very diverse, in terms of the people you were trying to attract. You weren't looking for people with a particular background.

CW: That's right. A lot of people, we attracted a small number of non-Jews, some of whom converted to Judaism. For a while, we attracted the new congressman, Henry Waxman, with his young family, but they didn't stay. We had at least one African-American, long-standing member. We attracted a very wide group of people, some of whom knew stuff about Judaism and some of whom knew almost nothing. And that was fine with us. (01:01:00) The way you become a member, as I wrote in this little pamphlet, is by coming to activities.

JG: And was there a membership in any other sense?

CW: Later.

JG: Later. But not during this first year. There were no dues, or anything like that.

CW: No, no. Later there were dues. Later there was even a coordinator, but that was after my time. A paid coordinator. That was after '75, I think.

JG: So you said in your pre-interview questionnaire that Fabrangen immediately became your place to "be and do Jewish." So what was drawing you in at this point. You'd been searching!

CW: Yes, I had been. I think I probably liked several things about it. I liked the people, the diverse group of people. I liked, you know, it was the sixties, I was in my twenties. I liked the ecstatic dancing. Well, it was the seventies, but it was the sixties. (01:02:00)

JG: Late sixties, early seventies.

CW: I liked the dancing, I liked the, as Durkheim would say, the effervescence. I really loved the sense that we were creating a new form of Judaism that was, in our eyes, better than what we had grown up with. And most of us who had Jewish backgrounds had grown up with formal Conservative or Reform synagogues where people were wearing robes and the congregation was a passive audience. So the idea of shaping it ourselves to our own needs, out of our own encounter with tradition, was profoundly attractive. And the fact that it was, for me, gender-egalitarian, that it was a chance to participate in a very active way, was very attractive too. And it was a community, I told you about the importance of community. We had Shabbos dinners (01:03:00) at each other's homes. We did a lot of stuff together besides formal meetings. You know, go hiking or canoeing or something. We — pretty quickly there was a women's group formed which had a lot of the — probably in '72 or '73 — there was a women's group that formed that had a lot of the energy of the community in it. And then there was another women's group formed afterwards.

JG: Early on did you have the sense that it was pretty equally divided between men and women, or — did men or women predominate?

CW: You mean in leadership roles?

JG: No, I just mean in the community

CW: In numbers? No, no, probably women predominated. That's a way we were different from the other groups.

JG: Yes. Or there were no women in the beginning in at least two of them.

CW: Right. No, I'd say there were more women than men in membership. Although, more men than women in leadership roles to begin with. It took me a couple of years before I got my courage up to lead *davening*. And by then, we were having a *davening* (01:04:00), you know. And I learned, during my final year there, I learned to read Torah, although there were other women who were reading Torah, and I trained people to read Haftara, which I knew how to do from Hebrew school. So —

JG: So tell me about what kinds of activities were going on, in general. So besides the services, I mean, Friday night dinners.

CW: Yes, and then gradually it became more people had Friday night dinners in their own homes, and there was also Shabbos dinners after — You know, Shabbos lunch after *davening*, that people had in each other's homes. Sometimes we would have Havdalah together. We also had retreats. I remember one in particular. I can't remember where we had these things. But I remember one, I was involved in the planning of the food. And it was a retreat to study Sefardic culture. (01:05:00) And —

JG: Someone came up with that as a theme?

CW: In the course of discussion, we decided that would be a good thing to do, over this, to study the history of Sefardic Jews, and their culture, and I remember doing a fair amount of research. I was working at the Library of Congress, of course, with the Hebrew books. So I had the greatest library in the world open to me to do research. I did this, I read this book on comparative Halachah between Sefardim and Ashkenazim, I can't remember, some guy's name, begins with a Z, can't remember. And I researched food, I used Claudia Rodin's, one of my favorite cookbooks, *Middle Eastern Cooking*. Everyone said the food was the best we'd ever had on a retreat. And you know, we had various sessions. We also tried to make it look, as we thought, Sefardic. I think we had carpets spread out on the floor, cushions or something. Although, again, (01:06:00) in those days, when we *davened*, we *davened* in a circle sitting on the floor, on cushions or whatever.

JG: So that wasn't unusual.

CW: That wasn't unusual. It was the décor that was more — we had draperies and stuff like that. We also attracted people who you could say had talents in the dance area. Several people who were sign language interpreters who were also very much sort of, very physical people, at least that's what I've noticed. We had here, again, I don't remember the year, but it was very interesting. A woman, I don't remember her name, she was from Casper, Wyoming, and she was originally not Jewish. I don't remember if she converted. But in any case, she decided to have a Saturday night dinner and invite people. That is, instead of a Shabbos dinner. (01:07:00) And it was fun; she had hors d'oeuvres, nice kinds of things you would have in a fancy dinner party, which we didn't do for Shabbos. We did other kinds of things for Shabbos. So we were all dressed up. It was — it was like the — nobody, I mean everybody was enjoying it, and sort of having a little giggle at it, but it was really like the anti-Shabbat dinner.

JW: Did she intend it that way, or was it —?

CW: I don't know. I think it was just that she said — maybe she grew up with it, who knows. Although some of us grew up with them too, but she said, I wanted to do this for a change.

JW: And it was fun.

CW: Yes, it was fun. And —

JW: You said it was different from how you would do Shabbat dinners. So tell us about those. These would take place in people's homes, or are we talking about a potluck at the —

CW: Yes. Well we would have (01:08:00) some of each, and I don't remember the era where we stopped having the main potluck dinner at Fabrangen on Friday nights, I don't remember when that was. Maybe we always had it. I don't really know; it all runs together. Potluck dinner was dairy, and people just brought a bunch of casseroles. There would be wine, and challah. There would be kiddush. There would be candle-lighting beforehand. I don't remember what kind of *bentsching* there was. In people's homes there would be — yeah, there was, by the time, I remember actually — Arlene Agus came to visit me, and it was already, we knew the New York people, and I was living, and I remember having Shabbat dinner at home. And — I don't think it was just because of her. But, (01:09:00) you know, it could either be *milchig* or *fleishig*, it had challah, it had wine, it had dessert. People tried to — people did bring things to other people's houses for Shabbat dinner, which means that at least among the Shabbat dinner people, most of us kept kosher.

JG: And at potluck dinners that took place at Fabrangen?

CW: It just had to be dairy.

JG: Dairy.

CW: Or parve.

JG: So that was the consensus within the community.

CW: That's right. We had discussions about it. We also talked a lot about the halachic process, and how we would make decisions about these things. I remember more talk about the process than the actual decisions. So —

JG: Was there singing at these —

CW: Yes, there was. I think people did sing some *zemirot* at Shabbat dinner, at home, and Shabbat afternoon, but (01:10:00) I can't swear to it. But as I said, I think so.

JG: I wanted to ask you about the role of sort of social action, and explicitly political activities because so many people had been members also of JUJ and come from a politically left-leaning environment.

CW: Yeah. So, I was not a very political person, that's one thing to say about me. And I know that the common parlance was Havurat Shalom was the spiritual *havurah*, the New York Havurah was the intellectual *havurah*, and we were the political *havurah*. But Arthur Waskow sent out enormous mailings every week — now of course he can send them on email — (01:11:00) enormous mailings every week of all the articles he thought were important. Some people read them. I threw them out. And I made him feel very bad when I said, "I just don't have the energy for all that political shit." He said, "It's not shit!" So —

JG: Do you remember, for instance, draft counseling that was done by Fabragen? Or counseling that was done for people? Just as an activity of the organization?

CW: In a word, I don't remember.

JG: Okay, that's fine. How about the big rally, the anti-war, anti-Vietnam War rally in D.C. in '71. Do you remember that?

CW: Yes, I do. And I do remember that. I remember walking around Dupont Circle the night before and seeing (01:12:00) the soldiers come in in tanks. Or maybe it wasn't tanks, but it was military vehicles. And I was with some of the people there, some Fabragen people, and they said, "All ready for tomorrow?" And they said, "Yes, we are!" The soldiers did. And that was kind of scary, seeing the soldiers coming in. I spent that day at a first aid station, which might have been at Fabragen. And I actually could have gotten in trouble for not being at work that day, because the Federal Government — I was working for the Library of Congress — had instructed everybody to be at work. But I did stay out —

JG: As an act of political protest.

CW: It was, it was. And nothing happened to me as a result. But I guess because I had been doing something neutral, like first aid.

JG: And was there any need for first aid?

CW: I don't recall. (01:13:00) Probably not much. Not where we were, anyway.

JG: And do you remember having guests from other *havurot*? From Boston and New York coming down for this at all?

CW: I don't remember. The political just wasn't the center of my life.

JG: Yeah. So I want to get to that part. So let's delve into some of the key components. I want to talk a little bit more about community, which was obviously at the heart of the endeavor. And I want you to just describe, try and paint a picture for us, of what the community was like when Fabrangen first began, in those early years. Who were the kinds of people who were involved, and how many people were we talking about? What kinds of backgrounds did they bring?

CW: Well, let's see. So I know in the very early years there were (01:14:00) must have been forty or fifty people at the big potlucks dinners with the dancing and just a couple of people in the mornings for Shabbos morning, whatever we did. Later, we would probably have, and again this may run into '74, '75, just because I don't really remember, we would have twenty or thirty people on Shabbos morning for *davening* and Torah discussion. And as I say, more women than men. We had people who were Vietnam War veterans. I dated one of them for a number of years, and his roommate was also a Vietnam War veteran. Nice Jewish boys who were lawyers. We had — we tended to have (01:15:00) mostly people with some Jewish background and inclination, not only. But people who might have gone to day school in elementary school or — and maybe, again, maybe these were the people I was more friends with. Not all of them — some people were very political. So you should not leave that out, just not me. I'm thinking about Rosalie Richman who was in Fabrangen and later was in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, you know, all this kind of stuff. People were. And — yeah, we had one person there who had been kicked out of the Yeshiva of Flatbush when she was in tenth grade. But not many people with Orthodox backgrounds. (01:16:00) In fact, she's the only one I can think of, off the top of my head. Although there were people who came through sort of later. We had a lot of speakers — Adin Steinsaltz came to talk to us. So we were seen as a — and he actually affected me very powerfully.

JG: How so?

CW: I felt that — I was a youth. I felt that after I listened to him and he talked about his path to observance, and how he was brought up secular, and then the first time he put on a *kippah* he felt it weighed tons, and all this kind of stuff. I thought, God is calling me to do this. And I said, I don't want to be called.

JG: That's how you responded?

CW: I don't want to be Orthodox, I don't want to do it. (01:17:00) And I felt God was calling me for about two weeks. And then I said, I kept saying, nope, I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it. And finally, God stopped calling. Although, Steinsaltz had said, if he had answered God's call the first time, it would have been a lot easier for him, but I decided not to. And guess what, God has never called me to be Orthodox again. [*laughs*] But I guess I felt I was somebody who could be called by God to do some things. And look, when I was in college, Kabbalah was what I was studying because I was looking for spiritual experience. And that *is* the heart of my Judaism. That is, the experience of *davening*. The experience of being in relation to a deeper ground of being. And the Fabbrangen was a place to do that. A place where that kind of thing was taken (01:18:00) very seriously, where — that was part of the deal. Trying to live in relationship to the tradition, not just halachically, but spiritually. What did it mean, what did the Torah have to say to us? What did later writings have to say to us about how we should live our lives? About what life meant? About how to structure our lives. That's what I found in Judaism, was, as Levi Strauss says, symbols that are good to think with.

JG: So you were just mentioning the spiritual dimension, and its importance for you, and the experience of *davening*. So I wanted to delve into this a little bit more. Can you give us an overview of how *Shabbat* was observed? So you said, the movement from Friday night potlucks to —

CW: Dinners in homes.

JG: Dinners in homes. (01:19:00) And then, this beginning of a more robust community *Shabbat* mornings —

CW: *Shabbat* morning. That's right.

JG: What did that morning feel like, and what was the structure of —

CW: So, it grew out of this long Torah discussion, where we simply, in the early days, went around reading the parashah and stopping —

JG: In Hebrew or in English?

CW: In English.

JG: I'm just trying to picture — you're sitting on the floor?

CW: We're sitting on the floor in a circle, and we're passing — I don't know if we all have copies of the Humash or the Tanach in English. And we're reading it, and whenever anybody has something they want to talk to, we stop and say — It's not just the person who was reading, anybody could say, "Hmm." And this is the classical *havurah* locutions, "I have problems with this." "I have problems with this," you know. (01:20:00) Why was Avraham in charge and not Sarah? I have problems with all these sacrifices. I have problems with the fact that you have legal slavery. I have problems with the sexism in this story, I have problems with the ethical implications of being charged to murder the Canaanites.

JG: Right. And what would happen, when someone raised an issue like that?

CW: We would — it would be a matter for discussion, and we would never say — this is what many people who were not in Fabrangen or similar organizations have said — "The hell with this scripture, we don't want it." We had to do something other than that. We could say, we reject this *pasuk* (01:21:00), we reject it, but the scripture as a whole — we had midrash, too.

JG: What do you mean, we had midrash?

CW: That is, we tried to understand the difficult parts by coming up with interpretations. Can I come up with any examples? All the years are all mixed up in my head. I think also later people gave *divrei torah*.

JG: But in the beginning, no, you're saying?

CW: Mmhm. that's right.

JG: It was more this more organic discussion that felt like this.

CW: [*nods*] Yeah. And it went on for hours; we often didn't finish until three in the afternoon.

JG: Was it preceded by *davening*?

CW: I don't remember when that came — I don't remember the sequence. Eventually, there was a whole structure of a service, even *Musaf*. Because I remember — I think *Musaf*. (01:22:00) Because I remember, one of the first times I led *davening*, I did a repetition of the *Musaf Amidah* as far as I can recall. [*coughs*]

JG: Want to stop for a second?

CW: So I think we had *Musaf*, though I don't remember when; the *havurah* movement in general rejected *Musaf* as calling for the return of sacrifices and something we didn't want to do.

JG: And rebuilding the temple, etc.

CW: Exactly. But in the early days it was the return of sacrifices. That was before anybody had the crazy idea to rebuild the temple on its current site. We didn't think about that so much as just animal sacrifice. There were already in those days vegetarians. (01:23:00) Quite a few of them. And so, gradually we did have a selected *Pesukei Dezimra*. We also did have readings in English.

JG: Readings of —?

CW: Whatever people — poetry, prose, things that people thought would be interesting. I remember Rob reading something from Annie Dillard.

[Brief interlude]

JG: Annie Dillard, that's interesting.

CW: That's what made me read Annie Dillard, (01:24:00) I loved it. The first one, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

JG: I love that one, too.

CW: So obviously, at certain points, different people had responsibilities, and we also started to read Torah, eventually.

JG: In the beginning no, it was just the reading the parashah in English —

CW: That's right. And gradually, we added *davening* and we added Torah reading, probably under the influence of the Ticktins. But —

JG: Who came in '73?

CW: Yes, they came in the Fall of '73. So (01:25:00) I imagine that's how it happened, but I'm not certain. Rob always wanted to have more *davening*. He was the son of a Conservative rabbi, he grew up liking *davening*, liking *chazanut* and he had the voice that had the characteristics of *chazanut* but he couldn't carry a tune, so he had that kind of timbre, but didn't have, he couldn't carry a tune.

JG: What about you? You've talked about several times how you resonated to *davening*, and you —

CW: Yes, not *chazzan*-ish. But yes, I did, I did.

JG: Did you miss it though?

CW: Probably. I was certainly among those who were happy to see it getting more and more adopted. And I did lead *davening*, although I know it was after the Ticktins came because I remember Max remarking that I had thrown a little *yom tov nusach* into my repetition of the *Amidah*. (01:26:00) I was just trying to get through it. Yeah, I also remember early on David Schneyer teaching about the *nusach* for the different services.

JG: During the service?

CW: I think it was — it probably was in our class on the siddur, but it might not have been. It wasn't during the service. And I remember it being in the house, so it was early on. So he was talking about — and he sang a little bit of the *nusach*, and then I realized what these different — I had never verbalized it to myself, what a Friday night *nusach* sounded like, what *yom tov nusach* sounded like, *Shacharit nusach*, all that kind of stuff. Obviously there were people who knew those things, and of course David has a nice voice, and he was very into, again, this was a countercultural thing, what he called "Jew-grass." Jewish Bluegrass.

JG: So he would bring that in?

CW: He had a band, he had a band! (01:27:00) I think they played on Friday nights, they played for happy — in those early days. Alan Oresky. Who were his other people? Anyway, he put out tapes. I probably still have some of them. And, you know, things like

Rocky Mountain *Shabbes*, stuff like that, which was influenced by Carlebach, influenced by bluegrass music, and had Jewish words.

JG: Do you remember other kinds of sort of — influences that people brought in, whether music or poetry, from where? That's one kind of thing I'm curious about. And the other is, other ways of sort of gaining access to spiritual experience, whether through silence, through meditation, those kinds of —

CW: There wasn't much meditation in Fabrangen that I can recall. (01:28:00) There was in the Germantown Jewish Minyan, silence and meditation. It's possible that we did have silent *Pesukei Dezimra* sometimes, but I don't recall any meditation whatsoever. I could be wrong. There were, you know, the sort of — a little modern dance, expressive dance.

JG: During services?

CW: Yeah.

JG: When would that happen?

CW: I think it might have been just when someone who was talented in that way was leading the service, she might do some. That's what I recall. It wasn't that we all did it, but that this particular woman, who was also a sign language interpreter, did some of those kinds of things. I should mention, also, Kfar Out, this is not an example. Have you heard about Kfar Out yet?

JG: No, what is it?

CW: Kfar Out was — David Schneyer (01:29:00) and George Johnson decided they would go out to the country and found a Jewish commune where we could all live holistically. They called it Kfar Out. And I can't remember how long they lived there, maybe for the summer; we all went out there. I remember the toilet got stuffed up. You know, of course Mike Tabor did this in a much more real way. Living in the country, but not as a commune, and Arthur, also, lived some of those times out in rural Maryland.

JG: In a particular place, or they each did their own thing?

CW: I think they each did their own thing. They weren't all living near each — well, Arthur and Mike Tabor were near each other. Mike Tabor had a lot of the early archives of JUJ. His house burned down, Arthur told me once. When I was trying to collect some stuff.

JG: That's a loss.

CW: Yeah. And Michael Masch said he (01:30:00) had early archives in a box that he had tied to the top of his car, he was going down to the shore, he was going to work on them, and the box blew off! So, the archives are gone; those are the early archives. Yeah, I mean, so there was also that movement typical of the times towards the rural commune, but not really very fully realized. But there was this idea that living out in the country, and on the land — you know, you could bake enormous loaves of challah. We had, of course, some vegetarian cooking. That was part of it.

JG: Any particular cookbooks? Had *Moosewood* happened yet?

CW: No, *Moosewood* and — the *Vegetarian Epicure* were the cooking bibles of the Germantown Minyan, but they weren't — I don't think they were out at this point. This was a woman who was a vegetarian, and she just taught us. (01:31:00) It was a member of the community [see addendum]. So —

JG: What about, going back to the service, do you recall any sort of experimental approaches that focused on the breath?

CW: Well, okay —

JG: Or saying some particular words?

CW: Yeah. Not much. But this is something that Arthur pointed out, that I did always, which was when I was leading *davening*, and I was holding the Torah for the Shema, as you take out the Torah. He said, and I guess he followed this, that I would make eye contact with everybody in the room before I said the Shema. That is, binding the community in this affirmation. (01:32:00) So I don't remember when Arthur began to say "YAH!" for God, but I don't think it was during the Fabrangen era. I don't think we were into that kind of stuff.

JG: Not yet, it wasn't happening yet.

CW: I mean, by the time, '75, I got to the Germantown Minyan, there were people doing Sufi dancing, there was meditation, there was — and maybe we did it at Weiss's Farm, too. I just don't remember. Although it's not on the kind of, you know, agenda I just saw in this notebook.

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JG: Did you do things like chant parts of the liturgy in English?

CW: Yes, we did do that. We did do that. And I don't remember how and when we started to do that.

JG: (01:33:00) How about *niggunim*. Were they part of —?

CW: Yes, they definitely could be. Not though in the way I think they were in Havurat Shalom.

JG: What way is that?

CW: Well, my feeling is, and I could be wrong about this because I wasn't in Havurat Shalom very often, and not until '74, I don't think. But the idea of a *niggun* as a meditative kind of way to get you in the mood for spiritual experience — I don't think we did that kind of thing in Fabrangen, although I don't think I was at all shocked by it. We did sing — I'm just trying to think. (01:34:00) We did come back from Weiss's Farm and other places knowing *niggunim*. [sings *niggun*, see addendum] and we learned it from the Boston people. I don't remember — we did, I remember using — we didn't do a whole traditional *Pesukei Dezimra*. I'm sure we picked pieces out of it and sang them. We were interested in new rituals.

JG: Such as what?

CW: Covenant ceremonies for girls. There weren't any.

JG: Meaning, at birth, when they were born? (01:35:00)

CW: Right, at birth. I remember a whole big discussion about it at Weiss's Farm, among all the East Coast *havurah* people and a few people in other places.

JG: Were there children in the community very much at that point?

CW: No. And actually, Arthur founded the heder community, which was a school, and those people actually were pretty separate from Fabrangen, although some of them started out in Fabrangen. So the kids tended to get siphoned off to this other community, which was sort of a Hebrew school.

JG: They didn't participate, those families didn't participate in these Shabbos activities?

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CW: Not as much. They did their own thing. The only kids I can remember are Jeff and Resna Hammers' kids [see addendum], as regular participants/ Rachel and — I forget what their daughter's name was, a younger daughter. Oh well. (01:36:00)

JG: How old are Arthur's kids?

CW: So I guess they did come. Arthur's kids were about three and five when it started. Did they come on Shabbos morning? I don't know, I don't think Irene came on Shabbos morning.

JG: So what brought the idea of doing a covenantal ceremony for girls?

CW: Egalitarianism. Just our commitment to egalitarianism. It wasn't, oh, we've had a daughter, what should we do? It was, how do we make Judaism more egalitarian.

JG: So that was a subject for conversation.

CW: Yeah. And in fact, the whole thing I remember the discussion at Weiss's Farm, we were hung up for a long time about having to cut something. You cut a guy —

JG: During this *b'rit* ceremony.

CW: Well, should we pierce her ear? No, that's like a slave. Should we cut a little incision over her heart? (01:37:00) You know, I mean. Who was it? And the most radical suggestion was from the Gendlers, who did have children. Everett and Mary Gendler. They said, "You should cut the hymen." Needless to say, none of these things happened. But they said — a *bris*, a circumcision, is an opening of the male organ, taking away its covering. Cutting the hymen is the equivalent.

JG: People didn't buy that — in the sense that they didn't start doing it.

CW: Well, we bought it, but none of us had little girls, and none of us were about to start doing these things.

JG: So these were somewhat theoretical general discussions.

CW: They were, yeah. I mean, there were people there from Marblehead at that retreat who had kids. And the Ticktins (01:38:00) had kids, obviously. But, you know, we wrote these things up, we talked about them, they might have been published in Response. You

know, so — but how to make Judaism egalitarian was really a concern for us at Fabringen and I guess in some ways for the wider community as well.

JG: Within Fabringen, how had women participated? Until that point — it sounded from what you said it was quite egalitarian from the get-go.

CW: Women were counted in the minyan from the get go, and those women who had skills, which were a smaller percentage than the men, could lead Torah discussions, lead *davening*, read from the Torah, when we started to do all those things. Teach classes. (01:39:00)

JG: Do you remember the first time you actually read Torah?

CW: Yeah, I do, I wrote a poem about it. Which I probably ought to be able to retrieve for you. That is, I did learn by rote to read the second day of Rosh Hashanah. And I did that early on.

JG: From a tape?

CW: From a friend who made a tape for me. And of course the Rosh Hashanah trope is different, and I still read that sometime. But the learning to actually read was — the spring of '75, I guess, and it was my Omer project for that year. So people undertook things. You know, from Pesach to Shavuot, I was going to learn to read Torah from my friend Rose Berstein. And I was going to read Torah on Shavuot at Sinai. (01:40:00)

JG: Had other women read at that point?

CW: Yeah, Rose read all the time, because she knew how to do it. But it was — and I did haftarah, because I had learned that in Hebrew School, which I think I mentioned. And I guess we did haftarahs. When we read on a regular Shabbos, we read a very small amount of the parashah. A couple of aliyahs. Or an aliyah divided into a couple aliyahs.

JG: So you learned how to read, I mean, how to *leyn*.

CW: That's right.

JG: During this period. How did you learn?

CW: Rose and I sat and we worked on it. I mean, I already knew what trope was because I learned that in Hebrew school from the *haftarah*. So it was a matter of learning the

trope. I mean, the thing is, because I know Hebrew, reading Torah is not such a big deal for me. To memorize the words is nothing. Because I understand (01:41:00) Hebrew, I know Hebrew well, I know Biblical Hebrew. And once I know what the vocalization is, it's not hard to remember, except occasionally, if there's something unusual. So in my case it was learning the trope. Which is a lot easier than having to learn the trope set to a bunch of nonsensical words.

JG: Right, right.

CW: So, I'm not a particularly musical person. So I just said, we worked on it. And she wanted to read the Ten Commandments on Shavuot, so I didn't learn that. I did the whole reading on Shavuot up until then.

JG: So what was it like for you? Do you remember doing it?

CW: Yeah, I loved it. I loved it, and I mean, I wrote the poem about it much later. But also it was about my entitlement as a woman (01:42:00) to claim authority to read from the Torah. And I wrote it as a response to a poem by Merle Feld about being a woman at Sinai. So —

JG: Was it published anywhere?

CW: A couple of places. It was published first in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, and then mine was republished in that anthology called *And All the Women Followed Her*, which was about Miriam, because my poem was about Miriam, among other things. And you can probably find it on the Internet.

JG: So, and you continued reading Torah after that?

CW: Yes, I have continued reading the rest of my life. Although I don't do it very often now. I'm just too tired to read Torah on Shabbos, so I don't do it a lot.

JG: What about bat mitzvah? Had you had a bat mitzvah when you were growing up? (01:43:00)

CW: No. That was actually, that was an important thing at Fabringen. I had a bat mitzvah when I was twenty-six. Because my shul did not have bat mitzvah when I was thirteen. The next year a rabbi with daughters came, and they immediately started having bat mitzvah, but I didn't do it then. I was already fourteen. So what I did was, I had a big

party, I had a big service, I was all dressed up. All I did was the *haftarah* though, because that was before I learned to read Torah.

JG: At Fabrangen?

CW: At Fabrangen. And I probably gave a *d'var torah*, but I don't really remember. Yeah, we were giving *divrei torah*, because I would do *T'rumah* every year. The building of the *mishkan*, and I gave it often, early on, a kabbalistic interpretation. So, but I remember that I was wearing, again, one of these long, flowy Indian print dresses, and everyone's dancing around me and draping me (01:44:00) with their tallitot as part of this. And I guess we had a big pot luck lunch afterwards, or else I had it in my apartment. I actually don't remember. But I remember the sort of ecstatic feel of it all.

JG: Yeah. Did your family come? Or was it just —

CW: Oh, yeah. I mean, for me, as for a number of people, the *havurah* movement was the substitute family, for the rejected too-American family, too-assimilated family. And these communities were for me the chosen family. But my parents came, and some cousins came. We didn't have a lot of family in Washington.

JG: Were women at that point wearing tallisim and *kippot*?

CW: [*nods*] Not everybody. Actually — it was years until I wore a *kippah*. (01:45:00) I didn't wear a *kippah* on a regular basis until 1988. And that's because when I moved to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and had to join a shul because there were no alternative minyanim there.

JG: When you became professor at Lehigh?

CW: Lehigh, yeah. At Princeton I *davened* at the Hillel, with Eddie Feld, who was also a very important person in the *havurah* movement. And all that time I had been wearing a tallis but no head covering. One of the — the most respected elder guy at Brith Sholom said to me —

JG: This is Lehigh?

CW: No, yeah, it's not in Lehigh; in Bethlehem, a Conservative shul, he said to me, "Isn't it interesting? It's true that the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is in the Torah and the mitzvah of covering the head is not in the Torah." That is, giving me the benefit of the doubt that I

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had a good reason for this. I said, “I’m not going to disrespect these people.” (01:46:00)
And I started covering my head.

JG: That’s why. Why weren’t you at that point?

CW: I don’t know. I can’t understand it, actually, because now it’s so natural to me.

JG: Right.

CW: But, as Rob Agus also said, for women, covering your hair, covering your head, was oppressive. In the context of Judaism. You know, the sheitel, the head covering, all that kind of stuff. So maybe women didn’t cotton to it as much. But there were women in Fabringen who wore *kippot*, and there were women who wore tallisim, and there were women who wore neither of those things.

JG: Were there sort of women’s tallisim around at that point or not?

CW: Yeah, there started to be. I actually got a traditional tallis and I remember I bought the first tallis, I went to the Lower East Side and I said it was for my *khosn*. I had to lie, I felt, to buy one for myself. And the guy said, (01:47:00) “Let me try it on myself so you can see what it would look like.” I couldn’t try it on, God forbid a woman should touch it. And he said, “Are you a Beis Yankiv girl?” I said, “Well, no.” He said, “And is your *khosn* religious?” I said, “Well, not so religious.” He says, “You know, a wife can be a big influence on her husband.” Anyway, several years later, I lost that tallis and I actually was relieved because I had gotten it under false pretenses. But it was — I always wanted the plain wool tallis with the black stripes, you know, although I thought it was interesting that people were making other kinds of colorful tallisim, and men wore them too, eventually. So I don’t, again.

JG: So to what extent were you and other people at Fabringen associated with sort of the nascent Jewish feminist movement? (01:48:00)

CW: We were heavily into it. I did not go to the first Jewish Women’s Conference, although some people did and came back. I went to the second conference. I was just rereading my notes from it; that was also in that notebook.

JG: Tell us again what the notebook is.

CW: So I, as I was preparing for this event, and also moving out of my house in Bethlehem, I was going over various archival materials I have, and I found a notebook

that I kept during the year of 1973-'74 which contains notes from community meetings at Fabringen, notes from planning for *havurah* retreats, the inter-*havurah* retreats, and drafts of explanatory things I wrote about Fabringen, as well as — I was studying Yiddish with Max Ticktin at that time, all my Yiddish homework. And the last section of it is a dream diary, for some reason. (01:49:00)

JG: Okay, so that's the notebook.

CW: That's the notebook. And there are some mimeograph materials. There's newsletters from Fabringen, and there are letters of planning from the planning committee for the inter-*havurah* retreat at Weiss's Farm, and other things like that. So —

JG: So we were talking about that conference, the feminist conference.

CW: So, I actually wrote a very negative set of notes about it. I said I didn't really find any people here I liked, and actually, I mean, it was way too big.

JG: It was about — it was hundreds of people.

CW: It was hundreds of people, and it was also called the First Jewish Women's and Men's Conference; it had men also.

JG: This was the first, or the second?

CW: This was the second.

JG: The second, okay.

CW: And it was — (01:50:00) I do remember that they asked me to lead a Reform service on Friday night, which I was a little reluctant about because I said I liked a more traditional service.

JG: Why did they ask you to do that?

CW: Creative liturgist, I don't know, they thought I could do something. I remember — who was it? What's her name? Oh, well.

JG: See if it comes.

CW: Anyway, a well-known Jewish feminist scholar of rabbinics who teaches at JTS, Judith Hauptman.

JG: Yes.

CW: Okay. I remember she came to my service, just to see what I would do. I guess by then I had a reputation. So, and I remember doing the beginning of the *Amidah* in English including only the matriarchs, I think, instead of the patriarchs and the matriarchs. And I remember that I gave them attributes, the only one of which I remember is the eyes of Leah. (01:51:00) And I remember Judith complimented me on it. But I didn't, I don't know, it was maybe too New York-y, it was too huge, it was a lot of people already knew each other; it was the New York scene. I apparently, I mean wrote about it more negatively than I remember it.

JG: Was there a women's group that was taking shape within Fabbrangen?

CW: Absolutely, there were two.

JS: So what were those about?

CW: They were like a CR [consciousness raising] group, I guess. We met frequently, maybe weekly, maybe monthly, can't remember. We met, there were probably about eight of us in this group. And, we talked about our lives. And that included our Jewish lives. It included, I guess, it's hard for me to remember the substance of these discussions. (01:52:00) But I remember people saying that these women's groups were the locus of a lot of the creative energy in Fabbrangen, that out of these communities of women came a lot of ideas, a lot of spiritual power, I don't know, whatever. We did stuff.

JG: Did women advocate for any kinds of changes or innovations as the result of these that you can think of?

CW: This was — there was in those days, and this certainly was important in my own scholarly life later, there was the beginning of the search for a usable past. You know. Where are our female ancestors? I remember that Esther Ticktin wrote a little essay on *tehines*. That started me on a whole scholarly career and a book that I wrote, (01:53:00) you know.

JG: Had you heard about *tehines* before?

CW: I learned about them from Esther and Max. I'm quite sure. Maybe I had read about them in *Life is With People*. And you know, there was a kind of search for what was the spiritual power, who was Bruria? It was on a very elementary level, because that was where the Women's Movement was at that time. Not just the Jewish Women's Movement, but people who were trying — it's that great women of history stage. And so, we didn't need to advocate for changes in Fabringen. We had what we needed. But we wanted to know more. And we were very — I can't remember what year Ezrat Nashim was but — (01:54:00)

JG: Seventy-one or two.

CW: I think we were very proud to hear about that. We cheered our sisters on. We felt certainly that there was a great need for change in the Jewish community at large.

JG: Would you say that issues of gender and gendered roles were on the minds of men associated with Fabringen also?

CW: Yes. Yeah.

JG: Was it the subject of community meetings, how to embody the intentions?

CW: I would say that it was more the subject of things like Torah discussions. You know, how do you cope with the sexism in the Scriptures, or in tradition.

JG: The absence of women's voices.

CW: The absence of women's voices. (01:55:00) That's right. That's what I recall.

JG: But you've also said that, nonetheless, despite the real egalitarianism that existed, at least relatively speaking in Fabringen, there still was a preponderance of male leadership, men in leadership roles.

CW: Especially at the beginning. I think there was a shift; as time went on there were more women who could do things.

JG: Do you think that was at the heart, in a sense, of what the issues were? Women not having, coming into Fabringen with the same skill sets men had?

CW: I think, well, you know — yeah, but I mean a lot of the women who came in with good skill sets, came in with them a little later.

JG: Were they younger?

CW: Maybe a little. Maybe it was just a slightly different population. (01:56:00) But —

JG: In those years women didn't typically know how to read Torah, did they?

CW: Well, I don't know. I certainly knew women who did. And, I would say, women with day school backgrounds typically did have a fair number of skills, even if they couldn't read Torah.

JG: But in this period, '73, were there many women coming from day school backgrounds?

CW: There got to be more of them as time went on, so it seems to me. I remember people coming.

JG: Would you say there was a perceptible shift that happened in the experience of worship, as women took on more roles and gained expertise and various skills?

CW: (01:58:00) It's a good question. And I don't think I know the answer, really. It's so scattered and anecdotal my thoughts about this. It was women who did the modern dance, not men. You know, it was probably women giving *divrei torah* that raised more of the issues about women. Did we use feminine God language at all in Fabrangen? I don't remember. I know that we were excited to learn about people who were doing things like that. I don't remember the years of all these things. I remember I got that experimental siddur by Maggie Wenig when she was a student at Brown. I don't remember what year that was. (01:59:00) And you know, she certainly had some — I don't recall feeling, as I was *davening*, uh, this is a women's service.

JG: When did adult b'not mitzvah become a thing, so to speak. Was it in this early period?

CW: It was, I mean, I had a bat mitzvah as I mentioned, when I was twenty-six.

JG: So, that would have been what year?

CW: Seventy-three.

JG: Okay.

CW: So, I didn't do it as something that was unheard of. I didn't think, oh, I'm going to have a bat mitzvah, nobody's ever done this before. I said, hmm, some people can have adult bat mitzvahs, I'm going to have one.

JG: But they weren't being done as a group. (02:00:00)

CW: No, they weren't a big thing at this point. And —

JG: You're saying it was more an individual deciding that she wanted to do this.

CW: That's right.

[Break]

JG: We were talking about adult bat mitzvah.

CW: Yes, right, right.

JG: And you were saying that you wanted to talk about the model of equality.

CW: What I was saying is, at that early stage, the model of equality was basically "equal access." That is, we wanted equal access to previously male roles. We wanted to be rabbis, which, you know, in '71, I don't think any place was accepting women —

JG: Well, '72, Sally Priesand was ordained.

CW: Okay, so there were, but we wanted there to be women rabbis, we wanted there (02:01:00) to be women who could lead *davening*, who could read Torah, who read the Haftarah, who took leadership synagogue roles. I think the idea of women leaders as transformative was a little later, at least, it came a little later to us, that somehow the fact that women were going to be doing these things would change the character of them.

JG: And yet, it sounds like in the course of communication that was happening naturally, and within these consciousness-raising groups, issues that did become the basis for these kinds of transformations were already surfacing. Looking at where women's voices were present or not, those kinds of things.

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CW: Right, and I did do this, as I mentioned, this creative (02:02:00) service in which I foregrounded the matriarchs, did a different kind of service. I don't remember when Larry Kushner's first feminist prayerbook came out —

JG: A little later.

CW: A little later, yeah. So, anyway.

JG: So one other thing I wanted to ask you was that, you've mentioned this a little bit, Havurat Shalom is often talked about, the service style, and Havurat Shalom as being somewhat neo-hasidic in feel. And I'm wondering to what extent that description feels apt also for Fabrangen, and to what extent ideas and practices drawn from the Jewish mystical tradition sort of were present, and consciously so.

CW: Well, okay. So I think we were proud of the fact that (02:03:00) older people would come to our service and say, this sounds just like the service of my youth, because it had a lot of mumbling in it. It didn't look like the service they had known in their childhoods in Eastern Europe, but it sounded like it.

JG: Why didn't it look like it?

CW: Because we were sitting in a circle on the floor.

JG: Something that basic.

CW: Right. And also, it was men and women together, also we were wearing hippie clothes. Cut-off jeans or dashikis or whatever. So we felt very much drawn to a kind of — as I said, the subtitle of my dissertation about the Germantown Minyan is “Ambivalence and Tradition in a *Havurah* Community,” and (02:04:00) I mean, making Judaism meaningful. But we — I think that there were some people there who had a Hasidic model. David Schneyer from his Carlebach stuff, to a certain extent Rob Agus — but it wasn't as pervasive, by any means. We might have studied some stuff about Hasidism, and I was always very interested in Kabbalah and I would bring it in, in various — if I were giving a *d'var torah* or leading something at a retreat, and people were interested in it. But it wasn't experiential Kabbalah. I mean, I had been taught, as I mentioned, about the history of Kabbalah, not about the experience of it [see addendum]. I think one of the fascinating things about Kabbalah was the (02:05:00) very different gender roles, that is, the masculine side as you may know is the sweet, gentle, kind side, and the feminine side is the evil, destructive, rageful side. So and I remember giving a presentation about this, and I remember Rob saying to me afterwards, people just thought

you made a mistake when you said that, that you meant to say, the masculine side is this. So there was interest in that stuff, but I'd say it might have been more of an intellectual interest. I don't think our services felt hasidic, but they tried to feel traditional. And they tried to feel traditional in opposition to the shuls we grew up in.

JG: Meaning?

CW: Meaning: "The congregation will rise! May the Lord bless you and keep you." Or: "*Adon Olam Asher Malach.*" [see addendum] (02:06:00) So, that's what we were opposed to. And we wanted something that was more intimate, that we felt was more authentic, that we felt was more related to a community in which you didn't need a rabbi to be a professional, all those things.

JG: Was Zalman an influence?

CW: So, Zalman — yeah, I mean, Max brought him down a couple of times. And in those days, Jewish Renewal, I mean — this is probably important someplace, although it was probably a later period. I was already doing Jewish Renewal fieldwork at the time I made this observation. But I remember, I went to one of the inter-*havurah*, the National Havurah Committee retreats at Franklin Pierce College. (02:07:00) So it's obviously relatively recent. But somebody came there who was somebody I knew from Jewish Renewal, he decided to come and teach there for a change, or whatever. So I asked him afterwards, how did he like the *havurah* experience? He said, "Oh, it seemed so un-spiritual to me." He said, "When I teach in Jewish Renewal, first, we sit in silence. Then, we sing a *niggun*. We open our hearts. Then, we study the text. Then, we process the text, we sit in silence and receive it, we sing another *niggun* to close." He says, "Here, they go into a classroom, they open a text, they study it, and they close it at the end." (02:08:00) So I mean, there is that divergence, the charismatic way of Renewal, and the more cognitive way of the *havurah* movement as it later developed. You know, and Zalman always wanted to be a rebbe, he was a rebbe. And you could say Art also, Art Green, was a rebbe. We didn't want rebbes in our community, in Fabrangen. Even Max refused to be a rebbe. If you wanted to know, because, who do you want to *pasken shayles*, if you had a halachic question. You could not say to Max, what's the halachah on this. He would refuse that role. He said, "Let me tell you what the climate of halachic opinion in the various traditions about this are (02:09:00) so you can make your own decision." Or, so the community could make a decision. In Fabrangen we were very anti-charismatic.

JG: For that reason?

CW: For what reason?

JG: Tell me why.

CW: It was our commitment to egalitarianism. You know, it was our commitment to, I guess, democracy as we saw it.

JG: Not sort of depositing all this authority within an individual.

CW: That's right. And also of course, but you get a more charismatic service if you have a rebbe. That's just anthropology.

JG: Right.

CW: You know, so —

JG: Would there have been any objection to that though?

CW: What, a more charismatic service? No, I don't think so, it just didn't happen.

JG: And it was part of this commitment to this larger principle.

CW: I don't know, not that we had, not that the services were boring. (02:10:00) You know, but they weren't usually ecstatic, after our first six months of dancing to "All Along the Watchtower." So —

JG: So, summing up this issue of prayer and liturgy and the ways the community came together in that way, would you say it evolved significantly over that first period of time, or no?

CW: Yeah. I mean, in the very beginning, we didn't have Shabbos morning *davening* at all; we had Torah discussion. And then gradually, we had *davening*, which became the focal activity of the community. That was what you did to be a member of the community was to show up on Shabbos morning. And I'm not saying, you know, it could be powerful. (02:11:00) I mean, I remember, again, the first time I led *davening* and I led the *Kedushah* and I felt this powerful antiphonal kind of thing going on, for the first time just as the *davening* leader. I remember we did *Anim Zemiros*, and I remember leading it, sort of trying to address God with raw passion. You know, I was in my twenties. [*laughs*] And thinking, all right, this is this gorgeous male God, it's got black curls, and you know, it's everything — there's this very physical description of God in *Anim Zemiros*. So, you

know, I would say, so I don't know. It's not that the services were boring, but they weren't on that hasidic model. (02:12:00)

JG: Right.

CW: I don't know, you'll have to ask some other people and they may remember it differently. You will ask them, or you have asked them.

JG: No I haven't actually; you're the first of the Fabrangen. So let's turn a little bit and focus on Fabrangen as a study and learning community, which obviously was another key component. What would you say was Fabrangen's vision for the role of learning in the community?

CW: I think to create more Jews who could do it themselves. More Jews who could take a fully egalitarian part. That is, who could create Jewish lives for themselves. This actually went on to be a much bigger part of Fabrangen after I left. You know, huge amounts of courses and things. I don't really know too much about it. But (02:13:00) we wanted to be able to give people skills and knowledge. I thought of myself as one of the educators.

JG: Was there — how did the *havurah* envision the roles of teachers and of learners and the relationship between them?

CW: Once again, very egalitarian. Just because you could teach one thing didn't mean you couldn't be a student in another class. And I did both.

JG: So, everybody basically saw themselves as both teachers and learners —

CW: Well, I don't know if everybody saw themselves as a teacher.

JG: But I mean, the teachers saw themselves as both teachers and learners.

CW: That's right.

JG: When was the peer-to-peer education model that became part of the later national *havurah* — when was the developed?

CW: Don't know. All I know, it was part of the way we thought about classes. (02:14:00)

JG: Even back then. How so?

CW: Well, as I say, in Fabringen in those early years, I taught classes and I took classes.

JG: Was there any sense of an established curriculum, or a range of particular classes that Fabringen wanted to make sure were options for people who needed to gain skills or —

CW: I don't think we thought in those terms in the early years. Maybe people did later. Except always offering Hebrew, which I think we did a fair amount.

JG: Prayer book Hebrew?

CW: It was very elementary Hebrew, whatever it was.

JG: At least someone could read, literally, the siddur.

CW: That's right. Although actually, in those days, more people could read the alphabet than can now.

JG: Interesting.

CW: Yeah. The level of knowledge of — I know (02:15:00) from the generations of teaching my students. Anyway.

JG: Your students, as a university professor, you mean.

CW: Right. There was a much higher percentage in the early days of people who actually could "read" Hebrew, that is pronounce it, than there was later.

JG: You mentioned that before Max Ticktin's arrival in '73, you were in fact the authority in the group on a variety of different Jewish texts, history, Hebrew, etc. What was it like for you to have that role?

CW: I loved it. *[laughs]* And I felt very displaced by Max.

JG: Did you?

CW: Yes, I did, I did. I remember once, I didn't say this, but once Esther was talking about how, so here this gives you some (02:16:00) additional data, she was saying, that there was greater knowledge in the community by '74 or '75. She said that was good. She said, "Do you want everybody still to be asking Max all the time?" And I didn't say, but I

thought, before Max came, I was the one they asked! Rob also was an authority figure, because he had the rabbinic background, but I probably knew more. I'm sure I knew more texts and other stuff than he did. So that's not an egalitarian feeling. [*smiles*]

JG: Those feelings, I'm sure, existed, whether they were subterranean or not. Did you use your — was your authority basically manifest in classes, or did people come to you for —

CW: People, I say, in Torah discussions people would appeal to me. What does the Hebrew mean in this text we're reading the (02:17:00) English, what does the Hebrew mean? Or do you know any good midrashim on this, or where would we find them? Or even, I don't really know. Things like that. What's the halachah on this? I'd spent all those years being Orthodox, I'd learned a lot of halachah. So I could explain that too. Jewish history.

JG: Did listening to how Max responded to these kinds of questions affect how you did?

CW: Well, I guess I was really intrigued by that which I mentioned before, which was how he would not give a halachic ruling. But I had not been in the business of giving halachic rulings.

JG: Right. You weren't a rabbi either.

CW: I wasn't a rabbi. And I also — yeah, I wasn't a rabbi. So I was fascinated by that. I was fascinated by that as a way of embodying (02:18:00) a different approach to halachah, in which it was non-authoritative and was something to be developed by the community.

JG: Turning back again to social activism and the relationship to the larger community: how did the place of political activism evolve as a focus of community concern and activity in the period after UJA funding stopped? You've already mentioned that the community turned towards more its own spiritual life.

CW: Yeah. I'm not the person to ask.

JG: But it wasn't all around you all the time, it was —

CW: Maybe it was, I just didn't pay that much attention to it; it wasn't interesting to me. That is, I shared the political views of the time, you know. I joked about (02:19:00)

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stealing books from the Library of Congress for “the movement,” whatever that was. I never actually did it. I, you know, it just wasn’t where my head was at.

JG: Right!

CW: Arthur will give you a long answer on this.

JG: I will, and Zionism. Do you have anything you want to add about Zionism? And this was the period of —

CW: Well, we were at Weiss’s Farm during the Yom Kippur War.

JG: That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you about.

CW: So I mean, that was a powerful emotional experience, and Mrs. Weiss was really distraught.

JG: There was a Mrs. Weiss?

CW: Yes, she cooked; she owned the place. And I remember her babka.

JG: Who was Mrs. Weiss? And why was she renting it out to you?

CW: I believe — all I know about it is that there were a number of these kinds of kosher Jewish (02:20:00) hotels at one time in various rural places. And this was far from a glamorous place. It’s also possible that I went to a Habonim retreat there once. I think she rented this place out to Jewish youth. It’s possible that her daughter was involved in some New York *havurah* circles. I don’t know. There was no Mr. Weiss when I knew her. And this was her business. Was renting this place out to Jewish groups. So —

JG: So you were saying?

CW: She was extraordinarily distraught. We were all distraught. And she kept saying, and she was a Holocaust survivor, Mrs. Weiss, I’m pretty sure. So she said, “It should be good (02:21:00) for all the *yiddishe kinder*” [see [addendum](#)]. You know, she was, she was really caught by this. And I remember we were all anxious. There certainly was no sentiment during the Yom Kippur War that, thank God the Arabs are striking back or something like that. There was no feeling. There may have been certain kinds of ambivalence. But at that point, you know, ‘73, was it? ‘67 to ‘73 isn’t a long time. There was no sense that the occupation was going to stay on along all this time, you know.

There was no sense of what was to come. So I think people were distraught that the opposing armies had struck on (02:22:00) Yom Kippur. And we were concerned about the Jews in Israel. So that's my recollection of the Yom Kippur War.

JG: Had you resolved your own feelings about Israel, at least at that point in time?

CW: No, it took me years. But that was really a personal thing, you know. No, it took me years. I went — maybe when I went back for an extended period of research in 1985. But by then I was already, I'd already left the — I was leaving the Zionist narrative by that point. The picture of how the state had come into existence, and the justifications for it. And I saw a lot of racism in Israeli (02:23:00) society against Arabs during the time I was there, so that was a bit of a shock. What? You gave the Arab gardener a real glass to drink out of? Didn't you have a paper cup? Yeah.

JG: The main focus of this oral history project has been on the early period of what became known as the *havurah* movement, from 1968 to '73, and in this next and concluding section of our conversation, I'd like to focus on your thoughts about how this period of really intensive involvement with Fabrangen affected other aspects of your own life moving forward, and also your reflections on its broader impact, the broader impact of the *havurah* on American Jewish life. So you were an active part of Fabrangen from its inception in 1971 until you left to do your doctorate. (02:24:00)

CW: Yes, I left at the end of the summer of '75, or sometime in the summer of '75, when I enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania. I moved to Mount Airy because I had already met people from Philadelphia at the inter-*havurah* retreats.

JG: What was in Mount Airy?

CW: And I knew that there was something called the Germantown Minyan at Germantown Jewish Centre. And they also had *havurah aleph*, *havurah bet*, and *havurah gimmel* which were groups of families at Germantown. And I knew people — I knew Michael Masch and Rachel Falkove, Mel and Shoshana Silberstein, Bob and Katie Zimring. I think those were the people I knew before I came here. And I only looked in Mount Airy as a place to live. And I guess Alan Lehmann was here. There were a bunch of people I knew from inter-*havurah* retreats (02:25:00) were here. So I moved to that neighborhood because there was a *havurah* community.

JG: How did you decide to pursue this degree? You were at Fabrangen —

CW: So, I did not really know what I was going to be doing. As I said, I waited to be, and I went — I couldn't find something and I became a librarian, and I worked for five years at the Library of Congress, cataloguing Hebrew and Yiddish books, and also Albanian but that's another story. And I had always liked folklore, and I was cataloguing Hebrew and Yiddish books but I didn't really know any Yiddish. So that year of, I guess, '73-'74, I studied (02:26:00) Yiddish with Max, but Max probably told me about, and I applied to the YIVO summer Yiddish program which was held at Columbia in those days. And I got the library to send me.

JG: So you were — What was driving your interest at that point? It was your job, in part —

CW: Well, it was — I probably had, I mentioned briefly that exhibit, "Portal to America" [see addendum] about the Lower East Side, or maybe it was "Gateway to America," I can't remember which, but I remember first of all, that it was the first counter-Zionist narrative that I met. That is, in Israel and in Zionism, the idea was that the idealistic Jews went to Palestine, and that the materialistic Jews went to the United States. And I saw this exhibit, and I learned about, (02:27:00) and I did not know about, despite my curricula on socialism at Habonim, I didn't know about the Bundists. I didn't know about the Yiddish labor movement and all that kind of stuff. And that kindled an interest in me in the Yiddish culture. I also read *Life is With People* when I was in college or graduate school, another interest in that. Another twist of fate: I won an award in Hebrew school, and they gave me a copy of *Life is With People* as my award [see addendum]. And somebody else got Glatzer's *Hammer on the Rock: A Midrash Reader*. And I think, had it been switched, I might have gotten into midrash, you never know. [laughs] But anyway, I became interested in Eastern European Jewish civilization by reading that book. Anyway, (02:28:00) or that's how I remember it, I have to check the dates on this, but in any case.

JG: So you went to YIVO, you said, to study.

CW: Yes. And I was in the second year, the second — I was in Yiddish II not Yiddish I because I'd studied with Max. And Dovid Roskies was one of my teachers. And we read some hasidic tales, and we read one of the tales of Rabbi Nachman, I think, and we read some other popular nineteenth century Yiddish literature. And Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett was teaching there, although I never met her, she was teaching an advanced course on Yiddish ethnography. But I heard about her. And so at that point, that fall, I decided I would apply to Penn, and apply to a graduate program. I came up, I talked to Barbara actually, and did it all at the last minute, (02:29:00) thereby not getting any fellowships. But I did get in, you know. And I realized about the second year of graduate

school that what I really wanted to do vocationally was study Judaism the way a folklorist studies things.

JG: Which is what?

CW: The Judaism of ordinary Jews, with some attention to aesthetic expression. So, I mean, originally I thought I was going to do my dissertation on Jewish food, and as I joked, invite all my friends to the orals. And various things happened, but in the end I decided — I got interested in *techines*, I was already interested in *techines* and Yiddish women's prayers at that stage too, but I decided to do my dissertation on the Germantown Minyan. And especially (02:30:00) with a focus on the evolution of ritual, changing ritual, what *davening* was like, what Torah study was like. And people said to me, Don't study your own community. "Why not?" I said. Well, there were good reasons, but anyway. So I don't know exactly where we were here, what's the question?

JG: How you decided to pursue this degree.

CW: So that's how I decided to pursue the degree. And I took —

JG: And how you got involved in —

CW: And I got, I was involved with the minyan right away, from the day I moved in. And secondly I guess, I took folklore courses, and I also took two courses with Art Green. One course with Art and Zalman (02:31:00) on the tales of Rabbi Nachman. And one course with Judah Goldin while I was there. So I did a kind of Jewish Studies minor. So, and Art was in the minyan at that time, and Zalman was partly in the minyan and partly doing his own thing.

JG: So overall how would you compare your experiences at Fabrangen and later at the Germantown Minyan? Can you say something about the relationship between the two as minyans and also as *havurot*? Although you said that not everybody at Germantown would necessarily see themselves as *havurah*.

CW: Yeah, because we were getting into the era of what were called, what they called, the "independent minyanim." Anyway, I was very intensely involved with the Germantown Minyan, especially since I wrote my dissertation about them. (02:32:00) So I mean, I mentioned this in my questionnaire. I found the emotional tenor of the Germantown Minyan, especially at the beginning, refreshing. There were more people across a wider range of ages; there were people with kids, and there were people, a lot of people in Philadelphia who were human services people. Social workers, teachers, they

knew how to process a meeting. At Fabrangen, we had these intense community meetings and we'd all end up crying. [*laughs*] That didn't happen in Philadelphia. I thought, oh, you can have a community meeting and not cry! Everybody expresses their own point of view and it gets heard. What did we cry about? I can't remember. But there was a (02:33:00) kind of youthful intensity about Fabrangen, probably a lot of, you could say, long sensuous hugs among the members. People in Philadelphia didn't do that, as I found when I first tried to hug Rachel Falkove the way I hugged somebody and she sort of pushed me right away. So there was a kind of — you could say a sexual tension or an erotic tension that may have underlain Fabrangen in those early years that I didn't find in Philadelphia. It was just a more mature group.

JG: And people were married or had kids.

CW: A lot of married people. A lot of married people. And through the time I was there, people got married and started families. Maybe they were doing that (02:34:00) in Fabrangen by then too, but there were some people who were just older. So — and then, of course, what became the Germantown Minyan had started a year before I arrived, in '74. It was called the Library Minyan then. They met in the library. Then it started meeting in a classroom. And what happened was that it was an enormously successful community. And in the early days, a lot of feeling of tolerance for whoever, you know, somebody wanted to lead a *davening* that was really traditional, that was great. And somebody wanted to lead something that was Sufi dancing, that was great too. The community grew by leaps and bounds. We called it the “Yerushalayim de Pennsylvania.” The — like Vilna was the “Yerushalayim de Lita.” People were flocking to the neighborhood. Seventy-five was the year Art Green moved to Mount Airy from West Philadelphia. Zalman moved in that year. There were a lot of R.R.C. [Reconstructionist Rabbinical College] students. But people came from all over. And whereas we might have had, say, twenty or thirty people coming to the minyan in 1975, we had seventy-five, eighty, ninety by 1978. And then we had — (02:36:00) which I wrote about in my dissertation, we had schisms and coming back together, and people would say at community meetings now, they cried at community meetings again. They would say, “I used to leap out of bed on Shabbos morning to come to the minyan, but now I just lie there and cry.” Somebody said to me, “You should call your dissertation ‘Paradise Lost.’”

JG: What was going on?

CW: Well, what was going on was that once you had seventy-five or eighty people, you no longer had tolerance between somebody who was going to do it full traditional *davening* and somebody wanted to do Sufi dancing. Or meditation. It's no longer, oh

yeah, that's my friend Brian Wald; he wants to meditate this morning. Great. Or, that's Bruce, I can't remember what Bruce's last name was. You know (02:37:00) him, he loves to do a traditional *davening*, okay, even though I find it a little boring, we'll do that. But we all have Shabbos dinner together, we all hang out together, we all take care of each other's kids and borrow each other's cars. Once it passed a critical mass, people began to stigmatize the groups. "Those are a bunch of ignoramuses." "Those are the drips." "What about standards?" That became a big thing. Standards. How could you have somebody who's going to lead *davening* who doesn't lead the full *davening* or doesn't want to or doesn't know how to. So over time, the group split. Came back together, it split again. And eventually — there are many intermediate communities now. There is Minyan Masorti who are the traditionalists, (02:38:00) who have a full — this is where I *daven* — there is a full traditional *davening* and a full Torah reading. No one third triennial cycle for them. No, we're going to sit and read it for an hour and a half, if that's what it takes. And there is Dorshei Derekh which is now Reconstructionist, has a lot students and faculty from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in it, as well as other people. And it has more of what we — it uses a Reconstructionist siddur, but it's more of what we used to call *havurah*-style *davening*, which is, no *Musaf*, a more participatory Torah discussion. A Torah discussion that's a discussion. At Masorti they have a *d'var torah*.

JG: And no discussion?

CW: Sometimes there's a little discussion. But discussion is no longer the heart of it. And (02:39:00) they have, I think, discussion kind of gender egalitarian rule that if a woman speaks she calls a man next, and vice versa. A procedural rule. But I haven't been up there very often. I come up sometimes at kiddush. We all circulate sometimes at kiddush to say hello to people in the other minyanim.

JG: This is all taking place in one building, you're saying?

CW: Yes, it's all in one building. They would not let P'nei Or in the Germantown Jewish Center. P'nai Or wanted to meet in the building, too. But it's because they had a rabbi, Marcia Prager. That is, they had their own rabbi. In the community, our rabbi is the community's rabbi even though he doesn't *daven* with the other minyanim usually.

JG: Which, when you say our..

CW: The Germantown Jewish Centre rabbi. (02:40:00) For a long time during this period it was Leonard Gordon, who, of course, is now in Boston. And now is Adam Zeff. And he is the rabbi of the shul. And he leads the service in the Charry Sanctuary. Although once when he had a devastating loss of somebody dying, he just came down and *davened*

quietly with us. Nobody to ask him questions, nobody to — he didn't have to be a public person. And he does come down sometimes, on second day *yom tov*, or I mean — he probably *davens* with Dorshei Derekh on occasion too. So you have the three groups. So I guess what I would say to go back to your original question is, being in the *havurah* movement has had a profound, utterly important influence on my life. I still regard myself as a *havurah* Jew as opposed to some other kind. Even during the twenty-six years I lived (02:41:00) in Bethlehem and belonged to a Conservative shul, I did not really consider myself a Conservative Jew. That the principles of egalitarianism, of do-it-yourself Judaism, that we can take responsibility for our Jewish lives, of study, are still important to me. The Judaism as — I would say that for people who come to the minyan or Dorshei Derekh regularly, I don't know about the Charry Sanctuary, Judaism is probably the single most important influence in their life, or the single most focus, the most important focus in their lives, in one way or another, whatever their careers are, whatever their family obligations are. Maybe I'm wrong. (02:42:00) But Judaism as a way of life. And look, I go to Minyan Masorti. The level of knowledge there is extremely high. There are a number of people who have rabbinical degrees who *daven* there. There are other people who are professors of Jewish studies. There are other people who may be doctors or lawyers but are, had profoundly powerful Jewish educations. So — so anyway. And I guess, you know, this is a little disjointed, but I remember once, probably in my early years in Philadelphia, I went down to visit my, it was probably in '77, '78, something like that. I went down to visit my grandparents (02:43:00) who were then living in Miami Beach. And they took me to shul, Friday night. It was an enormous shul. I said to myself as I looked around, "Holy Moses, there are more people in this shul than there are on this Friday night than there are in the entire *havurah* movement." And, to my mind, it was a horrible service. The central part of it was a young lady who was becoming bat mitzvah, and they practically put a spotlight by her. The choir began to sing, *Ofyn Pripetchik*, as she slowly walked down the aisle like a beautiful bride, and in fact that simile was evoked by the rabbi. We say, we hope she will soon be walking down the aisle as a Jewish bride — she came up, he publicly scolded her friends in the front row, by saying, (02:44:00) "Well, their parents never taught them how to behave in shul." She did the blessings before the haftarah, the first two sentences or three sentences of the haftarah, the last sentence of the haftarah, the blessings after the haftarah, this is on a Friday night. And that was it; that was her bat mitzvah. And I'm thinking, this is where the Jews are. But I do think that the *havurah* movement and similar — similar currents within American Judaism have had a profound effect. You know, later in my life I go to Reform temples where I could be at a Renewal service. You know.

JG: We were starting to talk about the way your experience in Fabrangen impacted not only your personal (02:45:00) religious life, but also your professional life. But before we get to that, I just want to get to another thing, which was we were talking about the ways

in which you continued to see yourself as a *havurah* Jew. But I'm wondering if there were any ways that you find your religious life, your inner religious life, or your outer religious life for that matter, has diverged significantly from what you consider the original *havurah* take.

CW: Well, I had come to prefer very traditional *davening*, although egalitarian. And I'd say that a sort of classic *havurah davening* has more interpretation in it than I'm interested in now. (02:46:00) That is, it has people giving *kavanot*, "our *kavanah* for this part of the service is —" whatever. Minyan Masorti doesn't do that. And I am not interested, in most cases, in anybody giving me *kavanot* for parts of the service. I'd rather do it myself.

JG: Can you say just a little more about that, because we didn't discuss that earlier.

CW: And I don't really know when that came in. I talked before about the readings. I know that actually early on in the minyans, and still in Dorshei, and in a lot of *havurah* style minyans, there still is a way in which the service is punctuated by thoughts about the meaning of the service on that particular day by the person who's leading, the *shaliach tzibur*. And that that's part of the job — I'd say that's still part of the job in Renewal, often, but also I think in (02:47:00) other *havurah*-style minyanim that people will say something before *Shacharit*: what does *Shacharit* mean today, or before a particular prayer. Give a kind of interpretation of it. And at the minyan, actually, we actually do that on the High Holidays, that somebody does give a *kavanah* for different parts of the service. That's the only time we do it. And sparingly.

JG: Are there many members of your current minyan who also have a *havurah* background, so to speak?

CW: Some members of it were members of the original Germantown Minyan. But not that many. (02:48:00) Let me not kid myself. There's actually one couple in there who were members of Fabringen.

JG: You said that the Germantown Minyan members don't necessarily consider themselves *havurah* Jews but more — independent minyanim.

CW: I think that that's right and I would say that the people who are in Dorshei Derekh also don't consider themselves *havurah* Jews, they consider themselves Reconstructionists.

JG: So what's happened there? Where's that shift come from?

CW: I think that part of the shift — I can't speak to Dorshei. Part of the shift is from community to *davening* group. That is, as people have other aspects of their lives, (02:49:00) there is still a powerful sense of community in the minyan, although it also extends to the larger shul. But people are less involved with each other outside of shul than they once were. I would say that as people have gotten older, more tired, more busy, there aren't a lot of Shabbat dinners anymore at people's houses. There are some.

JG: How does that play out in your personal life?

CW: Well, my wife is not very mobile, so if we have Shabbat dinners, we tend to have them here. And I invite people from the minyan, on occasion. (02:50:00) Mostly very old friends. And there are a few people who invite us. And there are some people who would like to invite us, but Nancy can't get up the steps.

JG: So it's in a smaller — sense.

CW: Yeah. But there isn't that sense that there was when people were young couples, and their kids were all friends. Another important aspect of Germantown Jewish Center is the early childhood program, which was created out of the minyanim as people began to have kids, and it was created as a community need, and it's been a great kind of community resource and means of connection among people who *daven* in different places, because their kids are all in the early childhood program. (02:51:00) What was the connection here — anyway. But as people's, as people who were in the original community now have grandchildren, they're just no longer in the stage of life as we all were in the late '70s the early '80s, when we were very intertwined with kids and families and all that kind of stuff [see addendum].

JG: You mentioned in your pre-interview questionnaire that sociologists of Judaism do often make distinctions between the *havurot* of the Sixties and Seventies and the independent minyanim of the Eighties that followed. What's the basis of those distinctions, and why do you, you said personally, feel like it's more of a continuum rather than two separate phases, so to speak?

CW: (02:52:00) Um —

JG: I realize I'm asking this probably in your scholarly capacity.

CW: I understand that. I guess — so partly it's a matter of my own sort of personal predilections for seeing continuity and connections. It's the way I — I'm not, even

though when the conflict broke out in the Germantown Minyan and people said to me, “A-ha, now you’ll get the really good stuff.” I thought, “Oh no, I don’t want that.” I see real continuity from the *havurot* through the independent minyanim through the current egalitarian minyanim, who are so — I mean, they’re no longer actually so current, but you know, the D.C. Minyan, all these kids in their twenties, thirties, who are so anxious to (02:53:00) disavow that they’re anything like the earlier *havurah* movement.

JG: Are they? Are they so anxious to do that?

CW: Yes, they have been.

JG: And why is that? What do they see as the big distinctions?

CW: They’re *frumer*.

JG: Yeah, that makes sense, for sure.

CW: But I don’t think they are that different, that is, sure, they’re different in certain ways. But I think the impulse to have your own *davening* organized by your own community rather than by any authorities is common across all of them, and is — anyway, to me that’s the chief aspect of continuity. That we’re not going to leave this to the professionals, (02:54:00) or to the charismatic leader, which is the difference between that and Renewal.

JG: Do you see — so you did your dissertation on the Germantown Minyan, you went on to study *techines*.

CW: That’s right.

JG: And then you also came sort of back —

CW: Back to do more ethnography.

JG: What brought you back — which feels to me like a continuity, I must say?

CW: Yeah. Well, I don’t know. To a certain extent it’s, for a while you talk to living people and there are a lot of problems with that, a lot of good things about it and a lot of problems. They can get mad at you, some of my friends stopped talking to me when I was studying the Germantown Minyan. (02:55:00)

JG: Friends within the minyan?

CW: Yeah. I can't invite you to Shabbat dinner if you're going to be analyzing it. I said, "I can't turn it off." And so then, you study dead people who can't talk back to you. And then you get an itch to study living people again. I think that also one of the things I discovered about the era of the *techines* was that it was an important era of the popularization of Kabbalah. And that —

JG: What period is it?

CW: Seventeenth, eighteenth centuries are the period I studied. The *Zohar* was translated in parts into Yiddish, a lot of this was the Sabbateans. (02:56:00) They taught women *Zohar*, there was a lot going on there in which kabbalistic ideas, to an extent, were made available to laypeople, including women. And so I think the idea I got for studying Jewish Renewal was that this is another period, now, of the popularization of Kabbalah, and that was a place to study it. It was a place where I knew people, I thought I could get access, I mean, I wasn't brave enough, as my friend and colleague, Jodie — now I can't remember her last name that's terrible — who studied the Kabbalah center in Los Angeles, and wrote a very good book about it [see [addendum](#)]. I didn't have the nerve to do that. But I thought, you know, let's see what Kabbalah is like. And when I started out studying Jewish Renewal, I got really, (02:57:00) that was what I was looking for, was how do they use Kabbalah, how do they popularize it. Later I got interested in many other aspects of it, including — and also, my respect for Jewish Renewal grew during the years I did fieldwork there. I actually kind of started out denigrating them. Partly from my *havurah* point of view. Denigrating charismatic leadership, and whatever else. But I began to see, first of all, that they attracted people who had tremendous artistic talents. That people who they attracted, it's the old sort of cognitive-intuitive divide, but they attracted people who were wonderful visual artists, dancers, storytellers. Very creative. They did foster an intense spiritual experience, (02:58:00) I had experiences at Jewish Renewal retreats I've never had any place else. As any anthropologist will tell you, if you do the techniques, they work. [laughs] After a while I was much better at setting up the barriers, but especially the first couple of years of my fieldwork, I was just blown away. I remember the first retreat I went to, Shefa Gold was leading it, and she said, "We're going to work with some altered states of consciousness." And I said to myself, "I don't believe in altered states of consciousness." But by the end of the weekend, I was in one. [laughs] So I really learned respect for that mode of being, and for its intense spirituality. Which, of course, is something that has also drawn me. But I never wanted to (02:59:00) commit myself to Renewal fulltime; I'm really too cognitive for that.

JG: Do you still consider yourself a spiritual seeker?

CW: I don't know that seeker's the right word for me. I never considered myself a spiritual seeker. I don't like that word. I consider myself someone to whom spirituality is an important mode of religious expression. Or experience. So.

JG: So you said early on that Fabrangen, when you first encountered it, seemed to embody the collective sense of excitement and creativity of a whole generation, in shaping a new form of American Judaism. And from your vantage point now, personally, professionally, (03:00:00) to what extent do you feel like it lived up to that vision?

CW: Partially. You know, I mean, the world didn't change entirely as a result of the sixties, but it did change some. [*laughs*] And I would say that many more Jewish congregations have a participatory model now than did when I was growing up. Is that because of the *havurah* movement, or did the factors that changed the congregations also produce the *havurah* movement? I can't say. Because — here's something I wrote in my questionnaire that I think again is important to mention. And that is, at least in my view, the *havurah* movement had a tremendous influence on Jewish academia. (03:01:00) And from there, it influenced others. Arnie Eisen is the head of the Jewish Theological Seminary! He was a *havurah* Jew at some point in his life. He may not consider that to be the main way he's Jewish, but it can't have not had any effect. I mean, Paula Hyman, Steve Cohen, may he live and prosper and continue to proliferate his studies. For whom I have the profoundest respect. The whole field of the sociology of Judaism, profoundly influenced by Steve and other people. Bethamie Horowitz was in the *havurah* movement, you know. So I think that, you know, even Sam Heilman who's Orthodox did a stint in the Boston *havurah* (03:02:00) at some point, early on. A lot of people who have shaped the academic discourse on Judaism and the policy discourse on Judaism have been members of, participants in, the *havurah* movement at some time in their lives.

JG: What was the importance of the *havurah* movement in the development of the discipline of Jewish Studies?

CW: I'm not quite sure how to answer that. What I'd say is — you know, I haven't thought about it. I think about the range — (03:03:00) Bob Goldenberg, and biblical and post-biblical Judaism, Gershon Hundert and Polish Judaism, Larry Fine and Kabbalah, I mean — Danny Matt. So I would say that for some people, that interest in Hasidism and Kabbalah has sent a lot of scholars into those fields. And that was primarily a Boston influence, but also you've got the literary scholars of the New York Havurah, you've got Alan Mintz, I mean. Gershon Hundert is interested in hasidic history too. Partly it's a matter of field, perhaps. There probably is something about an approach to (03:04:00) Jewish studies but I have not thought it through. Mainly, I've just thought about the

tremendous number of good people who went into Jewish Studies who were also in the *havurah* movement.

JG: And finally, I wanted to ask you about what impact you would say the evolution of Jewish feminism had on the *havurah* movement over time, but also, were there ways in which you think the *havurah* movement influenced the directions in which ideas about women's roles and places evolved.

CW: [*nods*] At the time, the feminist movement and the *havurah* movement seemed to be deeply intertwined, the Jewish feminist movement. That is, all the people I knew (03:05:00) in the Jewish feminist movement who were also in the *havurah* movement. I'm sure there were other people in the Jewish feminist movement who I didn't really know, who came at it from other, the Brooklyn Bridge Collective, or whatever. There were — you know, so there were other groups of Jewish Feminists. But I was never in *B'not Esh*. That is, I went to the first meeting in 1981 I didn't keep going. But I think that *B'not Esh* which had a lot of people from the *havurah* movement in it — should I say what *B'not Esh* is.

JG: Yes, please.

CW: It was a gathering (03:06:00) of Jewish feminists at a retreat center in Cornwall, New York. A Catholic retreat center, and I suppose they still meet there, I don't even know. Over Memorial Day weekend, which is when I suppose they still meet and which is why I never went back because we always had a family reunion on Memorial Day Weekend I didn't want to miss. Anyway, Jewish feminists who spent the time playing with feminist ideas, even crazy ideas, whatever they felt like. And I think that they brought some of that creativity back to their local communities. A great many people were in that community who were from all over the country.

CW: I guess for many years I've been sad that I never continued with it. (03:07:00) But I didn't. And not everybody in *B'not Esh* was in the *havurah* movement, but a lot of people were. So I think that that, as a powerful feminist Jewish nexus, did influence the *havurah* movement, whether it was in liturgical creativity, or other ways. And Renewal founded its own group like that called *Ahayot Or*. But I don't know very much about that.

JG: And when was that, more or less?

CW: Must be at least fifteen years ago. Maybe more.

JG: But much more recently.

CW: I don't know, actually, I have to ask.

JG: But still, more recently than B'not Esh.

CW: Than B'not Esh. It was modeled on B'not Esh in some way.

JG: Is there anything else you want to add about the impact of the *havurah* (03:08:00) on yourself personally, or on the Jewish world, or the world beyond the Jewish world?

CW: Yeah, I won't say anything about the world beyond the Jewish world. I don't think — although I do remember seeing a Catholic equivalent of *The Jewish Catalog* in the early eighties or late seventies. And, you know, also, the accusation against us *havurah* Jews was we were the “pick and choose” Jews, and I remember talking to people who said, “Oh, we're being accused of being “cafeteria Catholics.” So I don't know if it was influenced, but it was certainly part of a wider movement. A wider movement of a different approach to religious life. One in which people had (03:09:00) more internal authority, as Arnie and Steve say, the “sovereign self” came to rule. That's an influential book [see addendum]! And I don't know, I guess as a scholar, I would have to say that questions of influence are just not entirely clear to me. Influence on myself I could talk about, but societal influence — there's a whole move in American society towards a more experiential religious life. You see it in everything from evangelicals to charismatic Catholics to Chabad. So I can't say that the *havurah* movement caused these things in Judaism. (03:10:00) Other people will be quicker to say, people in Jewish Renewal are always claiming that they caused the turn towards spirituality in American Judaism. I'm not so sure. You know, that in a certain way, American Judaism has become more like the ideals that we had is certainly true, but what the reasons are I can't tell you.

JG: And that may be a good place to end. So, Chava, thank you, this has been really wonderful and a very fascinating conversation, I hope we haven't worn you out too much.

CW: That's okay, I could talk about these things forever.

JG: Well, I'm so glad and thank you so much.

CW: My pleasure. I'm looking forward to reading some of these other interviews, or hearing some of these other interviews.

JG: Both will be available.

Chava Weissler, 08/30/16

CW: I'm sure you'll get a very different picture from Arthur tomorrow.

JG: It will be very interesting!

CW: [*laughs*]

Addendum

Pg. 2: To put it more clearly, because they died when I was relatively young, and my father said kaddish for them every day, I sometimes had the opportunity to accompany him to daily services.

Pg. 7: I meant to say that, unlike most of my fellow Hebrew School students, I read and remembered the textbooks on Jewish history written by Deborah Pessen.

Pg. 7: I believe that Trudy and her husband Doug (don't know the last name) moved to Israel decades ago.

Pg. 10: Moses Ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570); next to Isaac Luria, the preeminent kabbalist of Safed. We studied Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim* (The Pomegranate Orchard). Incidentally, it was in this class that I taught myself to read Rashi script, because the edition of the book we used was printed in Rashi script.

Pg. 10: *The Eight Chapters*, by Maimonides. An ethical work; an introduction by Maimonides to *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers).

Pg. 11: That said I was a foreign student, *Mah? At Amerika 'it?*" [What? You're an American?]

Pg. 12: The West Side Minyan, founded in 1974. They were emphatically not members of the NY Havurah and regarded Minyan Mi'at as the "Jewish for a living" minyan, i.e. populated by Jewish professionals.

Pg. 13: I was referring to Beit Havurah, not the New York Havurah. Beit Havurah was a house near Canaan, CT, that members of various East Coast Havurah groups bought together, I think in 1975, and used for retreats and other purposes. It lasted until a few years ago. The Mowshowitzes were key members, also Sarina Berlow. The Mowshowitzes had the archives, as I recall.

Pg. 17: The cartoon was in "off our backs": Wikipedia: *off our backs* (often referred to as *oob*) was an American radical feminist periodical that ran from 1970 to 2008.

Pg. 17: *When the World was Whole*

Pg. 19: To clarify the chronology, I worked as a secretary at the Israeli Embassy from June 1967 until sometime in the summer of 1968, and then again for two months in the

summer of 1969 right before I went to library school in Sept. 1969. I worked in the administrative/consular office, the press office, and, in 1969, in the office of the agricultural attache. While I was there, I was well liked and socialized with the Israeli staff, so Ben-Aharon's refusal to recognize me was a real shock.

Pg. 32: The Vegetarian Epicure was published in 1972, so I imagine we did use it. Cathy Losman is the name of the woman who taught the vegetarian cooking class. I still have the recipe sheets she gave out, as well as other recipes from her. I have quite a number of recipes from Fabrangen friends, some of which I still use regularly.

Pg. 33: The niggun begins: *Hineh yamim ba'im...ve-hishlakhti ra'av ba-arets*. I sang it beginning at *Lo ra'av la-lehem ve-lo tsama le-mayim ki im li-shmoa et divrei Hashem*. "A time is coming... when I will send a hunger upon the land." Not a hunger for bread, and not a thirst for water, but rather to hear the words of God. Amos 8:11. I'm pretty sure Michael Strassfeld taught it.

Pg. 34: Jeff and Resna Hammer. Older daughter Rachael, younger daughter, I think, Tamar. Tamar was adopted. An interesting couple. Jeff was from Herkimer, NY. Resna was from a large Caribbean family. She had converted to Judaism. Jeff got more and more orthodox. He was influenced by Habad, and Resna told me she had met the Rebbe. I believe Rachael went to rabbinical school at JTS, although I don't think she is now a rabbi. Maybe a lawyer in suburban Virginia. When the kids were little I was quite friendly with the Hammers and spent a lot of time with them.

Pg. 44: It's important to emphasize how very differently Kabbalah was understood at that time. Now it is all the popular rage, and all about experience. In those days, before the popularization of Kabbalah, those of us who had studied it academically regarded it as abstruse and technical. I shared my knowledge of Kabbalah regularly at Fabrangen, but usually information based on the writings of Gershom Scholem (or other materials I had studied as an undergraduate) and always in an intellectual rather than a devotional or experiential key.

Pg. 45: "Lord of the World, who reigned..." Closing hymn of Sabbath morning service. I sang these few words in my best imitation of cantorial style. My point in these two notes is that just transcribing the words gives no sense of the nature of the synagogue style Fabrangen members opposed.

Pg. 50: She said the whole phrase in Yiddish: "far ale yidishe kinder" "for all the Jewish children." I remember having the feeling that Mrs. Weiss thought that as a group we were not sufficiently distraught.

Pg. 52: “Portal to American: The Lower East Side 1870-1925,” Exhibition. The catalog was published in 1967, and I saw the exhibition at the Smithsonian when it was new, probably in 1967.

Pg. 52: I’m amazed that I made this mistake. I received a copy of “The Prince of the Ghetto” by Maurice Samuels, a study of the Yiddish writer Y. L. Peretz. It did provoke my fascination with Yiddish culture.

Pg. 58: To bring this up to date, shortly after the interview, a whole new contingent of young couples starting families moved to the neighborhood, and began to interact the way we used to. And in Dorshei there are a number of lesbian couples with small children.

Pg. 60: Jody Myers, *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest*, Westport: Praeger, 2007.

Pg. 63: Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen. *The Jew Within*. Indiana U.P., 2000.