Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Evelyn Beck

An Interview
Conducted by
Batya Weinbaum
1/25/2023

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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LEOHP Interview
Interviewee: Evelyn Beck
Interviewer: Batya Weinbaum
Date: 1/25/2023

Batya Weinbaum 0:02
Okay. All right now I'm gonna start.. Okay. Alright, This is January 25, 2023. I'm in St. Petersburg, Florida. This is Batya Weinbaum. I'll be interviewing Evi Beck and she's in Washington, DC. This interview is being conducted for the Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project for the Lesbian Herstory Archives. So, Evi, thank you so much for consenting to this interview. What connection do you have to the Lesbian Herstory Archives? Let's just start with that.

Evi Beck 0:41
Okay, and I should say, for the record, my name officially is Evelyn Torton Beck, widely known as Evi. So just for the record. Well, my connection to the Lesbian Herstory Archives goes back—waaay back to its foundation. I came out in the early seventies, and, of course, immediately subscribed to the Archives, to the newsletter, and actually visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives when Joan—it was still in Joan Nestle's apartment—when she and Deb first started the Archives. I have some pictures somewhere of the corridors lined with books. It was just a wonderful, empowering moment, an exciting and thrilling moment that this existed, even though it looked very far from what you would imagine an official archive might be.

Batya Weinbaum 1:42
That's wonderful. Okay, so now we've got your connection to the Archive. Thank you. Can you tell us where you were born, when, and why that's important to the interview.

Evi Beck 1:54
Okay, Well, I was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1933. So just last week, not even a week ago, I had my 90th birthday. Where I was born, and when, is extremely important because anyone who knows history will recognize that 1933 is the year that Hitler came to power. Although I lived a few years not directly under the Nazis, I believe that there was a worry about the coming war and the coming destruction of the Jews, even while I was very young. But, when in 1938, I was five years old, when there was the Anschluss—that is, the Nazis marched into Austria and the next day —I can remember looking out my windows and seeing Nazis marching in the street. That very either day or a day after, my father was arrested when two Nazis came into our home and just literally took him away. (note:I was there when it happened.) It was pretty traumatic. I mean, obviously.

So I lived under the Nazis for a whole year when he was taken to the concentration camps (note:first to) Dachau and (note: then) Buchenwald. I was living with my mother and a younger brother, and my mother's mother, who was really my other mother. She was very close to me. We were evicted from our apartment and sent to a ghetto in the city of Vienna. My father's business—he had a very small business. He had been born in Poland and came to Vienna. My mother was actually born in Vienna and grew up with a lot of antisemitism. So she had married him and he had a small business, and that was confiscated. So we really were on our own, except

that my father had a business partner who wasn't Jewish. He was Dutch, and he helped us out, I believe; otherwise, I don't know what we would have done.

Then in the mysteries of the Holocaust, after a year of being incarcerated, my father was released without notice to us. He just reappeared one day. Although, for that entire year my mother took me to the Nazi's headquarters to try to see if she could get him out. I believe she must have brought small amounts of money. That's what the Nazis did. They collected money from people on the hopes—keeping alive the hopes that their loved ones would return. Most of them did not, but for some lucky reason I think they really didn't know what to do with all the prisoners yet. This was between 1938 and '39.

So they released him, and he was sent back to us. And he was actually rearrested because he refused to—he was supposed to leave the country immediately. They were at that time just trying to get rid of Jews. They were not yet murdering them, unless they killed them when they were in the camps because somebody said something wrong or didn't obey orders. So he was supposed to leave the country, but he did not. So he was rearrested because he wanted to stay and protect us. After he was rearrested, and he begged them to let him out, he actually did flee to Milano, Italy, and my mother, my brother, and I were able to follow him. I have no idea how it is that we were able to get out of Austria because when I saw pictures at the Holocaust Museum of what it was like in 1939, no one was being allowed to leave.

So we just got out on a train. We had to leave my grandmother behind. I never saw her again because she was sent to Auschwitz. We lived in Italy for a year. Then, eventually, my father found some distant relatives who were living in the United States with some of her sons, who were rich, they certainly had enough money to bring us, or they sponsored us. That's how we got to the United States. These two men owned a fur factory, and my father worked for them for the rest of his life. My father I think was about 50, close to 50 at the time [note:46]. My mother was only in her thirties at that time [note: ten years younger]. So that's why it's important where and when I was born.

Batya Weinbaum 7:00
So I think—[crosstalk]

Evi Beck 7:01
—[crosstalk] when I was born, has influenced the rest of my activism. I'll say that at the start, and then we'll probably close with it, too.

Batya Weinbaum 7:10
Okay. What a story. I'm so glad you got out. Really.

Evi Beck 7:16
Me too. [redacted].

Batya Weinbaum 7:17
Can you tell us any groups that you were active in? I think you mentioned some [crosstalk]

Evi Beck 7:27
—[crosstalk] Well, when I came to this country, I was very bereft. I was really—my mother was having a nervous breakdown because she had lost her mother, or she didn't know it right away—and so what saved my life in my early years was a Jewish youth group. This was before there was such a thing as Israel; Palestine was still Palestine. But there was—because of the Holocaust, especially, the attempt to create a safe place for Jews. So I was in a Jewish Marxist youth group that really focused on collectivity, on working for a utopian world.

I mean, in those years, we really believed that Israel was going to become a kind of a utopia where everyone shared everything, where men and women were equal, and where Jews would be safe. [Note: It would be a safe space for everyone.] We were young children, so what we did was perhaps collect money for the Jewish National Fund to buy land. But because we were children, we never thought about who else might already be living there whose land was being bought or how. But we danced, [note: for hours and hours, in celebration of being alive.]We [note: also] did a lot of sports. We did a lot of farming work. We were training to become farmers and pioneers. That sense of community and a sense of belonging, and of being safe, really, I think saved me psychologically. I think it also laid the foundation for my feminism because feminism re-awoke those utopian goals to create a new world.

Batya Weinbaum 9:00
And dance became important to you through those groups also?

Evi Beck 9:07
What became important to me?

Batya Weinbaum 9:08
Dance.

Evi Beck 9:09
[Note Absolutely] Yes, very much so because we did Israeli dancing and dancing from— folk dancing from the Balkans, and so we would dance all night. I think dance is an incredible builder of community and a raiser of spirits and is a very healing kind of [note: activity] thing. So yes, dance was very important. And in my older age, now, it's become important again. We'll come to that later, I suppose.

Batya Weinbaum 9:41
And you said you went to a Yiddish-speaking socialist school in Brooklyn. So you know Yiddish?

Evi Beck 9:47
Yes, I do. My father—you know, when we came to this country our family was quite discombobulated. I think my father was a fairly traditional Jew. I have no idea if he was really religious, but he would have liked to—he believed in synagogue, and he had a beautiful singing voice, so he would often sing, both in synagogue and at home and at [note: fur union] events. [Note: He became a furrier in this country and worked his entire life for the relatives who had granted us an affidavit and saved our lives, as Italy stopped protecting Jews after we left.] So he

tried to keep us being Jewish because after the war it was really hard to figure out what that even meant, given that we were slated for annihilation. So he first sent me to a Hebrew school, which [note: I found] was horrible, because all they did—these were old, well I don't know if they were old men, they seemed old to me—all they did was teach us prayers, which had no meaning to me. I quit very shortly thereafter. Girls were not given Bat Mitzvahs, so I didn't have any real reason to stay.

But then he found for me—he was determined to keep me Jewish—a Yiddish school, Sholem Aleichem Folk Shule, which was socialist, which again had all these utopian visions. It had a woman teacher who was just wonderful, and I learned Yiddish, and I also learned about Yiddish literature. I learned to write Yiddish. I learned to speak Yiddish. I wrote essays in Yiddish, some of which I have somewhere around: "Why I Want to go to Palestine."

So, it was again, a very healing process and, of course, stood me in very good stead because my first dissertation was: The Impact of Yiddish Theatre on the Work of Franz Kafka. It was my first book. So I revived the Yiddish [note: I had learned as a child], and Yiddish also has been very important in the lesbian community. For some reason, lesbians have been in the forefront [note: of its current revival, finding Yiddish poets, translating their work.] Lesbian poets like Irena Klepfisz have been in the forefront of reviving Yiddish and of claiming it as a language [note: and using it in her own writing]. It is, of course, a woman's language because in the old country it was for women and uneducated men. So even though—the male Yiddish writers who first wrote [note: in Yiddish in the old country] wrote using sometimes women's names because Hebrew was supposed to be the language for men and for more serious, scholarly and holy work. [Note: Yiddish was the vernacular and used by men only in the home. It was the woman's language, and often denigrated, not even considered a language till the early years of the 20th century.]

Batya Weinbaum 12:20
So since you mentioned men, you did marry a man once didn't you? [crosstalk] We know you as a lesbian, but you had a man in your life at one point.

Evi Beck 12:28
Yes, I was going to say that [note: since I was very young],I knew I loved women, and women as Virginia Woolf said, "women alone stir my imagination." When I was young, my teachers saved my life. I had crushes on every single one of my [note: women teachers] They supported me, both as a young woman but also as an intellect and as a writer. So I knew that I was very drawn to women. I was sexually very naive, so it wasn't feeling sexual at the time, but deeply emotional. But then when I got to be a bit of a teenager, turned out my best friend was lesbian—but she was not [note: sexual] with me lesbian, we were just very close—but I was having these feelings, such strong feelings for women, I decided I must be lesbian. So I looked it up, went to the library, and found out that if you were lesbian, you were crazy, or sick, or you know something was really wrong with you. And I didn't think there was anything really wrong with me. So I decided I wasn't lesbian.

As I used to tell my students when I was teaching Women's Studies and Lesbian Studies, in that time of deep homophobia—I mean, it's hard to even remember how deep it was, and how

unspeakable the word lesbian was—I used to make my students in Women's Studies say the word "lesbians" for homework out in their world, so that they could get it across their lips. So during that time, [note: in the early seventies], I used to say anyone who had lesbian feelings but was on the spectrum [note: of sexuality] and could be with a man would choose that—because [note: of homophobia, but] you know, there were some who couldn't. I clearly [note: am drawn to women, but] [redacted] [note: sex wasn't my main problem with men, although sex was much much much more satisfying with women, and] my emotions are lesbian for sure. And I still call myself a lesbian to this day, and never will call myself anything else.

I did marry a man. I did not have trouble sexually. That's why I said the sexual part is only one part of the whole [note: of] being lesbian. It's an important part [note: an essential part]. But I was able to be sexual with a man. I married him. I continue to have my strongest connections with women, [note: always] though. I think that we—he and I—had a [note: reasonably] good [note: marriage for that time–I married in the fifties, when I was only 21]. {note: But we always] fought a lot [note: and I don't think he ever understood who I was]. We had two children, one of whom is a lesbian, which I will get to, but the other is a boy. He's not—he's straight, but very supportive [note: and always has been both of me and my daughter who came out ahead of me]. .

I stayed married until the women's movement. The women's movement saved me. Because, as I just said, I used to check up to make sure I wasn't a lesbian, or to see if I was. During the women's movement it became possible to become lesbian and not feel you were crazy because that was part of our reclaiming and reframing of what it meant to be a woman, and reclaiming lesbian lives for our history, both women's history and herstory. So I allowed myself to fall in love with a woman. I actually had divorced before this happened because during feminism, I became a very strong feminist. The man I was married to was a good socialist, a good lefty, but he could not accept the fact that my life and my desires and hopes would be equal to his.

Batya Weinbaum 16:13
So you became a feminist before you became a lesbian? Where were you when you became a feminist?

Evi Beck 16:19
Well, I was already teaching, I think, feminism. Well, I was in Europe in the late sixties, when the earliest feminists—I was in Europe finishing my dissertation because I was a late bloomer in that sense, it took me ten years to get my first doctorate. But I came back to the United States. After I finished my doctorate and it became a book almost immediately, I couldn't get a job. So by the time I was 40, I had gotten my first job at the University of Wisconsin, and I should say for the record, I wasn't out yet. But I had to fight to get that job. I couldn't afford a lawyer. But I fought my way in because I was rejected [note: for a job that had opened—with a book on Kafka—for a young man who didn't even have a doctorate yet and was going to be writing on Kafka. So I got my job at the University of Wisconsin [note: in 1972]

I was not—feminism then was just really beginning to be strong. My job was in 1972. I became feminist as soon as I heard about it, I think. I remember the first issue of Ms. Magazine. I devoured it and immediately began working toward creating Women's Studies at the university as soon as it was possible. But my marriage dissolved as soon as I got a job. I began very

soon—my husband had been supportive so long as I was working on my dissertation. As soon as I became strong and had an equal job, even though I didn't have tenure, he left the country, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief and then worked with women and feminist work. So by the time I actually came out, I was either divorced or it was in process; I was no longer married.

Batya Weinbaum 18:34
What kind of support did you get for the fight with the guy who got the job over you without a book and without a PhD?

Evi Beck 18:40
Well I had some support. I had support from the only woman in my department who had become an administrator at the university, Cyrena Pondrum, a quite brilliant scholar. [Note: She had also been my advisor for my dissertation. Without her I would probably never have gotten my Ph.D, since the men had no interest in an "older" woman.] But I don't know, I wish she would have called herself a feminist. She wasn't a feminist like I became a grassroots feminist. But she definitely was in the administration and when she heard what happened, she said to me, "Evi, you should ask to have a panel of people constituted at the university to look at your case." So that's what I did because I didn't have money to hire a lawyer or anything like that. They constituted a panel of men, all men, and can you believe they found in my favor?

Batya Weinbaum 19:33
That's amazing.

Evi Beck 19:34
Yeah, it really is. It's like unbelievable, but it happened. And it stood me in good stead because I think the people, the men in my different departments [Note: I ended up in Comparative Literature, German, and eventually also Women' studies once we created it. They] were a little afraid of me after that. You know, I had really pushed for myself. So I did have a woman who supported me. Without her, I would never even have thought of doing it, let alone know how to do it.

Batya Weinbaum 20:00
And was your husband an academic also?

Evi Beck 20:03
Yes, he was a mathematician. He was at the same university.

Batya Weinbaum 20:07
Okay, this was all at University of Wisconsin.

Evi Beck 20:09
Yeah. in Madison, Wisconsin.

Batya Weinbaum 20:11
Madison. Okay. So she was your advisor, this woman?

Evi Beck 20:19
Yes, she had been my advisor. I should say she also saved my career because the men in my department, knowing I was a faculty wife, they somehow—one of them said to me, "Oh, I thought you were just doing this for a hobby." They did not take me very seriously. So she really helped me find the dissertation topic [note: and supported me throughout.]

She introduced me to Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose work I translated later on. I didn't yet—that was slightly before feminism—when then afterwards, I realized what a sexist he was, I wrote about that. But yeah, so women have been extremely important. She was not a lesbian, but she was very supportive and might have been a lesbian in another life. So I was in the feminist movement, and there was so much focus on the acceptance of lesbians because lesbians were not accepted by feminists. You know, you remember that, even at the National Women's Studies Association. So it would became possible to be a lesbian, and I allowed those feelings to come forward.

I fell in love with a wonderful woman named Susan Lanser. She's now, well, a retired professor. [Note: We met in Madison, but then] she was first [note: a professor] at [note: the University of] Georgetown, then at Maryland, and then at Brandeis, and she wrote a wonderful book about re-gendering history and really looking at the sexuality, *The Sexuality of History,* she called it [note: Modernity and the Sapphic]. So it's [redacted] We were together for ten years [note: and we worked together developing] then Women's Studies [note: courses] developed. I was very active. I was one of the founding members of the National Women's Studies Association. [Note:With others], I founded the Jewish Caucus. I also [note: was one of the] founders of the Lesbian Caucus, and through all of this activism—I founded Lesbian Studies at Wisconsin—I [note:included lesbian materials and] brought lesbians into all of my courses, even before I came out, but once I came out, I really more fully worked toward creating Lesbian Studies.

In the National Women's Studies Association, where I was very active, I was on the council, and I think I should report how *Nice Jewish Girls* [correction: :*A Lesbian Anthology*] which was the book that probably means the most to me of anything I have ever written, and it's probably made the most impact in the world at large. So I will just say a little bit about that. Having become an active lesbian feminist, I did a lot of talking about lesbianism to different groups. And then living in Wisconsin, discovered that there were many lesbians who were feminist but who really had grown up with antisemitism and had never done any work on that. And I talked to Jewish groups, and discovered that they were incredibly homophobic just like the rest of the world. So I began bringing these issues to the National Women's Studies Association. When we had founded the Association, we had put in the preamble we are against—and we had a whole list of things: sexism, racism, homophobia, looksism, geography—we had not included antisemitism because at that time it [note: had not come into our consciousness and] wast[note: therefore] not a big issue.

Batya Weinbaum 24:10
At that time, was this in the seventies, you're talking?

Evi Beck 24:12

Yeah, it was '77 was the first meeting. And I was on the committee that even drafted that founding statement because it just was not in our consciousness at the time. The issues of difference in diversity and especially Jewish issues did not come up until a bit later in our consciousness. I think doing this work—speaking out for lesbians made me then more aware of the antisemitism or the ignorance about being Jewish among lesbians. I think that made us—and then even feminists discovered antisemitism and ignorance within feminists who were not lesbians. So I think there was—and don't forget that was the time of identity politics being so important that each of us, finding out who we were, as women, we had a great deal in common. But we also had many differences. And you know, racism, obviously from the beginning was a very strong issue. But these other issues also came up—class bias, you know, all of these issues. So we came to consciousness as Jews.

A few years into the National Women's Studies Association, we began pushing the lesbian—and the Jewish caucus began pushing for Jewish material. We had to keep pushing for it every year; somehow, it [note: Jewish issues] never quite took in the major Association, the larger Association itself, but we kept pushing. Then one day, we said, "My God, antisemitism isn't even in our preamble to the constitution of the Association." So we decided to bring it to a plenary thinking, of course, everyone would agree we have to add antisemitism. And lo and behold, unfortunately, it did not happen that way. It was a very ugly, and difficult plenary session. I can't remember the exact year it was in the late seventies.

Batya Weinbaum 26:23
Late seventies. I was gonna ask you.

Evi Beck 26:25
Yeah, it was the late seventies. It might have been the third meeting. Because racism also was a very hot issue and not really contentious,[note: that is, everyone agreed it was an important issue,] but it [note: antisemitism] needed to be stated over and over again. So we brought this to the plenary, "let's just add antisemitism to our founding document," and people, even some Jewish women resisted, saying, "Well, Jews are this. Jews are that. Arabs are Semites, too." And just not wanting to include antisemitism against Jews in and of itself.

Batya Weinbaum 26:25
I'm curious where was Florence Howe on this issue?

Evi Beck 26:25
She was more working with the Feminist Press. She did not take part of the political plenaries. I don't even know if she came to the plenaries. She was working with the Feminist Press at the time. I don't remember her speaking out at all. Anyway, we finally did get it through. I'm not sure now—I don't have the document—whether they also said antisemitism is included and maybe anti-Arab, which is perfectly fine, but it was necessary to have antisemitism in its everyday meaning, which is against Jews. But that was very traumatic. Even within the National Women's Studies Association, we had one time had to have all the lesbians in the room stand up—

Batya Weinbaum 28:15
I was there.

Evi Beck 28:02
—because in the early years, lesbians—you know it was scary because femin—quote "feminists", straight feminists—were trying to get feminism validated by the community at large and if there were too many lesbians, then it would carry the taint of lesbianism. So it was a job to get people really conscious and to get rid of that internalized—and also that sort of way of trying to pass. So yeah, I have to come to *Nice Jewish Girls* [correction: : *A Lesbian Anthology*.]

So it was at a National Women's Studies Association conference where I was speaking. I think I had created a panel on Jewish lesbians, and Gloria Greenfield, who was that time the founder of Persephone Press, that was the lesbian press that had done *This Bridge Called My Back*. They did, later on, Audre Lorde's writings. They did *Kitchen Table* books. They did a lot of important early books. They published—Gloria Greenfield said, "Evi, would you like to put together an anthology about Jewish lesbians?" It was a fabulous idea. It was also terrifying, because I had never put together an anthology. And because who knew what would come next, and it was just a very big responsibility. But in the anthology we tried to get as diverse a group of people as we could in those years. We do have some lesbians of color in the book. We have some across some economic divides. We have age divides, but obviously if I were putting this together right now, it would be different. I wanted to show a picture of the very first book that was—oh no, that's the second one. Sorry, this is the first one. [shows books to camera] The first anthology that was by Persephone Press.

Batya Weinbaum 30:05
What year was that?

Evi Beck 30:06
That was 1982.

Batya Weinbaum 30:08
'82. So now we're in the eighties. Okay.

Evi Beck 30:11
Yeah, just '82. It started before then because it always takes a few years, and then that one that I showed— Persephone Press didn't last. Although it did incredibly important books, it didn't last all that long. So it went belly up. So then Nancy Bereano, of what was then called Crossings Press, did the second—it's the same exact edition, but with a different cover. But then seven years later, Beacon Press was interested in re-issuing the anthology. It was still before there was any Lesbian or Gay Studies, but they re-issued it in a revised and updated edition. We especially had to revise the issues on Israel. Because Sabra and Shatila [note: massacre] had happened, we had to really rethink what we were saying about it. And of course, if I were to reissue the book now, I would revise it yet again, seriously. But I decided this is a classic book. I got notes from people saying it mattered to them, even though they were neither Jewish nor lesbian.

But somehow it was an early, very early book of what's now called intersectionality. And so it became really important. It included—and I wanted to say, my daughter, who is lesbian, and was actually my role model—she came out way ahead of me. I was freaked out when she came out,

even though I was a very good liberal, and some of my best friends were gay and lesbian. But she helped me come out, I would say, in that she—when we went to my husband, I was still married at the time that she came—she came out pretty young. She came out at the time of the not going to regular schools, you know, she was really in those early years. She was born in '55, so she was part of the sixties movement of drugs and drinking and yet also strong activism against the wars and against homophobia.

So anyway, I included her in *Nice Jewish Girls*. There's a wonderful essay by JEB called, "That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Jewish Lesbian." She and I were working on the galleys of—we have several essays in the new edition, together, where we talked about being mother and daughter and what that meant. She and her partner were part of the—she moved to Vermont eventually, and they had two children, but one of whom died when he was only two and a half. But they had another—she and her partner sued Vermont for the rights that lesbians and gays should have the right to marry. And they won that suit, so they were among the first in 19—. When was that? Well, it was 2000 that Vermont allowed gay marriage, and it was 1999 that they allowed civil unions. So she and her partner were part of three people who sued and won. And then my partner—my daughter is the one in the middle who's holding the baby. This is my grandson, Seth, who is now 22. He's not gay, but he's a strong activist, very active in the youth movement of supporting gay and lesbian. So this—

Batya Weinbaum 33:58
So what else did you do in the eighties? We were skipping ahead. What did you do in the eighties besides the book? You stayed at Wisconsin, or?

Evi Beck 34:09
I stayed at Wisconsin until 1984. In 1984 I was ready to move to a place that was a bigger city. Wisconsin was a fabulous place to both raise children and to come out. I almost had a chorus of people cheering when I came out because Madison, Wisconsin was that kind of a place at that time. So I was asked to apply to become the chair of Women's Studies. Well, it was neither department, yet it was a small two-person—we called them units, but it was already in existence at the University of Maryland in College Park. So I applied for that job, and I got it.

It was an amazing, amazing experience to come—first of all a move to Washington DC, where I've been ever since—because here there was even as much activism as there had been in Madison, there was even more. Of course, I got in touch with a lot of the people who were very active in lesbian feminism in those years, including Joan Biren, who had the essay in the anthology. She took some of these pictures. Yeah, that picture I showed was just Joan Biren's. Through coming to the University of Wisconsin, Maryland, I met the person who was to become my partner for the next 35 years, it was Lee Knefelkamp.

She was a professor at the university. She hadn't—she had barely come out. She had been married and did not have children. But she was very, very active in women's studies—as an overload. She even was in the Department of Curriculum and personnel services. She was a psychologist. She was an incredibly important supporter of all the work that I've ever done. We did a lot of work together in the early years building Women's Studies, and she was part of that at the university.

So for a while we were in the same university, though not in the same department. She was an adjunct [correction: affiliate] professor [note: of Women's Studies]was important, too, that there were a great many lesbians who chose to become Jewish. Although, she had chosen to become Jewish when she was much younger and had been married to a man. Judaism had appealed to her sense of ethics. She taught a lot about feminist ethics. And she really believed that Jewish spirituality and ethics were deeply the most moral way that she could think to live. So she had become Jewish.

So building Women's Studies at University of Maryland was an amazing—and it was interesting because I was hired, and of course *Nice Jewish Girls* was on my vita, but there was so much homophobia on that campus at that time. 1984 was not yet an enlightened year, really anywhere very much. So it was very interesting how I had to negotiate being out as a lesbian and at the same time negotiating with the university administration because, of course, we were accused of being lesbians. There were some professors who told their students not to take Women's Studies because it was all lesbians, which, of course, it was not.

At the beginning, there were two of us and one of us was straight. You know, Claire Moses was the other one, when she was a very important work editor at the time of Feminist Studies. But we built the department. We built it, and we made it into a department slowly. At that time, you could get extra money if you brought people from diversity. So we brought Bonnie Thornton Dill, and we brought other—many people from Lynn Bolles, many people from different aspects of doing work from different inter-disciplines. It became a very diverse department. There are now at least five or six women of color from doing different kinds of work. At one point, we even had a man from African American Studies, who was also gay, and he has left since for another job. But we've had a tremendous diversity of people. I think we still have a large feminist presence in the other departments who are connected with Women's Studies.

So it's now got—since the time I was there it developed a doctoral—which is a big deal. That was really a lot of work. Because in the early years, they didn't even want us to have a BS or BA in Women's Studies. So we now have many different levels of—so Women's Studies has become institutionalized in a big way and still attracts a great many lesbians to the department.

Oh, I forgot to go in there. I forgot in the late seventies. This is really important, but Wisconsin—sorry if it's a little jumping around, but Wisconsin was really important in the National Lesbian Feminist Organization, which lasted only one year from '78 to '79. But it tried to create a very large umbrella organization, and it met in California. But in Wisconsin, we developed chapters in small cities, like Green Bay, with Milwaukee, with Madison, and we actually had a Wisconsin meeting of the National Lesbian Feminist Organization, where actually Jewish lesbians met together for the first time in that place. So it was a small organization but it really had a big impact, I think, and was very important. So now we can go back to the eighties.

So my activism, of course, I was an activist out in the world. But I would say the most difference I have made has been within both the university and the communities at large. I used to talk at temples all over, or Women's Studies departments, or Jewish Studies, to talk about lesbian feminism and the need to transform the university. I always try to put it in a larger context of

identity issues. That, of course, that is one issue an that there are many crisscrosses and many other dimensions even within this group. Racism even within lesbian feminism exists. So we had to—that's one of the things I have tried to do is bring these other issues, these other isms, into focus, even within focusing on homophobia and antisemitism.

Batya Weinbaum 41:45
And what were you doing in the nineties?

Evi Beck 41:47
The nineties? Well, oh, yeah [laughs]. Well, I decided—I believe it was around just the turn of the century, I was working at the university. I had decided—because through Women's Studies, and through working with so many women and lesbians, that I really—Women's Studies, you know, tried to bring together the personal is political, the academic is political, the academic is personal. So I was working—and of course, in our courses, we encouraged all women who took our courses to bring themselves to their studies. So many women and lesbians talked about their difficulties that I realized I wanted to work more deeply than one could within the university setting.

So at the turn of the century, after having done all this work organizing within the university and outside of it too, because *Nice Jewish Girls* spawned a whole lot of other groups that continue to meet—some of whom still do meet; Jewish lesbians organizing themselves for activism of all kinds, and participating in different marches. But I decided I wanted to study to become a psychologist, so that I could do deeper work because I myself [redacted] — had done a lot of therapy—myself had found it incredibly useful. In spite of, I know—within feminism, there was a lot of talk that feminism just tried to make women fit into the regular culture, but actually the people I worked with did not ever try to do that, and validated my own development. So I wanted to work with women, with lesbians, with Holocaust survivors, with— so many women in my Women's Studies courses talked about early abuse.

I discovered that many women's silences have to do with having had abuse. So I decided to apply to a wonderful program that was non-campus-based, that is, it has a campus in California. I just happened upon it because somebody that my partner Lee Knefelkamp knew had taken that program, and a light like Gertrude Stein's light went off in my head. I said, "Oh, I can do this!" So I applied and got in and started to study psychology at the same time that I was still chair of the department. But then I stepped down as chair. Now we're getting into—yeah, this was in the nineties; it was all of the nineties because I graduated with my doctorate in Psychology in 2002, and it had taken me 13 years.

So working back, it definitely was in the nineties that I was doing this other studying. I could not afford to let go of my teaching, which I loved anyway, but I became what I call only a professor, which meant I didn't have a lot of administrative work to do. And I could focus on studying. It was, I would say—the Fielding Graduate University is the closest to a feminist university I've ever seen because it was mainly for adults changing careers and assumed the maturity on the part of the students. So you had many different ways of showing what you knew that were less traditional than the classroom would have allowed.

So I studied for 13 years. I did my—since one of my colleagues, Claire Moses, became chair and allowed me to teach at night, I was able to do an internship during the day. Then I became a psychologist and did work for a while as a therapist. I worked with actually mostly women, but with some men as well, but mostly with women of all ages. I worked at American University Clinic. I worked a little bit in private practice. Then I came upon this practice—well I came upon poetry therapy. Poetry had always been something very close to my heart. Obviously, teaching lesbian poets discovering all of this wonderful work that existed, led me while I was studying Psychology—again, one of my students who was at the University of Maryland, led me to poetry therapy. So I learned how to use poetry as a form of therapy, and that in itself has been a whole journey. Wonderful.

I should say that when I started to study Psychology, I had to do the same work I did in Women's Studies about Jewish, particularly Jewish inclusion. I think by that time, people were much more willing to include lesbians and gays. But Jewish was still resistant because Jews were perceived as white, as middle class, as all many of the stereotypes. So antisemitism was not taken as seriously. So I had my work cut out for me [note: even at such a progressive university], which I did do during that time.

But then, when I decided it was—I discovered this other practice, which is called sacred circle dance. That practice brought together, in a way, all the work that I'd ever been doing. Because I had also started to do some more deep spiritual work, even though I put together a *Nice Jewish Girls* as a lesbian anthology, which by the way, was out of print and is now going to a re-issuing it as an e-book, and as a publication on Amazon. So people will be able to use it in their classes again because it's now become a rare book. So you could have to pay $50 to $100 for it, which, of course, is ridiculous, but I'm hoping it can be used in classrooms again because when it came out, it was before its time. So Jewish Studies would not have included it, now it would. I think that Lesbian Studies barely existed, and did not include Jews necessarily.

So back to my sacred circle dance, which somehow brought together my utopian vision. I also have gotten very interested in mind-body work and how the mind and the body works together to create who we are, to make us stronger, to make us do our work in the world. So since for about twenty years now I've been teaching a sacred circle dance, which also led me to study phenomenology, which simply is the study of really understanding who we are, how we come to know what we know.

I guess in the meantime I skipped over my lesbian work on Kafka and Kahlo, because you asked me what else I was doing. Both of those writers, and my doctoral dissertation in Psychology, was a comparative study of Franz Kafka and Frida Kahlo as wounded artists who use their art to try to keep themselves alive. That's my model, but they both also had Jewish dimensions. [note: Kahlo's Jewish dimension has since been put into serious question, essentially discredited by two German scholars.] And they also had sexual dimensions.

There is definitely lesbian dimension in Kahlo's work, and also in her life, which has been documented. I also did a study of Kafka, and showed his lesbian [laughs], his gay imagination. I did that. I was actually [note: one of] the first to do that work, but it was only published in a very small anthology that didn't get much press. So now many of the male scholars have gotten to do

that, and have gotten their work out there. But I'm just glad that people are talking about it. I still hope someday to maybe write my book, or at least write an article about the Kafka-Kahlo connection, which I think is very powerful. So I've continued the lesbian work, but in different dimensions.

Now when I teach sacred circle dance—you know, obviously, we do very few couples dances—[note: and mostly we hold hands,] but I always, I make the dancing both a spiritual experience and a way of connecting to [note: each other and] what is going on in the world. Especially during COVID, I taught from my house [note: on zoom] twice a week, trying to keep community alive, which I am told was very successful. I'm still—because people came on from all over the world—I'm still [correction: For a long time I was] doing my Tuesday morning sessions as a hybrid with the Zoom on and people in the room. But I find that my return to this form of dance is deeply spiritually satisfying, and keeps me in a place where I can continue to do the work in the world that is necessary for that utopian vision that I had when I was a child.

I might add, for the record, I am quite freaked out about what has happened to the State of Israel. I'm deeply mourning those visions, but I have become active in Palestine-Israel Peace Movement, and I'm trying to do as much as I can in supporting the possibility of ending the animosity in the war, ending the occupation, and creating a world or a country in which Jews and Palestinians and any other people who come to live there can live democratically, peacefully, and in a way that is worthy of having created this new state.

Batya Weinbaum 52:46
Okay, is there anything else you'd like to add? I think we're coming to the end of the hour.

Evi Beck 52:51
I think I've got everything in truthfully.

Batya Weinbaum 52:54
Okay.

Evi Beck 52:56
And if I haven't, I have to let it go because that's part of the practice of becoming an elder. Yes, I will say that it's been a process, and I feel very fortunate to have lived this long to know people like Batya, whose work has also been important to me, of course, to be interviewed by you Batya. And to be part of a movement that I hope will continue to help work toward a better world.

Batya Weinbaum 53:29
Is there any message you'd like to give to younger women coming into the movement today?

Evi Beck 53:41
Well, I would like to say that, “look for community”. Don't just look inward but look outward and see what kind of allies we can create. Look to other movements to work together. Never forget the history where we come from both if we're talking about Jews and lesbians. Remember Jewish history. Remember lesbian history. Remember it wasn't always easy ever to say those

words. When I first started to put together this anthology [note: *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*], and said, I'm working with Jewish lesbians, people looked at me and said, are there many? Yes, there are many. And we all have a history. So I would say I would like the idea of keeping the word lesbian alive. No matter what other identities develop, I think it's really important to keep women alive and lesbians alive, in the language and in the world. And let there be a multiplicity of identities, but let those remain because those are the ones that are most easily obliterated. And we don't want that to happen again.

Batya Weinbaum 54:53
No, we sure don't. Well, thank you for your time. And don't forget to click Upload to cloud.

Evi Beck 55:01
Okay when I press ok. So let me go to stop recording—pause recording, okay.