Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Barbara Kahn

An Interview
Conducted by
Alexandra Adelina Nita
11/21/2022

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LEOHP Interview
Interviewee: Barbara Kahn
Interviewer: Alexandra Adelina Nita
Date: November 21, 2022

Adelina Nita 00:02
Hello, and thank you for joining me. Today is November 21, 2022, and we're recording an oral history with me, Alexandra Adelina Nita talking to Barbara Kahn about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and we are both recording from beautiful New York City. Alright, to start off when and where were you born?

Barbara Kahn 00:26
Well, I was born a long time ago in Camden, New Jersey, which is, for people not familiar with it, which is just over the bridge from Center City, Philadelphia. It's about 10 minutes on the local bus.

Adelina Nita 00:40
Who did you live with as a child?

Barbara Kahn 00:45
Pardon me?

Adelina Nita 00:46
Who did you live with as a child?

Barbara Kahn 00:49
My parents and eventually, three siblings. I'm the middle daughter of three. And my brother's the youngest.

Adelina Nita 01:03
What were your– what are your parents and your siblings like? What was your relationship with them?

Barbara Kahn 01:09
Well, it was always pretty good. I mean, I'm very fortunate to have a really good relationship. And it's been sustained all these years with my siblings, we really look out for each other. We're very supportive of each other. And now they're like two more generations after us. So hopefully they are continuing that legacy that our parents left us. I remember my mother who had

Alzheimer's, my father had already passed, and my older sister does not remember this, but I remember it clearly. She turned to my sister very lucidly and said, “When I go, it's your responsibility to keep the family together.” She said that never happened. I said, “Of course it happened. I didn't dream it.” I said, “You're doing a good job. It's okay.”

Adelina Nita 02:05
Did you mention the specific city you were born in before?

Barbara Kahn 02:09
Yeah. Camden, New Jersey.

Adelina Nita 02:12
What was it like living in Camden?

Barbara Kahn 02:14
Ah, alright. Well, if it weren't so close to Philadelphia, it would be terrible, unless you talk to my older sister who lived on another planet in the same city. It was– I used to claim I was from Philadelphia. That's what I thought of Camden. It was very– well, it was almost all middle class, at least in the area that I grew up in, middle class, lower middle class. The public schools were integrated until you got into the school building. And then you were supposed to do what they called keep to your own kind. But of course, I didn't pay attention to that. And my two friends in high school, one was African American, and the other was Pentecostal. And me. So we got it from all three sides. Why are you hanging around with those white kids? Why are you hanging out with that Jew? Why are you hanging out with, you know, these two that don't accept Jesus? You know, I mean, we, but we just muddled through anyway. But I always wanted to work in theater. So there was a theater there, it was– I spent my time at the library, basically, reading about working in the theater or about theater history. So I decided that– I think I was about 10, must have been, I don't think I was older than 10 or I wouldn't have thought of something like this– that if I did something bad and I was sentenced to prison, I could do eight years. So I was going to pretend I was sentenced to live in Camden, New Jersey until I turned 18. [Laughs]– that's kind of like what was always in the back of my mind. I never told my parents or anybody but that's that's how I looked at it. I didn't quite make it. I was 17 when I just got the hell out of Camden. Of course, I didn't have anywhere to go. [Laughs]– it was the summer before I started college, and I was really just very angry. I think it was just teenage anger. And I told my parents I was leaving home. And since I gave them notice on Tuesday that I was leaving on Friday, I don't think they believed me, because I don't think kids usually gave notice when they ran away from home. But I didn't know where to go, and my sister had an apartment in Atlantic City for the summer. She was already in college and with her roommate, so I took the bus there. And I said, “I need your couch for the summer.” And I think she's snitched on me. Because my parents

showed up the following Monday, tried to make nice to me and I wasn't having any of it. You know, I got a job for the summer. But you know, we got over that.
Because I have to say, again, how fortunate I am to have been born in the family I was born into, because even the period of time, when I was going through issues with them, I never ever doubted that they had my back. If I ever needed them, they would be there. And that was always there. And it was very reassuring, even if I didn't articulate it to myself. And also my siblings, you know, and there were two more after me. And again, we're all very close now. And we, you know, we dealt with the death of both of our parents and my father first, much younger. And he was sick for a very long time. So that was difficult, it was difficult for my mother and for all of us to try to chip in, of course. I wasn't living at home then. And then after he died, my mother eventually started developing Alzheimer's. So again, that was a very difficult time for all of us siblings. And for me, because I was long distance, and I couldn't kind of chip in and help in the way that the others could who lived [note:near] or at least close enough to take care of her until she got into the nursing home. But my siblings are both– two of them are social workers, and one was a high school counselor. So they were working in their field when it came to my mother and me. But you know, we, they took care of her very well, they eventually divided up, you know, who was going to handle her finances, who was going to manage your health care, that sort of thing. And I tried to visit as much as possible. But it was very difficult. It was expensive, and it was time-consuming. And if I was in a production, it was really hard to get time off to, you know, to take that trip and stay over.

But I can tell you one story about my parents. They were not very demonstrative in front of us, you know, in terms of how they felt about each other, until my mother was in the hospital, having her gallbladder out. So I took the long distance bus and I went to visit her in the afternoon, that afternoon. And it was getting around dinner time. And she said, "You need to go get some dinner and then go back to the house and don't come back tonight". And I said, "Well, why not? Is– are you all right? Do I have to get the doctor?" She said "No". She said "But I've been in the hospital for five days and I haven't been alone with my husband yet" [Laughs]– she said, "Because people keep visiting! And I appreciate that, but when you get back to the house, will you contact anybody you think who might be visiting tonight and tell them not to come?" So if that's not a demonstration of how they felt about each other– so anyway, that's the family I grew up with, and that I'm still very close with.

Adelina Nita 08:35
Sounds like you have a really loving family. And even from a young age, you had a very strong sense of self, an idea of what you wanted to do with your life. Did you always understand yourself as a lesbian, or is that something that sort of you realized over time?

Barbara Kahn 08:51

Well, it's gonna sound really stupid because it really was stupid. But I can't compartmentalize my life. I always knew what attracted me, who attracted me, and who I had crushes on. But as a child, as an adolescent, I thought, well, that's how you feel. It's not what you do. What you do is what you see everybody else doing. You get a boyfriend. You know, you potentially get married, get married, and I had a near miss with that, fortunately. It took a long time before I suddenly went, "Stupid!" [laughs] It's the same thing just– so it wasn't that I was closeted, where I knew I was a lesbian and I shouldn't tell anybody. I just thought, you know, I'm very attracted to women and that's okay. But I thought that's as far– it was very stupid. And I probably wasted a lot of time, but it was okay. I had some good relationships with men that I realized later were not as complete as other people had. So yeah, and I did come very close to getting married until he said, "My wife will not work in the theater." I said, "Excuse me?" [laughs]– this was a Frenchman who was much older than me, so I was like in awe, I was a teenager and here I had this, you know, 31-year-old French boyfriend, who was– he worked for the French government and was stationed in New York for three years to study the American economy or something like that. And I remember we were in a taxi going down Broadway, when he said that. I said, "Well, who are you gonna marry?" I said, "It's not going to be me." [Laughs]– and we got into a huge argument, which was not the first argument that we had. And usually a couple days later he would call, but he didn't call. So I called the French American friends who had introduced me to him. And they said, "Well, he's back in France." I said, "He's what?" And he picked up and moved back to Paris. And within–they told me like, within two weeks, he was married to somebody he had just met. So that was a good escape. I did look him up later, on my first trip to Paris, and it was fine, you know, as friends. Sort of. [Laughs]– 'cause he was divorced, I didn't know that. And so that became a little bit of an issue. But you know, I clarified things.

Adelina Nita 11:59
What did the community– different communities you belonged to in Camden think about LGBT people?

Barbara Kahn 12:07
Well working in theater, that was never an issue. Especially in New York. When I was a teenager, and I was, you know, able to get into Philadelphia by myself– when I was old enough to take that 10-minute bus ride by myself, I was like, 11 or 12– I started hanging out at the theaters there. And eventually, I was in a professional workshop and everything. But again, that wasn't an issue for me. And so I wasn't even thinking about that. When I started working in theater in New York, it was predominantly gay, off-Broadway. I didn't know who the lesbians were, but I kind of suspected. So, but you know, I had my work to do. I was in a play and I worked and so on. And so it was only after I came out, and I started thinking back on things I went, "You were surrounded by people," that, you know, it was as far as my community, it was merged. And it's still somewhat merged. But the theater that produces my work in New York City is very accessible, it's always been accessible. They produced some of the very early gay and lesbian

playwrights. So I'm very honored to be part of that tradition there. But I told them to stop calling me the lesbian playwright. [Laughs]– you know, not that I minded that but it's like, you know, you don't call the other people, straight playwrights. So, you know, and it was fine. We, it worked out fine. So, you know, I'm very lucky to have a place that does my work. And they're very happy to bring in all the lesbians to come and see my work and buy tickets, which they do.

Adelina Nita 14:15
Oh, what, what's the name of the theater?

Barbara Kahn 14:18
It's the Theater for the New City. And they began in 1971, I believe. I got involved in 1992. They did the first production of mine in 1994. And they've been doing a new play every year of mine since then. So coming up next February 2023 will be my 26th full-length production there. So I don't think I would have the body of work that I have if not for them. I'm going to go back a little bit in terms of merging my two identities, my theater identity and my lesbian identity. Before I got involved there, I– I started out as an actor, and then I directed both my work and other people's work. And I didn't have a venue that I eventually got, so I was basically self-producing, or somebody else locally would do something of mine. But they were always one-off. So I decided I should write a play for myself, that has legs, they call it, you know, has potential for TV series, things like that. So I wrote this very heterosexual romantic love story. And eventually, I self-produced it, and I directed it, but somebody else played the part that I wrote for myself. But then when I finally came to my senses, and figured out my life, I wrote– I got involved with a group in Greenwich Village called Village Playwrights, which was a peer group of gay and lesbian playwrights. And I brought in a short play. And they said, "No, it's not a one act play. It's Act One, keep writing." And it turned out to be a lesbian romantic comedy, and it's been the most produced of my plays, you know, around the country, and so on.

Adelina Nita 16:27
What is it, what is it called?

Barbara Kahn 16:28
It's called *Seating and Other Arrangements*. And, you know, it's just a romantic comedy about a couple that meets, and then the ex of the older one shows up wanting to, not knowing [laughs]– that it's too late, but becomes very fond of, you know, so she figured out she was going to break up this relationship. But then she realized that it was a very nice, young woman. She didn't want to do that to her. So anyway, it's kind of like, I throw into the mix a stereotypical therapist [laughs], who speaks the jargon. And since I come from a family of social workers, that was easy to do. So she's always saying, "Well, how do you feel about that? [laughs] Tell me your feelings. What's your inner child think?" You know, that kind of thing. So again, it's a very funny play. And then, you know, I started– one of my sisters, along with being a therapist, is– worked most

of her adult life as a human rights activist. And I said to her once- it's my younger sister- I said, “I wish I could do what you do. You know, you read about some political problem, and you get angry and upset, and then you get three more political prisoners released.” I said, “I just got upset about it.” And she said, “Why should you do what I do? Do what you do best.” And that changed the whole trajectory of the plays that I write.

And I started writing plays about people, about social justice [unclear]– I don't like to give themes to them, because I write plays, not themes. But I started, I wrote a play about, that was based on her work with Amnesty International. So it wasn't about her, but it was about what I learned from her about how they operate. And that was the first play of mine that was produced at Theater for the New City and that was in 1994. And that was picked up by a festival, like 15 years after that. Somebody who had seen that production who was producing a festival asked if they could do it in the festival, because they remembered it. Which, you know –let – so I got to see what she meant by doing what you do best. And I was able to reach people beyond that first production.

But then I started doing, looking into our history, or lesbian history in particular. And I started writing plays about people whose lives had been either erased or distorted in popular culture. And that's basically what I've been writing for all these years. And I always have lesbians, lesbian characters. Sometimes it takes a lot of research to find out if this real life person really was a lesbian. So one example I can give of that is I wrote the book and lyrics for a musical about lesbian pirates. And if you Google lesbian pirates, their names come up. And they lived in 1722 I think it was, '20 or '22. So I found this book about them, contemporary book, and I read it. And then I got to the part about when the two women got together. And then came the disclaimer. "Well, when the one who was passing, took her clothes off, the other one realized that it was another woman. So they stopped having sex." And I'm like, “What, were you there? [Laughs]– I mean, how did they know this, you know, two and a half centuries later? It was ridiculous. So I threw that out, and just, you know, made sure that they consummated that relationship. [Laughs]– but I find things like that, you know, there's always a disclaimer. Another example is Amelia Earhart. Can I prove she was a lesbian? No, but I can give you plenty of indications who she hang- hung out with. There was a letter that she wrote to her husband three days before their wedding. Love was nowhere in this letter. But it said, “I just want to confirm in writing what we agreed before we go through with the wedding.” And it was things like, besides where we live together, we can each have our separate places, and we don't have to tell the other where it is. [Laughs]– you know, things like that. And then I looked up– who she was hanging out with in Greenwich Village. It was other lesbians! And Eleanor Roosevelt. And she would, she would take them out, like some nights, they would go out to the small airport in Long Island, and she would take them up for a spin in her little plane. Why was she hanging out with all the lesbians? So, things like that. And I think it's as much as these other so-called

historians try to, you know, issue that disclaimer that, you know, there's no evidence and we can't assume– well, I can assume, I think and I think it's safe to assume that.

The current play I'm working on which is going to be produced in February is another example. It takes place in 1870 in Greenwich Village, and two of the main characters are Emma Lazarus, who wrote the poem that ended up on the Statue of Liberty, who was a Sephardic Jew who grew up in the Village, and her best friend Georgina Schuyler, who was a direct descendant of Alexander Hamilton and the early Dutch settlers. If you Google each of them, neither one of them ever married, and they were close friends. Now what did they have in common? You know, the woman who grew up in the mansion with all the descendants of the Dutch settlers and Alexander Hamilton, and this young Jewish poet in Greenwich Village. Neither one of them married. Now, Emma Lazarus wrote the poem. Not planning, ever dreamed it would be on the statue, but it was written when they were raising money to pay for the pedestal when the statue was gifted. She died– I think she was 38, and Georgina Schuyler lived on, and it was like 20 or 30 years later, petitioned to have her friend Emma's poem put on the Statue of Liberty. So they had to be pretty close for, you know, for decades later for her to be pushing this remembrance of her– her best friend. So, you know, did they have sex? I don't know, you know. [laughs] But they sure as hell didn't have it with men. [Laughs]– so those are two of the characters.

And then I was looking up who else was in New York City, any other lesbians in 1870. And sure enough, there popped up Charlotte Cushman and her, the woman she called her wife, Emma Stebbins. And Charlotte Cushman, for those of you who don't know, was the most famous actress in the English-speaking stage in the mid-19th century, in both the US and in England. And Emma Stebbins was a sculptor who designed the statue Angel of the Waters in Bethesda Fountain in Central Park- it's a very famous place- and they lived in Rome except when Charlotte would go on tour. And she came to New York City to, for treatment because she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. So she was going to see a doctor in Boston. And she stopped off to see her friend Emma Lazarus. And I'm like, Whoa, wait a minute. So now these are self-identified lesbians without using that word, who are her friends besides Georgina. So I called my friend, Carolyn Gage, who lives in Maine, who's a brilliant playwright, who writes plays about lesbians and lesbians in history. And she wrote a play about Charlotte at the end of her life, and it inspired me to write a full-length play about Charlotte earlier on when she was touring in St. Louis. So I called Carolyn and I said, "What do you think?" And she said, "Charlotte and Emma would not have been friends with any other women if they weren't lesbians." I said, "Good, that's good enough for me." [Laughs]– so, you know, in the play, I don't, I don't come out and say that they were a couple. But I give as much information as I've been able to find and let people draw their own conclusions. And, you know, I'm assuming they're going to draw the same ones that I drew, unless they're totally oblivious. So. And I have a following in New York City that I'm very grateful for in the lesbian community that comes to see

my plays. So I can never stop writing lesbian characters, or they'll drum me out of the community. But I'm happy to do it. So.

Adelina Nita 26:46
I know that you founded Sisters on the Stage. How–? What–? How did that happen?

Barbara Kahn 26:55
Well, two of my friends, this was before I got involved with Theater for the New City, was around 1990. And we all worked in theater, mostly as playwrights, but you know, also as actors. And we just said, you know, there's no, there's no place for us, you know, we're knocking on doors, or we're self-producing. So we formed Sisters on Stage. And we went to The Center, The Gay Center, and they agreed to be our fiscal sponsor. And I, at that time, at least, we were the only organization or group that they ever gave status to, they gave us free space there, and so on. And for the next, I think it was four years or five years that we were in existence, we did an annual event, a weekend, that we did there, or sometimes we did it in larger, with actual theater spaces. And we would do a weekend. Saturday, we would have workshops and panels about lesbian theater. And Sunday, we would do just a whole afternoon of plays by lesbians. And we, you know, we were very careful, we– people thought, Well, wow, what a nice mix. And you know– what, we just had a cutoff point, as soon as we got enough plays, that's it. So we didn't make any effort to keep anybody out, except if they were taking too long to submit a play and they missed the deadline.

Looking back, should we have been more, made more of an effort to, to bring in more people? But we had you know, my two partners in Sisters on Stage, Janis Astor del Valle, who's Puerto Rican American, and Bev, who's white, and me. But we did bring in other people, we had, we started a mentoring program, where we each took on a beginning playwright that we mentored. And we had women of color that we did that with and so on. And so I think the short period of time that we were in existence, we did a lot of good, I think, I hope, and the only reason we stopped doing it is that individually, we were making more progress in our careers. And so, just, we had to make that choice, I guess, you know, do we do we turn down some of these other offers that we have so we can stay with Sisters on Stage, or do we, you know, continue to push our own careers and so we kind of, we never officially disbanded, but we just stopped. But we did things, like one year was devoted to lesbian musical theater. And people started laughing. Oh, yeah, right. Sure. Well, there was a lot of it.

And one of the things that we realized, that we tried to promote, is not that there weren't a lot of women playwrights, lesbian playwrights, they just did not have access. But they were there. And they were busy, and they were writing. And I think that we were responsible, at least, to correct some of that, and eventually, you know, other people came, came out, and I think with the women's movement, the gay rights movement, you know, there was more attention paid. So that–

There were, you know– if you asked, like, who influenced my work as far as lesbian playwrights, the only one who was getting produced at that time was Jane Chambers. That was it. It was Jane Chambers, who was a wonderful playwright, who, unfortunately, died young. So she doesn't have a big body of work, but it's a wonderful body of work. But there are so many others. And when we did Sisters on Stage, we discovered that there were a lot of others, and theater like Theater for the New City was always inclusive. And some of the lesbians that got their start there, well, the most significant one was María Irene Fornés. And they produced some of her really early plays, they produced the first play by Harvey Fierstein, and, you know, so they were very accessible. And they weren't afraid of being quote, "stigmatized" as a gay theater. They weren't, they're not. You know, but so I think things changed, and they changed for the good. I hope it's not being reversed now. Unfortunately, there's some indications that people are making an effort to turn back the clock. And I don't think they're going to be able to do that completely but it might be rough for a period of time, I think, at least for the rest of my lifetime. So I'm very fortunate to have a venue.

Adelina Nita 32:30
Yeah. Was your interest in, sort of, contributing to the axis of lesbian history why you got involved with the Lesbian Herstory Archives? What did your involvement look like?

Barbara Kahn 32:46
Well, before I got involved with Theater for the New City, the Archives was still on the Upper West Side in Joan Nestle's apartment. And I think it was not long before the move to Brooklyn, and she moved to Australia. But she had these events called, I think it was called, "Afternoon at the Archives." And so I, Sisters on Stage, we were asked to do an afternoon there, and we did and we performed our work, other people's work, and so on. So that was my first connection with the Archive. After they moved to Brooklyn, I did a couple of events there that I was invited to do– either my own or I did an afternoon of readings where I just performed other people's work along with some other readers. And Deb, who co-founded the Archives with Joan, comes to see my plays and has been very supportive. And I know a couple of times, we had some things for sale, and so she bought– she should wait for me after the performance– and say I bought a copy for the Archives. Like one of the examples in the play about Charlotte Cushman in St. Louis. And at that time in the mid-19th century, I guess it was the beginning of what later became like baseball cards, they would have these cards called carte de visite, and you would go to the theater and they would have these cards, these photos, like you would get a packet of photos of all of the actors and they would sign them. So we did that with our cast. And we sold them in the cafe at the theater so she bought that and it was something in another play of mine that we created a book that went with it, that she bought for the Archives. So I actually would have donated both of them, but she had already bought them.

At some point, I have to figure out how to convert a lot of my own archives, so I can donate more stuff to the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Almost everything I've done in theater, has, at least some of my plays, has been recorded, and awards that I got, different ceremonies, things like that. Everything. The Sisters on Stage, I have recordings of things that we did. But they're in old formats, and they need, they desperately need conversion before they totally disappear. And it's a very costly process and time consuming, and I don't have the money. At some point, hopefully, I could get a grant to cover that, or find a place that, you know, has the facility. My niece who works at a library in New Jersey, said well libraries have those conversion things, you should check the libraries, which I'm gonna do. So. And I have a little bit of backup on that because a few years ago, I was invited to participate in what was then called the Actors Fund Performing Arts Legacy Project. And they changed their name after 125 years to the Entertainment Community Fund. Which is fine, it's their decision, but I still call it the Actors Fund. It's easier to say. And so they have this huge website. And I was able to create, and design it the way I wanted, and so on but we got a lot of technical help, a retrospective of my career. And it's there. And, you know, being there, and I included a lot of photos, poster designs, there's a section– they also included an oral history, which they had somebody do with me, and they have a section called "highlights" where I could write articles that I wanted. So I wrote about, you know, significant people in my life and the people who have helped and that kind of thing. So that's there. And the purpose of it is for the future, for people who are either working in theater, or who are theater historians, to have a place to go, to see what was happening. And what's really nice about it is it's not Broadway-focused. Yes, there are Broadway stars, but there are also set designers and regional theater, you know, they really have expanded to really be a community archive, which I think is just wonderful. So I'm happy to represent off-Broadway, with others, of course. So that's there. But you know, I still have my personal archives, you know, and this is such a great deal so, you know, I mean, there's nobody for me to leave them to, and my family wouldn't know what to do with them. And so, you know, I'm trying before time runs out, [laughs]– to figure something out with that.

Adelina Nita 38:39
I know you mentioned before that one story you'd like to be shared in this interview in the archives was I think your coming out?

Barbara Kahn 38:51
Well, I was– like I said, I wasn't ever in. I just put it together and then, you know, the, after those first couple of plays, once I wrote the play, the Lesbian romantic comedy, I, you know, I didn't– I didn't come out to my family. Because my siblings didn't come out as straight. I just showed up with a girlfriend [laughs]– who got along with my mother, you know, they became so close. So when I ended that relationship, which I didn't early on believe was ever going to end, it deteriorated. My mother, who had early Alzheimer's, that was the one thing she wouldn't forget. Why aren't you still together? [Laughs]– can you just have dinner with her?" "No, you have

dinner with her? I don't care. You call her! It's fine." You know. So the one thing she– it took her like two years to forget, you know, to stop asking me how she was and you know, that kind of thing. So again, I wasn't out. The only one I actually, deliberately came out to was my brother. And that was necessity because one summer, I got a really good deal on an apartment for a month in this gay complex in East Hampton, New York. And I was gonna be there for a month, I was actually recovering from Epstein-Barr virus where I'd been in bed for seven months, and I thought it was a great way to do that. And so it was two bedrooms. And so, you know, I invited family, friends, I invited my partner at the time to come out there. My mother came out for one weekend, and my brother drove up to pick her up and he was in high school. And he was going to come back with his friend the next weekend. And that was the weekend that my partner was coming. So like I said, I wasn't totally out, but I wasn't in. So I said to him, when he came to pick up my mother, I said, "I need to have a talk with you, come out on the lawn. Let's sit." And I said, "You know, next weekend, my friend who's coming, is not just my friend, you know." Well, I came out to him. And I said, "I don't know your friend from high school that you're coming with. If he has a problem with that, I don't want him here." He said "Well I could still bring my dog?" I said, "Yes you can bring your dog." And that was how I came out to my brother. You know, it was not an issue for him. Nobody in my family, even my extended family. I have an uncle on my father's side, I had an uncle, you know, and he was getting off on it, I know. Because I would come to family things with my partner at the time. And he tried really hard, and he would say when I would run into him, he'd say, "How's your, your significant other?" One time I was at a family event, somewhere in the outskirts of Philadelphia, and he was there and he said, "Come talk to me." "Okay, Uncle Ben"– so we sat on the steps–inside the house, so going upstairs, right? And he said, and he's looking around like this, and he goes, "You know, in Philadelphia, they have a new kind of newspaper." I said, "Really?" He goes, "Yeah, it's alternate." I said, "Oh". He goes, "You know, the men go with the men and the women with the women." I said, "Oh, you mean Orthodox?" he goes, "No, no!" [Laughs]– and then I felt guilty for teasing him like that.

But that was my extended family, you know, who never had an issue with it, at least that they said to me. And I had two cousins, who are gay, brother and sister. And one of them, I didn't know was a lesbian. I know about her brother, because the gay grapevine between Philadelphia and New York is very active. [Laughs]– but when he came out to me, I didn't tell him I already knew. And it was at my brother's wedding. And we're in the lobby, before the ceremony, and he said, "There's something I want to tell you." Okay. And he goes, "You know, I'm gay." I said, "Oh". And he points to his sister who's like 10 feet away, looking on, and he goes "So is she", and I went, "Really?" Well. My cousin Norma had the courage to be a Freedom Rider, to be arrested in Mississippi, to be sent to one of those awful prisons during the whole Civil Rights era. And, you know, they're both bit older than I am. And she was very closeted. She was with the same woman for more than 30 years. And she honestly believed that people believed that was still her roommate. And I said to her once, at some family gathering, and my partner at the time

was off talking to somebody, and I said to her, “Where's Joan?” And she goes, “Shh!” I said, “Come on, look around. Nobody in this family has a problem with it, except you!” And that's the last family event she went to. I mean– and I don't know what caused her to have that kind of internalized homophobia. But it's really sad. Because she, like I said she had courage, but not when it came to that. And that's very sad to me. But I did Google her, she has the cutest, cutest mug shot [laughs]– online. I found it for when she was arrested in Mississippi. But, no. She had the same partner. I visited them when they were in Pennsylvania with my partner at the time. And yeah, and she really believed that the family believed that her roommate would follow her across the country when she would move. She'd give up her job and follow her roommate? No. So– but that's the only case of pretty much of coming out directly with anybody. You know, everybody else they just figured it out. Because it is what it is, you know, my nieces, my nephew. Except, I think one nephew was visiting me for a weekend. And I was with my partner at the time that I was with the longest, and he and I went to the grocery store. And on the way back, he said, “Can I ask you a question?” I think he was like 11 or 12? I said, Yeah. And he goes, “Is she like my aunt? And I said, “Yeah.” And he said, “Oh, 'cause I wasn't sure if she was like my mom's friend, or and your friend, or if she's really like my aunt.” And I said, “That's a good way to look at it.” He was happy to know that. So there's no reason to make an announcement. If I was in a different family, I might have to do that. And I know so many people who, you know, have had terrible experiences in coming out, and I feel for them. And I know people who are estranged from their families because of that. And it's tragic, really is. Somebody said recently on the news, the same person that, or the person that you're denying today is the same person that you loved yesterday. They haven't changed. And I think that's true. And my family's always been that way. I mean, my father died before I think he figured it out. But I was, I was travel– I'll just tell another story.

I was traveling in Europe, by myself, although I had friends in Paris. I got a free ticket to Madrid. And I got the flu, and I was so sick. And I thought–I couldn't transfer this ticket–and I thought I'll get over the flu, I'm never going to have a free ticket to Europe again. So I got on the Spanish charter. And I was so sick. And I finally thought this is the stupidest thing. You're gonna die in Madrid. [laughs] When you're not gonna be able to speak to anybody. So anyway, we get, arrive at Madrid, and we go through passport control and there are only four of us. Everybody else is a Spanish national, just goes through. This woman behind me said, “Are you all right?” And I went, “No, I'm really sick. And I have to go to France tomorrow. I can't even pick up my luggage.” And she said, “Well let's just get through here, I'll take care of you.” Well turn– long story short, she was a nurse in the Air Force, on leave, she was stationed in North Carolina. She was meeting her ex-lover, who was a jet mechanic stationed in Turkey. And they were going to take their leave together, rent a car and drive to Barcelona. So she's looking and she says her flight hasn't come in yet. And she said if it's alright with her, you know, we don't have definite plans. Maybe we could, we'll drive you to France tomorrow. And basically, that's what happened. So anyway, she got all her luggage, my luggage– because I couldn't lift– then she put it in the

back of a taxi and so when you get to this–, I had a reservation at a hotel overnight. She said, "Get a room for us." And so I did that. And my parents always said, you know when, anytime you're flying anywhere, call us when you arrive, just so we know that you're safe, and we can go to sleep. So I called my parents, and I didn't know my sister was there, my younger sister, and I explained to them that I got a ride to France the next day. Well, "Who's driving you to France? And I said, "Oh, well I met these women and they're in the Air Force, and I saw their leave papers"– I was lying, like making up all this stuff, right? And I find out later that after they got off the phone, my father's standing there and he goes, "You know, when I was in the service, there were women in the service and they liked other women." [Laughs]– that's as far as I got with my father. So I mean, he didn't seem, you know, concerned about it, he just was kind of puzzled, like, but I think he would have been okay, he was fine. But he, you know, he was a refugee, a child refugee. And so it always frightened him when we were traveling to Europe. So–. And I have to say my siblings and I always make the distinction between refugees, immigrants, and migrants, because they're not the same. Refugees are running for their lives. Migrants, you know, immigrants, are coming for various reasons, usually economic, and migrants are temp temporary coming, you know, to earn some money to go back home or to send back home. But now it seems all mixed up, and to be nasty words, and it's unfortunate. So.

One of the things I try to do with my plays is to write about immigrants, to write about refugees, and humanize them and personalize them. So putting it in a historical context, keeps people from thinking it's propaganda, that it's political, you know, they can make their own connection. I describe it as writing about the past, so I can hold a mirror to the present. And people can make that connection. So, and particularly with lesbians, there's a lesbian that I wrote about. And I ended up writing three plays about her, three full-length plays, as I kept getting more and more information about her. And my late friend, Steve Siegel, who was also gay, was head of the library at the 92nd Street Y, and he would help me do research. And he tracked down her great nephew in Israel, this woman that I wrote about, and he came to see the second play. And long story short, I eventually shared all of my research that Steve found that I found on my own, it was all offline. It was copies of correspondence at the public library, things like that, you know, her immigration file, which Steve found for me, which I couldn't find, because he had access as a librarian that I didn't have access to. And so I shared all of this research with a historian [note: Jonathan Ned Katz] who write– who wrote a biography about her that just came out at the end of last year. And there was a book signing. Now this woman, who called herself Eve Adams, was a Polish Jewish immigrant who ran a tea room in Greenwich Village in the 1920s. And during a very similar period as today, when there was anti, anti-gay, anti-immigrant, anti-semitism. She ended up being arrested, spent a year and a half in a women's prison what's now Roosevelt Island, and deported back to Europe. And she lived in Paris for a number of years, and ended up in World War II being deported and murdered in Auschwitz. So, we, the site of her tea room is in a building that's been landmarked and it's owned now by a man who has a restaurant there. So he let us have the lower level, which was where the tea room was, for this book signing and

gathering. And what was really wonderful was that relatives of hers who didn't know each other existed, were brought together that day. And it was such a lovely event, and I was very honored to be included. And a writer from the *New York Times* was also invited, who had written a belated obituary for her. *The New York Times* has started this project of obituaries of people who should have had them when they died, but mostly women of course, so she wrote an obituary for Eve Adams and had interviewed me for that, and so she was invited. And it was such a lovely afternoon. To see these people like, you know, talking about the ancestors they had in common, not just Eve Adams, but the others. And, you know, and I feel honored that I created that, let that happen. I made that happen. And people have gone on to write more about her. Sometimes they call me, sometimes they don't. And I think about it, and would I like to get more credit? Yeah. But my feeling about is, it was her life, it doesn't belong to me. So anybody wants my information about her? Sure, I give it to them. And, you know, why would I hoard it? There's no reason I, I've gone about as far as I can go. I shared it with a historian because I don't write biographies. And I was very happy that there was going to be one, you know, and he's done a lot of, you know, as much as you could do a book tour during the pandemic. You know, but her name is out there now. And it should be, and had she not died in Auschwitz, I think she would have been recognized for what she did in New York, the writers that she helped here, like Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin was a friend of hers. You know, she supported all these writers, but then she died.

And there's Sylvia Beach, who had this, the bookshop, Shakespeare & Company. And she's the one that became famous, and rightly so, for supporting these people at the beginning of their careers, who then became very famous. And I think Eve Adams would have had the same recognition had she lived. You know, she supported Henry Miller when he came to Paris, because his mistress's husband was paying him. You know, I mean, I don't understand his relationships, but they're, they're heterosexual relationships. [Laughs]– But when the money was late, he would ask Eve and she'd give him some money. So one of my plays is about that relationship, and there's one where Anaïs Nin has written another volume, and it's 1938 or 39. And she comes to Paris, and she wrote about this in her book, about she ran into her friend Eve Adams, and they made an appointment to meet at a cafe. And she wanted Eve to help promote her new book, because Eve was a bookseller there. And Eve said, Eve was telling her how, you know, all the Americans were leaving, because there were signs of war coming up and so on. And all of a sudden, Eve said, this– I forget which one said, you know, this woman is looking at you and, and Eve said, No, she's looking at you. At another table. And finally, Anaïs Nin looks, and she went, "Oh, now I remember her from an orgy." [Laughs]– yeah, so I mean, there's that stuff about her that you, I can't make up. But I try to write about it. [Laughs]– but that was Eve Adams, and I felt very honored to, you know, to bring her life out. Bring her out.

Adelina Nita 58:35

Your work deals so deeply with New York history. And you've been writing in New York all this time. How do you feel that the city has changed or stayed the same while you've been here?

Barbara Kahn 58:45
Well, there's a lot of gentrification going on. You know, I think change is good. Well, change is neutral, can be either good or bad. There's a lot of bad change going on, which is why I love the work of Village Preservation, because they are fighting desperately to keep our historic legacy. Tourists don't come to New York City to find the same chain stores that they have back home. You know, that kind of thing. They want to see where their ancestors lived on the Lower East Side or, you know, things like that, that they come– or they want to go to see a play or, you know, that's why they come here. And so Andrew Berman, who, who's current head of the organization, they're fighting desperately to save these historic buildings. And they write– their petitions for landmarking include, not just the architectural legacy of these buildings, but their cultural legacy. And so they do walking tours, their website, you know you can follow tours on their website, of different, you know, tours of Jewish Lower East Side, a tour of the gay village. You know, things like that, you know, lesbian and gay places and so on. And they're not always successful, because those real estate developers are relentless. And they just did something that is just dreadful, and they're being rewarded for it. Now, Greenwich Village, the whole village, is a historic landmark. So you have to get permission. So they bought this, this same developer bought these two buildings on Gay Street. One of them was the site of a very famous movie called *My Sister Eileen,* another movie called *On The Town,* you know, it has a lot of cultural significance as well as historic. So they did illegally renovations in the basement. And guess what, there's so much damage now the building can't be saved. So they petitioned for demolition, and it was granted. Why were they rewarded with this? So of course, now, they're claiming that the adjacent building also has structural damage. The damage came from them! You know, and that's an old trick that's been used that I've learned in New York City. There were two Broad– historic Broadway theaters years ago that this developer wanted to demolish. And there were protests every day. So what did he do? He waited until the middle of the night when the protesters weren't there, had the bulldozers come in, and bulldozed them. So what was his punishment? Million dollar fine, and he couldn't do real estate for a year. Well, that was penny change to him. So he had his son do the buils–do you think they didn't talk about what they were doing? You know, and they built something else there. So you know, he was rewarded.

And it's unfortunate that they look, you know, Manhattan's a small island. And, you know, they're, they keep looking for more areas to demolish and build on. Jared Kushner has set about to just demolish the Lower East Side. And he got $2 billion from the Saudis to do it, thinking they would have access to his father-in-law. You know, I mean, I don't want to get started on political stuff. [Laughs]– yes, I do. But anyway, that's– but you know, it affects, it affects our legacy, as lesbians, it affects our legacy. When these buildings are demolished, that have our history. You know, there are other buildings that they've done the same thing in the Village.

Because they can't legally demolish them unless they're not fit, you know, for people to go in, they're not safe. So they make them not safe and they say, see, you know, we, what are we going to do? So. So I try in my plays to highlight some of these places.

I wrote a play called *Where Do All the Ghosts Go?* that was set in the St. Denis the night before it was demolished. And that building, it was almost a block long. It was built as a hotel. Then it became offices. When it was a hotel nearly every celebrity who came to New York starting in 1853 stayed in that hotel. So I picked five of them, and made them the ghosts in the hotel, and who discover in the play that the building is going to be demolished. And they don't know where they're gonna go. So the lesbian couple helps them figure it out. [laughs] So there's five of them, there's Sarah Bernhardt, Buffalo Bill Cody, who stayed there when his Wild West show was on, Marcel Duchamp, who had his artist studio there, Elizabeth Keckley, who was an African-American woman who was a friend of Mrs. Lincoln. And after the assassination, when Mrs. Lincoln came to New York, to try to sell some things because they were withholding a pension from her, Congress. But she didn't want to use her real name. So she went to register in this hotel. And they wouldn't give her friend, Elizabeth Keckley [note: who was African American], a room. And she insisted, and they said, Well, she could stay in the attic. And Mrs. Lincoln said, "Well, if it's good enough for her, it's good enough for me." And the two of them stayed in the attic. And Elizabeth Keckley wrote a memoir, and one of the chapters was about what happened at that hotel. So you know, it had a big history and it's gone. So, you know, besides the Village Preservation, and me, who's going to know that history? You know, so I wrote about it. So, you know, that's my attachment to New York, it's that when I moved here it was like coming home. And I never got homesick for Camden, New Jersey, ever. I missed my family. Sure. But they moved out of Camden after I left to one of the suburbs.

But, you know, I remember once, my sister and brother-in-law, we were driving from Philadelphia, to their house in the suburbs. And my sister said, "Oh, do you want to go drive back and see the old neighborhood?" And I said, "No." She said, "Are you sure?" I said, "No, I have no desire to see it." [Laughs]– and she said, "Well, I do." We drove past it. I had no emotional attachment to it at all. But I have it to New York. I visited New York twice before I moved here. And both times, I felt like I was coming home. The only other place I ever felt like that, that I've ever been homesick for, is Paris. And at some point in my life, I thought about moving there. But I could never be able to– you know, I couldn't get a permit to work there. So I was trying to work it out with a friend of mine who lived there who worked in theater where I could get a waiver, but then she got pregnant. And you know, it just– we had long talks about it when I would visit and then it just petered out. So and then, you know, my mother was getting sick. And I thought, well, I'm not going to move so far away. You know, it's one thing to be in a long distance bus for an hour and a half or two hours. But it's another if I have to fly back. So that ended that dream. But you know, that's how I've always felt about New York. Still feel about it. So I don't always set plays here. But in recent years, I've tried to, as much as possible. But I've

set plays, I set plays in Wyoming. Have I ever been to Wyoming? No. How could you set a play there? Well, it's called research. I set a, you know, set plays in Paris. And once we were in France, I was with my sister and brother-in-law who's French, right. And we visited his family in Provence, and then we were driving up to Paris. And they were going to surprise me to visit, to take a detour and visit the estate of George Sand– and I had co-authored a play about George Sand, the 19th century author. And we get to the estate and we're taking this tour through and she had a puppet theater in her house there, which is still there. And I'd already had the production. And my mother's looking and she said, "That's just like in your play, isn't it?" And I said, "Mom, it's called research." [laughs] Yeah, so. But those are the only places that I had a connection to. Wyoming. I wanted to write a play about immigrants from Eastern Europe who didn't end up working in the garment district in New York City. And I wanted to write about women who immigrated alone. Because all the stories were about, you know, couples coming, families coming, families being reunited like my family. But what about the women who came by themselves? And they did come by themselves in the late 19th century, in the early 20th century. So of course, they were lesbian in my play. [Laughs]– and then I thought, "Well, where did they go after New York?" And a friend of mine had seen an exhibit in the Smithsonian and brought me the pamphlet, and it was called *Jews in Wyoming*. And it was put together by a photographer who grew up in Wyoming who was Jewish. So I contacted her, she lives in LA. And I started exploring how would they end up in Wyoming? And I set the play there in the 1920s. And that's how my two immigrants came over alone and met in New York, the two women ended up in Wyoming. So. And I love finding things out, you know, and I figure, if I go, Wow! then the audience will. So I need to write about that, or I have to include that.

Adelina Nita 1:11:06
Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about or bring up that we haven't gone over yet?

Barbara Kahn 1:11:14
Well we've pretty much focused on what I wanted to talk about today, which is kind of merging my theater identity and my lesbian identity and making them the same, which they are. And you know, people can Google me, Barbara Kahn playwright. And there's plenty of stuff you can find. And do look me up. Come to see my work if you haven't already, if you have already, thank you so much, it means a lot to me. And I'm so grateful to Crystal Field and Theater for the New City for giving me a home, and I want to give a special shout out to them. You know, I don't think I would have the body of work, I don't think I would have had the freedom to write whatever I want to write about, without having it be checked. My first play that I co-authored, was done at La MaMa. Produced by Ellen Stewart. So you know, that was a big step for me, I had performed as an actor there. But then I moved on, you know, when I got the opportunity at Theater for the New City, I'm taking advantage of it, that's for sure. And we are a family, there are those of us who've stayed there and continued to work there. Some people have moved on, you know, like Harvey Fierstein. And Sam Shepard got a Pulitzer Prize for his play that was commissioned by

Theater for the New City. [redacted] You know, so they've been a big, big supporter of our community. And it's my New York City family. So it's probably where I'm going to be on Thanksgiving for dinner there. Since I'm still not traveling safely, I don't care what they say about you don't need masks and things. You know, I've been careful for the last two and a half years of the pandemic, I don't want to blow it. Finally, even though people say, well you're not going to get as sick as you would then. But I don't want to get sick at all. And so I'm being very careful. But anyway, I appreciate this opportunity very much, of sharing some of my life with the Archives and with the people who will hopefully find it in the future, or the present. So I think that– I've talked a lot, [laughs]– I don't, you know, socially I'm like, but you know, talk about my work? Yeah, fine. I can go, you've realized how much I can talk about that, about myself. So I thank you for the opportunity. I thank you for doing it and giving me the permission to be so long-winded.

Adelina Nita 1:14:33
Thank you. Thank you so much for being here and sharing all of that and I know that everyone here and in the future will be very grateful to know that.

Barbara Kahn 1:14:45
Well, thank you very much. I think technically we survived. As [unclear] I told you I created a mini studio just in a very corner of my studio apartment.

Adelina Nita 1:14:59
Yeah. Let me stop– is it alright if I stop the recording?

Barbara Kahn 1:15:04
Sure.