INTERVIEW: Joan Israel
INTERVIEWER: Sarah Arvey
DATE: June 16, 2003

Interviewer: **So, this is Joan Israel. Today is June 16th 2003. Joan, could you tell us a little bit about where you were born and when?**

J. Israel: I was born on July 24th 1930 in the middle of the depression at the Lutheran hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Why I was born at the Lutheran hospital when we were Jewish and we lived in Queens I'm not so sure, but that was the beginning for me. (Laughter)

Interviewer: **And how about your family upbringing and your economic circumstances, what was life like for you in New York?**

J. Israel: Well, I lived in Queens. I lived in Ozone Park, which is a suburb. I have two sisters. I'm a middle child. I have an older sister five years older and a youngest sister seven years younger, and my father had — first he had a bar which was very unusual for Jewish people, and then he went into the clothing business, which having three daughters was wonderful, so he had a clothing store in Queens. He and my mother both worked in it and so I guess you would say we were middle class. I'd say we were middle class not upper middle class by all means. Although we did have a car, which was unusual, and my mother drove, which was also unusual for women at that time. Although I'm Jewish, it was not an observant family. I always knew I was Jewish I was always proud of being Jewish. I grew up in really a non-Jewish neighborhood. There were three Jews in my class and people would go to me and say, "you're a good Jew" which I find very upsetting to me now, that was sort of a compliment at that time, but it was — I really grew up in a non-Jewish neighborhood.

Interviewer: **Do you think — when you're thinking about your younger years — were there any influences that might have made you steer towards feminism activism?**

J. Israel: I think so. My parents were always politically active. They were always seemed to be on the right side as far as I was concerned. My mother I would say — in those days the words feminist was not around — but my mother always encouraged me to do whatever I want, not to do things because boys would like it or wouldn't like it, to really follow my passion. She and my father both always encouraged me and my other sisters to study, to do well, to have a career. Now this was in the 1930's, 1940's and so I think that helped me to be more independent person.

Interviewer: **I'm going to stop right here Joan because for some reason so…**

[Pause]

Interviewer: **What about your education?**

J. Israel: My education? I went to public school PS63 in Queens and then I went to a school in Brooklyn. It was called Girls Tech. My mother encouraged me to do that because it had a childcare, it had a nursery, and she thought I'd be a great pediatrician. But she wasn't a pushy mother. She sounds like but she wasn't. She was just an encouraging mother, so I went to Brooklyn, took a subway two trains an hour and a half each way, and the high school in our area wasn't that good she felt; so and then I went to city college in New York for two years and then I graduated for the University of Rochester because I got married and went to Rochester, New York and Rochester was very different than New York City. It was like night and day, and then I got my masters in social work from Smith College School of Social Work.

Interviewer: **What made you want to get a Masters? You were searching for a career?**

J. Israel: Yes, and you know I didn't feel I wanted to get a Ph.D. in psychology. I'm really more of a hands on person and I didn't want to go to medical school, and I had met someone who was in that program in Rochester and it just seemed like the right thing for me.

Interviewer: **You were married at that time. Could you tell me a little bit about your spouse?**

J. Israel: Yes. He was a psychologist and he graduated for the University of Rochester and he — we were in this area because he got a job in the Merrill-Palmer Institute and one of the reasons I wanted to go to the Smith College is because they had school during the summer and had field placements for the whole year. And they would send you to where your spouse was, sometimes they wouldn't, but if you asked, they would and so it all worked out very well.

Interviewer: **Okay, so your husband was a psychologist, but when did you start having children?**

J. Israel: After I graduated I worked for three years and then I started having children and I sort of kept my finger in the pie by doing marketing interviews like "what song does this margarine remind you of," et cetera. Oh yes, oh yes a very famous marketing firm. I can't remember their name, so that's when I started having children. I mean that's when I started working and having children.

Interviewer: **All right, and the next part of the interview we're going to talk about your activism involvements and the role that you played. So with your upbringing do you think that anything lead you to join up with the feminist movement?**

J. Israel: Yes, yes. I think when I was in college they used the term male superiority. I don't know what they used for probably in those years they didn't have anything for women. But yes I do think it helped me to see myself as wanting to be involved with feminists, because I remembered with my first husband when we would go someplace and he was involved in a lot of research but [what] I was involved in very interesting — I was a director of an outpatient socialization program for psychotic patients. No one would ask me about what I did, you know? It was like you were you were there but you were invisible and I always had that feeling, I didn't know what to do with it but it was there.

Interviewer: Was your husband supportive of you working?

J. Israel: Yes, oh yes, yes. He was very supportive. You know he was very supportive and he was helpful, but in those days, you worked, but it was your main job to take of the children and do all the household things, and yes, he was very supportive.

Interviewer: Was there ever any moment that was a "click" moment — a moment where you thought, "I need to be active in the feminist movement"?

J. Israel: Well, the way I got involved in the feminist movement involves another husband, Kenneth to whom I'm married now. And Marge Levin who was the cofounder of Detroit NOW had a brunch for me because her mother was the…was very involved as the chairperson of the Operation Friendship, she had a brunch for me and my husband and she said during that brunch of which they hadn't had a meeting yet of Detroit NOW. She said, "How would you like to come to this meeting?" And since I was at Merrill-Palmer and she told me where it was — at Patricia Burnett's studio, which was around the corner from Merrill-Palmer — I said fine. I said, "you know sort of as a lark let's see what they're saying." And so, myself and a group of women walked over this one day to the Scarab Club and heard Patricia and Marge talk about NOW. And then that was a click moment and the way it was organized the people said, "Well what would you like to do, what would you like to do?" And since I had done my masters on childcare plans on hospitalized psychotic women I said, "Oh I'll do childcare," and that's how I got into the women's movement.

Interviewer: What year was that?

J. Israel: That was 1969.

Interviewer: Ok. So two years after the Detroit riot?

J. Israel: Exactly.

Interviewer: And what sort of organizational roles did you play between 1965 thru 85? So if you could talk about your whole career, which is a big question.

J. Israel: Well when I joined NOW I believe that Patricia was president and Marge was vice president. I was the chair of the childcare committee and we had about ten women who were, you'd think they were a hundred women, we planned conferences –

[Phone Ringing]

Interviewer: Let's stop for a second and let the

[Pause]

Interviewer: Okay so we're moving on. The next question we had is about the organizational roles you played during this period.

J. Israel: Right. So at the beginning, I was chair of the childcare committee and we had about ten women who were magnificent. I didn't know all of them before we started but I feel like a sister to all of them, and we planned conferences, childcare conferences, childcare and campus, childcare labor, and childcare. Joyce Miller who became the first women vice president of the AF of LCIO came as a speaker. We planned four conferences. We passed legislations, which has still affected childcare in this state.

Interviewer: What sort of legislation?

J. Israel: Well this is a little bit of a story. One of the first women's equality days, we had a big rally downtown in Kennedy square and we, the NOW women and the women's liberation women, who were interested in childcare got together and we decided we were going to go to the city counsel and demand, demand something from them, more involvement better. And so it must have been fifty to a hundred women came, some with their babies, and we wanted to meet with the counsel and they said "No, you have to you have to stay and wait till the meeting is over. You have to stay in the auditorium and wait." Well the babies began to cry, so I went to the sergeant of arms and I said, "You tell them that we are coming in now." And so we walked down the hall and some of the women put the babies on their laps and they put one on Carl Levin's lap — [the woman] who was the

president of the counsel of NOW — our senator, and it wet on his lap and I always remind him of that (laughs). So of course they said, "Do a study." So we had to do a study on the HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] under a fellow, Tony Vance, who didn't know a kid from a puppy. And we did this magnificent study and we came up with a recommendation that the city and the county needed to be more involved because the state was the only unit of government involved, and out of that came the fourth seat.

The Wayne County Childcare Commission, which is still in practice now, and actually a friend of my daughter-in-law is also involved in child development is chair of that. And what they did was make recommendations about — in fact, I met somebody at my grandson's graduation, a women who had worked there she said, "I was involved in getting good childcare for disabled children, I was involved in writing grants." So whenever you see organizations really worked…we got some other legislation to make the ratio of childcare more advantageous to the children. We did research. We went to the newspapers and talked to their staffs. We went to Blue Cross [Blue Shield]. We gathered because some of the women on this committee like Lillian Troll and Algea Harrison was foremost research people in the University.

Interviewer: **Who was funding this?**

J. Israel: Funding? Funding? (Laughter)

Interviewer: **Yeah, were you getting paid to do this?**

J. Israel: No this was all volunteer. This was because we felt that childcare was really extremely important and I'm sad to say that childcare is the one area on a national level that fell short of our goals for many reasons. There was the Mondale [bill], I can't remember the bill that was introduced but it was always it was too much money, we couldn't afford it. On a trip to Europe that I made not precisely for childcare, but I visited childcare. This was 1971. Everybody in Europe had childcare. The French had infant childcare, you know? We are now beginning to use our public schools facilities for childcare but parents have to pay extra tuition…but we really made a difference, and no we didn't get paid but it was so vital and so exciting and so energizing. At that time when you did something, it tended to make a difference

Interviewer: **What now…why were you interested in working on city and state level as opposed to a federal level? What difference do you think that made in what you were able to achieve?**

J. Israel: Well, I think there were other people working on a federal level and I think

the city and the county level - this is what we knew and this is what was at home and it's a much different ballgame when you work on a federal level. I mean there are issues to work on a federal [level] in terms of discrimination and so on and I think in hindsight you know, oh yes it would have been good, and we did work for passage of childcare legislation.

Interviewer: **Interesting. Any other campaigns that you were involved with? Did you head the childcare campaign? How many women were with you working? When did you do it?**

J. Israel: When did I do it?

Interviewer: **In the middle of your career? While you were raising your children?**

J. Israel: You know I look back and I don't know when I did it. I certainly was energized by it. My husband was very — is and shares everything in terms of the home, the shopping, the cooking, and so on. And as far as the children were concerned, they were about, what, nine or ten, they were very cooperative. We said, "This is your night." You know, two nights you have to prepare dinner and the first night I still remember this we had lettuce sandwiches and something it was very simple which we…I can't remember, but it got done and I had some help in the house, you know? But it was the kind of thing that nothing was too much, nothing was too much, and I think it's because I met women that I hadn't known before. Many of them types of women that I never would have come in contact with in being a social worker. You know, you get sort of in your own professional and social group.

Interviewer: **And so what were the types of women that were involved in these activist movements?**

J. Israel: Well, first of all I think there was a somewhat diverse economical…mostly there were middle class and mostly middle class white actually. The problem really was at that time that we needed to bring in more black women and Mexican women, but of course when you're working to really survive it's hard to have time for a meeting and that's true of a lot of social movements, that's middle class people and it isn't right, and you see working class movements Caesar Chavez and so on those groups…What was the question?

Interviewer: **The different types of women.**

J. Israel: Oh well there were a lot of non-Jewish women that I met from different groups. Women I just wouldn't have run into in my life and that was fabulous.

Interviewer: **And did they become a part of your social circle or did you become involved with them as friends as well as members of your feminist group?**

J. Israel: Well, the childcare committee there was friendship. You know after all how much time did you have? Although my husband had felt comfortable with them it tended to be — I mean our social activities were separate from my political activities there were some women with whom I socialized who were part of it, but I would say that our social group was not really part of it. Although I'm thinking now of women like Diana Leventer. She was an old friend before this and Lillian Troll is still somebody — she's in her eighties — that I talk to in California and so on. So it was mixed, it was mixed.

Interviewer: **And with the childcare issues what sort — what were you trying to achieve? Who were you trying to get childcare for?**

J. Israel: Everybody.

Interviewer: **Everybody?**

J. Israel: We wanted universal childcare. Like school, we thought this was a right and so that's why we wanted to get it for them because it was not a privilege, it was a right. And it wasn't only women who worked outside the home we had put out a brochure and said that there should be a relief time for women inside the home and so we had a wonderful program.

[Grass Cutting]

J. Israel You know I think the cutters are here for the grass.

Interviewer: **That's sort of problematic**

[Pause]

Interviewer: **Okay, so going back.**

J. Israel: What we wanted was universal childcare for everybody in that working outside the home or inside the home if need be. And we also wanted quality day care. Many of us, Algea, myself, Lillian Troll and other people on that committee were involved professionally with children, child development. So we were asking for what should be, not only good for the mothers but the fathers, and we would…we also talked about parental childcare in terms…but at that time, although women were getting into the work force it was really not quite as common as it is now. So we were talking about quality childcare. We wanted the very best.

Interviewer: **As well you should.**

[Both laughs]

J. Israel: Right, absolutely why not?

Interviewer: **And these were all in connection with NOW? You have an official institution with which you were affiliated?**

J. Israel: We were the childcare committee of NOW and I think being involved with NOW had a lot had a lot of clout at that time.

Interviewer: **Why?**

J. Israel: Why? Because NOW had a national presence. NOW had brought suit and I'll tell you against many of the institutions. NOW was in the news and NOW had — the women's movement had — many wonderful demonstrations that could not be ignored. So I think being involved in NOW was very instrumental.

One of early campaigns was against the telephone company. And I think NOW had sued, or the EEOC had come out with a report saying that they were being unfair to women, and so what we did — and I believe I was vice president of the chapter at that time or I was the president after Patricia but I can't remember the exact years — and we got the 300 page EEOC report. There was group of us, about six, and we read that report and we play acted — we role played that report — and then we went, we had a meeting with the people at Michigan Bell…we knew more about what their organization… unless they were playing dumb which is possible too. Also one of the women Sally Girlack was involved in a suit because…they didn't know whether… I forget what job she did, but she did the same job as a man but was being paid less. But after that the suit was won and when a woman linesperson would come to my house I would get so excited. "Do you know why you have that job?" She didn't know but that wasn't the important thing.

And also I got very involved in aging women and aging — I'm not quite sure — oh yes, I know how I got involved in that and that was really kind of separate from NOW. As part of my professional work at the Jewish agency where I was working, I worked with a group of mothers. Mothers of, out here actually in the suburbs, mothers of kids who were on drugs and [had] stolen from different houses, and one of the women came in and she had been to a make up session at a temple. And we were talking about how come women wear makeup and men don't. Anyway to make a long story short, Susan Sontag had written an article in the Atlantic Monthly's "The

Double Standard of Aging." My friend Lillian Troll who was at Merrill-Palmer with me and was on this childcare committee and I saw each other every day and I said Lillian we ought to have a conference on the double standard of aging. So with Wayne State and with The University of Michigan, we developed this concept of the double standard of aging. It was a three-day workshop. It had 16 — it was a three-day conference, it was the first sponsored by the Gerontology Section and it was the first session just on women that the Gerontology Section had ever done, and I think this was 1973.

Out of that came two publications called *No Longer Young*. They are the proceedings of the speeches and all. We had people like Mary Calderone, who was the mother of sex education, Wilma Cone who founded social security. I had Wilma Scott Heide come in she was the president of national NOW and Susan Sontag came from Paris and spoke at the Power Center on…but I was a little disappointed because she really repeated what was in the article and I thought she was going to say something else. It was fantastic and the women who are now the head of the Center of Education of Women — oh I can't think of her name right now. Do you remember her name? I'll have to look it up. She and I had lunch a couple of years ago and she said, "You know Joan that conference changed my life," and I said, "How?" and she said, "I was just going along being a graduate student at that time," and she said, "the issues were presented so clearly that it was very special." And actually in my work — cause actually I had two jobs then, I worked at Merrill-Palmer at the staff supervised field placement and taught the different seminars and I also worked part time at Operation Friendship — and so we have the first…at Operation Friendship we have the first older American grant in Michigan and —

Interviewer: **Can you tell me what Operation Friendship is?**

J. Israel: Sure, now this is nothing to do with NOW.

Interviewer: **Okay but —**

J. Israel: Operation friendship is, and I think it might still be in existence, a program that was sponsored by the National Council for Jewish Women and the Central Methodist Church, a church in Michigan, in Detroit, to bring patients who had been for many many years out into the committee to help them socializing, even maybe a job because they were using now — they had medication which they would allow people if they took it to benefit — and so I was the director of that, but it was a part time job and it was staffed by volunteers. We had two of a profession in that and I see them occasionally. So I became interested in aging, which sort of lead me into the conference on women, and aging and I work on… Wilma Donahue was the mother of Gerontology and she was — I don't think she's alive. She was a

dynamo, she was a dynamo.

Interviewer: **At this time you mentioned you played very high in political roles in the NOW organization; you were vice president, you were working at the same time, how did you come to do all that, how did you manage it?**

J. Israel: Right that's a good question. Well I think I remember I told you about the kids doing dinner. Well first of all I did have full time help in the house, so I think that was one way — but I remember once in my marriage to Ken…he had said to me, "What's for dinner?" because it was my job to cook and plan dinner, and I remember a line in Marilyn French's book the — what was the name of her first book? I can't remember — it was a real stunner. And she said, "There have been massacres over the question of what is for dinner." So I said to him, "It's a pain in the neck trying to figure out what's for dinner every night, so you know what: I'll do two days, you do two days, and the kids will do two days." So how did I do it? I think I allowed myself not to feel that I was less of a woman because I wasn't doing these things and I think my husband having being brought up in a home where his mother was a widow, he did a lot of things around the house to please her. And so he ended up wanting to please me. That was not a bad deal. So it may not have been for political reasons but it worked very well and it's still working. So, I don't know how I did that. I went from my job at Merrill-Palmer to my job at Operation Friendship and I was home, I was with the kids, I did a lot of physical activity. I don't know how I did it. I did it because it made me feel so alive so — I've been involved politically since…in global issues at NOW. You would do something and there would be a change and that's energizing.

One of the big issues I was involved in was the media, but before I get into that, you had asked about stories and maybe you'll hear this from other women. Maryann Mahaffey, who is still on the Detroit Council, was not allowed to come in thru the front door of the Detroit Athletic Club. Women had to use the side door. One of the other things I hope will come from these interviews is that young women and men too will realize that all of this did not fall from the sky one day. And so we decided to have a demonstration, and so we had the cameras there from the television stations and we walked in the front door. All of us and there must have been about 20 or 30 women, just walked in the front door at lunch time and they didn't know what hit them. And Maryann Mahaffey was there of course and there were these big headlines you know: "Women Invade Detroit Athletic Club," but then there was a very wonderful circular stairway that went up from the lobby and so we walked up that circular stairway and just stood, and Gerry Barrons said to me, "Now what, Joan? Now Joan, what are we supposed to do?" So I said, "Sing 'I Am Woman'." Gerry Barrons has a fabulous voice. So from the top of the circular stairway with the members and the staff of the Detroit Athletic Club not knowing what had happened she began to belt

out "I Am Woman." You did these things. You didn't waste any time and organizationally I think — not that there weren't personality differences, there were, but I don't know, they seemed to take second place. During this time also I think I gave up…I think I gave up Operation Friendship.

Interviewer: **When was this and do you remember — So Joan we were talking a little bit about the Detroit Athletic Club demonstration, did you have more to say about that?**

J. Israel: Yes, because the policy changed. There was a lot of publicity and their policy changed. And I must say with our contacts with Michigan Bell and the EEOC we had a picket line after our meeting with them and that got publicity and their policy changed. They agreed to the EEOC guidelines and so, as I said many times, it was — I had the energy because it was creating something in front of my very eyes that I was a part of, and that gives you energy. It's only frustration that makes you tired. And my kids are all both feminists — they're feminist and my husband is too. So I feel like I think being a feminist is really, I mean everybody had their own version of it, but trying to give women choice not only in terms of abortion but choice in terms of the kind of lives they want to lead and freeing them from the guilt that so many of them did and still do suffer from. I got some of the material on the Internet and I guess Gloria Steinem said "I never met a man who questioned how he could combine career and children." So that's it. And women don't have to get married these days, and I think there was also some, you know attempts to be made at that time to include gay women, and to make overtures to black and Hispanic women, and anything that was made should have been more so but it whatever it wasn't.

Interviewer: **When you say your kids are feminists and your husband is feminist, was it common to call men feminists at that time?**

J. Israel: No, and they were little at that time. But as they've grown up and took and have related to different issues, and again my husband doesn't like labels but he is. He is, he said with a lot of pride and joy on my part. I couldn't stay with him if he wasn't, I think.

Interviewer: **Going back to talking a little bit more about activism, did you have personal and organizational allies or opponents? Were there —**

J. Israel: Oh opponents, we had Phyllis Schlafly. You know, against the ERA and who was the women here just recently she reared her head in terms of — she was against women fighting in the armed services: Elaine Donnelly. She's a local creature. Yes we had parts of the Catholic church — I was not on the front line of the abortion issue, I mean I was president of the chapter but that wasn't my main activity, but the women who were invaded [the] bishops' conference here in Detroit; they will tell you about it when you

interview them. So yes, we had many enemies. We had people who thought we were being too pushy, that we should wait — friends you know, they sort of sat with their mouths open. So yes it wasn't always easy. It wasn't easy.

Interviewer: **And how did you get around those obstacles these opponents were making, doing things to do hinder your activities?**

J. Israel: Well I think politically we sometimes we debated them, although I think if I'm correct that we decided when Phyllis Schlafly would come in and want an opponent on the ERA we wouldn't debate her. We wouldn't give her that whatever. So as the way you do it now, you try and strengthen your position, you try and get publicity and educate people. There were consciousness-raising groups and I didn't belong to one but the motto was "the personal is the political." This resonated with women because they were ready for it and men came along because in a sense particularly now economically they say you need two incomes and so but it resonated with women. It wasn't something we imposed on anybody, so that's how you get around: you work hard and hope.

Interviewer: **You mentioned you were active in Jewish organizations. Is this an example of cause or issues you worked on besides typical women's issues, or how do you make those connections between religion and gender?**

J. Israel: Well, I really wasn't active in Jewish organizations. I worked professionally with the National Council of Jewish Women. But I wasn't active in the National Council of Jewish Women — in fact I was just at a meeting now at another group I acted with, Stop Hate, and they said…and I told her that they hadn't been born probably when I was doing that and I said "No, I'm not a member now." I'm not active now. You have to choose. You have to sit where you —

Interviewer: **When do you have to choose? What do you have to choose?**

J. Israel: You have to choose where you are going to spend your time and energy, and actually I was going to say I left Operation Friendship because a group of us from NOW, Mary Jo Walsh, Jackie Washington, Gerry Barrons, Marcia Cron, and Harriet Alpern, and I don't think I left anybody out, and myself, formed a business called New Options where we wanted to get non-traditional jobs for women because non-traditional jobs paid more than traditional jobs and the whole issue of equal worth and comparable worth and so we formed this organization. We had offices in the Book Building, I think it's still there downtown, and we had — we went to different companies, we had conferences, we tried to do consciousness-raising. We also found non-traditional jobs for women and that lasted for I guess about

four years.

I was doing that and still doing my professional work. I had gone into private practice at that time in psychotherapy, so I had left Merrill-Palmer, which had cut their programs and I felt that there wasn't any such thing as feminist therapy available, and I got involved wrote papers on feminist therapy, and really if people say "what kind of therapy do you practice?" I don't usually say feminist therapy — I'm very eclectic I take from various philosophies and parts. A lot of people come to see me, they're not feminists and they don't want — they might know I'm a feminist but it's not my job to impose my philosophies upon my clients. So, I was doing the New Options and my therapy. I always seem to have two jobs. Now I don't have two jobs. Well I'm 72 so it's okay. But then at some point there was pressure from the other women in New Options to give up my therapy work and be full-time and I said I couldn't do that so I left. I guess at that time I was just had one job as a professional psychotherapist. One of the issues too we got very involved in was with the media.

Interviewer: **What kind of work?**

J. Israel: Well, at that time I was president of NOW, Mary Jo Walsh was vice president and we went to all the three television stations in Detroit area the numbers: Channel 7, Channel 4, Channel 2. Channel 7 had signed a contract with EOC because they had taken ads for the army so they had a federal obligation, and we went in and we said, "We're going to challenge your license." Jim Osborne, who had just moved from San Francisco to Detroit — it was in the middle of a snow storm, his office was filled with boxes — and we came in there that morning, Mary Jo and myself and we said, "We're here to challenge your license, and welcome to Detroit." He was great though and out of that and discussions with the national media person Kathy Bunk who was like 20 and what was like an army of consultants — she was very bright very headstrong — and with the general counsel of ABC they signed a contract with us, with NOW. The contract was to go, listen to this, from 0 to 1 for their technical people. A woman who was a technician? Forget it.

They ran consciousness raising sessions for them. They did programming and Jean Finletter who later became came one of two national general managers of stations after Jim left was program director. She did programs on women's health. Yes it was at 6 A.M. in the morning in terms of self…well I'm talking about 19…the late 1970's, they didn't know women had breasts then, you know…and so we had this contract. They provided conferences, like how grass roots groups could do PSA's, public service announcements, and that evolved out of that small group.

From NOW came the Michigan Media Committee which was mostly NOW

people, but not all NOW people and we were the contacts with the stations, actually with Channel 2, I believe their license was challenged with another group in Washington, I can't remember who it was, and channel 4 we kind of left alone at that time, because we just had — we couldn't do everything. In 1980, the Michigan Media Project, and I will give you a copy of our program if I can find it, the Michigan Media Project had a three-day conference down at the Book-Cadillac. The keynote speaker was Lynn Shear, who used to — I think she's still on. We had Nicholas Johnson who happened to be the head of the FCC, he was the youngest head of the FCC originally, and we had again many many workshops and receptions and everybody came to that, the newspaper people, the television people, it really was terrific. So media was the next main issue for me because I still think it's important. Although the media leaves a lot to be desired in many ways — it's so you know they say you can't win an election without good media. Unfortunately it's true.

Interviewer: **As far as your involvement in the media: you merely were trying to get more positions for women [or] you were trying to get the media to focus on a different —**

J. Israel: Well, to provide programming for women to — we once threatened to throw a picket line around channel 4 'cause I think there was the dating game that they had, which demeaned — it had secretaries — and no it wasn't "The Dating Game" — I don't know what the name of it was. But there was a program where they would the have secretary and the wife fight over the husband — disgusting, really disgusting. We threatened to go out to California to see the producers. So it was programming, it was attitudinal change, it was staffing, you know? Now the head of the channel 7 in ABC in Detroit is a woman, Grace Skillcrest. She came from the sales department. At that time there were no women in the sales department because historically general manages came from the sales department, so they had to open up their sales department. So it really was a broad overview of the media, which still even now with all the reality stuff — I mean it's gone down the tubes anyway.

Interviewer: **The final question about activist roles is: did you have fun?**

J. Israel: Absolutely, and I always say now you have fun. You have to enjoy it. Yes, there were problems but you have to feel a measure of success, but you know if you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem. And recently I heard a woman, Granny D, who walked across the country for campaign finance reform when she was 90 and she really revived this feeling about the power of one. So there is always the power of one and maybe Eleanor Roosevelt said that a long time ago. And I'm still involved in political things. Not involved in NOW so much anymore, involved in a women's peace group called WAND and we're just taking on the global

issues. But it is a feminist group although the women [in] WAND are different than the women in NOW. They're different, they're not quite as direct, I would say. (Laughs)

Interviewer: **The next part of the interview I'm going to ask you to reflect upon second wave feminism which is defined, I guess, as feminist movements in the 60's 70's and 80's, what is your definition of feminism?**

J. Israel: Well, my definition of feminism is that it is a philosophy, which creates an atmosphere where women and men can choose economically, personally, and so on. Now that's sort of pie in the sky, but that's okay. And one of the things I think that economically, to tell poor women, whether it's in the United States or in the [rest of the] world, where they're being raped and slaughtered as these terrible things happen, to choose professionally, you know forget it, so you have to kind of gear what your hopes are. I'm talking about myself as a middle class, white woman, but recently we read an article by Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times*. He had described what was going on — I can't remember the country in Africa — where girls of 12, 13, and 14 who were giving birth and then receiving no aid and it's just hard, so we sent them some money but you can't…and there is a group in the United States that is trying to have a center to help these girls. So you have to be aware of not being so elitist, and the other thing: I never went to the international conferences in Beijing and…but I think it's about giving people opportunity, that's what feminist means to me.

Interviewer: **Do you think that the press accurately reflected the movements in which you participated?**

J. Israel: Read that again.

Interviewer: **Do you believe that the press the media accurately portray —**

J. Israel: No. No I don't.

Interviewer: **Why?**

J. Israel: For the most part I don't, because they didn't think it was important. They ignored us. There was this book by this woman from the *New York Times, The Woman in the Balcony*, they weren't allowed to cover the press conferences on the main floor, so they didn't think it was important only. It was only when their feet were held to the fire and only when they realized that women were an important economic resource, and I remember going to — I think it was Campbell-Ewald about their advertising — and we went to other agencies too, ad agencies, sometimes with the people from the television station, sometimes by ourselves. They only realized that women were important and began putting women in their ads. Now it's: so does

money talk? Yes money talks. Are there a lot of women selling cars? No. There are a few. Tokenism runs rampant in the world. I don't think — you look at the Congress, look at your CEOs, you look at most of the administrative areas in the world most of them are blue suits. They're white men in blue suits and so there is still a lot of change that has to occur.

Interviewer: **What do you perceive —**

J. Israel: And let me say this, women themselves still are brainwashed into the struggle between being themselves, being — and when I say powerful I don't mean powerful in terms of they are going to hit you over the head — and pleasing men. And I see this in my office so many times: young women struggle with this issue of pleasing men and kind of following their dreams and that's an issue.

Interviewer: **What do you think were the main achievements of your wave of feminism and what were the main failures?**

J. Israel: Well I think the main achievements were that women do play generally a more important role in this world. I think having choice was a main achievement. The ERA had been reintroduced and I'd be pleased to say that Debbie Stabenow and Carl Levin have signed on — that was a failure that was a failure. I think there have been women accepted in various professional schools and I think that personally at least the young women that I see both socially and in my office do feel stronger about themselves and although they have the conflict of career and home they feel — they don't question that they are going to have a career, this is something they are going to do. When they don't, they realize it's a big problem, especially with divorce and death so frequent. So I think that's been a success. I think the failure is I don't think we did make enough headway with blacks and Hispanics and minority, other minority women, and I know that more women are more accepting of gay women and [the gay] lifestyle. What are the failures? The failures are we didn't change the world. The failures are politically we don't — although we have more women running for office and the organization I'm involved with now encourages that we have a senator. That's encouraging. That's positive.

Interviewer: **Did you have any particular mentor or outstanding figure that you learned from and looked up to through your activism?**

J. Israel: Well I think although I said my mother was not political she was by my side. She was very proud of what I did politically. I think I was her alter ego, so I think I owe my mother — I'd like to get…I think I owe my mother a big thank you, and I think somebody you will interview, Millie Jeffrey, has been an icon and for me, Wilma Scott Heide, who is not alive, was president of NOW. We had the best talks. She was a very warm and

thoughtful and encouraging person and when she came to this conference on aging, I think the title of her talk was…they were talking about housewives. She said, "I never knew a woman who married a house." She had a great sense of humor. I think those people were my mentors and I would say colleagues Algea [Harrison] and Lillian Troll they were very special, very special. I treasure them.

Interviewer: **Do you have any advice for the next generation of feminists?**

J. Israel: Yes, the advice is to know what your history is, which I hope this — these interviews will help fill the vacuum, and to realize you are going to lose whatever was gained if you aren't alert and active. And so my advice is to pay attention and don't sit back because the world will pass you by, and to take advantage of opportunities, and to talk to the women who were at the beginning of this, and to share, to enrich each other, that's my advice.

Interviewer: **What do you think the outstanding issues are that they are going to have to confront?**

J. Israel: Well, I think taking away of choice is an outstanding issue because they are already doing that in Michigan — they take little chunks and said, "Oh no no no, we aren't going to touch choice." I think it would be good to have the ERA passed, I think that would be good. I think the outstanding issues are still in terms of poverty: women live longer and are poor. I think as a therapist, the outstanding issues are to try to get more balance in relationships. I think the outstanding issues are the issues that are always there we just have to readdress them in terms of context of our present political situation. Things are going to get worse because of the economic situation and all this money that is being sent for war, and so we are going to suffer — borrowing money for scholarships, I think they've stopped that, but they are going to make it worse for families. It's going to be worse for the families who need it most. It's going to be worse. So I think young women have to stand up on their own two feet and look around and choose. You can't have it all but you can almost have it all, and to make good choices about your significant other whoever that may be.

Interviewer: **Good Advice. Those are the last questions we have. We have about two minutes left on the tape. Do you have any things that you want to add to what we've said and also any questions you may —**

J. Israel: Yes, I would like you to go where the telephone was and there's a picture of my mother and I'd like you to get it and I'm going to hold it.

Interviewer: **So this is your mother?**

J. Israel: So this is my mother. Her name was Lottie and — I just want to have her on

camera so that everybody can see the marvelous person that she was.

Interviewer: **Lottie, what was her last name?**

J. Israel: Liftshutz. L-i-f-s-c-h-u-t-z , although her maiden last name was different, it was Schlonem (??); and you might say, I didn't put in that during this time I made two films, short films: one on a woman on welfare, one on growing older. And several papers. I was a panelist on Morch Crims (??) free for all at DIV, and it's been a wonderful journey.

Interviewer: **Great thank you so much.**

J. Israel: Thank you.

Interviewer: **A pleasure to interview you.**

[END]