INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY DENBURG

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MAKING BARNARD HISTORY

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The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Dorothy Denburg conducted by Mollie Galchus in March 2015 at Abraham Joshua Heschel High School in Manhattan, NY.

Q: To start off, can you tell me about your parents' background before we get to you. Where they were born, and some important aspects to know about them.

Denburg: Sure. My father—his name was Felix Urman, was born in a very small village in Poland along the Russian border in the southeast corner of Poland called \*\*\*Kreschev. He was the second son and fourth child in a family of eight and he, from the time he was 10, he sat alongside his father and his older brother and learned how to be a tailor, and he was in his early 20's when the war broke out.

My mother was born in a small village outside of Vilna which is the capital of Lithuania and she was the oldest of three girls. She was the first girl ever admitted to the local high school, or \*\*gymnasium, under the quota of two Jews a year so the two Jews—the highest scorers on the entrance exam had always been boys, but my mother was the first girl and she was always very proud of that and anybody I ever met from my mother's town since then have always said, "Oh Michelle was the smartest girl in all of our town."

During the war my father was hidden by a Christian farmer who had known his family, in the loft of his barn for 26 months, and my mother and the oldest of her two younger sisters—my mother and my aunt, were in a series of labor and concentration camps. They were liberated at the end of the war by the Russians on one of the women's death marches. My parents met afterwards in a displaced persons camp. Education was always terribly important to my parents, particularly my mother was kind of very academically ambitious on behalf of her children, having had her own education interruption.

Q: Can you talk about your childhood? Where you were born, moving here...

Denburg: Sure. So my parents were in this displaced persons camp and my father had a very large family. He was the only survivor in his nuclear family but then there were in his father's generation, there were several aunts and uncles and only one uncle and his two sons survived and they lived in Paris so my father's uncle was trying to track down members of the family through various relief agencies and the International Red Cross, and he located my father and he traveled to the displaced persons camp to encourage my father to move to Paris which he and my mother did, which is how it was I came to be born in Paris.

My parents lived in Paris for five years and in many ways they were very happy, and if you look at old family pictures, French culture is such that everybody is off in August so they used to go to the beach with cousins in the little cottage. It looks very carefree at the remove of photos, so when I started studying French I used to ask my parents why it was that they chose to leave France and they both said that they felt that after the war that Europe was not a good place, or a hospitable place for Jews.

The French in particular were quite xenophobic so even though at the time that I was born my parents had been living and working in Paris for several years and spoke French, my birth certificate actually says Polonaise which was interesting because my parents at that point considered themselves stateless—they certainly didn't identify as Polish citizens. Amway, then we came to America.

Q: Can you talk about your childhood here? You came to the Bronx first?

Denburg: Yes.

Q: And just growing up, what did you do for fun? Just take me through...

Denburg: Sure. So, the first apartment that we lived in when we came to America was in the Bronx, in the South Bronx, and we lived in an old apartment building on the first floor. The other neighbors were mostly younger couples, the age of my parents—American men who'd come back from the army and so on, so I had a few friends in the building who were approximately my age—a little older, a little younger. We, weather permitting, played outside all the time. The apartment building was U-shaped so there was a courtyard, so we played all kinds of games that you can play with the little red Spaldeen balls—which nobody ever said “Spalding,” everybody said “Spaldeen” —I still think they're called “Spaldeens.” Anyway, we played \*\*\*“A My Name Is” where you put your leg over [motions how to play game], we played jump rope, we played stoop ball, we played \*\*\*potsie where we made a grid on the sidewalk with chalk, and nobody was comfortable enough for children to have bicycles or anything so we played mostly games involving a jump rope or a ball.

When I started kindergarten, I don't have very clear memories of my earliest years here but I've heard a thousand times from my parents and from friends of theirs and so on that I spoke a combination of French, Yiddish, and English. The most famous sentence which a cousin of mine that I've always been close to, her parents were the people who sponsored us to come to this country—the most famous I uttered apparently was "\*\*\*Toby, which was my cousin's name, \_\_\_\_\_ mayn nezele is running." So, anyway, whether it was related to that or it was attendance requirements or whatever, I was left back in kindergarten and then when I was in third grade my family moved to Brooklyn which was pretty exciting at the time. We moved to an apartment building on Ocean Avenue across the street from Prospect Park. We were on the fourth floor of a four-story walk-up, above the subway. My parents were quite excited to get out of the Bronx, which at that time, by the time I left, I was very much a minority in my third grade class as the neighborhood had begun to change demographically.

In third grade when I was nine we moved to Brooklyn. We played pretty much the same games on a different street and I became very close friends right away with another girl in my third grade class whose parents were also Holocaust survivors. She remained a close friend of mine to this day.

Q: How did your parents speak about their experience in the Holocaust to you growing up, or how did it affect every aspect in your life? Did it come up? Did they not talk about it?

Denburg: It's very interesting. When I was in my late 20's I think, a book was reviewed in the *Times* that I promptly bought by a professor at NYU by the name of Helen Epstein. The book was called *Children of the Holocaust*, which I never thought was a good title because to me it sounds like it's going to talk about child survivors, but it's actually a study of children of survivors. And when I read that book I was blown away, but I was stunned by the number of people who are interviewed who said that their parents never talked about the war or their experiences and that seemed very strange to me, although, as I completed the book I recognized that the patterns that the writer was talking about were true of many other families that I knew, but not mine. I don't remember—I don't have any memories that predate having some knowledge of my parents' experiences during the war. And one interesting thing that I've reflected on as an adult is that—you know, the world Holocaust is a relatively new word, it was coined by historians and commentators. Really probably by the time I was a young adult, not before, in my parents' circle and as I was growing up when people met each other the first question a person with an accent would ask another person with an accent in Yiddish usually—it doesn't translate—in English the question is just "How did you get through the war? What did you do in the war?" In Yiddish, it really says, "How did you get over the war? How did you overcome the war?" But in any case, and sort of the other interesting linguistic construction is that the word "survivor" is a relatively new term. My parents when I was growing up always referred to themselves as \*\*\*grines, or refugees, which is interesting.

In any case, among my earliest school memories is learning that song that we all used to sing in public school before Thanksgiving, "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother house we go. The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh..." I remember asking how come I had no grandparents and I mean, I can clearly remember my parents telling me that there was a war, there was a man named Hitler, the Germans were bad, they killed all the Jews—I mean, I don't remember not knowing. And, similarly, in the year that *The Diary of Anne Frank* was published in this country, I remember my mother read it, devouring it in a single sitting, and then saying to me somewhat—I don't know if I would say disparagingly, or cynically, but I remember my mother saying "Oy, she had it easy. Her whole family was together, she had a roof over their head." I mean, I vividly remember not wanting to finish my dinner. The litany, the refrain was, "You're going to sit until you finish everything on your plate. You're so lucky. There were nights when I would be grateful to eat potato skins." So I think my parents' experience was always a part of my consciousness.

Q: What was your relationship like with them [parents]? And you have a younger brother?

Denburg: Mhm.

Q: Were you always together growing up, were you looking forward, when you were a teenager to going out more, just what was your home...?

Denburg: It's very interesting. My brother is not quite four years younger than me but I was born in Europe and he was born here and that in it of itself I think is something of a difference. He used to jokingly say, "Well I'm a real American and you're not." At some level, I think he believed it. His experience and his memories are a little different from mine. My nuclear family was in fact very, very, very close. I didn't realize at the time that it was unusually or maybe some would even say stifling, but in part, because my father had no sisters or brothers and because my mother's only sister was in Israel, my mother and her sister separated in the DP camp when my mother decided to go to Paris with my father, my aunt continued on to Israel on the hunger strike ships, so we had really no family in this country. We spent all of our Sundays either with these distant American cousins of my father who had sponsored us for citizenship—brought us over—or the three other families of people from my father's town. One was a man who with my father and one other man were the three survivors from the whole town who lived through the German massacre of people of their town.

And the other was a man who had come before the war, and my father worked six days a week. He had a job in the garment center and he worked additionally after work two nights a week and all day Saturday, doing alterations in a cleaning store. My parents lived very frugally and saved everything they could to buy a house which they did when I was 13, but like on Saturdays my father was working, my mother took my brother and I to the park or we just played in the house. If the weather wasn't good and we played in the house, the radio was on all day long. My brother and I played continuously and then on Sundays in the morning my father often worked at home, sewing our clothes and in the afternoon we either got together with these other families at our house or their house or with our American families. But we did everything together and then when I was 12 my mother started working and I took care of my brother after school, but once my mother started working, my father worked a little less—he didn't work at night in the cleaning store—he worked just on Saturdays, and my father took driving lessons and bought a car, and we used to go house hunting every Sunday until we bought a house and then every Sunday we would go shopping *for* things for the house. We did everything together, and I assumed that was normal [laughs].

Q: What was your religious life like growing up?

Denburg: So my parents—I believe, though I really was never explicitly told so—I think my parents' faith was probably altered, or changed, by the experience of the war. They both came—my father in particular, my father's family was a little more old-fashioned than my mother's in a sense just because their small town was more remote—there was no bigger city nearby. My mother's small town was near a big city, but they both came from observant families—very traditional, traditionally observant. My mother's father from family pictures was clean-shaven. My father's father wore a hat and a beard. But, clearly upon arriving in this country if not in Paris—I don't know—they moved away from a lot of traditional observance. Obviously I mentioned my father worked on Saturday—that's certainly not...kosher [laughs]. But, we observed all the holidays. My parents—we had their friends over on the holidays, we went to synagogue, my mother—we had two seders every year and my mother changed the dishes and kept all of the dietary restrictions of Passover. Interestingly when we lived—I was the age to have started Hebrew school when we lived in the Bronx, but there was no after-school Hebrew school around, so when we moved to Brooklyn my parents enrolled my brother in Hebrew school, and my mother attempted to register me but I was too old for the first grade and I didn't want to be with younger children, so I didn't go to Hebrew school, but my brother did.

Q: And can you talk about your academics growing up? And your mother's emphasis on education?

Denburg: So, my mother read to us all the time. Interestingly, the first books that I recall my mother reading to us were Yiddish. There was a tremendous apartment shortage in the years that we came to America. You know, there were so many young GIs returning, so the people who brought us to America helped my parents look for an apartment and the apartment they found in the Bronx they could only have on the condition that they bought the furniture and books and stuff of the old man who was living there—even though it was a rental apartment [laughs], so there was this expensive collection of old Yiddish books that I'm really sorry we didn't hold onto, but my mother read to us from traditional Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem and at some point I'm sure she switched to Yiddish, but I don't remember. I do remember that there was no nearby branch of the public library where we lived in the Bronx, so my mother took me after school at the beginning of second grade, once a week a book mobile which was like a big truck with books—the book mobile came to outside the schoolyard of my elementary school once a week. My mother took me to get my own library card and you were permitted two books a week and I still remember the first books I got. But, each week we would go and return those books and get two more books. My mother, it was very interesting, my father really picked up English by virtue of working every day, and my mother spoke with the other mothers in the building and so on but my mother went to night high school on the nights that my father wasn't working—he came home, watched us, and my mother went to school. My mother always managed to stay a couple of steps ahead of me and she would, when I got my weekly spelling words, she would test me, and it was very clear from the minute I started school, that the expectation was that I would work hard and do well in school. I mean, the academic expectations in my house were very high. My mother was that caricature of a Jewish mother who if I got a 99 on a math test didn't say "Wonderful." She said, "What happened to the other point?" And if as was most often the case, the other point was like one point that you lost for a careless mistake, that was like totally unacceptable. And spelling, as far as she was concerned, of course you were going to get a hundred, because you had the words in advance. How could you not get a hundred? I mean, you would study them until you nailed them. All the way through school, my parents took great pride in every academic achievement.

Q: Can you describe your high school?

Denburg: Sure. So I went to James Madison High School in Brooklyn. When I was 13 as a mentioned my parents bought a house in a neighborhood in Brooklyn called Mill Basin and I went for one year to junior high school in that new neighborhood in ninth grade, so I'm like a classic baby boomer. When I started high school, all of the schools were vastly overcrowded so we were on a split session. There were 1260 seniors in my graduating class at Madison. Everything was very highly tracked. There was a tremendous stratification between the top students, the next group down, the next group down [hand motions]. I was in all honors classes—those were the people who were my friends. And again there was both a competitive atmosphere in the high school—though good-natured but certainly an expectation at home that I would do well, so I never really set out—I never said to myself "Oh, I have to be at the top" or anything, but I worked hard in any case. I did graduate close to the top of my class—I was fifth in a class of 1216, which was pretty good. My mother was pleased. At graduation, you know, I got prizes in almost every subject, I guess.

That said, my parents were always very clear that they expected me to go to college. But interestingly, and my parents, to their credit, were more educationally motivated than some of their peers, so this very close friend of mine that I met in third grade when we moved to Brooklyn who remained my friend, she had an older sister who was actually born in the DP camps—she was nine years older than us—and she may have been born in the concentration camp actually if she was nine years older than us. When we were like in third grade, she was starting high school, and her mother who worked as a cook in a kosher catering place, her mother asked my mother which track she should enroll her in for high school. And it was her inclination to enroll her in what was called the commercial track which was where you learned secretarial skills and stuff, and my mother told her "No, no, no, no, you should enroll her in the academic track so she can go to college," and the other mother said [in accent] "Oy, vat does she need to go to college for? [no longer in accent] What's important is she should meet a nice boy and get married." So my mother, who could see she wasn't going to get anywhere with the argument about college, said to her, "Well, if she's in the academic track, she might meet a better quality boy," so that's how she convinced my friend's mother for both daughters to go to the academic track. But for all of that emphasis, their assumption was always that I was going to go to Brooklyn College, and my parents actually said to me—there was no self-consciousness on their part, or no defensiveness—they said to me, "You're a girl. Your brother is the boy. He has to go away to college to learn to be a man, which struck me at the time as quite unjust insofar as I was the better student than my brother, but that's exactly how it played out. So, I really had no ambition beyond Brooklyn College, but my high school AP English teacher was a Barnard alum and she asked me where I was applying, and almost everybody who was going to college was applying to a CUNY school but most of them who—and most of them had American-born parents, and a lot of them had college-educated parents—most of them were applying to private schools and to SUNY schools as well, so when I told my English teacher I was only applying to Brooklyn College, she went ballistic and she said "Oh! You can't just stay in Brooklyn. Do you want to grow up to be Kings Highway—that was a street near us—Kings Highway \*\*\*Schlumpherade which was a phrase that only she used. In any case, she insisted that I apply to Barnard and to Smith and then a friend of my father's told him that the union offered 10 scholarships a year to members of children in the United States and Canada, and my father being a naive man, said "Well, you know, I'm sure they only go to people who are bigwigs in the union," and his friend said, "No, you have to be a rank and file member. Children of union officials are actually prohibited from applying," so I applied and I won the scholarship which made it possible for me to go to Barnard instead of Brooklyn College.

Q: Did you visit Barnard before?

Denburg: I went for an interview—that was it. I got off the subway at 116th and Broadway and I had traveled into Manhattan from Brooklyn on the subway with friends many, many times, but I'd never been above—I don't think I'd ever been above the bottom of Central Park. And, I was really taken aback that this university existed in the city, and I had my interview, and I really was not—I don't know whether I was withholding thoughts of Barnard because I didn't think I'd be able to afford to go, but I do remember thinking "Well this is no big deal because if I came here as a commuter, I wouldn't really be part of the college experience the way the people who live in the dorms are and stuff,” but then when I got the scholarship, even though it might seem on the surface that it would have been an open and shut decision, it wasn't so open and shut. My parents said that they would do whatever I decided. They said that if I went to Barnard I would live at home and they would give me the same allowance they would have given me if I had gone to Brooklyn College and that I could keep the scholarship money and buy a car or do whatever I wanted or traveled but that if I decided to go to Barnard, I'd have to apply the money to the tuition. One way or the other, we landed on the decision that I should go to Barnard.

Q: How did you actually to Barnard—what trains? Before the 1, what did you take in Brooklyn?

Denburg: Ah. You'd have to ask me what I took before I took the train. [laughs] Before I took the train, I had to take—it's now a city bus, but at the time it was a private bus company that the city eventually took the route back from—I took a bus that was down the street from my house and it was almost a half an hour—not quite, like a 28-minute bus ride on that bus—to the Kings Highway station in Brooklyn which was like the fourth station from the end of the line. In those days it was the old BMT which stood for Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit. At some point when I was in college they redid the nomenclature and the signage and it became the Q train which is what it still is. So, I took the bus to Kings Highway, I got on the train—I got on the train when it was the BMT—to forty-second street, and then took the number 1. Then later when they changed the trains, I took that train to 59th street and then changed to the number 1.

Q: You commuted for two years?

Denburg: Two and a half years. I moved up to campus spring semester of my junior year.

Q: When you first got to Barnard your freshman year—first-year

Denburg: It's okay, it was my freshman year then.

Q: What did you think about it?

Denburg: So, about a week before school started my orientation sponsor who lived in Brooklyn had her six orientation advisees to lunch in her house in Brooklyn, and so I met the other five people in her group—one of whom to this day is my best friend. One went to private school—girl's school—one went to a Yeshiva in Brooklyn, the others were public school kids. Then during orientation, commuters had the option—in fact, they were encouraged to live on campus, so we lived—I lived with my sponsor in 616. I really was impressed and blown away by orientation. There was a presentation by the honor board, there were all kinds of panels, there was a luncheon at which the president spoke. It was all pretty inspirational. And at that time there was a group that doesn't exist anymore because of the changes to the honor system. It was called the Board of Proctors and it consisted of one or two students in each major, it was sort of an honor to be a proctor, and exams were not proctored. The honor system was kind of absolute, but the Board of Proctors did two things—they walked up and down the halls during exams with tissues and lifesavers—they wore black robes—and during programming planning each term they sat in the lobby of Barnard Hall at long tables and answered questions about their majors. In any case, the girl who was the head of the Board of Proctors—the girl—woman, who was head of the honor board, and the president of student government were all on a panel and I remember thinking that I'd never met or seen such smart young women in my life. I was obviously right—one of them went on to be a very, very distinguished judge. But in all seriousness they really were dazzling.

My first few weeks at Barnard, commuting—so I had a couple of commuting friends from orientation—were very overwhelming. I thought I'd made a terrible mistake and that I was over my head academically. Everybody in my classes seemed very smart and certainly smarter than me. My freshman English class was taught by a woman named Catharine Stimpson who even at the time was well-known but she was a very distinguished scholar—feminist scholar—the founder of an important journal of women's thought. She went on, at one point she was the president of the MacArthur Foundation that gives those genius grants, and she was for many, many years the dean of the graduate school at NYU—I don't think she is anymore. But, anyway, I had her for freshman English, and she was very exacting, and I was taking history, freshman English, Psych 1, and French in my first semester. And everything I kept getting back in every class in the first weeks were like B's and B pluses. And in freshman English the policy was not to grade your papers. And \*\*\*Kate Stimpson had very tiny handwriting, and I would get back this paper marked up with this tiny, tiny handwriting week after week, and we had to have a conference about each paper. So, at around midterm time having gotten a B+ on the history midterm for which I had like killed myself studying, I was just feeling terrible about myself, and in my English conference, she said "Well, Miss Urman—" and it was very formal—everybody, all the people were Miss this, Miss that—so I just dissolved into tears and said, "I don't have any idea from these notations whether this is a good paper, a bad paper, an A paper, or a B paper, and I have two scholarships and if I don't maintain a B average, I'm going to lose my scholarships, I'm going to just flunk out of here, so could you please tell me what grade you would give me if you were giving a grade?" But she was like so above that pedestrian kind of grade fixation. She said, "Miss Urman, no no, this is the paper. You really have to get over this—we're not about the grades...blah blah." It was terrible. In any case, I did pretty well and I did pretty well in her course about which I felt good. But really my whole first year I kept second-guessing myself, and I remember standing at the station waiting or the train and sometimes going home and thinking, "Did I make a mistake? Would I have been much better off at Brooklyn College where I could have just been sailing through?" After freshman year, I felt better and I did progressively better. In history, my history professor who was an older senior member of the department told me rather sweetly that what I had done wrong on the first midterm was that I obviously was so intent on demonstrating that I had done the reading that I had thrown everything I could into each of my essay answers with no organization, and no specific—I wasn't specifically addressing the answers—I was just trying to demonstrate that I'd done all the readings. So I got my act together and I did better, and by the end of freshman year I was feeling okay—but not great.

One of my funniest moments at Barnard, which is only funny at retrospect—at the time it was a low point. Second semester of my sophomore year I had made the decision to major in English which is actually what I thought I would major in when I entered Barnard, but I gave like two semesters worth of thought to psychology which I also very much enjoyed, and in second semester of my sophomore year, just at that point where we all declare majors, I was taking two English courses. One was an American Lit course and the other was The Modern Novel with a well-known, remembered-for-her-sarcasm professor, who smoked—which you could still do in the classroom—so she would meet with you, cigarette between two fingers, puffing [puffs] inhaling and exhaling. And, we had two short papers, and the first short paper I got back was a B over B minus with a lot of comments and the second paper—well maybe it was a B+ over B, I don't know. The second paper I got back—and I had addressed, I thought, all the comments from the first paper—and I got the same exact grade but with no comments, and I was kind of annoyed. And I went to see her during office hours and I said, "Professor Morse, I did every single thing you told me to do in the paper, I got the same exact grade—no comments. And that's discouraging because I just declared an English major." And this character takes a long [puffs] drag on her cigarette, exhales slowly and says to me, "Well, my dear, these decisions are never irrevocable." So that was it, I was like ready to kill myself. Fortunately, a day or two later in my other English class I got back a long paper with an A and I said, "Oh, the hell with her," and I went on to feel okay about my English major, but it was a big adjustment to me, but part of the adjustment interestingly was in my head. I mean, I needed to learn like on that history exam, I needed to learn what was expected, but a lot of it was my own insecurity, which when I think back to my freshman English class, I really did come with outstanding preparation. I had this great AP English teacher and the curriculum in my high school was that starting in sophomore year if you were in the honors classes, everybody had to write 250 words a night. Most of the nights we were assigned a specific question, and then periodically we would have an open-ended assignment. And then for the weekends you had to write 500 words—it was like not... And we did a long research paper, and I really had year after year, outstanding English teachers. But, here I was in this freshman English class, and there was a girl named Mary who had gone to Brearley, there were a couple of girls from prep schools and private schools—a lot of girls from Bronx Science, and I just felt like everybody was better-prepared than I was. And it took a while to realize that in fact, my preparation—at least in English—was great. So yeah, that was my adjustment. Long answer, sorry.

Q: When you decided to major in English, were you thinking about a career or were your parents just thinking about you going to college and then just staying home and getting married. What did you think your future would be?

Denburg: To my parents' credit—I'm sure they expected me to get married, that's a whole other story—but, they always expected me to have a career. But they were old-fashioned enough that my mother from time to time would say, "Well, what can be a better career than to be a teacher? You'll have the summers off with your children." And a teacher to European people, or to European Jews, a teacher connoted a certain status. I think it was my expectation because my world was quite narrow when I started Barnard that I would major in English and be an English teacher, and I had had these great English teachers—it seemed like a nice thing to do. At Barnard--well first, I was really interested in psych and I gave a lot of thought to a psych major, and I went back and forth and back and forth, and at the end of the day, I'm not sure whether I made my decision because I really loved reading and writing or because as a psych major you had to take calculus—I'll never know! [laughs]

But I pretty much thought I would be a teacher until maybe my junior year, I gave some thought—I had a fabulous job that I got through Barnard in a publishing house the summer after my junior year and that seemed like a sort of exciting possible career path, but then I really felt encouraged and or pushed—I don't know which—to go to graduate school, which was you know at that point in time what most good majors did [laughs]. You went to graduate school. Very, very few women in my class went directly to either medical school or law school. I think there were two women in my class who went straight to law school. We now have a gazillion doctors and lawyers in the class, but most of them did something, then went back, but I really was some place in my junior or senior year that I felt that maybe being a high school English teacher is not the be all and end all.

Q: Can you talk about your student government activities? When did you join? Your roles? And also, can you talk about—I was reading some articles in the Bulletin about the Urman Report, and what that was.

Denburg: So, that's funny. I think if I had to identify the turning point for me or what actually ended up being the thing that led to the way the rest of my career unfolded, it would be student government at Barnard because what really pulled me out of this sort of narrow, narrower experience I might have had of sitting everyday with my friends in what was then called the Annex, having lunch with my commuter friends and doing my work and dating and getting on the train, and yaddah yaddah, was student government. So, the woman who was my orientation sponsor-—a fabulous woman to whom I am indebted named \*Minna—was president of student government. And she happened to be an observant Jew from the Yeshiva Flatbush at a time when Barnard had no kosher meal plan or anything, and she served as president of student government, went to all these Board of Trustee dinners, did all this stuff without like making mention of the fact she kosher. She would pick at her salad at that was it. Anyway, \*\*\*Minna encouraged me to run for treasurer of student government when I was a sophomore, and I did, so I got to know all these people who were residents and I enjoyed it and we had meetings and it made me feel a little bit more connected to the community, but then she really pushed me to succeed her as president, and pointed out to me that if I did I would have a free room in the residence halls. I was a little nervous about A—whether I could handle it and B—how my parents would feel about my moving onto campus, but I did it.

And you know, those were very complicated times, so I was on the student government exec board as treasurer during the riots of '68 and then '69 was an off-year for riots, and I was really involved in many interesting things, the most interesting of which was that post-'68, I don't know whether the impetus came from the president or from the faculty, but student government was pushing for increased student voice in campus governments which was very much a post'68 mindset. So, the president appointed this committee which if you think about it now, the name itself sounds like a joke, but everybody was taking it very seriously at the time, called the Committee on Committees. And the Committee on Committees had two or three students—I was one of them by virtue of being president of student government—several faculty members, the Associate Dean of the Faculty, and we met at great length [laughs] —every week for two hours, we interviewed the Director of Admissions, we interviewed all the members of the \*\*\*COI and we wrote this report. And for some reason, I guess because it was the times, as president of student government I was asked to author the report. And we issued the report, I guess at the beginning of my senior year, and it called for the creation of tripartite committees with the exception of the \*\*\*COI which already existed and in which we asked for four student members representing the distribution of class and discipline, that structure exists to the present day—and that's pretty impressive, right?

So a lot of the committee that got set up have dwindled and some have stayed on, but it really was sort of a good faith effort to assure some serious student voice in matters affecting the whole college. The other committee that I was on by virtue of being president of student government, I actually continued to be on the following year when I was in graduate school in English at Columbia, was the Barnard Columbia Joint Committee on Coeducation. And that was only one Barnard student, one Columbia student, and the then Dean of Columbia College. I mean it was pretty interesting, a higher-profile committee in a sense that Barnard members were tenured faculty or administrators, etcetera, the same for Columbia, and we issued a report after two years on ways to increase coeducation between Barnard and Columbia, which radically opened up cross registration. When I was a student you could take classes at Columbia if it wasn't given at Barnard, or if it was given at Barnard, you had to have like a reason that you weren't taking it at Barnard, so really as a practical matter you could take a lot of classes at Columbia, but this just made it very easy. And so, I found myself like really having a lot of working relations with faculty and administrators, became—and that coupled with the plan to go to graduate school—I began to see myself as perhaps a faculty member in my future life.

Q: Can you talk about your relationship with Christine Royer?

Denburg: So, Ms. Royer—I've said everything I can say about that in the letter that you have. Ms. Royer was my advisor. I was in the lucky half of the alphabet [audio not clear...]. But, then when I declared my major in English, she became my major advisor. She was teaching the American Lit class where I was getting the A, and I confided everything in her and she was wonderful and very encouraging, and in spring of my senior year, my mother invited her home to our seder, and she came and that was like so remarkable to me that she would do that. And, on the day of my graduation, she gave me mother a dozen roses, and my mother was so touched. Then my mother died after I graduated from Barnard, unexpectedly—she was very young, she was only 45. [Silence, while Denburg became momentarily emotional] [laugh - "I never get through that part easily."] And Chris just became like a substitute mother for me. My children who are all grown, but they consider her their grandma.

Q: I guess if we can go back to student government and the counterculture and protests. How did you fit in with that movement?

Denburg: That’s very, very hard to answer, because on the one hand I was not a "man the barricades" person, and I think that was in part because of who I was and who my parents were. I guess I was just ever so slightly too authority-orientated, or—I wasn't going to be in the buildings. That said, I was a nudge as president of student government, I was perpetually prodding the administration for a greater student voice, for changes, though I would assume—although it's hard to say because like all of us are friends 50 years later, 45 years later—but you know, to some of the barricade people I probably seemed conservative—but not, well not conservative—but I was sort of an advocate of change but in a position that was a traditional position—president of student government.

Q: In the letter, you mentioned that you had friends who were already engaged or married by your senior year, so was the student population split between very traditional people still and counterculture—more radical?

Denburg: I think probably the very traditional people were probably by that point if not a minority, certainly less than half the class, but close to half the class were more traditional. Or maybe it was that a quarter was very traditional, a quarter was very radical, and the middle fifty were somewhere on the continuum—I don't know. But a point of fact, there were quite a few early marriages and my own personal story is semi-comic. I got engaged in the beginning of my senior year to my high school boyfriend. Someplace in the spring, not long, I mean around the time we should have been mailing invitations, I knew I couldn't go through with this. My mother was great, she totally stunned me, I thought she would go crazy because we like had the invitations in the house and all the dresses were bought and stuff. She said, "Nope, if you're not happy, I don't want you to do this." [I] broke the engagement, and that was sort of liberating, but a lot of my friends, you know, I had one friend who got married like a week after graduation. A lot of them got married that summer. I wasn't the only one with a broken engagement, but there were quite a few—very many early marriages. I had one friend who got married in the summer after sophomore year—she was my lab partner in psych. Ntozake Shange, the writer, was in my class and she got married the summer before senior year to a teacher. She and I were on the Committee of Committees together. And most of the—many—not all, but many of those early marriages did not end well.

Q: Were you involved with religious life on campus at all?

Denburg: No, but it's very interesting that you ask because there was much less religious life on campus. There was no—well, there was in Earl Hall a small office of Jewish life, and there was a campus rabbi, but really only resident students needed some form of religious life. Religion was much less talked about, so people who were kosher were—it didn't occur to them to demand kosher food. People were pretty more uneasy—I don't know. People didn't talk much about religion. And there were plenty of observant people. One of the reasons I think religious life on campus was less of an institutionalized part was that something like 40 percent of Barnard students were commuting, so they didn't need campus support for their religious life. The policy that now exists of not giving exams or assignments on major religious holidays did not exist. And I remember like there was this like huge crisis when I was a sophomore, a few of us were doing our lab science and had labs on the second day of Rosh Hashanah and were like in a tizzy about whether to go to lab or not because you weren't allowed to make them up, and it was a big deal. You know, that has gotten easier over the years because of the express prohibition against discriminating on the basis of religion.

Q: How did your relationship with your family change in college, commuting-wise, and also the protests or strikes on campus—were you commuting at that point? How did those two worlds coincide?

Denburg: So I was commuting in the spring of '68 during the first set of riots. I was living on campus in 1970 for the second of the set of riots. So I commuted back and forth everyday even though there were no classes—don't ask me, well 'cause you had to be there—part of the action and stuff. I did have a terrible experience one day of stepping off the subway as police were struggling with students in the street. That was very scary. My parents were perplexed by all the student activism. First of all, my parents were old-fashioned enough to always believe that institutions and teachers were right. You know, I remember coming home from school in seventh grade and complaining about this really awful social studies teacher I had, and my parents were so angry that I was being so disrespectful and they virtually said the teacher's always right, but they had no idea why students would think that they were going to stop the war in Vietnam by paralyzing the university. But on the other hand, they would never tell me to stay home, and so they didn't—they just kept worrying that I would get home safely each night.

My relationship with my parents did not really change when I was in college. My parents thought it was great that I became president of student government. There was a lovely tradition that Barnard had that has bitten the dust of a mother-daughter reception for the students on the exec board and in the various rep council positions and their mothers, and the daughters and mothers got corsages, it was in Sulzberger Parlor. My mother came to that, she was tickled pink. In retrospect, I'd never given any thought or I never had any regrets that I didn't go away to college or didn't live on campus all four years because as it happened, because my mother died that year after I graduated from Barnard. Hindsight changes everything, so I realized that if I had gone away, I would have given away those last years that I had with her.

Q: Just to fast forward, can you talk about your time in the admissions office, specifically the change from less commuters—more out-of-town people, and also just the demographic makeup of the students?

Denburg: Actually the big change in the makeup of the study body really occurred after I left admissions, or was beginning when I left admissions, because the distribution of commuters and residents was actually fixed by the residence hall capacity. And that remained pretty fixed until we opened Sulzberger Hall in 1989. So, when I started working in admissions, when you look at the admissions statistics now it's kind of comical, one of my responsibilities after my first year was to keep all of the statistics, so I have that perspective. Barnard was heavily commuter, and it was much easier to get in as a resident student than as a commuter, but overall, the admissions picture was far less competitive. It was really in the late '80s with the opening of Sulzberger that the college was able to become fully residential and the applicant pool really began to take off as a result.

There are a couple of important things about the commuter-res thing. The most important thing is that for those first—for the whole middle part of the last century it was commuters who kept the college going, but the college was part of the Seven Sisters and wanted to be perceived that way. The decision by Columbia to admit women meant that Barnard, or at least Ellen Futter, was smart enough to see that it meant that Barnard had to redefine itself to be much more selective to be a better and more equal partner to Columbia. So, with the opening of Sulzberger, you began to get more applicants from all over and became more selective. There still remained a big problem with the commuters because from long before I got to Barnard—like from maybe through the twentieth century, one of the ways in which the college managed financially was to treat the commuters differently for purposes of financial aid than residents. So, until only like 12—I don't remember if we did this 12 years ago, 15—but about 12 years ago, if you were admitted as a commuter and you had financial need, the college gave you a financial aid package, but it was based on a commuter budget. So if you were going to live in the residence halls but you were from Queens, you got an aid package that assumed you were living at home. So for many, many years, commuters either did one of two things. They either lived at home, though fewer and fewer did that, they double-borrowed, or they took jobs. They did all kind of financially unhealthy things to live in the dorms. Now, that could have gone on indefinitely, but we were not getting some of the best applicants from places like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science because their college counselors said to them, "You know, if you go to Barnard, you'll get a commuter package. If you go to Cornell or Vassar you'll get a resident package." So, one of the things that I was determined to do as dean was to get rid of that policy and over time I got the support of the board, but we phased it in over four years. We began with the seniors who were already in the dorms, and moved back. So, with the elimination of that commuter-res distinction, Barnard really became the best Barnard it could be because you could get the best qualified students regardless of need, and not handicap your best local students.

Q: Can you just talk briefly about the Committee on Race, Religion, and Ethnicity? Were you—I saw your name in the Bulletin on a sign that a meeting was coming up and you were the person that maybe was leading the meeting.

Denburg: So that committee was set up by Ellen Futter—who remembers when? I was still First-Year Class Dean. I wasn't Dean of the College yet. There were two chairs—it lasted for many years—there were two chairs—one was always a faculty member, and one was always an administrator. There were maybe six—four or six working groups. The committee was deliberately meant to be tripartite so that everybody would have investment in it, and it was in an effort to make sure that everybody on campus felt included and represented. It started off being Race, Religion, and Ethnicity. It ultimately, in its last few years, was CORRIE with an “I” —"C.O.R.I.E.E." and the "I" was identity and encompassed LGBTQ issues. One of the committees was like a programming committee, one of the committees was a classroom faculty committee. I can't remember what they all are, but the one that I chaired was on admissions, and I was First-Year Class Dean at that time and we organized the first Admitted Students of Color Weekends among other things which as you know is now institutionalized and part of the admissions program.

Q: So was that—

Denburg: It was a great committee.

Q: Did the committees help with recruiting from high schools?

Denburg: Yeah, they were great. So one committee did programming, one committee did like faculty lectures and stuff, but our committee sent students out to help with recruiting and it culminated in the \*\*\*[\_\_\_ event???]

Q: And just a final question, why did you stay at Barnard for your career? What is it about Barnard that made you stay for so long?

Denburg: I don't know if that's the easiest question or the hardest question. So, I never intended to spend my career at Barnard, and when I took my first admissions job, which I don't think I mentioned—I took my first admissions job after my first year of graduate school in part because my mother had died and I wanted to move home with my dad, and part because I really wanted a break after that first year of graduate school. I mean I'm not sure I would have taken the break if my mother had not died. I took that job in admissions offered to me by one of the most wonderful people in my life, a woman by the name of Helen McCann who was the Director of Admissions at the time and was a wonderful person and a wonderful mentor, and I loved her dearly. Took that job with the intention of doing it for one year. Toward the end of that year, the woman who was the assistant director—it was a simpler structure then—left to go to the Ford Foundation and Helen offered me her job for which I was in no way prepared, but she had confidence in me and I rose to the occasion, and I ended up loving it, so I stayed. And, in deciding to stay I decided to get a counseling degree which I did, and then I enrolled in the PhD program in higher ed administration.

In admissions, is where I sort of finished my Barnard education in that when I started working in admissions, I had made one trip with my parents when I was like 12 to Scranton, Pennsylvania and one trip with my parents to Springfield, Massachusetts and that was it. And in my senior year, my then boyfriend-fiance took me with him for a day to Washington, and as president of student government I went to a student meeting in El Paso, Texas and I went with one of the college's vice presidents to a national meeting in Chicago. That was what I had seen of the United States of America. Oh, and as president of the student government I went to a thing organized by the White House. The president was Richard Nixon at the time so we don't brag about that too much. But, in admissions I traveled—my first city was Washington. I had never driven a car before. I had a license—a brand-new license. And I spent a week in the D.C. area—I went to public and private schools in D.C. and all the Montgomery County, Maryland and Alexandria County, Virginia schools. And then Philadelphia became one of my areas, Massachusetts, Chicago, and all of a sudden I was traveling, I was doing college nights, speaking about Barnard three and four times a night. I was speaking to small groups and large groups, and it changed me. And I loved the young women I met and I loved seeing them come to Barnard and I loved seeing what became of them. In what would have been my eighth year in the admissions office, my first child was turning two and I was out many nights a week and when I was home, I was reading folders, and I decided that admissions was not compatible with having a two-year old, and I left. And the admissions office gave me a beautiful retirement party and a very pretty print by an artist I liked. And I was home for less than six months and I decided that I was miserable. And I got a call that September—late August from the woman who was then—the title was Vice President for Student Affairs—that job actually morphed into the Dean of the College job. Her name was Barbara Schmitter, and she said they had a very large freshman class coming in and would I be interested in working part-time as an academic advisor. I don't think I had to think about it—I think I—it didn't take me as along as it said to say "yes," to say "yes"—I mean, like the words were out of my mouth before she could finish. And that was September of 1979, and for the next four years, I want to say, I worked part-time in the Dean of Studies Office as an academic advisor. I still had no long-term career trajectory. I was working on my doctorate. But, I loved the Barnard students I was advising—I loved them, and when I say I enjoyed it, clearly it was besides being satisfied for me—something happened because I still hear from those women whose advisor I was all those many years ago. So, in '83, without going into too many details, a combination of two things were going on. I was working more. The advising system was not so great—people were getting advisors assigned alphabetically. I made a proposal for changing the advising system. Long story short, if I agreed to work more hours, the then Dean of Studies agreed to make me Freshman Class Dean. Did that. Did that for a number of years. Threw my hat in the ring to be Dean of College when that job was created, so I don't know that I planned to stay forever, but the minute I became Dean of the College, I realized that I was in the job of my dreams or the best possible job I could ever have. And I did that with great satisfaction for many years. I always continued to advise some students because that was where I sort of kept honest but I was able to do a number of things, including changing like the commuter-res policy, making financial aid portable for students studying abroad, changing how we house students. I mean, I did things that I felt good about, and I never actively wanted to leave. Does that answer your question?

Q: Is there anything else you want to add?

Denburg: I think Barnard, over time, due to great leadership by Ellen Futter, and then by Judith [Shapiro], and now by Debora [Spar], but particularly some very important decisions that Ellen made that made it possible for the college to survive and then thrive after Columbia made the decision to admit women. The biggest change has been that Barnard has become as selective as it is, but the fact that it's more selective doesn't change what it has always been which is that it takes young women with a spark or even only the faintest idea of what they may become, and it makes it possible through them to become the best possible them. And I've loved being part of that.