

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of
Susan Slyomovics

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Susan Slyomovics conducted by Janet Price on August 18th and 19th, 2015. The interview is part of the Barnard College Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcription of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Barnard Alumni Class of 1971 Oral History Project

Interviewee: Susan Slyomovics

Location: Los Angeles, CA

Interviewer: Janet Price

Date: August 18 and 19, 2015

00:00:10 Q: Today is August 18th, 2015, and I am Janet Price, from The Barnard Voices, Inc. And we are doing a B71 oral history of Susan Slyomovics, Class of '71, in her beautiful home in the Westwood section of Los Angeles. Hello, Susan. And the time is 10:35 Pacific Time, in the morning, because Susan is a morning person. (Slyomovics laughs) Hello, Susan. And thank you so much for doing this. Let's start from the very beginning. Tell me about your family and your very early years.

00:00:57 Slyomovics: Let's see. I was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, July 1950. July 5th, 1950. And that city, Montreal, shaped me enormously, as did my parents. So let's see, my parents came to Montreal in October 1948, they were Czechoslovakian Jews, refugees, they'd been in the DP (displaced persons) camp, and had come to Canada because that was the first visa they could get. So they had fled several times. My father had fled the Nazis in 1938 from Sudetenland, and managed to get out because he was part of some sort of political underground, and ended up being the Czechoslovakian consul-in-exile in Antwerp, and then served in England in the Czechoslovakian Brigade from 1940, and was part of the liberation of his country's capital in 1945, May of 1945. My mother—the rest of his family, his mothers, his sisters—I'm sorry, his parents, sisters, died in various Nazi concentration camps, a fact he didn't know until 1945. My mother, in her turn, along with her mother, survived Auschwitz, Markkleeberg, Płaszów, that was the camp in *Schindler's List*. And my parents met in Czechoslovakia after the war and then

the Communists took over in '48, and they actually walked over the mountains to a DP camp in Austria where my brother was born. So the whole family arrives in 1948, not knowing English. My parents with a three or four-months-old sick baby, you know, constantly either refugees or survivors, and they just got off the boat in Montreal; many of the other people—for example, actually, it occurs to me (laughs) Saul Bellow, his family landed in Quebec and then went on to Chicago, but my parents stayed because my father said there was a sick wife, sick kid, and they land in French-speaking, Catholic Quebec. And so that city, Montreal, besides that family configuration, (air conditioner turns on) Montreal had the largest number of Holocaust survivors—It's the air conditioning—Montreal had the largest number of Holocaust survivors in North America, fully one third—20 to 30 percent of the Jewish community identified as survivors. And then there's the city of Montreal; everybody used to tell me how cosmopolitan it is, lovely French, well it isn't, certainly not in the 1950s and early sixties when I grew up. I tell people to think Beirut, Nicosia, Jerusalem, you know, cities at war, internal populations, no mixing, segregated schooling, you went to school by religion, other sectarianism, you didn't mix. My father used to call it the largest Jewish ghetto in North America, and he said he never lived as a ghetto Jew in Czechoslovakia, in Carlsbad, or Prague; why should he have come to America to live like this? And he always told me to leave, “Go to America; go to the United States.”

00:05:01 Q: If I could interrupt just a second, why did they choose Montreal to emigrate to, what's the story behind that?

00:05:07 Slyomovics: It was chosen for them; they sat in a DP camp, and the Canadian government actually—the Canadian Jewish Committee [Canadian Jewish Congress] had tried to

get Jews into Canada; it was impossible to get into the United States after 1945, or very difficult unless you had family there. And so by '48, you know, there were still people in DP camps, so in 1948 leaders of the Canadian Jewish Committee—whatever they were called, Congress—had managed to apply pressure to the government to allow Jews to come in to Canada in 1948, and so they had a quota of five hundred furriers that would be allowed into Canada, and my father was a furrier. And so the Canadians came around to the DP camps and he grabbed it to get out. Just take the first visa. He also said he wanted to get out of Europe, because, you know, it was fall of 1948; he didn't know if the Soviets were going to invade Austria, because the DP camp was in Salzburg. And I believe they were in the American sector—Salzburg was the American sector, and there was just this sense, you know, Berlin is already divided, under siege, there was just the sense that what had happened to them in Czechoslovakia, what had happened in Germany, could happen in Austria, and so my father's feeling was get out of Europe, get away from all that past, start over.

00:06:38 Q: One other question about Czechoslovakia, before we go back to baby Susan, is they spent a few years after the war in Czechoslovakia. What were they doing? What was their life like then?

00:06:50 Slyomovics: So they went—after '45 my father was demobilized from the Czechoslovakian Brigade, and he met my mother who was much younger than him—thirteen years—through his niece who was my mother's best friend, and my mother had been liberated from a Nazi satellite camp, a slave labor camp, and had returned to Prague, and had actually started medical school in September of 1945, just a few months after she was liberated, and they

met through these connections, family friends. And they got engaged, they got married, my father built up a fur practice; they were Czechoslovakian nationalists, as only Jews can be. (laughs) Not Czech, not Slovak, but they embraced that interwar vision of Tomáš [Garrigue] Masaryk; I mean, I actually thought Prague was the capital of the world until—the most important city in the world growing up; certainly Montreal was not, as in any refugee household. So my father was a furrier, my mother a medical student, and they had to flee again in '48 to Canada. The Canadians did not recognize my mother's medical studies, plus they had no money, she had a baby, then I was born two years later, and so 1950s Canada was not that much different from 1950s United States, women didn't work. Although if they had stayed in Prague she would have been a doctor probably.

00:08:38 Q: So where was your family living at the time you were born, and what was your early childhood like?

00:08:45 Slyomovics: We were living in Montreal. First in sort of the Montreal equivalent of the Lower East Side, I guess. It was a neighborhood called Park Extension, and then they moved to a suburban area, which was largely Jewish; the entire area was an enclave around the synagogue, so I went to synagogue every Saturday, Hebrew school, Zionist Hebrew-speaking summer camp, and no interaction with non-Jews. None.

00:09:18 Q: What sect was your summer camp? Was it Habonim? Was it—it wasn't Hashomer Hatzair?

00:09:23 Slyomovics: Bnai Akiva.

00:09:25 Q: Bnai Akiva. So that's—

00:09:25 Slyomovics: Which is cultural Zionism, Orthodox Judaism. (laughs) Who else could ask that kind of question? No, it wasn't left at all. And it wasn't even Yiddishist unfortunately, because my parents spoke Yiddish at home.

00:09:43 Q: Did you learn Yiddish?

00:09:44 Slyomovics: Yeah. I don't speak it very well, but I learnt; I translate poetry. And my brother and I learned French, which my parents never learned. And we didn't learn Czech for—I didn't know Czech very well, so we each had our own languages to hide from the other, and English and Yiddish were the ones in common. My brother and I went to Hebrew school so we also knew Hebrew quite well. And I really learnt English well teaching my parents, I must admit. It was a wonderful experience, and my mother was an astonishing reader and learner and fascinated by the English language.

00:10:28 Q: So what is your first memory as a very, very young child?

00:10:34 Slyomovics: The very first one I could remember was I was five years old, and I can see the pattern, the stone pattern on our suburban walkway, and I'm sitting and waiting for the yellow school bus to come and pick me up, and it's not going to come for another two hours, but

I'm an early riser; I loved school, always loved school, and I just—I can see the pattern on the walkway, and the bus arriving, and just this joy, I'm out in the world. It's a very powerful memory, yeah.

00:11:13 Q: So tell me a little bit about you and your brother when you were little. Did you play together, did he pick on you, did you bother him? What was your relationship?

00:11:22 Slyomovics: I probably bothered him but he never gave me that impression. He's two years older than me; we're very close. We never talk politics, because we are radically different. There's sort of a pact in our household not to talk politics because there's no way we can ever agree. And I love him enormously. And he took care of me all my life. I skipped a grade actually, sort of, because he used to come home and teach me what he learnt. He taught me how to read very, very young; I could read reasonably well at—according to my parents, I could read pretty well by five. You know they were giving me those nice little big picture books, and he would come home—he's a born teacher, and he became a teacher, so he taught me everything. A brilliant mathematician, which was my weak point, but I got through math thanks to him, not thanks to the teachers who don't know how to teach math.

00:12:24 Q: Still don't.

00:12:25 Slyomovics: Yeah. I did well thanks to him. You know, we had a different system, we had like the British A Level [General Certificate of Education Advanced Level] kind of thing; it didn't matter what you did in high school as long as the exam that everybody in the province

took, as long as you passed that, which kind of made high school less pressured than it is here in the United States, because it doesn't matter what your teacher gives you as a grade, it's how you do on this province-wide exam system, and I did much better in that one than I did at school.

(laughs)

00:12:59 Q: So the elementary school you went to was a Jewish school?

00:13:02 Slyomovics: No, it was a Protestant school, because the Talmud Torah hadn't gone full time until I was older, so I would go to the Protestant school, and then I would go every afternoon for several hours to the Hebrew school.

00:13:18 Q: Did you take Protestant religious instruction?

00:13:21 Slyomovics: Well, the Jews of Montreal made an agreement with the Protestant school board; there was no non-religious education in the Province of Quebec, utterly sectarian. So the Jewish community had made an agreement where we would not—there would be no religious classes for us, but we used to start every morning with the Lord's Prayer, and that was like my first rebellion. I refused to say it, (laughs) and I got into trouble for that. So then they made me say it, but then I drew the line at that last part, "Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord." I wouldn't say that, and I got the whole class not to say it, and since we were all Jews in this Protestant class, there was this utter silence, you know, on that phrase that infuriated the teachers. I still remember that.

00:14:12 Q: How old were you then?

00:14:14 Slyomovics: Oh, I must have been fifth or sixth grade; before that I was pretty compliant. I liked my teachers and I did very well in school, it was this—a different world from what appeared to me at the time as a very rich, loving, manic, Holocaust survivor refugee household. (laughs) School was orderly, Protestant, you know, the English-speaking—(laughs) It made sense, it was not chaotic, and I just loved it.

00:14:52 Q: So tell us some stories about your mom and dad, so we can understand this manic Holocaust household.

00:15:00 Slyomovics: Well, there was none of this silence. My mother was speaking from the beginning; she was part of these organizations that were called Concentration Camp Inmate Organizations, they used to meet in our house. I used to listen to these—what they would talk about, there were the _____ (??) themes that they would deal with. And then my mother became very, very active in a variety of—what would you call it, Jewish women's organizations, in particular B'nai B'rith. So by 1964—I was fourteen—she was already president of—either her chapter or a much larger conglomeration of B'nai B'rith Jewish women's organizations, and I used to write her speeches. She would tell them to me orally. You know, she was a brilliant speaker, and a very good reader but didn't spell, and was convinced that she had to have a speech in front of her, even though I told her, you know, you can just go with it. She says, “No, no, no, you have to write it out.” So I would write out—she would talk to me and I'd sit at the Hermes typewriter—it was orange—and I'd type out her speeches, and I'd change things, I'd fix things

up, I'd put things she may not wanted to have said. (both laugh) But it was a wonderful training in writing, in how to—you know, a rhetorical training. And then she went on to become—she's a very well-known speaker on the Holocaust in Canada, and there's You-Tube videos, tons of videotapes, and she specialized in—She was one of the first in the early sixties to work on setting up Holocaust education for high school students. She loved high school students; she said that was the best age, before they were jaded. And so she was a remarkable speaker, set up all sorts of things across Canada. And then they moved to Vancouver in 1969, and she did the same thing there. But the Jewish women's group was Hadassah-WIZO, and she got lots of awards in Canada for Holocaust education, and one quite prestigious one.

00:17:16 Q: Did she come to your high school to speak?

00:17:18 Slyomovics: She didn't. Well, she spoke in my—she spoke to teachers in my elementary school, because at the time, you know, this is in the fifties, and the early sixties; either people didn't believe what had gone on in Auschwitz, or they didn't think it was suitable for school children in the fifties and early sixties, so she often spoke to the teachers' groups at the beginning, and then slowly Holocaust education evolved into something else over time; there's a chronology of presenting this material. But we certainly never stopped hearing about it, never. We were constantly aware of all sorts of things, triggers, things—My brother and I spent the summer together and we were laughing over the triggers that we all knew; she couldn't go in the New York City subway, couldn't go near trains. She wouldn't pick me up at the train station when I used to come from Berkeley to Vancouver, Seattle to Vancouver by train. (laughs) I had to carry my luggage several blocks so she wouldn't be near a train station or hear the trains. We

always had to carry water around in the fifties and sixties, and this is before water bottles, so we used to bring these glass jars of water with us everywhere because if she were thirsty she would just freak out and start to tremble. I mean, there were all sorts of things: police uniforms, German Shepherds. Oh, God, I remember once we went through—in the early seventies—we went through the Rome airport, and they were searching for drugs, and these German Shepherds come at us, you know, leaping all over the place, on chains, with these guys in police uniforms; my mother went berserk. So we found this very nice – you know, we said, She can't walk through this path that you make all the tours go through. They were very, very nice; they put her in an ambulance, and we met her, you know, around the front. She just couldn't even go through this gauntlet that they have for drugs, and drug use. So we were very attuned to her problems, her triggers, her manic stuff. We thought it was normal. Everybody we knew was a Holocaust survivor.

00:19:40 Q: Were there groups for the children of survivors?

00:19:43 Slyomovics: Not that early. No, the first group I ever ran into was in the seventies, and I first heard about it maybe '75, '76, through Jewish Theological Seminary, where I was getting my MA. They started groups. And then when I went to Berkeley in '77, there was a call for children of survivors to meet, and there must have been a hundred and twenty people in that room, in Berkeley.

00:20:13 Q: Wow!

00:20:13 Slyomovics: Yeah! And, you know, we went around—the meeting was—it took like three hours. You know, they go around the room and tell their stories, and they're extraordinary stories.

00:20:25 Q: Did your mom seek treatment?

00:20:29 Slyomovics: (laughs and sighs) Well, 1948, she told me, the psychiatrists didn't understand. They just didn't understand what Auschwitz was or meant; it was too early. I don't even think they understood how to deal with a bona fide refugee who had been traumatized, not through the concentration camps. But she said she had very good doctors who took care of her physically, because she came with a lot of ailments. And now basically, I think she tried once or twice, and she didn't find it very interesting. But the person who ran the Holocaust videotapes, in 1977, in Vancouver—and those videotapes are wonderful; I think they're better than the ones that are at the Yale Fortunoff [Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies]. It was done by a psychiatrist named Rob—what's Rob's last name? Krell. Dr. Rob [Robert] Krell. He himself was a child survivor, and he didn't have a template of questions. He just let you talk. And they're both sitting there like, you know, it's a television interview; it's not, you know, the kind of interview that we're doing. You know, you could see the interaction between the two of them.

00:21:43 Q: Well, I could have horns and the viewer wouldn't know.

00:21:46 Slyomovics: And they're sitting there, and it was really nicely done. And he did a lot of them, and so it was done about the same as the big Yale one. It's less well known, but I think he

did a much better job, from my point of view. And my mother enjoyed the experience. She knew the interviewer, which mattered; she said that works best, and she felt comfortable with him, and he let her go wherever she wanted to go.

00:22:09 Q: And you viewed those.

00:22:10 Slyomovics: I have copies of them, yeah.

00:22:12 Q: Did you learn anything from them that you didn't already know about your mother and her experience?

00:22:18 Slyomovics: There're always all sorts of interesting things that came up, (laughs) but as it turned out the [Steven Allan] Spielberg one helped me, because they had a template, and that interviewer was not going to be budged; she was going to say what happened before the war, what happened during the war, and what happened after the war, so I got an actual chronology as opposed to the Krell one where I got an insight into what had happened to her and how she felt about it.

00:22:47 Q: True confessions, and I should have said this at the beginning of the tape—Susan and I have been friends since our first week at Barnard [College]; we were both on the same floor—

00:22:57 Slyomovics: Which we can't remember.

00:22:58 Q: Right. Susan says it was three Hewitt; I say it was two Reid—

00:23:02 Slyomovics: And we're compromising on three Reid, right?

00:23:05 Q: Right, that's our compromise. That's our story and we're sticking to it.

00:23:08 Slyomovics: We have to check, check it out.

00:23:10 Q: And so I know way too much about Susan, but I'm doing my best not to show it.

And Susan's smiling at me. (laughs)

00:23:19 Slyomovics: You're doing good. A very good interview.

00:23:22 Q: And I knew both her parents fairly well, adored them, loved her parents, as only a friend can love her friend's parents, because I didn't see their parenting, I just saw their wonderful personalities. But I mention this now, I think of this now because—

00:23:39 Slyomovics: You knew my brother.

00:23:40 Q: And I knew your brother. When I was in Israel I visited him, so I've seen him recently. So I'm trying as hard as I can to ask open-ended questions, but I have to ask this follow-up. Your mother is charming; she looks—she looked like Ingrid Bergman, she sounded like Zsa

Zsa Gabor, and she could change the subject with charm and élan like no one I ever knew. And so she must have tried that, in each interview, to skirt around things she didn't want to talk about?

00:24:13 Slyomovics: Oh, yes. I had to come fully prepared. I knew a few things, and then what I did—the way I actually learned something was I wrote a book. And then it became a serious—she took it seriously. So I'd give her the chapters and she would read them and then start riffing on certain things that I actually hadn't heard before. And most of the time when she started talking about the camps, it would just erupt; you never knew when it would happen, and so I started taking notes—I always carry a notebook anyway, so I started taking notes. I have pieces of paper, I'd date them, I'd write them, and then eventually I wrote them up, and then she would add things to them. (air conditioner noise) So when I wrote the book I put the different interview dates in which I actually heard something. And there were a couple of things she didn't want that I had to take out, *absolutely* had to take out. One of them I won, and one of them I lost, but we kept amplifying it. My father added some stuff, too; it was harder for him to talk about it, because for him to talk about his parents—father was killed in Theresienstadt, Terezín, which was the main Czech camp by 1943, and his mother was killed in Auschwitz, his sisters—I was named after his mother, so he used to call me by his mother's name.

00:25:37 Q: What was his mother's name?

00:25:39 Slyomovics: Susan isn't my real name; Susan is the name they gave me because they didn't know where we would end up; they wanted a name that would fly anywhere. So my real name is Bluma, so he used to call me Blimele, which means *little Bluma*.

00:25:53 Q: And in Hebrew it's Shoshanna?

00:25:6 Slyomovics: No, they never used the Hebrew name.

00:25:58 Q: Bluma.

00:26:00 Slyomovics: Bluma was the real name. And there are people in Montreal knew me by that name, because that was the name I went by in all my Hebrew schools, and Zionist summer camps, and so many people didn't know my name was Susan. So anybody before, from high school and before, knows that name. (laughs)

00:26:19 Q: So did your mom have nightmares? Did she wake you up at night, that sort of thing?

00:26:24 Slyomovics: Well, they both used to scream. (laughs) And then they'd comfort each other. Oh, I would hear them screaming and moaning. He was pretty bad too; my father was pretty bad too. The two of them just, you know, they grew up in a world that no longer existed; they spoke the same Yiddish dialect, which isn't taught. When I was studied Yiddish at Berkeley they taught us the Litvak one, which I think—are you a Litvak?

00:26:52 Q: Yes.

00:26:53 Slyomovics: Yes. Well, there you go, it's the Vilna Lithuanian dialect, and we are West Carpathian, so (laughs) you know, my father used to get so annoyed at me—you know, with the teachers, "Why are you—? This is not our Yiddish." So he'd always tell me—he was a native speaker—he would always tell me what was the correct form (laughs), what I had to do to pass the class. So it was like bilingual Yiddish speakers, and then the same thing happened with French; we were taught standard French in the schools, but on the street we heard the Québécois version of French. I don't know if you—at the time they called it a dialect, but I don't think that's true anymore. It was called *joual*. I have all these languages in my head, and then of course my brother and I used Hebrew, *and* I decided I had to get out of Montreal *fast*. It was the middle of the Quebec Revolution [Quiet Revolution]. My brother and I—(laughs) my brother was a Marxist at the time, he isn't anymore—came up with a settler colonial paradigm, and he says, "We're losers in this situation." You have the Québécois, or the peasants, or the underclass, or the agricultural, or the laborers. The Anglophone British, I mean English Canadians, own everything, and there was a thin layer of Jewish professionals living in their ghetto. And he says, "We're going to lose in this situation no matter what." He used to lecture me when I was about fourteen on Marx. He says, "We got to get out." And my father would tell me, "You have to get out." And so my brother's choice was Israel, and mine was New York, and Barnard.

00:28:41 Q: We'll come back to that very shortly, but—and that will be a lot of fun. But let's hear a little bit more about your father.

00:28:50 Slyomovics: Oh, he was the one I was actually closest to. (laughs) You know, it's a strange thing to say in my family, because he strictly speaking was also a child of a survivor, having lost his parents and most of his family in the camps, and he was one of the few I knew who had not been in the camps. For example, my grandmother showed up in 1949, she'd gone to Cuba, Batista, you could buy your way into Batista's Cuba. And she had, after the war, married a cousin of her husband who had died, and this was in Mauthausen, all the different Nazi camps, so she married a cousin who had lost his wife and children—so survivors marrying survivors. They end up in Cuba and then they come to Montreal, and we're all living together in this community of deeply, deeply wounded human beings. But my father was relatively sane; he just had World War II to deal with, (laughs) as a soldier, and he'd gotten wounded, but you know he was heroic and he thought of himself as heroic. He had been at D-Day in 1944; he'd been all—you know, I learnt World War II history inside out through him. And we watched *Patton*, that movie. He adored [US General George S.] Patton. My father was in the Tank Corps, and he said Patton was the only general who knew how to use the tank properly. And so I saw *Patton*, the movie, about twenty times, because that was the only movie he wouldn't fall asleep in, and this is before—you know—we would actually go to the theater to see it. *Battle of the Bulge* was another favorite. *The Battle of Midway*, he was willing to do too, even though that was the Pacific. And so he would tell me wonderfully funny war stories. He never told me anything sad, didn't want—never told me anything bad, anything about his family, anything about how he felt, until I started writing this book. And he was—he was in his mid-nineties, he died three years ago at ninety-seven.

00:31:08 Q: May his memory be a blessing.

00:31:10 Slyomovics: Yeah, I miss him, I miss them both. My mother died last year and I miss them terribly. I'm an orphan. (laughs) My brother and I.

Is this working? Is that what you're worried about?

00:31:23 Q: I don't see—It seems to be working, but I don't see your mic. Oh, there it is. Excellent. Okay. Everything's copacetic.

So when you were a child what kind of work did your dad do? Did he stay as a furrier?

00:31:39 Slyomovics: Yeah, he was a furrier.

00:31:40 Q: And didn't he do other things afterwards?

00:31:44 Slyomovics: Well, he did very well as a furrier, and he had one of the—built up one of the nicest studios in Montreal, and then he got the bug of real estate, and he pretty much lost everything. And that's one of the reasons they moved to Vancouver, pretty much I would say, starting all over again. And they felt that Montreal was not—there was this sense that you didn't know what was going to happen in Montreal in 1969, 1970; the tanks had come in, it was a state of emergency, a few bombs went off, you know, it could've been some sort of independence movement, and most of my high school class in fact—we would graduate in '67—um, I may be wrong now because people move around, but I don't think anybody is in Montreal. People left

for Toronto, Vancouver, the United States. If you were English speaking, and in particular English-speaking Jewish, you felt like that there was no future for you there, even if you knew French. It just felt like you were a settler and you didn't belong; go to English-speaking Canada where everybody is kind of an immigrant, and there's no, what they call *Français de souche*. You know, *Québécois de souche*, “people who are native.” (laughs)

00:33:09 Q: Although they weren't really.

00:33:11 Slyomovics: No, they weren't, but at the time we didn't know that. (both laugh) That's how it seemed, you know, they called themselves—I'm using the quotes, I think it was maybe René Lévesque used the term? [Transcriber's note: It was Pierre Vallières.] One of the great leaders of Quebec separatism, the province kept voting to separate, never quite made it. But the term that was used in quotes was White Niggers, you know, sort of a parallel to the civil rights African American underclass. And it certainly it was true, and my brother said, "Look, it's true, but we're just the wrong ethnic group. We're going to lose in this situation."

00:33:49 Q: Well, before we get to Barnard we need to talk about your high school experience.

Ah! But before we do that tell me a story or two about you and your dad when you were little.

00:33:59 Slyomovics: Oh, gosh, my dad was so wonderful, adventurous, full of energy. What he wanted for his daughter was not what he wanted for his wife. He wanted me to get degrees, to go out in the world, and he said to me, “It's, you know, a different world from the 1950s where women didn't have that some opportunity.” He was this patriarchal feminist. So when I was

sixteen he signed me up for flying lessons, and I would go out to the airport with him, and when my mother found out she freaked, and he—and he backed off and so did I. And I remember going to him and saying to him, "I'm not going to back off ever again, and I want your support." And I campaigned for a couple of years to go to the United States to school, and I started with him, and I said, "She—my mother is not going to agree, she wants me to stay home, live at home." McGill [University] is a very good university. My older brother went there, you know, married locally, all of this sort of stuff, and I said, "I'm not going to do this, and I need your help." And he says, "You got it. You got it. I'm behind this, I want you out in the world." I wanted to go off to Spain; I had conceived of this nutty desire to learn Spanish in high school. My father says go, my mother freaked. My father says, "No, no, no, she'll be okay, it's a summer school, it's all carefully curated, she's watched over," so he paid for it and I went. And that was the Barnard thing too, the argument was (laughs) there were curfews, we would be watched over, (laughs) it's an all-girls school, it's an excellent Ivy League university, it's an opportunity for her to go. My mother wanted me to go to Brandeis [University], which I actually got into, and Bryn Mawr [College], nobody wanted after I—In high school the principal who'd come from New York, from The Little Red School House in New York, and then came to my high school, which was—my parents put me in a private high school for my last three years which was *fabulous*, I got *such* good training in every single subject. And so the American, he was an American, and he said, "Everybody's leaving Quebec, why go to Toronto to a big huge university, why not go to one of the women's colleges in the United States?" So he gave me a list of all of them, about twelve of them. And I'm very orderly, so I put them in alphabetical order, and I applied to Bryn Mawr, Barnard, and Brandeis, and by the time I hit the third one I thought to myself, I've had it, you know, each one was a different application, so I stopped at the Bs; that was it. (Price laughs)

And, of course, McGill was the backup, because I had gotten in Early Decision, they gave Early Decision to the top high school students in Canada, I mean in Montreal or Quebec. (laughs) So I got into all three. My mother wanted Brandeis, and I wanted Barnard. And one of the reasons I wanted Barnard was my high school librarian had gone to Barnard, and she loved it. And my senior year I was pretty much kicked out of every single class, and the punishment was to go to the library; looking back this makes no sense to me. You know, I just started at the A's, and read my way through; I had no idea what I was doing, I just worked my way through the entire alphabet under the fiction section. And every now and then she would suggest something like James Baldwin, it was *The Fire Next Time*; I remember she suggested it. And the worse thing that could ever happen to me was to get kicked out of the library, which only happened when other students who were kicked out joined me, because, you know, what we're doing was chatting, we just couldn't stop talking, we're high school kids, and we never—and I had a long commute to this private high school, it took three buses and an hour and a half, in that Montreal freezing weather, which has given me a total distaste for anything that's cold. And so the only time I would see my friends was during the school hours, and we were all like that, it was a catchment private school that brought people from all over the city. And so we never stopped talking. (laughs) I was the worst offender by far, but that was not, you know, a main problem, I mean I wasn't particularly rude, it was just I couldn't stop talking, right. So I'd get kicked out to the library and I'd read. And then if someone else got kicked out, which was a little rarer, we would talk and then we'd get kicked out of the library and we'd have to sit in the hallway and be silent. That was the killer. (laughs) But I had such an education there, wonderful teachers, and that librarian was probably the most important person in my high school career, just telling me who to read: Joseph Heller, I mean all of these people and the writers that were extraordinary.

00:39:30 Q: And what about your friends? Who were your friends? Where did you fit in socially? Did you have a boyfriend? What was your peer influence?

00:39:40 Slyomovics: No boyfriend, please. This wasn't done in my time. (laughs) Boyfriend! God! I'm still very close to my high school friends, I still go to my high school reunions, there were only twenty-two of us. And one in particular I stayed very close to.

00:39:59 Q: Harriet?

00:40:00 Slyomovics: Yeah, Harriet, yeah, and in fact I'm supposed to give a talk in Toronto, and whenever I go there for any reason, conferences or whatever, or when she comes to Los Angeles, you know, we stay at each other's houses, so we remain close. And there are several others I'm close to, another one is an anthropologist, at SMU, in Texas, Southern Methodist University, so whenever we go to the anthropology, the annual anthropology meetings, wherever they are, we make sure to have lunch together, so things like that. It's a close group and I think we're planning another reunion sometime soon.

00:40:43 Q: So think back to your high school days and what would you do together? Did you ever see each other outside of school—

00:40:49 Slyomovics: Never.

00:40:49 Q: —being so far apart?

00:40:50 Slyomovics: Never. Very, very rare. We would sometimes stay late afterwards, but we were total nerds, I mean, we were always reading books, telling each other about books, you know, this was a school for smart kids, or rich kids it appears, one or the other. And I just remember the games we played; we used to play dictionary games, we'd take a word that nobody ever heard of and you'd give four definitions, only one of which was correct. I mean we loved that game. (laughs) Or we would read to each other. Also, we would read books to each other. Oh, and *Star Trek*. We were all—no, I wasn't as bad as some of them—we were all *Star Trek* fiends, and this was the original *Star Trek*; William Shatner was from Montreal, and the Montreal Jewish ghetto. And he would come back to the synagogue to visit his parents, who everybody knew. Shaare Zedek in Côte-Saint-Luc—(laughs) when he showed up there was pandemonium, and it wasn't popular the first year or two. So another one of my early political actions was a letter-writing campaign, because they were threatening to cancel that first *Star Trek*. And my other friends were *Hobbit* freaks. I never liked *The Hobbit*, never. I never could get into those books.

00:42:20 Q: So what were your favorite books in high school, since you were such an avid—

00:42:23 Slyomovics: Baldwin, Baldwin, I loved James Baldwin. And you read with a fever. You know, where I liked this book, the librarian told me that *The Fire Next Time* was a good book, I read it, I liked it, so I read *everything* that the library had, even if good, bad: *Giovanni's Room*, there was novels, whatever, you'd start with that. So I remember him as unbelievably

important, and who else was important? I remember reading parts of Frantz Fanon. I remember *Catch 22*; we knew it by heart. People knew entire phrases. I wasn't that good at it but some of my friends were very good. We had compulsory Latin in high school; this is Canada, right? (laughs) Compulsory—I loved it! And so we would do these games with Latin, with conjugation; we were really nerds, I must admit. Science was not a part of this; this was history, literature, popular culture of the 1960s.

00:43:34 Q: You had to take science, right?

00:43:36 Slyomovics: Oh, yeah, I took—we had biology, chemistry; we had to take ten subjects, it was a different system, you had to take exams in ten subjects to graduate. So what a lot of us did is we took more, because they would take the ten top exams. And you took all the exams at the same time throughout the province. And in our case we had to take a lot of the exams at McGill University.

00:44:02 Q: And that was different from the O Levels [Ordinary Level] and the A Levels?

00:44:05 Slyomovics: Well they started—in my day they only had—I can't remember anymore, but the O Levels would get you into McGill, and then they had an A Level system, which would give you another year or so, which my parents wanted me to do because there was a wonderful A Level school in Switzerland. That's what my father wanted for me, again, the same controlled environment for a young female, in Neuchâtel. And they gave the Canadian A Levels, along probably with other school systems, but I wanted to go to New York. (laughs) He felt I was too

young; I was only seventeen when I went off to college. I'm a year younger than the rest of my class, and they wanted me to have that extra year.

00:44:57 Q: But you prevailed.

00:44:59 Slyomovics: Yeah. Switzerland was more expensive, it was further away; my grandmother by this time, and my step-grandfather, had moved to Brooklyn—there were all sorts of things that were on my side. (both laugh) Barnard was not that expensive in 1967.

00:45:17 Q: Right. Fifteen hundred dollars.

00:45:19 Slyomovics: Something like that, and Switzerland was a hell of a lot more, plus the airfare.

00:45:26 Q: So you went to Barnard. How did you get there when you first arrived?

00:45:30 Slyomovics: Oh, (coughs) I'll never forget that scene. It was my father standing in front of his offices in downtown Montreal—all his life he was a beautiful dresser, wore these Fedora hats, three-piece suits—sobbing, because I'm leaving, right. And so we had a 1960-something Chrysler Imperial, with these giant fins or tails, it was cream colored. And my mother drove me there with another friend of hers, with, you know, a suitcase. And I wouldn't take any dresses; I wouldn't listen to their fashion advice. I brought jeans, I brought what I wanted; this was 1967, right? No fancy clothes, nothing. Boots and a lot of jeans, and everything was black, I think,

black jackets; I tried to paint my high school—in high school, my bedroom black. (laughs) I was one of those kids, yeah.

00:46:39 Q: I should ask you what music you listened to in high school, since you're such a fascinating teenager.

00:46:46 Slyomovics: Oh, yeah. No, music was really important. The Beatles came to Montreal. I didn't see them, but all my high school friends—they came in 1964, and so you were a Beatles or a Rolling Stones fan, and then among The Beatles you'd pick, so I was a John Lennon, always. And then there were all these British groups that we knew about that came to Canada, just like we got a lot of British television shows, and French television shows; there was only two channels, unlike the Americans, one British—I mean, one English, one French. And so there were all these British groups we really liked: The Kinks was one of my favorite, I remember. And I don't know how, I just learned it from the other, my other high school friends. *Everybody* loved music, the guys were in a band, oh, there was always a local band of, you know, these guys forming a band.

00:47:43 Q: Okay, so your mother and her friend take you to Barnard in your cream-colored Chrysler. Did you have a trunk on the top, or was everything in the car?

00:47:53 Slyomovics: I had one suitcase. Against my parents' wishes, they were happy to do anything, and I had a carton of books. I wanted to be—I had this, I don't know, beatnik affect, or pseudo-beatnik affect, pared down, live simply.

00:48:15 Q: So you get to the dorm. What are your first memories?

00:48:18 Slyomovics: Oh, do you remember what it was like? I just remember carts, these people fighting over carts to put their stuff into, and I didn't have to do that. (laughs) So my mother puts me in the dorm room and takes off, goes to see her mother who lives in Brooklyn and, "Bye!" (laughs) And there was that first weekend, and I remember you could choose different activities to do; there was an orientation, and I chose WKCR, the radio, and I worked for them—I worked for them, I volunteered for them fall quarter.

00:48:58 Q: And who did you meet first?

00:49:01 Slyomovics: Well there was my roommate, and of course—and I don't remember how or when we met, you're the one who tells me this story—I met you because you were across the hall from me. I met your roommate, Anya Gromadzka, and you corrected me, because I thought Caroline lived on our floor, and she did not, so I met Caroline through you, and her roommate, Anna. And the three—the compromise, like three Reid was not as big as three Hewitt. And it was like this square C-shaped kind of thing, and we were the shorter arm; we weren't the main thing through which we traveled, so it had a kind of little intimate feeling to it, because it appeared to me in my memory it had been a shorter corridor than the central one that connected these two arms. Do you remember something like that?

00:49:56 Q: No, but I have no memory for space. You may be right.

00:50:00 Slyomovics: The room was ugly, and small; it was painted this disgusting green. And I was next to the bathrooms. So, you know, we often kept our doors open, and so people would stop by on their way to the bathroom. (both laugh) And I could hear, you know, things flushing and all sorts of things there. (Price laughs) But I just had the sense of this very convivial floor to come home to. And I met people in my classes that I liked.

00:50:33 Q: So what was your first weeks of class like? What classes did you take? Did you feel prepared? Did you like your professors?

00:50:40 Slyomovics: I have no memory of the classes. I have no memory of any decent professors except one my senior year, whose name I can't remember. No memory whatsoever of classes.

00:50:51 Q: What subject?

00:50:53 Slyomovics: I told you, it's that senior seminar on muckrakers. And I liked her enormously, and in fact she was the only one who remembered me enough to write me a letter of recommendation, which I didn't realize till after how important something like that was. When I eventually went back to graduate school, I only had her to write me that letter. So I have no memory of classes. I remember going through the tunnels to class, because—I mean, to the point where I could roll out of bed five minutes before class, pull on my jeans and one of my numerous black turtlenecks, which were my father's, and boots—I wore boots—and just roll into class at

the last minute; I loved that. You know, you could never emerge from that little cocoon if you felt like it.

00:51:46 Q: You remember the cafeteria?

00:51:48 Slyomovics: Oh, Lord, yes. They had a Sunday afternoon—that was another convivial place, because we all were on the food plan, it was three meals a day. You know, there were a lot of the meals I missed, but dinner I could rely on running into friends and hanging out there and talking for hours. And I remember the Sundays, the ongoing battle my entire freshman year: I owned no skirt, and they wouldn't let you in to Sunday dinner without a skirt, so I'd show up wearing my jeans with a towel, she wouldn't let me in, I'd pull my jeans off—it was all girls, right, more or less—and I'd wrap the towel around me and I'd ask was this okay? And I remember she gave in. (Price laughs) She gave in.

00:52:40 Q: You always were a pain in the neck. (laughs)

00:52:43 Slyomovics: You know these dress rules? They were strict; this school was stricter than my parents were, and I thought my parents were strict. But my parents had one sort of avenue I could exploit because it sort of conformed to a lot of my own wishes and needs; if something was scholarly, they were willing to support it, like go to Spain and spend the summer there, go to Barnard, go out late at night because the Montreal Jewish public library was having one of it's many Yiddish poetry readings. You know that I could do. (laughs)

00:53:25 Q: Ah. Late at night. Did you have problems with our curfew?

00:53:28 Slyomovics: Oh, man, yeah. I got in trouble the first weekend. I don't even remember what I did; maybe I had stayed too long at KCR, WKCR? There was a ten thirty curfew for us, right? Well, I waltz in around one in the morning, and I'm way off the curfew. So they actually had a judicial hearing, and I can see the woman's face, you know, Class of '69, who was the head of this kind of judicial board that adjudicated these infractions. And apparently there was some sort of rule in the fall of '67, for every five minutes that you were late for the curfew you were, you know, docked and relegated to the dorms for I don't know, one night, one weekend, I don't know what it was. But I basically used up like a semester worth, if not more. But, you know, I was very good the first couple of weeks, and then I realized nobody's enforcing this. So, you know, I followed the ten thirty curfew after that. I mean, it was not followed. (laughs)

00:54:40 Q: (laughs) Who did you meet at KCR?

00:54:45 Slyomovics: I actually remember—he went on to have a career at NPR [National Public Radio], his name was Robert Siegel.

00:54:50 Q: Oh, my goodness, yes!

00:54:52 Slyomovics: Yeah, he was a senior there. But he didn't go under that name at NPR; he didn't use the name Siegel, and I only recognized his voice. Robert something? He used his middle name. So he was there as a senior. It was lots of interesting people who loved the radio,

and they weren't—and I found them to be non-sexist engineer nerds, and they did their best because there weren't that many Barnard women interested in WKCR; there were several women who had, you know, a couple of shows. But they wanted me to get some sort of FCC [Federal Communications Commission] certificate so I could actually work behind the—work at the controls. But in the meantime they put me on the newsbeat. And so I said to them, "Well, what do I do for the news?" And they said, Just do whatever you want. We have a Reuters—What are those things called? You know, the Reuters—ticker tape keeps going. It was like this giant machine, you know, ancient printer, and it just kept spewing forth AP [The Associated Press], Reuters; they said, You write the news, and Robert Siegel or whoever it was is going to read them. And you just, like, cut and paste the news and put together transition things as I wanted. And so I decided, well, the United States was not getting enough news about Canada. (Price laughs) So I added all of these Canadian things at the time—remember I'm a Canadian citizen; I'm in the United States on a student visa. Now, all the rules for foreigners apply, except I don't need an entry visa; in those days Canadians could cross the border, but if I wanted to stay I had to go through the same international student thing as everybody else, which meant I couldn't work, there were all sorts of restrictions on me. (laughs) I used to borrow people's social security numbers. (laughs) You know, in order to get part-time jobs. And so the only jobs I could get on campus were Columbia or Barnard jobs. So I had some very strange jobs. I passed the tour guide position, so I was a Columbia University Official Tour Guide for, I think, a year or two. (laughs) I had to dress up for that, because you have to be—represent the students, and they gave us, you know, outlines of what you had to say, within which, you know, you could open it up to what you wanted. You had to do sample tours to show them that you knew what you were doing, (laughs) and I remember—it's coming back to me, and I shouldn't laugh, (both laugh) I didn't

know what to do—maybe it was a form of hazing by the other tour guides, since I was the youngest, the first one there. I don't know what the hell it was, but they gave me a tour group of blind people. (both laugh) What do I do?

00:58:23 Q: Did you have to worry about them getting around or did they have sighted people with them, or dogs or something?

00:58:29 Slyomovics: Well, my memory of it is it was almost like a chain gang, you know, one had their hand on the shoulder in front of the other, and I was leading them around. (laughs) But I got really inventive, so I started leading them only to the sculptures on campus. Like we'd feel for Athena and the owl there, the Henry Moore sculpture; I tried to think of things that were tactile on campus. (both laugh) Forget Barnard, we weren't going to walk across Broadway that way. (both laugh) Not taking them there. Oh, that was one of the strangest experiences, but I kind of got into it, into the descriptive parts of it, how do you make people—and I used that later in one of my classes in visual anthropology. I would tell students to describe a photograph as if they're talking to someone who can't see the photograph. Imagine you're blind, whatever it is that takes you to describe this image in front of you to someone who you have to pretend that they can't see it, and so that they can somehow visualize that image. And I always had that image of that tour group, you know, of that chain gang. (both laugh)

00:59:53 Q: What other tours did you do?

00:59:55 Slyomovics: That's the only one that I remember. And I got to know the other tour guides, a lot of them were Columbia students. I met a lot of fraternity brothers that way at several fraternities, through them, and engineering students through the KCR people, who you know I thought were really nice guys. And everything changed you know in '68 in terms of (laughs) my life at Barnard. But I remember, you know, a very pleasant first year of being delighted at being away from my family, away from Montreal; nobody knew or cared about the Holocaust, everybody was American to me. I was away from what seemed to be the French-English wars; I did not see the color wars, the American race wars at the time; even though, you know, we watched the civil rights stuff, it just didn't hit you in your little bubble on Morningside Heights until 1968. But it just seemed I was away from all of these things I didn't like; I was very, very happy that first year.

01:01:02 Q: I remember—I have a memory of you going to the homecoming dance, wearing Anya's dress. Tell us about that.

01:01:09 Slyomovics: Yes. I have no memory of the homecoming, but I went to it. And, you know, a lot of men there who cared about Columbia College, and I couldn't differentiate them; the homecoming was in the fall, wasn't it? And I remember Anya's dress very vividly, because I was so differently dressed from everybody else wearing these lovely long kind of prom dresses, and she had a very tight satin green shimmery sheath, hugged my body, and then there was this over-dress, see-through, transparent, beautiful kind of sea images on top if it, it was like nobody else there, and it was short. But other than that—I had a good time there, too; I loved to dance, so I went to a lot of dances. Parties, there were the clubs down in—I went down to the, you know,

to The Village, there were all of those folk clubs there. I saw The Fugs; I remember that. I'm trying to think of who else I saw down there, a lot of singers.

01:02:20 Q: Do you remember going to see the—the Fillmore East?

01:02:24 Slyomovics: Oh, yes, we went to the Fillmore East, but I'm not sure if that wasn't after '68; I can't remember anymore.

01:02:29 Q: Possibly. Possibly.

01:02:31 Slyomovics: I remember, of course, The Grateful Dead, but that was '68—also after '68. What else? There were incredible—Oh, the Thalia, remember the Thalia? I mean, we would go without even bothering to find out who was there, or what was playing. You'd pay your, I don't know, fifty cents, seventy-five cents; there was a double feature. And I also took that Wednesday—that class that was called Wednesday Evening at the Movies with—I took it like three years in a row—with Sarris, Andrew Sarris.

01:03:09 Q: Oh, yes!

01:03:09 Slyomovics: It was heavenly; he didn't care if you kept research—you know, kept signing up for it, or maybe even sitting in. And he would talk for a bit, then he'd leave, and then he'd show you—I saw [Alexander] Dovzhenko, I saw [*Battleship*] *Potemkin*—

01:03:27 Q: *Children of Paradise*.

01:03:28 Slyomovics: *Children of Paradise*, which was my favorite film for years. Weren't you in that class, too, at some point? But I started taking it then, and I just kept going.

01:03:39 Q: What was the film that Anya, and Caroline and you and I would see over and over again; it was set in the Soviet Union?

01:03:49 Slyomovics: Oh, yes, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, [Sergei] Parajanov. And in fact, it was set in the Carpathian Mountains where my parents come from. On top of that, you know. It was like this area, you know, this mythic area; my father used to tell me we were Jewish hillbillies, we're not Vienna or Berlin Jews. (Price laughs) "This is where we're from. We're mountain Jews; that's why we're tall, blue-eyed, blonde hair."

01:04:21 Q: (laughs) You are not blue eyed.

01:04:23 Slyomovics: No, he was.

01:04:24 Q: Ah, yes.

01:04:25 Slyomovics: He was.

01:04:25 Q: Your father looked like Mr. Clean.

01:04:27 Slyomovics: Well, he was bald, yeah.

01:04:28 Q: But very handsome; your mom looked like Ingrid Bergman, I think.

01:04:32 Slyomovics: Yeah, they were very beautiful, both of them. And, oh, gosh, dressers, always dressed beautifully.

01:04:38 Q: Yeah, so elegant. So I think we're inching our way to spring of '68. Talk to me about your spring of '68.

01:04:56 Slyomovics: Utterly formative. Huge influence on me to this day. Validated all this inchoate senses of things, of rebellion, of feminism, because remember it was preceded by the founding of the Columbia Women's Liberation—I don't know what it was called, association, movement, whatever, and I used to attend their meetings all the time, and was very influenced by Ti-Grace Atkinson, and all the others who were a part of that; I went to all of those meetings. But it just seemed to me this extraordinary bringing together of all the things that I just didn't know how to think about, how to act on, in terms of the collectivity that made sense to me. And it was you, and Janet—you and Caroline, because it didn't even occur to me that I should go into the buildings, and it was *you* who told me, "Let's go into Fayerweather [Hall]," and I don't know if it was to check it out, or we belonged there, or we agreed with it, but you know I went to all of those meetings, endless, endless meetings, listening to everybody talking; I remember huge amounts of making tuna fish with you, (Price laughs) a lot of kitchen stuff, and just, you know,

sitting and I guess this is when I was in Mathematics more, which is where I was finally arrested, you know, just watching people lower the buckets, bring the food up, this extraordinary communal organization that served me in years to come, whether it was political, whether it was social, whether it was culinary; it was just a marvelous, marvelous whatever, month—

01:06:59 Q: Well, we started out with Fayerweather, and my best guess about why Fayerweather was that the window was big; it was easy to get in and out, and I was not the most athletic person even then.

01:07:10 Slyomovics: Weren't they more open? Avery was for architecture; Hamilton was out; Low seemed to be for the leaders; Fayerweather seemed to accommodate everybody. Right?

01:07:20 Q: Right. I think that was probably it.

01:07:23 Slyomovics: Besides the window being big, because the window in Mathematics, I recall, was quite small.

01:07:27 Q: Yeah, you had to be athletic to get up to Mathematics. So how did you move from Fayerweather to Mathematics? What was happening?

01:07:33 Slyomovics: Yeah, I don't know if I told you, because we were together pretty much; we slept on the floor near each other, we were all near each other, and we often would say, "Oh, there's someone—" You know, there was always something to do, There's a group meeting about

this in this area, or, Let's check out what's going on in the kitchen—There was always some activity or a meeting for us to go to. And I know we were aware of each other, and who was doing what, and I can't remember if I told you or not, or whether it was a surprise, but I had met—I can't—

01:08:07 Q: Marlon.

01:08:07 Slyomovics: Yeah, Marlon, whatever his last name was. He was a cameraman for Newsreel, and he was taking a lot of the footage that was there, and we became really good friends, I guess, in Fayerweather, so inadvertently the day of the bust he says to me, “Look, I need to go over to Mathematics. There's other Newsreel colleagues there; why don't you come over with me? You'll help me carry stuff over—” Whatever it was. “Sure, sure.” So I remember going to Mathematics, and it was much harder to get in, but they knew Marlon, and he introduced me as his assistant, so in I go, into Mathematics, and we were talking to people, and I'm enjoying myself, again, a very different crowd of people. And so the bust happens. Marlon was thirty-two at the time; I was seventeen, so he says to me, “I do not want to get arrested. I have an arrest record—” Or whatever it was, he said, “I'm leaving. Do you want to come with me?” I said, “No, I'm staying.”

So I didn't know that many people; I didn't have the kind of infrastructure that I had at Fayerweather, so I went up to the top floor, and there I figured I'd get a view, right? So there I encountered J.J. [John Gregory Jacobs] who, to this day, I think of all the time, J. Jacobs, J.J., I don't know, a ranting lefty. And so J.J. was giving us all who were up there his theory, while the

police are slowly busting other places, you know, there are lights everywhere; we could see the action from the top floor of Mathematics, and J.J. is giving us his theory of how we have to, in some sense, take the Maoist revolution, cultural revolution—of course this is 1968—and apply it to the New York Catskills, where we had to get The Catskills, and the agricultural area surrounding the urban core in the heart of the state, you know, as revolutionaries, and then we come in from the countryside and we take over New York City, right? So I'm seventeen; I said, "But, J.J., it's the Borscht Belt." (both laugh) And he went on and on—just the sense that—of revolutionary possibilities even among those Orthodox Jewish bungalows that I knew up in the Borscht Belt where my family had spent many a holiday, a High Holiday up there.

So I was enjoying the whole thing, and then it became clear that the police were about to bust into Mathematics, which apparently had set up all sorts of defenses, you know, on every staircase there were, you know, the desks were taken and set up as kind of check points, barriers for them, so there was a big meeting at some point, you know, under this kind of pressure, and we were told those who wanted to resist and fight the pigs, like J.J., stay up on the fourth floor, and the rest of us who wanted to do, you know, some sort of passive resistance, we should just take the staircase and sit there with our arms like this, head bent down—some kind of news had hit us about, you know, what had happened in Fayerweather, and a lot of people getting hurt, so, you know, again, you could walk out and get arrested, but I don't think anybody in Mathematics was willing to do it. So we all kind of hugged each other, and I was actually carried out. I still remember one cop with my feet, and the other one under my arms. I lost my shoes along the way, and I was put in a paddy wagon, and I was with actually Tom Hayden, his girlfriend at the time; they were telling us that they were working in Newark. There was some poverty program

they were working on there. And a very nice officer who nobody else but me would speak to. His name was Sergeant Buckley; I still remember him very, very clear, um, he had Hershey bars, and he offered them to everybody there, and I was the only one who took it. I'm starving, and so we end up again in some police room again, really stinky, awful, but no different from my dorm room, you know, that horrible green color, you know, just these series of spaces that seem to disappear from American life as we fix everything up so nicely at the universities or even the police, in many cases. And I remember they took down everybody's name, and they asked where we born, and I said, "Montreal, Canada." So the guy looks at me and says, "Are you a citizen?" I said, "No, I'm here on a student visa." So the guy says, "Oh, good we can deport you." So he looks down at my birth date, because it was April 30th, somewhere around there, and my birthday is July 5th, so I'm two months or so shy of turning eighteen, so I still remember the guy saying, "Oh, shit! She's a minor; we can't deport her." (both laugh) "She's a youthful offender. *Oh, shit!*" And I think he put down *Y* next to my name. And I was just treated like everybody else. I also have a memory of handcuffing, something like that, some way where we were kept altogether, it was about eight of us in the group, and there was only one other woman, which was Tom Hayden's girlfriend, so then they separated male and female and she was there with me. And not very talkative, a revolutionary as I recall, or maybe she was frightened now that I look back, but didn't say anything to me, you know, I was kind of chattering away because I was just clueless. (both laugh)

01:14:38 Q: Weren't we all?

01:14:40 Slyomovics: And then at some point I was in the women's—what was it called, the one that turned into a park at Jefferson Market?

01:14:49 Q: Right, [New York] Women's House of Detention.

01:14:51 Slyomovics: Yeah, I remember being there, and again that one woman was with me, but the rest of the cell was full of what looked like, to me, black prostitutes in blonde wigs, and, you know, with this open toilet seat there in the middle of this big holding cell. And I still remember that woman looking at me, (laughs) you know, saying, "What are *you* in here for?" And, you know, I said, "Student revolutionary work." She just died laughing. (Price laughs) "Honey, that's stupid." And then it could be we were moved, she and I, to The Tombs [Manhattan House of Detention] at some point, and again another holding cell with an open toilet that stunk. And we were given one baloney sandwich, and I remember seeing you walking by, and me going, "Janet, I'm here!" Or maybe you were in the cell and I walked by? I don't know which came first. And you said, "Oh, we thought you had run away." You know, we had a few seconds, "No, no, I'm here," so probably it was the reverse because I was one of the last arrested, so you were probably there already in the cells, and then I remember the wonderful drama and theater of being in the courtroom with Frank [Smithwick] Hogan. Here's one memory: it was packed, right, utterly packed. There's Frank Hogan, right, the DA [District Attorney]. And they must have made a deal with him, and William Kunstler was our lawyer. Barnard paid for us, I still remembered; I owed him fifty bucks, which I never paid for, because that's what we were assessed. So Barnard supported us; Columbia actually went after some of the—certainly not the basketball players, I remembered them getting off first, and then (Price laughs) a friend of mine

who had been in the—it must have been the Progressive Labor Party, something that was further left than SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], and his mother showed up, and he was this nice Long Island Jew, also a freshman, I can't remember his name, and I remember the courtroom being convulsed because he said—the mother gets up when he gets called up; I never got called up but he got called up—and I remember this little Jewish woman getting up there, and saying, “*That's my son! He's a good boy, you let him alone!*” (both laugh) And it was just this wonderful, wonderful—you know, hundreds of us packed into this—So I remember at the time they gave us another court date, they dismissed it, and I had to come back several times, drive back from Montreal. And I met a lot of people in the courtroom (laughs)—after it's over I meet a couple of other people, you know, outside agitators, right? So one of them decides he wants—you know, he hears I'm going up to Montreal. My mother comes and gets me. My parents were not very happy; they liked the fact that I was politically active, but my father's great fear was dealing with the police, because as far as he's concerned Nazi police, Communist police, Montreal police, they're all corrupt, because in Quebec you didn't have, when we were growing up, habeas corpus, you had the French system of—well, there isn't—there's a word for it now because of Guantanamo, when you can keep someone a certain amount of time, but pre-9/11 that wasn't the norm in the United States, right, but it was the norm in any French-inspired legal system like Quebec. I guess you call it *incommunicado*; they have a preventative detention. There we go. So you could keep people up to, I think it was four days, without a lawyer, do what you want to them. And so for my father anything to do with the police was a danger to his daughter, that's all he cared about. So I said, “No, Sergeant Buckley, he was really nice to me, dad. You know, it's not the same down here.” You know, the United States has changed for the worse. So, (laughs) I'm all done, right? My mother comes down, picks me up, I mean, I know

that Route 87 by heart from Montreal to New York, right? I know *every* rest stop; I've driven it hundreds of times, to my grandmother's, to Barnard, then I went to JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary of America], my parents were always driving us back and forth, that was the cheapest way to go, and it was nice to have a car in New York in those days. So one of the so-called outside agitators—to this day my mother has not forgotten it—says, "Can I get a ride with you to Montreal?" There was this, sure, you know, they're open and nice, I vouched for him, we get to the border, he says, "You know, I'm a draft dodger and I'm requesting political asylum." (laughs) My mother looks at me, you know, they've been through, you know, Nazis, Communist, lack of papers, I mean, they had no papers when they arrived in Montreal; they had to do everything orally and create a paper trail, which is why I love paperwork. So they're suddenly faced with this; (laughs) my mother looks at me and says, "*No!*" (laughs) because, you know, we were stuck there at least six hours till they processed him, it wouldn't even occur to my mother to leave him there, ever. And I think, you know, he may have showed up at our house, or until someone came and got him, and he went off somewhere else. (laughs) But she still tells that story about crossing the border with me, "Susan and your friends." You know, he hadn't told me either, you know. He could have made the decision just at that moment. Who knows, but he decided that's how he was going to operate.

01:21:18 Q: Amazing. So, Susan, they picked—they didn't pick you up from the courtroom to take you home.

01:21:25 Slyomovics: No.

01:21:25 Q: There were weeks that went by before you went home.

01:21:28 Slyomovics: No, I went home almost immediately, school—wait, no school wasn't over yet, school was *fabulous* after that, remember? That's I think when—what was that—bands came to play; there were all sorts of plays put on. I saw—was it Moses Asch? Sholem Asch? One of them—

01:21:49 Q: Sholem Asch, right.

01:21:50 Slyomovics: I'm not sure, yeah, it could be. Anyway, the play was called *The Strike*. It was set in Poland, and Herschel Bernardi was there. There was so many events going on, and most of the teachers bought into it, so classes were held on the lawn, all sorts of things. I, of course, didn't care a damn about my classes, and everybody got—we all could take Passes at the end, unless you wanted to do extra work for a grade, but I pretty much went with the Ps all the way through. But it was a magnificent time. And I can't remember at what point we had to go back to court, but you know, I could have gone to my grandmother's in Brooklyn, and then my parents drove me up; I always had my grandmother as the base. And in fact, she paid for most of my Barnard tuition the first year from the German reparations money for Auschwitz.

01:22:43 Q: Amazing. So you said that '68 was formative.

01:22:50 Slyomovics: Yes.

01:22:50 Q: So talk more about that.

01:22:53 Slyomovics: Well, Barnard was blown for a lot of us after that. I went back to Montreal in the summer because I couldn't really go anywhere because of the court dates, and so I went to summer school, took intensive French; I kept thinking Montreal was going to be my home, so I had never learnt Québécois literature. And I remember there I was the only Anglophone. There was one other woman, an Anglophone Montreal-er; of course, she was Jewish too. My French was pretty good, but growing up our French was—teachers—because of the sectarianism, we couldn't have any Québécois teachers. So our teachers were Swiss, Haitian, Moroccan Jews, we learnt a different French than what everybody was speaking; we never learned the literature. So I took all sorts of classes in Québécois literature, which I applied to Barnard; Barnard accepted all of my classes.

And I worked part time. My father decided that an American BA—it didn't look like it was going to get me very far, you know, he was going, philosophy, art history, those were the classes I was taking, so he decided—so he put me in a—what's it called? A stock brokerage. So I worked in a stock brokerage, and I actually got a Canadian stockbroker degree. Yes, my father was very proud of me, and the company was called Morgan Ostiguy, which was affiliated with Morgan Stanley. And they didn't treat me very well. (laughs) Very, very sexist. I had to go in the back door with the secretaries, as the only woman stockbroker. The men, of course, would go in the front door. I was told I would never be able to deal with a customer; yes, sexism rampant in the business world, in fact it probably still is. It gave me a good, healthy dislike of anything to do with the business world. And my parents and I were very proud that the—you know, the exams

were hard, but the guys failed and I didn't. I passed, and then the stockbroker who was the guy—it was my father's stockbroker, so he used his influence to get me in there, and later my father told me—I still have the license, you know—my father told me that they had been very embarrassed because I was the only one who passed in the stock brokerage, because it was not an easy license to get. My father always wanted me to be the first woman on the Canadian Stock Exchange; that was his dream for me. And I thought to myself, This world sucks. (laughs) I don't want any part of it. But you know, for my father he felt better, “She had something,” you know, “This American BA is very nice, but it's not going to earn her a living.” (laughs) He used to ask me in Yiddish, “What's your parnoosa?” *Parnoosa* is how are you going to make a living. How are you going to support yourself. “_____ (??) parnoosa.”

01:26:12 Q: So you go back to Barnard sophomore year—

01:26:15 Slyomovics: Yeah, and it just seemed to me Columbia was in shambles. You know, there were so many student demands; the curriculum was under review. I wasn't sure what I was majoring in. You already had chosen history. Anya was doing Slavic linguistics. Caroline was deep in Chinese, remember? I had no idea. I liked art history, but I didn't want to do the art history—I mean, I was very good, but—I had wonderful teachers, they were my best. And I had the languages, and they were very nice to me, because you needed French, and I could get by in German because of Yiddish, I could figure it out with a dictionary, and they said, Undergrad, that's good enough. And Julius [Samuel] Held I remember talking to me; he was very nice—these people were very nice. And I had—what was his name, for Renaissance, for an entire year? The name Ackerman sticks, but I don't think that's right. He was very, very good. I had Barbara

Novak who was an assistant professor for modern—she was brilliant. I took medieval art history; I took lots of art history, but I didn't like it as what they were doing, I wanted to do—and again it wasn't clear. I want to do non-Western art, you know, for me my interest has always been the Middle East, and North Africa. Never took an anthropology class, ever, as an undergrad. Only realized when I was in grad school that that was where I should be going. It took me a while. But I wanted to do something that was art, aesthetics; the word human rights did not exist, (laughs) as a discipline. You know, those were the things I later discovered, you know, how you could work in a particular approach that was highly scholarly but still had some kind of roots in something you cared about politically. So it took a while to figure out where you were going to find that, so that was pretty good. So I remember that year being a total bust, having fun, there were always lectures, things to go to. I just remember being busy. You know, school meant nothing. Barely got through it. Was that the year? No, that was not the year you went abroad.

01:28:35 Q: No.

01:28:35 Slyomovics: So the year after was even better, and crazier. You know, there was always, you know, you still had the problem of the gymnasium down in Harlem that Columbia wanted to take; there were all sorts of wonderful problems. Linda [LeClair]—Barnard blew apart, no more parietals. We could have men, slowly men coming back in. Or just the normal life, you know, who wanted to sleep with them? But you wanted to talk to them, not necessarily in, you know, some sort of sexual encounter; there are other ways of meeting guys. So I just remember Barnard opening up. No more Greek Games, which I thought were absurd. (both laugh) I think they're back, aren't they? God. No?

01:29:26 Q: No, they're back and gone again, I heard.

01:29:30 Slyomovics: Never a good idea. (laughs) All sorts of things seemed to have gotten better, not everything, and we were living in Plimpton [Hall], so that was another kind of core emotional shape for me; there was only you, Anya, Caroline, and some—you know for that year, it was Abigail, right? And then for a while it was—

01:29:59 Q: Laurie Lefferts.

01:29:59 Slyomovics: Laurie Lefferts. So there were all these people to come back to. You knew you had a warm home. Because I had run into people who hated their Plimpton, where they went their own way, and we used to—I learned how to cook from you guys, incredible meals. We'd borrow each other's dresses, lots of talking. I mean, it just felt wonderful. I love those kinds of situations where you combine social scholarly aspects. So there was Plimpton, some classes which I have no memory about, except the art history ones, which were excellent.

Then the third year, while you were gone, and again the political activism building and building, and I had gone to summer schools, in order—I decided this is not for me, Barnard isn't working. I can't take Arabic at the time, you had to go into third year. (coughs) Barnard had agreements with Columbia; each department worked differently, so you had to come in with two years and then Columbia would let you into maybe third or second year. You had to go one year somewhere else because the demand was too great. In fact, Anya went to Harvard and studied

Arabic; total waste of time, he was such a bad teacher. So the things I cared about I couldn't really study, so I thought, Okay, I'll finish in three years, I'll go to summer school, I'll do everything, but I'm still left with six classes instead of four, my spring semester, and [Richard Milhous] Nixon bombs Cambodia, and American universities just blow up, and there go all my Ps again; I must have had shitloads of Ps. I had a very, very checkered undergraduate. And when I applied to graduate school at Columbia, which I decided not to go to but I did get in, I was interviewed by people in the department, and all I had to say is I was Barnard Class of '71—this is a few years later, and they said, We understand. You know, I was trying to explain why my grades were so peculiar, and why there were so many Passes, in my major! (laughs) Which you were not supposed to be doing. They said, No, no. We understand. These years were volatile, was the word he used.

01:32:22 Q: You were a philosophy major.

01:32:24 Slyomovics: I ended up my senior year as a philosophy major, yeah.

01:32:26 Q: Why?

01:32:27 Slyomovics: I had taken philosophy courses, and you know, nothing really grabbed me, and I didn't want to do the art history senior seminars, and thesis, so I took the easy route out. And I certainly—what I thought was philosophy, our philosophy department at Columbia thought was literature. I was interested in the continental philosophers, especially the French, of course, this is the sixties, you know. Or French writers, such as Frantz Fanon who *blew me away*.

That to me was, you know, my guru. Now, that's not philosophy; they were all Anglo, I suppose that Anglo American analytic philosophy for which I have no head.

01:33:13 Q: But you did it.

01:33:13 Slyomovics: Yeah, I got through it. Senior year on [Ludwig] Wittgenstein—could not remember a thing if you asked me now what this was all about; total waste of my time.

01:33:24 Q: So backing up a little bit, again to how formative this experience was, you said it made you a feminist. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

01:33:34 Slyomovics: Well, it made me realize I was a feminist. I mean, I had these little rebellions; I knew sexism firsthand, you know, your high school teacher—classic things—saying, “Why do you need to understand physics? You're just going to get married.” All the things that people knew and said. And then there were the consciousness-raising groups; I went to quite a few of them in those years.

01:33:56 Q: What do you remember about them?

01:33:59 Slyomovics: Just the same thing: talking, coming to those realizations, being told about things like click moments, reading *Ms.*, reading Ti-Grace Atkinson, and reading Jewish feminist stuff, too—that you could actually be Orthodox Jewish, and at the time, you know, the Conservative movement did not allow women rabbis, and I got my MA at Jewish Theological

Seminary, and they actually said to me, “You're one of the most—you know, there are others, but you're one of the most advanced graduate students at the seminary; why don't you go for a PhD and then we can present you as a viable candidate for rabbinical school?” I told you that story, no?

01:34:46: Q: No!

01:34:46 Slyomovics: Oh, God. So my wonderful advisor said that to me. He was pushing to have—this is 1976—he's pushing to have JTS, and the Conservative Jewish movement, you know, accept women rabbis, which they eventually did I think in 1982; my dates could be off. So he said to me, “Why don't we try this avenue?” And I said to him, “Well, there's one problem. I don't believe in any of this.” (laughs) I'll never forget the guy's face. So he starts kind of sputtering, and I'm waiting—this is my wonderful advisor, what's he going to say to me? So he says, “You're a—You're a—” What's it going to be? You know, and he says, “You're an epikoros.” *Epikoros* is a Talmudic term, which means epicurean, one of these philosophers who is mentioned in the Talmud this philosophical school that challenged rabbinic Judaism. (laughs) First insult, right? I mean, I knew what an epikoros was, right? It may not mean that in normal parlance, but you know Orthodox Jews will often throw it around to mean secular, apostate, you know, someone outside our world—

01:36:12 Q: Heretical?

01:36:12 Slyomovics: Yeah, yeah. So I thought of it—of course, it was pretty hard not to laugh. It's my biggest problem, you know, not laughing.

01:36:24 Q: Evidently.

01:36:24 Slyomovics: Yeah, yeah. (Price laughs) You know, these things struck me as very funny. It's a big problem with, you know, my son, students, they say things—I'm like, "Wow!" And so I said, "Yeah, you're right. Yeah." So he said to me, "We're fossils to you, aren't we?" "Yeah, you're right." So he says, "Okay. What you're going to do is you're going to apply to an anthropology, folklore, religion departments, Near Eastern languages department; I will write you any recommendation you want, you get your MA, here you go." And that's what I did. He was a wonderful, wonderful mentor. Rabbi David Wolf Silverman. And I studied the history of Jews under Islam with him. And he got me an Arabic tutor who was excellent.

01:37:17 Q: Wow!

01:37:17 Slyomovics: Oh no, they were very good to me at JTS. But you know, no one asked what you believed. That's their Judaism orthodoxy I remember: you're there, therefore you're religious. No one asked do you go to synagogue? No one asked what you believe. Not true anymore. You now have to believe in Israel.

01:37:40 Q: Let's take a break. Because I am pooped.

01:37:44: Slyomovics: It's noon. Two hours!

01:37:45 Q: Right. We've been at this for two hours. Can you believe it? So let's take a break; I'll turn everything off, we'll get a bite, get something to drink, and then let's go back to it.

01:37:56 Slyomovics: Sure. Good thing. Let's eat lunch.

01:38:00 [they turn off machine, turn it back on, adjust mic]

01:39:12 Q: So we're now resuming the interview of Susan Slyomovics on August 18th, 2015, and it's one thirty. So, Susan, before we leave Barnard I want to ask you a couple of classic questions. The first thing is, can you remember a moment when you said, "Yes. I'm so glad I went to Barnard."? And then the converse.

01:39:35 Slyomovics: No. It was always, "I'm so glad I'm in New York." And then Barnard, "I'm so glad I met all these women at Barnard." That would be the way I said it. I wanted to go to University of California, Santa Cruz, which I had read about in Montreal; it was this new, radical, open university, and my parents wouldn't let me to go that far. So, you know, I figured if I really agitated for that, they would be happy that I was going to a school in New York, or near them. But of course, two years later they moved to Vancouver, and I would have been close to them. But that was my first choice; I wanted to go to a big, American, state university, ideally in California.

01:40:25 Q: Really!

01:40:25 Slyomovics: I wanted out of the snow, too; it was a killer.

01:40:28 Q: Yeah, you mentioned that earlier.

01:40:31 Slyomovics: I used to cry taking the bus, and my tears would freeze. (laughs) It was like an hour and a half bus ride to and from school.

01:40:40 Q: And was there ever a moment when you thought to yourself, Wow, going to Barnard was a mistake?

01:40:47 Slyomovics: No. Never. Never.

01:40:50: Q: (singing) _____ (??). So you finish Barnard in three years, and what's next for little Susan?

01:41:01 Slyomovics: Well, I went off to several different graduate schools. Lived in Israel for two years, studied there, picked up another MA at Jewish Theological Seminary, transferred to Berkeley, got a PhD—well, it took eight years to get a PhD. And it was basically free; even though I was a Canadian citizen on a green card, I had managed to get—it was easy in those days to get residency, and so I lived for four years in Egypt, oh, eight to ten months in Tunisia, took trips to Sudan, of course Israel and Palestine, went to Morocco, just went all over the Middle

East, and realized that that was where I wanted to do my dissertation, base my career. And then it took a while—it took five years for me to get a job, five years of postdoc-ing, temping, the kind of thing you temp at, two postdocs, teaching part time at NYU [New York University], working in museums. I was single, I remarried for a second time; I'd been married a short time in my twenties. My marriage ended in divorce; I remarried my husband, my current husband, in my late thirties. Got pregnant at forty-one, had a kid at forty-two. So now we have a twenty-two-year-old son who's finishing his MA in London. Which means I can't retire, even though I'm sixty-five, for another four years, because he's covered under Obama Care, that's the Affordable Healthcare Act, until he's twenty-six, but as long as I work full time. I've been a professor for many years; my first tenure-track job—NYU was part time—was at Brown, where our son was born in Providence. Then I moved—I was there for six years, I moved to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology], and now I'm at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], back in the California I love so much. I married a lovely guy; he's a graphic artist, and he follows me, works freelance, follows me wherever we go. And we've lived abroad; he loves to live abroad, he's originally from Algeria, raised in France, and he loves the work in the Middle East and North Africa. He does his thing, we've often dragged our son, and it's been very pleasant, a really nice life.

01:43:48 Q: So let's go back to your early years of traveling for your dissertation. Your dissertation was about?

01:43:56 Slyomovics: Egypt. It was about the equivalent of—for example, in the West you have *The Song of Roland*, *El Cid* [*The Poem of the Cid*], these classics that embody a nationalist epic,

and when I was in grad school there was this Parry-Lord theory, that the origins of Homeric poetry and literature were actually oral epic poets, that the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were originally oral before they were written. So [Milman] Parry and [Albert] Lord go off to what was now the former—what was the former Yugoslavia/Bosnia/Serbia where there's still this tradition of oral poetry, and they try to make some sort of claim—a little dicey in many ways, but an interesting claim that was both literary and creative and improvisational, that how to understand the repetitions in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—Homer was this oral bard, and here we have these mainly Muslim, in fact Bosnian, but some Serbian Catholic poets who were improvising these epics, and the epic was never the same; it was created in performance, and one of the things Albert Lord said, “There are no epics in the Arab world,” so that was kind of a challenge.

So there was a group of us, myself included, that went off to the Middle East and North Africa. I went off to Egypt where there was this extraordinary, well-known epic tradition of—and I followed a poet for an entire year; it was *absolute heaven*. Someone gave me a Fulbright to basically party every night, tape-record, interview poets, see what's the difference between an elicit—my elicited performance, and the performance of what happened, you know, during a live occasion where the poet would make fun of the audience, would, you know, throw in—these are medieval epics that are living—would throw in contemporary Arab-Israeli political situations. And the poet was an outcast, so there we were, you know, this tall North American with this tiny little Sa'idi poet. It was just a wonderful—so I stayed for two years, until my advisor at Berkeley, my wonderful blessed advisor, Alan Dundes, sends me a telegram. This is 1982; telegrams, right? Or maybe it was—what were the other things at the time? And I'm in this village in Upper Egypt, south of Luxor, not much, I mean, no real electricity, other than a bulb

that came down, that naked bulb, about a mile in from the Nile, and they knew me as *duktura*, which everybody said with enormous irony, because I didn't have my doctorate; they knew this is what I was doing for my doctoral dissertation. This guy comes with a telegram on a bicycle, "Duktura, duktura! Telegram, telegram." And I open it up and it's from my advisor: "Dear Susan, Come home! Alan." (both laugh) I'd been there two years. My Fulbright had stretched, you know, the Fulbrights were local currency anyway, I couldn't take it out in those days, and so I'd stretched it for two years; I had no desire really to come home. So I decided, okay, I'll come home, I'll finish the dissertation, I'll get the PhD, but that was what my dissertation was about, oral Arabic epic poets.

01:47:44 Q: Now you were a woman in a fairly traditional setting, following around this man.

What was that like?

01:47:54 Slyomovics: (whispers) *A lot of fun.* (laughs) Well, the thing I found in religious and conservative societies, the one I grew up with too, was this belief in scholarship, and remember I'm literate in Arabic, and most of the people I'm working with, the poet included, is not, he has—you know, he can remember fifty thousand lines, which I can't, but he can't read and write. And before I went off to Cairo my mother decided it was really important for me to get a blessing from the Hasidic rabbi in Brooklyn, Tosher rebbe who they loosely followed. So on my way to the airport in Cairo, (laughs) the old JFK—[they are interrupted for a moment by a man]

01:48:53 Q: That was the wonderful Nadjib Berber, who is Susan's *beloved* husband, interrupting us, like every husband has in every interview I've done.

01:49:04 Slyomovics: Because he can't remember what our health care is, the name of it. Is it HMO? PPO?

01:49:11 Q: Okay.

01:49:11 Slyomovics: So, I'm on my way to the old, I think it was—no it was JFK [John F. Kennedy International] Airport, that beautiful Eero Saarinen building for TWA [Trans World Airlines]. And there were two flights that left every evening, one to Cairo and one to Jerusalem, every evening. So my mother is about—my parents are driving me to the airport, at JFK, and my mother says, "No, no. We've got to stop and get the blessing of the rabbi, in Brooklyn," and she had brought—you know, I'm wearing my jeans; I'm ready for this, I don't know, seven-hour overseas transcontinental trip, and she'd brought a head covering and a skirt in the car. "Put it on, Susan." Okay, okay. I'm not going to fight with them; they're letting me go to Cairo, right? There's no problem with that. So my mother goes—we get ushered into the Holy Rabbi's inner sanctum, and my mother's speaking to him in Yiddish, and he can't look at us [because] we're women, so he's like this, right? So my mother says, "My daughter's going off to Cairo; how will she lead a Jewish life? What if she meets a non-Jewish man? It's dangerous—" All of this kind of stuff, "She's far from home; can she keep kosher?" The whole thing, right? Which was kind of ridiculous because I hadn't kept kosher since I was seventeen and left home, but you know these were *her* concerns, which was her daughter going off to this strange adventure. And I'll never forget what the rabbi said to her. He's looking down like this, and he says, "Scholarship is

scholarship. Let her go." *I loved it!* I've always held it close, "Scholarship is scholarship." You know, "She's going to do a PhD." There's that, I forgot that part.

So when I got to Egypt, and this very conservative—they were southerners, I'm six hundred and fifty kilometers from Cairo, heading south towards The Sudan, and I found the same thing, you know, this notion, gender-free if you're literate, and if you're doing scholarship, and if you're doing it on something they care about. You know, half the people doing research in Upper Egypt seemed to be doing, you know, things like family planning, (laughs) and I didn't realize that. Like the first week I was there, one of the women said to me, "How many children should you have?" You know, I said, "Have as many as you want; it's not my business. In fact, have mine; I have none." (laughter) "Have my quota." You know, they were all being told to take—you know, because they had big families, like my father's, ten or something like that, and what do I care about stuff like that. Or I ran into one anthropologist—I'll never forget, a Scandinavian one, may she rot in hell—who said to me, "You know, these people do not feel the same way about children as we do, that's why they have so many; we need to help them care for their children better." This is like 1982, right? I mean, what am I dealing with here? I was interested in their literature, their music and their poetry, some of the things they valued, and it was a magnificent epic. So I wrote a book, articles; I have a couple of things on my website, of the films and photographs I took; I never finished the entire forty thousand lines of this guy, but I slowly published about a third in translation with analysis. It was wonderful work. It really was. I loved Egypt with a passion; I spent four years there.

01:52:59 Q: What did you wear when you were doing this work?

01:53:03 Slyomovics: Well, you had to dress conservatively, which in fact was the way I grew up, you know, the combination of Orthodox Judaism in Montreal, you can't—I got a ticket once in Montreal, in the early sixties, for wearing short shorts. It was a fifty-dollar ticket for wearing short shorts on the street. To this day, I can't figure that out. I was stopped on the street and told, by a police car, you cannot dress like this in public. I'd never heard of this thing. You know, you go to synagogue you always dress—you cover your arms, you cover your hair. When I was young we wore gloves, pantyhose, you know, shoes. And I just found it was growing up in a Jewish ghetto where people knew who you were, who your family was, what the reputation was, I found it very similar and very easy to assimilate, but you know, at this point I'm a PhD student and I am not going to dress like their women. So I wore jeans, which was okay, and I wore—I was there in winter a lot so I had this long greatcoat, and I always wore a kerchief on my head, and even covering my hair, and even in the hottest weather, and it went up to 110-12 degrees; I was always covered with my arms, you know, wore some sort of long skirt, with jeans underneath, which is not that different from—a very young girl would wear something like that. And I wore a straw hat, because at the time, you know, I mean, the sun was brutal and I hate the sun, you know, directly on me, and the only thing I could find in 1982, before tourism had developed, was the hats they put on donkeys, so I bought one of them; it had a huge brim. And people just thought it was ridiculous. But you know, I explained why I was wearing everything. *It had a reason!* Ah, yes, women have to keep their skins white, they told me. We understand that. (Price laughs) You know people, they were just wanting to help me, and there were certain things I couldn't do; I couldn't go to a bar and drink beer, and I don't drink ever so it didn't matter. You know, the constraints I didn't find particularly difficult. They had this thing, in fact,

where I had to keep working; they used to push me to work, "You haven't done enough of this. What about asking—" (laughs) You know, women in the Middle East certainly are often excellent students in science and math because they're pushed to stay home and study, and that's what they wanted me to do, "You've gotta write this up. You gotta do this—" We were working on a dictionary together of the dialect, and I just found people very helpful.

01:55:50 Q: And who was the "we"?

01:55:53 Slyomovics: Well, there were a group of senior elite men, whose protection I needed in the village. And then there was the poet. And the poet is a wild card, you know, because poets don't have the same kind of status as everybody else; they can say things to hurt you, you know, they're musicians, they're performers, it's a really interesting middle ground, and there was no problem for them to, you know, hang out with me, as long as—I always had to have another man there for the most part, and they were very careful to maintain that these things were being done properly. And sometimes I worked outdoors in cafés and whoever came by in the café—there was one café I loved to go to; the owner was one of the people I was working on a dictionary with, and whenever people came by, you know, I'd be introduced, I would talk about my project, they would tell me about this poet or that poet, you know, there were like fifty of them in the region. Or they would tell me reminiscences of what they knew, why they couldn't recite because they were landowners, it was improper; I learned a lot of information. So my love of hanging out got professionalized (laughs). I could write about hanging out.

01:57:09 Q: So all of that time in the library and getting kicked out of school came in handy.

01:57:15 Slyomovics: Well, any communal activity where you listen to people a lot, and I listened to my mother and my parents, you know, I had to listen, I had to listen for, you know, the craziness, because there was a craziness there with this background, and I had to figure out what was normal, what was sane, and what was their craziness. And Barnard was another reason I loved it; I thought of America as sane compared to Montreal and my family. You know, that there were norms, there was sanity, the way you could behave, you know, universities could be relied on; with my parents I never knew, you know, *they were so manic*. (laughs) They were so happy to be alive, they thought we were gifts, they thought we were the most precious thing in the world, their kids. But they, you know, they would have this screaming at night, there would be moments of depression, they would suddenly burst into tears over anything. I went to college, there's my father standing there sobbing his heart out as if he would never see me again. And in fact, when I saw Anya, (laughs) we all came down to Miami, that first year, freshman year, and Anya was in Miami, and so I saw her at Christmas, I went to Christmas parties with her, Anya came over with friends, would pick up me and my brother, and every time we left, my parents would go through this unbelievable emotional goodbye, and at one point one of Anya's friends said, "Are you going away somewhere?" "No, no, we're just going for the evening." We were so used to this, (laughs) these emotional transitions. And I watched Americans or Canadians, and I'd say, "You know, they don't do these things." (both laugh) There was so much good stuff, this incredible hospitality, but this *everything* was infested with melodrama and emotion.

01:59:23 Q: When you were in Egypt, did you have any women friends?

01:59:27 Slyomovics: Oh, many, many. Again, it was the same sociability, because you have a kind of sex-segregated society that the ghetto, Jewish ghetto had; I found the same thing in Cairo, with intense female friendships, and some of my closest friends are people from Morocco, from Egypt, who I'm still very close to today.

01:59:49 Q: But these weren't the village women?

01:59:51 Slyomovics: No, I was a student in Cairo for two years, and I did fieldwork for two years, so I went to school in Cairo and had very close women friends. You know, it's like you'd all get together. You'd kick the men out; the men have to go out to the café, you know, all these men you see sitting in cafés? I started to think maybe they didn't want to be there, (laughs) the women have the home, we'd all get together in our pajamas or whatever, and we'd cook or we'd crawl into bed together, and make these super complicated dishes; (air conditioner comes on) I started to think that culinary activities in the Middle East and in Egypt were there in order to take up time. So you'd stuff a—what's the English—*courgette*—I don't know what it is in English.

02:00:39 Q: A pepper? No.

02:00:42 Slyomovics: Say a pepper or anything else.

02:00:45 Q: Zucchini?

02:00:46 Slyomovics: Zucchini. It's *courgette*, okay. You'd make a little hole, you'd very carefully take out the insides, you'd mix it with all sorts of things, and you'd very carefully put it back so it looked *exactly* the same. You would spend hours doing this, and it looked the same.
(both laugh)

02:01:08 Q: Taste different.

02:01:09 Slyomovics: Yeah. (laughs) You know labor-intensive stuff like that. (laughs)

02:01:19 Q: So it was to take up time or to be with other women?

02:01:23 Slyomovics: Yeah, there was a lot of activities women did together. You know, you'd find women holding hands together. It was much more, you know, physically and emotionally close than say, North American, although my female friendships at Barnard were pretty intense.

02:01:44 Q: So you come back, your advisor says, "Susan, come home," you go home, you write your dissertation, and then what's next?

02:01:54 Slyomovics: Five years as an academic nomad till I get a tenure-track position at Brown University, where my son was born. And they were very nice to me, too. I showed up pregnant; there was no maternity leave in 1993 when he was born, which is simply outrageous. Now there is pretty much everywhere, and certainly in the University of California system, but there, there wasn't any. So I show up pregnant, and everybody tells me it's the kiss of death, but it

wasn't, you know? They were unbelievably nice, and they even were quasi-illegal, where they gave me—you know, I didn't get the maternity leave, but they had me doing a non-teaching semester so I could be with this beautiful little boy that was born in February, so I had from January through till September of what was, you know, no course load, and you know, a chance to be with my son, which I loved.

02:02:58 Q: When did you first publish?

02:03:01 Slyomovics: My first article was 1986; I got my PhD in 1985, so I published on these poets. It was on their poetry that incorporated contemporary politics, like the Arab-Israeli war, poems and praise of Gamal Abdel Nasser or things like that, and how you could deal with a medieval epic and update it so that the audience would catch some interesting connections. The hero would be carrying, instead of a sword, a Kalashnikov. (both laugh) It rhymed with something.

02:03:39 Q: Did you find that the poet changed his performance not only based on the audience, but also the location, village versus city?

02:03:50 Slyomovics: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, the whole thing worked on a system of puns, so words would have double, triple, quadruple meanings. And those who were followers of him—and he had his audiences that, you know, he would go on a fifty-kilometer circle—they would get the multiple meanings; the people who were not the adepts, like the senior males, would you know, get the storyline which was quite dramatic. And he could also—he could pun on your

name, he could pun on anything, and in between people would hold up money, and he would do a poem in honor of them. And if you didn't do that, he could make fun of you, he could make you a character in the poem, kill you off. I mean, there were so many things he could do with these performances.

02:04:38 Q: So it was an incentive to give him some tips.

02:04:41 Slyomovics: Oh, yeah. No, that's the way he earned his living; you'd be paid for—I became a patron, that's how I was inserted, and I actually inflated the performances terribly; (laughs) I was paying him double of what the locals were paying him. But you would hire him for an occasion: circumcision, return from the Hajj, a Ramadan evening, all sorts of—a wedding even, all sorts of wonderful things. Or you want, you know, to honor somebody, you'd get a bunch of friends together, you'd pay, you paid for his cigarettes, there would often be hashish that you paid for, there would be a meal, and so I became a patron, one of his really good patrons. (both laugh)

02:05:25 Q: So he didn't make fun of you.

02:05:26 Slyomovics: Of course he did. (laughs) Nobody was exempt.

02:05:30 Q: So for instance, what did he say?

02:05:30 Slyomovics: You know at one point I remember asking him, you know, "Can you pun on anything?" Because what we would do afterwards was I would tape him—videotape was very difficult because it was this 1982, 83, it was this enormously heavy set of equipment, and there were a couple of Copts in the village who did wedding performances, so I would hire them—

02:06:00 Q: Copts. C-o-p-t-s?

02:06:02 Slyomovics: Yeah, sorry. Egyptian Copts who I would get—who I would hire to do something fast, so I have one video on my website from 1983; it was really funny. But it was mainly taping them, and the microphone, you forget it's there, right? You don't see it, even if it's one of those big phallic kind of things. (laughs) So I remember at one point, I said to him, "Can you pun anything?" Because he was going over the taped performance, and I said to him, "I'm not an adept, I'm not a follower of this; can you explain the puns to me?" So he would stop the tape, which neither of us really understood how it worked—he used to tell me, "Hit stop," and then he would tell me what that pun meant. And then I would go to the audience and ask them what they thought these puns meant. And they were very complex, quatrains, you know, that interlocked, rhymed, and could have, you know, unbelievable multiple meanings, right? So if the end word was punned, and you could pun it, and the internal also, and you're talking kind of exponential possibilities of meaning. So I said, "Can you pun my name?" And it's Sou-san, as he sometimes called me. So he said the pun was *Sou-wa*, *Sou-wa* for that, which means a double-intensive, *together*, *together*.

02:07:26 Q: Oh.

02:07:30 Slyomovics: Yeah, that was a sweet one. But he would make fun of me all the time. Whenever they called me duktura, “Will the duktura deign to come?” You heard this—you know, things like that. “_____ (??) duktura—” They wouldn't address me directly most of the time, it was always duktura. (both laugh) And they knew I didn't have a doctorate. (both laugh) And I once said to them, "Why are you calling me that?" "Well, it's our wish for you, it's an aspiration." (Price laughs) Everything in Egypt is, you know, some future aspiration. “We inflated all of these titles; why not you?” (both laugh)

02:08:13 Q: So you come back—

02:08:15 Slyomovics: Yeah, I'm going to have to stop soon. I come back to Berkeley.

02:08:19 Q: Actually, maybe now you're going to have to stop.

02:08:21 Slyomovics: Yeah.

end part one

begin part two

00:00:11 Q: Good morning, Sou-san. This is August 19th, about 9:30 a.m. Los Angeles time, and we're back for our third session. And we've saved the best for last. And again we're in the Westwood section of Los Angeles; this is Janet Price, and I'm interviewing Susan Slyomovics

for the BC '71 Oral History Project. Susan, when we left off you were back in Berkeley after spending a couple of years in Egypt and finally being summoned home by your advisor. So take us through the next few years of your life; what did you write, where did you go, who were your friends, what are your most important memories?

00:01:02 Slyomovics: How many years you want to go up to? Like the whole rest of my life? I can do that.

00:01:06 Q: No, no, no. Let's go—my suggestion is we go from coming back from Egypt, until meeting Nadjib, your second husband, and your best husband, sorry, (laughs) and then we'll take your life from Nadjib, Brown, and Skandar going forward. That's a good way of dividing it, don't you think? So speak away and I'll shoot follow-up questions as needed.

00:01:37 Slyomovics: So that's a period only of about four or five years actually.

00:01:41 Q: There you go, perfect.

00:01:43 Slyomovics: So I got my PhD from Berkeley. And I had a postdoc back to Egypt, so that was like year four and a half, back to Cairo; it was a wonderful one, Cairo and Israel-Palestine. And I was working on Palestinian theatre, and I wrote an article about what it was like to do these kinds of ephemeral performances when you have Israeli censorship, and the kind of interesting dance that the Palestinian theatre writer, who's basically an actor doing improvisation, suddenly has to come up with a script to pass the censor. So it was just a wonderful thing to

watch. And I got a job before leaving; (water pouring) I had stopped in New York, probably saw you then, too, in '85, interviewed for a job at The Jewish Museum, and while I was in Egypt they told me I got the job, so I came back after I'd been there six months; I was going to stay (laughs) there longer, you know this money goes really far and I know how to make it go far, too. And so I came back and I was hired at The Jewish Museum to—specifically for a project. They had been access to, or permission to have, the [Adolf] Eichmann trial tapes which at the time, now they're much—they've discovered much more, were a little less than two hundred hours, and I was to catalog them; I watched the entire Eichmann trial over a period of six to seven, eight months, cataloged them, matched it against the transcripts because the transcripts were complete and had been given to us by—I wish I could remember, some Israeli state institution, and they were not made available to the general public even in 1985. It was really extraordinary; it took a lawsuit in fact to release them, and it was done by an Israeli filmmaker, Aels—no, not Sivan—another filmmaker had gone to court in Israel to make this public.

00:04:03 Q: The Eichmann trials were some time in the sixties, weren't they?

00:04:06 Slyomovics: Yeah, it was '61, '62; the Israelis picked up [Adolf] Eichmann in Argentina, (laughs) illegally transported him to Israel for this trial, and Hannah Arendt had written this remarkable book called *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and for people who work on Holocaust testimony it was really important because it was one of—there had been other trials, but this was a trial in which by choice, legal strategy, the main approach was to bring witnesses; I think there were a hundred and eleven witnesses. And most of the tapes were those witnesses, that's what we had. So you know, you're going through witness, witness, witness, some of them

having no direct link to Eichmann but just to give you a sense of this extraordinary, you know, Auschwitz—you know, planet of concentration camps. So that's what I did for six months, nine to five. Catalogued—

00:05:11 Q: What languages did they speak in?

00:05:13 Slyomovics: Well, that was really interesting; I really got to dislike the translator. You know, I know Hebrew, I can understand—you know, my French is good, I can even get by in German, and I could turn off sometimes the translator's voice; it was this woman with a very high voice, nasal voice, good translator but, you know, the attempt to translate is to be affectless. So you know, you're hearing tortures and beatings, and there's a high voice, "And then he beat me and—" No emotion while the person is—you see the person weeping in front of you. It was *really strange*. (both laugh) I actually preferred reading the transcript and just turning off the sound for some of it. But I cataloged the whole thing for the purposes of an exhibition at The Jewish Museum. Now, the interesting thing about this was it introduced me inadvertently to Leo Hurwitz. Leo Hurwitz was the director of the Eichmann trial tapes; he was the father of Tom Hurwitz, who was also at—who I knew not well, but at Columbia, and one of the organizers of the '68 uprising and Leo used to come and give food, you know. There are these wonderful stories of him giving food, you know, every day; he completely supported the uprising. And he'd been a—not that it was ever confirmed by him, but he had been a member of the Communist Party, so his job as the head of NBC News in the late forties disappeared; they fired—you know, they had this thing called *Red Channels* [*Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*], it was a list of everybody who had what they thought were communist

affiliations, so he was blacklisted. And in fact, I'm trying to remember, 2008—I still have all that material and research that I did; in 2008 I did a conference at UCLA called, "Filming the Eichmann Trial," and I brought everybody who was willing to come and who I could pay, who had actually done *any* kind of film about the Eichmann trial, or had written about the Eichmann trial, including Tom Hurwitz, and all of those talks are posted on the UCLA website. And that's another one of my retirement projects; I want to write about Leo Hurwitz and write about what he had done with the Eichmann trial. And I also interviewed him myself in 1985; there's a filmed interview with him that I did for this Jewish Museum exhibition.

So there had been a real problem; The Jewish Museum had gone all out, it was the anniversary of the Eichmann trial—I forget which one, '61 to '85, twenty-fifth maybe—and they were running all the tapes, and I had cataloged them so they had a, you know, a little guide to what you were seeing with the times. So at eleven o'clock you're going to see, I don't know, Ka-tzetnik (laughs), who—I forgot his real name at this point [Translator's note: It's Yehiel De-Nur.]—who had written a book of what it was like to be one of the boy/child homosexual brothel kids in one of the camps, something like that. I mean it was *just* extraordinary. And I realized what was really interesting to me, I had no nightmares, nothing, I was just immersed in this. And I'd always put off thinking or writing about my parents, and this one gave me the sense that, you know, I could do this. You know, it's not this black hole that I always have to ignore. And so they didn't invite Leo. I mean, he was still—this is 1985; I don't know, the blacklist was still operating in the Jewish community. They did not invite him. He lived on Eighty-Sixth Street on the West Side; the museum was then in the nineties on the East Side; everybody who was there knew he was alive and well, so when he found out that this exhibition was about to happen he called the

museum. I think it was a Sunday, and I was the only one there. So I answer the phone, and you know, every time a section came up, you know, they'd film for about an hour and it was extraordinary film—video I think it was, experience, because he had four cameras feeding him film and he was editing live, because that was the way you did it then. It was just brilliant. And so he calls up and each time it would come up, "Directed by Leo Hurwitz." You know, this thing, and it never occurred to me that he was alive because he wasn't in part of any of this exhibition, and it didn't occur to me to ask. So this man calls and says, "My name is Leo Hurwitz, and I'm calling about your exhibition," and I'm like, the first thing I said to him, "You're alive?" (both laugh) And he laughed, he said, "Yeah, very much so, and who are you?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm here cataloging you." He said, "Can I come over?" It was a Sunday. "Sure!" And it turned out I hadn't realized that the museum, you know, it was one of those smoking guns. Had they done it deliberately? Had they not done it deliberately? It was never proven. Who knows? I, of course, believe they did it deliberately. They can't be that stupid, you know, the most famous—and he's a well-known film director, founder of the NYU—one of the founders of the NYU Film School. I mean, it didn't make any sense to me, especially afterwards. So Leo says to me—I had absolutely no training whatsoever—Leo says, "We're going to make a film." (laughs) "Okay, I don't know anything, Leo." "Really, the trick," he said to me, "in making films is the script, it's the writing. That's what comes first, you really need a good script; you can't just wing it. I know that's the way people do it now, but this is what we have to do, and you have the entire trial in your head." (laughs) So we put together, and I still have it, an eight-minute tape to try and sell The Jewish Museum, and you know, it struck me as a no-brainer, the very same director who had made these original films in 1962, what if you let him go through this stuff twenty-five years later? And he's a major film director! They turned us down. And they gave the money—it was like fifty

thousand dollars, and we could easily have done it; in fact, we made the little eight-minute thing for two hundred bucks. I still have it; it's a nice teaser kind of thing—and they gave it to someone who I certainly remember the name, but I will not state it, who turned out a piece of shit, a compilation tape to go—the idea was to have a film to go with the traveling exhibition of these tapes which were going to go to different museums. So I was introduced to Leo Hurwitz, and he was marvelous. He died, I'm trying to remember, in 19—was it '88? God, I can't remember anymore. And he was a wonderful friend, just lovely, and we watched films together, and then I did a couple of film festivals. I was—so at that point my life at The Jewish Museum was no longer tenable; they couldn't fire me, because you know, I was a good employee, but you know, I was accusing them of maintaining the blacklist. (laughs) And they just want to get rid of me, so after a year I left for another job—

00:13:21 Q: Wait. Follow-up. Do you think that your battle in support of Leo helped you get through looking at the Auschwitz trial, and dealing with all of this testimony?

00:13:35 Slyomovics: No, they were two separate things, completely separate.

00:13:39 Q: So what kind of emotion—

00:13:40 Slyomovics: I still have all of the correspondence with The Jewish Museum, all of this stuff.

00:13:47 Q: Well, obviously they were two separate occurrences, but emotionally what were you going through as you looked through these tapes of horrible, unspeakable—testimony about unspeakable things?

00:14:05 Slyomovics: There was no historical context. You know, you had a—it was done deliberately. I mean, Hannah Arendt has written her criticism of all of this, but you got these little snippets of what was going on, you know, suddenly here you were in Treblinka, then you were in Theresienstadt ghetto, and you know, one person cannot embody this extraordinary world. So there was nothing there that I—you know, there was just this horror that people were—and you know, by 1985 people were talking, there was testimony, and so you know, some of the stories you heard were quite terrible, but still I couldn't get a handle on when or where or how this all worked. For me that was, you know, the history is part of the emotion; I don't know who you are or what happened to you, really. So it wasn't till my mother was interviewed, which was in that time period—I forgot the dates; it's in there—by Spielberg, that for example, I hadn't—

00:15:11 Q: That was in the 1990s, I believe.

00:15:13 Slyomovics: Yeah, that was right. That I actually had an chronology. So you know, the issues of Jewish complicity, Jewish leadership, should they have fought back, those seemed to be a lot of the major issues; people weren't thinking, at least I wasn't aware, which is probably more likely the case, what it means to give testimony, you know, what are the narrative codes, what are the clichés, what are the repetitions, similar to what I had done with the oral Arab epic; it

hadn't occurred to me to apply that kind of reasoning and approach to narratives of suffering. But it did start me on that path of narratives of suffering, which became you know, one of the things I looked at, and a great interest in legal anthropology. What were the laws that allowed you to take an Eichmann? You know, there was no such thing as the Pinochet rules, of going after someone if he showed up in another country. I mean, what do you do with perpetrators? I got very interested in the entire process of bringing someone to trial. What was the value of testimony in trial? And this was still before the, you know, South African Truth Commissions; it's like I was waiting for that South African Truth Commission, something that made sense to me, both legally and in human terms, but that took much longer. But the Eichmann trial opened up a huge amount of stuff. But I still hadn't—you know, I used to still take notes whenever my mother would come up with one of her *strange* triggers, you know. (sighs) Oh, God! (laughs) You know, for example, some friend would do something terrible to her, so she would tell me one of the stories I put in the book, "This reminds me of when Fagey hit me over the head, and she had power." And it was again one of those extraordinary, crazed family moments that I'd come to realize where, you know, it erupted into normality. You know, the past, the Holocaust past erupted into normality. Some friend of hers had been mean to her, and to her it was—reminded her—it wasn't the same as; there's no equivalence—"This is what Fagey did to me when she was the *Lagerältester*," which is, you know, a kind of kapo for the women's group."And she had some power over us, and she beat me" for, I don't know, stealing potatoes. In other words she was, you know, joining the perpetrators instead of her own people. I still kept doing that, but I still didn't have the framework, and it was the South African Truth [and Reconciliation] Commission—I *was riveted to that*; I thought to myself, Finally, something that has legal force, goes after the

perpetrators, whatever the concession it makes it makes, but it also foregrounds, you know, testimony in a way that actually has an effect that I can understand.

00:18:35 Q: When I was in Israel studying Jewish mysticism, my professor said—this was back in '69, '70—she said it took about fifty years after the expulsion from Spain for the survivors and refugees to start talking about it, for the Jewish Sephardic community to start dealing with it. And that's the time period we're almost up to with the Eichmann trial. Do you think that was the opening up of the conversation?

00:19:10 Slyomovics: That's what people say. It was '61; it's not fifty years by any means. The Eichmann trial was '61.

00:10:17 Q: No. Thirty-five perhaps?

00:19:18 Q: I don't know. What is it? '45-'55. Not even; it was fifteen years, sixteen years, from 1945 to 1961. But remember there were other trials going on; there was the Nuremberg trials, the Germans had the Auschwitz, the Germans were doing these trials. But they didn't have this kind of film value where you know, there's Leo filming everything and it's going to the United States. You know, that every night there'd be a feed of what was going on, so it didn't have that kind of international currency. If you look at the Nuremberg trials, the films, at least the ones that I've seen available, you don't get the entire sequence. So that took about fifteen, sixteen years, but as I mentioned earlier, my mother never—she was never silenced. Fifties, as long as I can remember she always talked about it. My father was of course different; it was much harder for

him to talk about it. In fact, not until he was in his nineties could I get things that weren't positive; he would make unbelievable jokes, he would tell army stories, and then it was only later I realized the stories he's telling me is about, say, a man on the run from the Nazis, from Carlsbad in the Sudetenland to Belgium to France. Walking the length of France, being picked up by a British troop ship to enlist in the army in England. I mean, this is someone on the run, interned in Paris. I even went to visit—The French interned all of the enemy aliens, and of course the Czechs were now enemy aliens because they were considered to be on the German side. My father was in Paris during the fall of Paris when the Germans came in, and he was interned by the French in May, in the Roland Garros tennis stadium. They still play tennis there; I think there's a plaque somewhere. You know, they had turned it into a giant, outdoor internment camp.

00:21:20 Q: Amazing.

00:21:21 Slyomovics: Yeah, yeah. Their stories are heroic. So I better get back to me for this, right? Eighty-five to ninety—so then I got a job for a year as folklorist to The City of New York. It was a non-profit; I did that for a year. I liked it very much, a lot of film festivals. I actually made one documentary film. And I realized (laughs) that I don't have—I just can't let go of detail, and I probably didn't do it right. You know, I couldn't cut off songs in the middle; I couldn't—I hate snippets in anything, which is what the Eichmann trial seemed to give me. I wanted the entire song, and movies don't do that. They're constantly cutting, right? You know, so I'm more of a documenter than a documentary filmmaker. So that film is around, it's online.

00:22:12 Q: What's it about?

00:22:12 Slyomovics: It's about—we had gotten—I put together a project with another person in—as a part of a folklore NGO [non-governmental organization] in New York City, and we had wanted to do a series of films on what were called New Americans. And we had three projects outlined, and we only got money for the first one, or for whatever reason, and it was on the—

00:22:37 Q: Chicleo.

00:22:38 Slyomovics: No, no, the Indian women immigrants, and the Henna. So I made a forty-minute, which she cut them like—my co-collaborator cut it down to twenty-seven minutes, you know, so it would work for television, and I hated the cut. But you know, the cut version worked now that I look at it, but at the time, the idea—I couldn't even get it down. And Tom Hurwitz was my cameraman. I had hired him for that. And after that I taught for part time, at NYU, in the Department of Performance Studies; I was applying for jobs, academic jobs every year. I'd send out about a hundred and fifty applications, went for interviews, and picked up this academic nomadic life, picked up jobs here and there in New York City, teaching. And then I got a postdoc to the University of Pennsylvania, and I started my book on the object of memory on the Palestinian village that had been taken over by one of the founders of the Dada Movement, and turned into an Israeli-Jewish artist colony with the former inhabitants, Palestinian citizens of Israel, renovating their stone houses. So I stuck to the architecture, the art, what I called Dada Colonialism, to try and understand this extraordinary place where the village, the Palestinian village in Israel, had *not* been destroyed, was preserved but by Jews, and the former inhabitants

lived above in an illegal settlement, and in Israeli-style cement block housing. So it was a wonderful topic and occupied a lot of my time.

00:24:32 Q: How did you pick it? How did you find this subject to write about?

00:24:36 Slyomovics: Well, I'd known about the village a long time; I have a large family in Israel, and my uncle, my uncle and my aunt—one of my father's sisters actually—had married the music critic, one of the great music critics of the Israeli radio station, Kol Israel, and in fact when I was in Cairo, I ran into people who knew him, they listened to him, and his name is Yehuda Cohen. And he had the most extraordinary broadcast that would reach, you know, countries nearby. (laughs) "You're Yehuda Cohen's niece?" I remember someone saying that to me in Cairo. And they used to go to Ein Hod; they were part of that artsy world of the fifties and sixties, and we went to Israel in 1960, and you know, I had heard about these places, but what really got me was a series of Palestinian books in Arabic, where they had written—there was a book devoted to each Palestinian destroyed village, and it came out of Birzeit University, written by Sharif Kanaana, who was an anthropologist there, who I'd come to know through Alan Dundes. My advisor actually had invited several Palestinians to Berkeley. And there was a book for each destroyed Palestinian village, and volume one was Ein Houd, and he asked me to review it because it's only in Arabic. So I wrote up a review, and I read that first book and I thought, This is an extraordinary story; it's telling the story of the Palestinians, it's not telling what's there now very much. So I thought it was a beautiful way to deal with that particular Israeli-Palestinian issue. (laughs)

00:26:16 Q: I remember the preface to that book. Can you talk—

00:26:21 Slyomovics: I don't remember. What? That's a leading question, Janet!

00:26:25 Q: I'm sorry, but I have to ask it; the preface is about your mother's villages memory book.

00:26:32 Slyomovics: Oh, yes, now I can—I thought it was important to compare this phenomenon cross culturally, and I had my own copy of *The Destroyed Jewish Villages in Eastern Europe*, including the one from my parents' villages. But there're also Armenian ones, there are Bosnians, you know, whenever war and displacement destroys and there are people who survive, they get together and they want to put out a book: former settlers in Algeria have done it, Pieds-Noirs; I mean, it's an extraordinarily pervasive traumatic memory product that you find in many places.

00:27:12 Q: Did the irony hit a nerve?

00:27:15 Slyomovics: I don't see it as an irony. You know, if you're talking about the—I see it as, you know, scholarly comparison. What are the—I avoid irony whenever I can. (laughs) It's cheap, cheap. You know, what are the literary, rhetorical-historical strategies, structural moves that you're making in all of these memorial books, memory books, whatever they've been called? And often by people who are not familiar that anybody else has done this kind of thing. How come they're so similar? You know, they all have the same sort of protocol, the list of martyrs,

old photographs, you know, a soccer team with everybody named, you know, a soccer team picture, you know, the things that I throw out for my kids, suddenly this has [an] unbelievable amount of emotion and affect because the people are scattered, the team is gone, the city's gone, the village is gone, and everybody's using these same kind of artifacts in very similar ways.

00:28:22 Q: Fascinating.

00:28:23 Slyomovics: Yeah. Okay, so we're up to 1990, I get a postdoc at Penn, wonderful year. I'm commuting between New York and Penn; I had met my second husband already on a trip to Algeria, in 19—I took any invitation anyone sent me. So someone—you know one thing, it's kind of a cascading snowballing effect—so someone had read an article I had written here, and a theatre person in Algeria invited me to come to Algeria, and I'd also been invited for my work on epic poets; they were having this *giant* congress on epic poetry in the Arab world. So I had several invitations, and I thought I always wanted to go there. So not easy, still to this day, you need a visa; it's not like Morocco and Tunisia, which are open to tourists. The Algerians don't have a tourist infrastructure except for themselves; it's internal tourism. They don't want that mass, you know, Scandinavian nude sun beach; (laughs) they don't want any of that. So I had all these invitations, and I went there and I met my husband, Nadjib, who was a political cartoonist, did comic books, because I'd been sent to look for Algerian cartoonists by Tom Zummer, who actually curated—he's a friend of mine in New York—he had curated or he was then in the process of curating an international exhibition on cartoonists at the Wexner Center [for The Arts] at [The] Ohio State University. So I'd already met my husband thanks to Tom, who said, “Go, see what you can collect there.” I arrive in Algeria and they say to me, No, no. Avoid the

president of the Algerian Cartoonist Association, he's a figurehead. Go for the vice president; he's young and *dynamique*, was the word they gave me. So I met him, and within a week that was it. We were together. That was it. And so he came to Ohio State University, and the Wexner Center as part of this exposition—exhibition is the English word——*exposition* [French] exhibition, and it turned out I was pregnant, we got married, he stayed, Algeria had a civil war, we couldn't go back for several years, I had a beautiful son who was born when I was forty-two, and I had a job at Brown University after the postdoc, my first tenure-track job, and I arrived there pregnant and with a family. (laughs) And I had a lovely time there for six years.

00:31:17 Q: How did they handle your pregnancy at Brown?

00:31:21 Slyomovics: Oh, God, no maternity leave in those days. Just awful. But, they were very nice about it within my department; you know, it wasn't considered a right, they were—you know, whatever they thought, there was no university policy in my department, and so they were really nice about it, and the chair and several other people said, Look, this is what we're going to do because there's no maternity leave; we're going to give you a non-teaching semester, and we'll make it work. So I still had to come in to meetings and things, but I didn't have to teach, and that's a *huge*, you know, getting off a full load and half the time. I still remember the chair, a marvelous man, two chairs, I think they were doing a co-habitation, maybe? They did that one for a while, two of them, they were fabulous, fabulous mentors. And one of them said to me, "Don't even come in for the meetings." (laughs) "We don't care." But you know, they were wonderful to me, but you know, it was a favor. And apparently when the dean became a woman, she got rid of these deals and didn't replace it with maternity leave, and I remember being

interviewed by her. May she rot in hell. And she says to me, "Two days after I gave birth I was back in the lab." You know, bully for you. It's crazy. And the State of Rhode Island gave you—one of the few states at the time—gave you six weeks paid maternity leave, and I remember filling out the forms and going to the bureaucrat there, and saying, "Look, I'm getting a salary from Brown. This is double dipping, isn't it?" She said, "Nope, we don't care. This is Rhode Island." (laughs)

00:33:09 Q: How lovely!

00:33:09 Slyomovics: And one of the people said, "This is our legacy. It's an old labor fight, socialist legacy." So that was very good. But you know, I don't even know, it took a long time, and when I moved to MIT, they had maternity leave for un-tenured women. I don't think they called it that. I don't know what it was. And we were able to fight for parental leave, and elder care leave, and leave for adoption. You know, I used to call it, to the horror of the MIT engineers there—I called it vaginal birth canal leave. (both laugh) You almost could see them cringing every time I said vagina. I said, "It doesn't matter at this particular moment, it doesn't last that long; what matters is having a child in *any* shape or form. We want parental leave. Male, female, anybody. And we want elder care." And because—this was 1999—the women scientists at MIT, all twenty or twenty-five of them, you know, in this enormous faculty, had actually conducted major research for five years about how they were discriminated against, and most of them it seemed did not have children, you know, it seemed that was what—they had to make their decision in order to stay in the lab, and they still weren't advancing the same way; they weren't getting grad students to write labs, whatever it was, you know, they weren't part of that particular

old boy network. And the anthropology department, in fact, was asked to do interviews with everybody, so we were all interviewed there. So I have another interview that I have a copy of somewhere, you know on a floppy disc, I think. (both laugh)

00:35:10 Q: How do you even use those?

00:35:13 Slyomovics: Yeah, I should find it somewhere. So that's the only other kind of—it was an oral history though of being a female academic, and they have a copy there, and they told us it was going to be in a vault, and I said, “You can have all the permissions you want if this will help other female academics.”

00:35:31 Q: Did anything change?

00:35:31 Slyomovics: Oh, man, yes. The provost—the only time I've met an administrator that I adored— Bob [Robert] Brown, extraordinary man, raised by a single mother, met with the women—this is my memory of the meeting, you know I could be combining several meetings—but I could just feel the hair on the back of my neck rise. He said to us something like—he got all the women faculty together; we weren't that many, and we used to meet, and we met, I think it was at the MIT Museum, which I liked very much, a lovely little place, and he also paid for us to have get-togethers once a month, and one of the faculty members used to organize these all-women get-togethers, all-women dances for the women faculty; it was extraordinary, and just sort of broke the walls in the department. Bob Brown said, *something* like this: “You're right. We're wrong. We're engineers, let's fix it. No lawyers. What do you want?” That's what it came

down to. I thought to myself, This man is *incredible*. And they built a daycare center, of course like all daycare centers it charges way too much. We got parental leave. There were all sorts of wonderful things that changed. I got a 20 percent raise, I think, because they were doing equity matching of male and female salaries. I mean, those years were pretty exciting at MIT.

00:37:19 Q: Yes. Let's go back—this was rich stuff, but let's go back to Brown, and your experience there. You've just published, [*The*] *Object of Memory*. I believe it's the first time you've written about Palestinians; am I right?

00:37:32 Slyomovics: I published it when I was at MIT. I wrote it at Brown. Thanks to Brown, I wrote it. But it came out when I moved to MIT, and when I accepted the job at MIT. that's where I put it, under my MIT.

00:37:46 Q: Why did you move from Brown to MIT?

00:37:48 Slyomovics: Double the salary. I liked Brown, but you know they don't pay well. We couldn't live on my salary at all. My husband was going to Brown. (laughs) I always tell our son, you know, "Your father's an Ivy League dropout; he dropped out of Brown." They had started a program on computer art and computer graphics, and he took the classes for a week—I mean a year, and then, you know, felt that he knew more than they did. (laughs) That was number one, and number two he had to take liberal arts classes, so for example, I'll never forget, he signed up for a French class—he's a native French speaker, right? And the class was on Versailles, and you know they had these American students, undergrads, who were kind of struggling to speak

French, and my husband wouldn't shut up in the class, so the teacher finally said to him, "Look, don't come to class, you know the material, just stay home, you don't have to come. And write the paper." (laughter) So I forgot, he wrote a paper, a nice huge paper in French. And so it was that kind of thing, you know, he took all the art classes and the computer classes; he took everything they had in art and computer graphics, and that was it. And he says, "What am I going to do, major in French at Brown? What's the point of that?"

00:39:05 Q: Did Nadjib have a university education in Algeria or France?

00:39:09 Slyomovics: No, no. He never went to university. But he went to Brown. (both laugh) They had—I don't know if they have it now, but they had tuition-free for spouses, not just faculty children, but faculty spouses. And there weren't very many.

00:39:30 Q: So anything else memorable in your years at Brown?

00:39:33 Slyomovics: Yeah, every summer we left. You know, it was a semester system; I'd have four months, and I got fellowships. So Nadjib actually came—well, first we went to Jordan, for four months in '94, and I researched one chapter of *The Object of Memory* with a diaspora in Irbid, the Palestinian Diaspora, of this village, near Haifa, by the way, it's about eighteen kilometers southeast of Haifa and the Carmel Mountains. And of course, many of the people had fled; two-thirds of them had fled and ended up in a refugee camp in Irbid. So I went there; spent four months interviewing them. That was one chapter. And then the year after I got another fellowship.

00:41:54 Slyomovics: Yeah, so, no. Yeah, so my whole family was there, and my brother and his family lived in Jerusalem, and we had a wonderful time. They found us an apartment, we were there for four months, we traveled all over, and you know, I finished the research in 1995. And I had a wonderful fellowship after that, a Guggenheim fellowship for the year. And I wrote the book while on the Guggenheim, and it came out when I moved to MIT.

00:42:24 Q: And was there a pushback from the Jewish community?

00:42:27 Slyomovics: No, nothing.

00:42:28 Q: Nobody noticed?

00:42:29 Slyomovics: I don't think anybody reads my stuff. (both laugh) Until this one.

00:42:34 Q: And what about your family?

00:42:37 Slyomovics: Um, my father always said the same—he was the only one who read *everything, always read everything*. And my mother got a little upset with it. My brother wouldn't read it. Um, my niece and nephew read it and liked it very much; his children read it. And my parents had two reactions; my mother said, "This book is not good for the Jews." And my father's was—it was really very moving; he said to me, "Look, I love you no matter what you

do. But why does it have to be you that writes this? Given what our family has gone through, why does it have to be you? Let someone else do it.”

00:43:25 Q: And what was your answer?

00:43:27 Slyomovics: I had no answer to it. “This is what I want to do, Pop, and I’m going to do it. It’s different; I don’t have anything to fear. I have a tenure-track job. I have extraordinary privilege. I’m allowed to follow my interests. I can do whatever I want in terms of research. How many people get to say that?” But they were much happier when I went to Morocco and worked on my next project.

00:43:57 Q: And what was that?

00:43:57 Slyomovics: Well, my husband was having trouble getting into Arab countries, even though he’s Arab. (laughs) And then it was the Oslo Accords had fallen apart, and he could not really—you know, it was not something he—and I was not going to go travel to places without him. So he’s not an academic but he knows how to manipulate academics; he’s watched this long enough. And he says to me, “Look, all your work and your publications up to now have been Egypt and Palestine.” He said, “You really need to have more breadth as opposed to depth as an anthropologist. Why not go to North Africa?” And so—we can’t go to Algeria because it was still the civil war, so he says to me, “The choice is Tunisia or Morocco. Which do you want to go to?” I said, “Morocco.” I had been there in 1969 and it had changed my life; it was a wonderful trip. “Morocco!”

00:45:01 Q: Changed your life in what way?

00:45:03 Slyomovics: Eureka. It was the summer of 1969, and I was in Spain, and studying Spanish again, and this is [Francisco] Franco's Spain, I was in Barcelona, and Majorca where there were Catalan speakers, and in 1969 their form of resistance against Franco was not to speak Spanish. (laughs) And I thought to myself, Boy is this crazy. I go to a place that is anti-Spanish, Catalan speakers, they're annoyed at me when I practice my Spanish on them, the program's not particularly good, I think I'll take off. So I had two roommates, and the program was about, I think six weeks, and in those days they had those blue—1969, right? Blue aerogram letters that you fold up, so I wrote twelve of them, and I told my roommates to mail them to them, and I gave them when to mail them—very good roommates, you know, and they did it. I found them later when I came back to my parents' house. And I took off and hitch-hiked through—I wanted to go through southern Spain, and that was the first and last time I was in Spain was the summer of '69, until I went this past summer, so I hadn't been there in all of this time. And I arrived to Málaga, you know, hitchhiking with a group of other people, and I got to Málaga and it was unbelievable. There was a sign that said, “Ferry to Tangier.” You know, I read my beatniks; Tangier was really big in 1969. Hippies were going there. Beatniks were going there. There was this huge mass of people on the roads of southern Europe, hitchhiking, in ways that I didn't see this time, nobody hitchhikes anymore, I guess it's too dangerous, or it's just not—people have money, or move around differently, but you rarely see a hitchhiker in Europe now, and we were just tons. You know, you have a little cardboard sign, and you know, “Málaga,” stuff like that. We got tons of rides, no problem, no worries. So two of us decided, hey, let's take the ferry to

Tangier. Land in Tangier, and I just was blown away by it. I thought to myself, This is it. This is it. Eureka. I found what I wanted. *Everything* I loved, you know. Architecture, smells, my French worked, my Hebrew worked there, I stayed with a Moroccan Jew who had a bunch of hotels. And in '96 we went back as a family there, and I showed them where I had stayed in '69, living on the rooftops for twenty-five cents a night. I think I went with twenty bucks; it was insanity. Stayed there close to ten weeks, started Arabic, toured around, and there was a hippie circuit. You went to Essaouira, where The Living Theatre were living on the beach in 1969. Fez, then you'd live on the beach in Salé, which was opposite Rabat, but you basically stayed in Tangier. It was extraordinary. I just loved every minute of it.

00:48:31 Q: So you didn't get to Casablanca on that trip?

00:48:34 Slyomovics: No, no. Not at all. But I saw something that kind of marked me. There were these, um—the Moroccan police would come through; the first word in Arabic I ever learned—(laughs) I thought it was Arabic—was the word *laraf* (Price laughs) and it's Moroccan Arabic, for the French *la raffle*, which is a police sweep. They would just come through the old walled city, the Medina, the souk, and just pick up anybody. You know, Moroccans, foreigners, and you'd have to basically buy your way out, you know. And so several of my friends got picked up, and I went to the police station, and you know, it was just so arbitrary, arbitrary tyranny, and it just stuck in my mind as something extraordinary. (laughs) So, let's see, where are we?

00:49:31 Q: So we're back with Nadjib and you going to Morocco, with Skandar, your young child.

00:49:35 Slyomovics: Yeah, so every year, you know, I'd get a grant, organize a conference, so one year it would be Jordan, and another year it would be Jerusalem, another year it would be Tangier, another year it would be Casablanca; I just got every single fellowship to travel there. Wrote articles, books, and then I got a Fulbright for the year, for twelve months, to go to Casablanca, '99-2000, so Skandar was in first grade, and went to a tri-lingual school; Nadjib produced some—a beautiful comic book, in fact, a graphic novel would be the term, by a former political prisoner, and he worked with him to make the cover and to—and I have it here, it's a lovely piece of work. And I interviewed people, right and left, on the Moroccan Truth Commission, that didn't appear then, not till 2004, but there was a huge push and political prisoners were organizing, Islamists, feminists, Amazigh, Berber nationalists. I just went to every meeting you could imagine. It was wonderful. And I continued, and still do; I go back a lot to see the follow-up of the Moroccan Truth Commission, because it's gone through several phases. So it was 2004 and 2005 was the actual commission, and now it's gone through reparation, and then it's gone through community reparation, museums, you know, some wonderful series, and it's considered the—Bless you.

00:51:14 Q: Thank you. Let the record reflect the interviewer has just sneezed. (both laugh) This is so much fun. Let the record reflect this is a gas. (laughter)

00:51:34 Slyomovics: So where are we? So these are a series of projects—

00:51:36 Q: You and Nadjib and Skandar is in the first grade, and he's going to a trilingual school. What was that like for your boy?

00:51:45 Slyomovics: He learnt French beautifully, and he used to correct my spelling, my pronunciation. He learnt Moroccan Arabic, but classical Arabic teaching was terrible, so he learned to write his name in the first grade, but that was it. But there were several really interesting things that happened; the school had corporal punishment, and it was on their God-damned website, and I was furious. My kid was traumatized by it. I went after them. I hired one of the human rights lawyers who had been a former political prisoner, and I said I was going to sue them unless they stopped it. And so they did a poll of the Moroccan families; the school was 90 percent Moroccan, and these were Moroccans who had chosen to go into the English-speaking American system as opposed to the French—wealthy Moroccans—as opposed to the French system or the Spanish system, which were other private schools that were available. And so the principal said to me, "You know, I did a poll, and the poll shows that the majority of the Moroccan parents prefer corporal punishment." So I said to him, "What was the alternative you gave them?" And it was expulsion. And I said to them, "You've given them no choice, because if the kid gets expelled there is no other school for them to go to in Casablanca; they have to go up to Rabat or Tangier." Those were the three American primary and secondary school systems that had been established for a long time. I said, "They have no choice, so don't tell me they like it; they prefer this to having their kid expelled." (laughs) "And find an alternative to expulsion. They've invested their entire kid's future in the English-speaking American system, so work with that." Anyway, we won; the threat of the lawsuit got taken off. (laughs)

00:53:49 Q: So no one got corporal punishment?

00:53:51 Slyomovics: After a certain period, but the kids still believed it, so it kind of worked. My kid would say, "You know, they beat you with paddles and nails attached to it." You know, they had all—you know, rumor would fly all over the place. But the other important thing was I had met four years previously a woman political prisoner, named Fatna [El Bouih] who became a *very* close friend of mine. And I translated—you know, I worked with her on her book. I mean, she wrote her book; I worked with someone else to translate it into English, to bring her to the United States; we've had several projects together, writing together. And she is, you know, like this emotional anchor for me in Morocco; there's several people I'm very, very close to there, in ways that, you know, is like, sort of like I see you in the years past, right? But you know, a feminist, activist, had been five years in prison, and someone who is so emotionally capable, she can read people so beautifully. It's a pleasure being with her. (laughs) We once went—I brought her to MIT. as a speaker, and I brought her to several other places on a book tour, and she was a speaker. And I had a chair that had been endowed by a Frenchwoman who had married an American man, I guess during World War II, and the Frenchwoman owned a great deal of Harvard Square, and she had a four-story building right in the heart of Harvard Square, or a square nearby. And she had this four-story collection of African artifacts—North African, Sub-Saharan African stuff—and she was always interested in meeting my speakers. So I had never been to her house; I would meet her outside, and so she invited Fatna and me to come, and of course she spoke excellent French, Fatna speaks excellent French—I didn't say very much. And so this is a donor, a major donor, and she leaves to make us tea, you know it's all very nice and

gracious, and I remember Fatna put her hand on my hand, and she said to me, "Susan, don't be angry about all of these artifacts here." She knew I was furious; I mean it was just pillage, it was, you know, private and not even kept in good condition, you know these—things that were museum quality. Four stories of this stuff. Sort of like the Hearst Castle, but you know, but this is now. Who does this anymore, right? I don't know what happened to her stuff, and I remember her just—I hadn't said a word, just patting me on the hand, she said, "Don't be angry about all this stuff you see here; these things happen. Maybe it's for the best. Maybe it's better it's here than with us. Look what we've done to our artifacts and objects." And I said, "No, it isn't better here." "Don't be angry, Susan." (laughs) I was sitting there bristling. But I thought I had hidden it from her; you know, I was just very quiet. (laughs) You know, it's like she reads me. (both laugh) So I was just in Morocco recently, and we worked on another project, and we still have several more to go; there are museums, torture centers, including the center where she herself was tortured. (siren in background) She would like it to be turned into some kind of a memorialization site. So there are all sorts of prisons all over, secret prisons all over Morocco.

00:57:56 Q: Wow! You know, I never asked you about your son's name. Tell us about how you named Skandar.

00:58:04 Slyomovics: Oh, that's interesting, and I remember, Fatna was also key to my writing about the Holocaust, because—and I'll get back to that question, too—there was an early system of reparations, and Fatna says to me, "I'm not taking them." And I said to her, "Why not?" And she said, "It's blood money." Same thing I'd heard from my mother for fifty years, and I looked at her and it was like, *boing!* (laughs) You know, the same sentiment. You know, I've got to do

something about this; why do people refuse to take money? And then there was another set of reparations, that she was willing to take, because I had—what helped her make that decision is someone else had taken reparations that I interviewed, and he had showed me the document; he said the money didn't matter. He'd shown me a document that the Kingdom of the Morocco, signed, sealed, official document of apology. This is an apology for the illegal trial, torture—all of this stuff that you underwent, the Moroccan government tenders you an apology.

00:59:32 Q: Wow!

00:59:32 Slyomovics: Yeah. It was this incredible document. I took a picture of it, a photocopy of it, and I said, "Look, you're going to get this. It's not just money. It's an acknowledgement of what happened to you. They're not buying you off; it's not blood money." And you know, she talked about it with her family, you know, for her it meant a great deal not to take money. In the end I think she did take it—

00:59:58 Q: And she didn't have to testify or prove anything?

01:00:01 Slyomovics: Oh, yeah. She had to go. I went with her. It was so hard. It was so hard. She cried.

01:00:10 Q: It's reliving a terrible time.

01:00:15 Slyomovics: It's more than that. You realize how many years you've lost. Because you're telling them—it's not so much reliving, because they don't contest that, it's what happened to you afterwards. You couldn't get a job, because you were a political prisoner, a former political prisoner. You had all of these medical needs, psychological needs that were never met, lost years of schooling; she was arrested at seventeen, my mother's age, or eighteen, you know, when you go to college. So it really isn't the reliving that seemed to have gotten to people, and I was with her when she went there, that got her started. And she had had an extraordinary career; she's one of these women who came from a rural area who was brilliant, and in the post-independence period Morocco gave scholarships, and brought people from the countryside into Casablanca, and she was put into a dormitory, a girls' dormitory, where she got politicized, joined all of the national students movement, you know, went to the university, started, I think, started the university until she got arrested, and she was one of I don't know how many—many kids. And you know, there were many things that resonated with my mother being sent off to school as a boarder because there was nothing in the village, and she was very smart and her father wanted my mother to go, and get a better education than in the village, so he sent her to the city; he only saw her on weekends, she had to travel on the Sabbath, and people talked about that; you know, You're letting your daughter travel on the Sabbath, going to a secular school. You know, he wanted her to get educated. And Fatna's father was the same way; he was the fakir, which is the Koran teacher in the village. And she was smart and he wanted her to get these opportunities, and he sent her away. And we walk into the Truth Commission's headquarters in Rabat and they had organized things, beautiful, to treat people—you know, they fed you when you got there, and they had this whole intake system to make you feel good. They really had learned a lot and they'd done some magnificent things. And she walks into the sitting

room, and this old man, you know, twisted and *ugh*, and he gets up, and he says to her, "Are you the daughter of the *faqih* of the village of so and so?" And she just lost it. You know, tears, you know, her father had died, she was very close to him in many ways, he had pushed her into this education, which you know, this wasn't done in the sixties. You know, to send your daughter away, you know, you had to really believe in this stuff. And it was Morocco and the post-independence period was like that, and Czechoslovakian, the inter-war period had that similar thing, we were going to provide you with a Czech education, but you had to come, you know, and pay for it and go, you know, away from a home for a girl to get it. So every time I looked at her, you know, she'd come out with something like my mother, and I thought to myself, I really, really can't—you know, I'll keep working on the Morocco stuff, but I see a way in to the Holocaust stuff through reparations. I don't have to deal with what happened; I'm going to deal with the aftermath.

01:04:08 Q: So that was the road in.

01:04:09 Slyomovics: That was the road in; Fatna was the road in, yeah.

01:04:13 Q: And when did you start your book, which is called *How to Accept German Reparations*? That came out in 2014, right?

01:04:21 Slyomovics: Yeah. Well, I'd been taking notes for years, but I actually only really decided I was going to do it in 2005, so it's taken me—it took me nine years, which is longer than just about any writing project I have ever done. And I'd stop it for a couple of years, and

then my parents had, you know, had enough of it, and then I'd come back to it. I started it at MIT as part of a memoir-writing group. I managed to do seventeen pages, then I let it drop. We moved to UCLA, and what really, really allowed me to finish—I call it my therapy group; every Monday from three to five, in the anthropology department, weekly seminar, reading group—I don't know what the hell you want to call it; they call it an interest group. It's called Mind, Medicine, and Culture [MMAC]. It was astonishing; I presented half the book there in different versions. And it's just a wonderful atmosphere. The people who run it are extraordinary; they're colleagues of mine who do psychological and medical anthropology. And you can do a topic; you know, you all decide on the topic together during the quarter, or a module, or who you want to bring, or what you want to read; you sit down the first week, and it just worked for me. So I attended from 2006, and I just kept writing it for them, and they were my readers, in effect. Not my family, not anybody else, it was this particular—called MMAC—group, which I still go to.

01:06:03 Q: So there were a bunch of topics, and your book was one of them?

01:06:07 Slyomovics: People would present whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, whatever you'd come up with. There was a floating group of people, some people registered for it as students. And some of us just keep going, you know, psychiatrists, psychologists, people from all—anybody who's interested in the psych/med/anthropological aspect of *any* subject. So one time it was trauma, you know, another time it was subjectivities, you know, whatever the reading was that people wanted to do.

01:06:38 Q: So did their comments and questions help shape the book?

01:06:41 Slyomovics: Yes. (laughs) So the way it worked is I would talk for—it's a two-hour seminar; I would give them what I had written, I would talk for twenty minutes—something different than what I had written—and then for an hour and forty minutes there were questions sent to me, or discussion, or questions or people interrupting. They had two people taking notes, who emailed me the notes, because you don't remember when you're in the middle of this; you're so focused on what people are saying and how to answer; I can't write when this is going on. And then when I leave, "God, what did I say?" So, impeccable notes, by two people who are now professors elsewhere. Just brilliant, every single time. And those notes helped me a lot. A huge amount of feedback. And afterwards you'd run into people who were part of that seminar, who would say to me, You know, you gotta talk to so and so, or see so and so, because UCLA is so big. So someone sent me to a law professor who I liked enormously, who read some of my chapters, who I talked to, who's now retired, and he writes on reparations in general. And he gave me another interesting approach, the idea that reparations are necessary but not sufficient. It'll never, never be enough. You know, and the kind of arguments, pro and con. So I would not have been able to write that book without UCLA; each chapter I actually wrote for a different UCLA entity. The one on the archives I wrote for the School of Information Sciences seminar, they wanted—they had a seminar in archives, and they asked me to speak about the archives I went to. So each one was written—(Price coughs) I've never written a book quite like that in that way, where everything had been kind of what they called work-shopped, discussed, looked at.

01:08:44 Q: Yeah, each chapter comes at the topic from a different angle, which is very enriching. But they do hold together.

01:08:53 Slyomovics: Yeah. Then there was a visiting scholar, Lorenzo Veracini, who has written the core books on settler colonialism, on—was editor of the journal *Settler Colonial Studies*, so he came to UCLA from Australia—so there were conferences, discussions—he read my last chapter. The Algerian one was another UCLA conference, so Sarah [Abrevaya] Stein, who's a Sephardic studies professor, and I organized a conference on Jews in Algeria; she read the stuff *many* times. I mean, each chapter had somebody looking at it, and it made a difference, I think.

01:09:35 Q: What group did you write “The Children of Survivors” for?

01:09:39 Slyomovics: That was the one—I had actually written that in 1990, for a conference at Penn [University of Pennsylvania] when I was a postdoc on Yiddish folklore. And I updated it. So I'd written it for them.

01:09:56 Q: So, let's talk a little bit about that last chapter on settler colonialism, and you make the distinction between, for instance, the Germans giving reparations to Holocaust survivors who were sort of repatriated as Europeans.

01:10:16 Slyomovics: From Algeria, yeah.

01:10:17 Q: Yeah, but also the distinction between European Jews who received reparations, and Africans who'd been colonized, and subjected to terrible treatment, who were not seen as subjects for reparation.

01:10:36 Slyomovics: Worthy. (laughs)

01:10:36 Q: Worthy, yes.

01:10:39 Slyomovics: Yeah. As I—you know, the Holocaust part of my family was just the first half; I wouldn't have written it if I didn't have a larger purpose in mind. There's enough Holocaust memoirs around, and I think a lot of them are just brilliant; I love the work of Marianne Hirsch, for example. I mean, I couldn't see that I was saying anything new just by doing or writing about my parents. But the part that I thought was, you know, mildly original was I located the history of Holocaust reparations among Algerian Jewry, and so they had been given restitution in '43, and '44 when North Africa was liberated from the Germans, and from Vichy, for that matter, actually from Vichy not the Germans. Well, both. (laughs) Algeria from Vichy, let's keep it that way, Tunisia and Germans and Vichy. Libya, Italian fascism, (laughs) each one had a different story. And I had been reading a lot of the work of some of the architects of reparations, and they had looked to the Algerian Jewish case as a really good example, and one of them had written a whole chapter on it in making the case for Holocaust reparations. So I looked at it far deeper, and began to see it within the framework of settler colonialism, because the Jews were a minority in the Algerian camps, you know, maybe maximum 15 percent, a lot more Algerian Muslims—I'm using colonialism terms, you know, *Muslim*, *Jew*, you know, that

kind of thing. It's not the term I would normally use—who had been put in as militants, as criminals, because they thought the French Communists went in there; Spanish Republicans were the majority in a lot of the camps. People fleeing Europe of every persuasion, fleeing European fascism, often were deported to Algeria when they got to France, or just ended up. You know, like the movie *Casablanca* starts off with a map, and it shows people leaving from Marseille to Oran, and then it shows you the map, a line going to Casablanca. Well, a lot of people were stopped in Oran, which is in Algeria, and had different—depending on how much money—nationalities; it was a very fluid situation. So I looked at that, and then I started looking into other cases of reparation, and I included Israelis paying Palestinians reparations, Americans paying for drone killings, you know, all the different categories where you pay off a victim, collateral damage, the names you call it, condolence payments. The Israelis ran some of the reparations—which is not the word they used—through worker compensation boards for killing Palestinian citizens of Israel. So you know, there had been discussions in the 1950s in Israel about giving reparations or not. The Israelis have paid reparations for some of the Gaza wars, you know, there's always one more behind, (laughs) you know. And I discussed all of these cases, and I decided it was—one could compare, from the point of view of reparations, which was what the whole book was about, the Holocaust, and the Nakbah, which is the Palestinian 1948 catastrophe where they had been forcibly—you know 80 percent of them forcibly expelled from historical Palestine. So that was the end of the book, was the comparison, and that was the only time I got—you know, I got feedback from the Jewish community, which I don't think reads anything I write. I had been invited to a Holocaust center along with a law school, a joint invitation, because you know, Holocaust centers have more money apparently, (laughs). And apparently I was told by the law professor who had arranged this set-up, who wanted [me] to

speak to his law students, another to do a public lecture at the Holocaust center, because he wanted me there for his own particular class which had to do with torts, damages, and reparations. So he couldn't figure out a way to fly me there so he got a Holocaust center to pay for it. And then they come back to him and say, We're disinventing her. And he says, “ Why?” And they say, The last chapter, which tells me they read the damn book. (laughs) So I have never had an invitation from any Jewish entity, which normally if you're writing a Holocaust book you would get invited; you'd have a grand tour of all of these centers. The Center for Jewish Studies at UCLA did invite me, I was rather surprised, but they did.

01:15:58 Q: Well, at least they didn't have to pay for your travel. (laughs)

01:16:01 Slyomovics: Yeah, it was a freebie.

01:16:04 Q: I want to—forgive me for hoisting you on your own petard, but I want to read these words from the end of your book, and ask you about them.

01:16:16 Slyomovics: That would make a good ending to this interview, you reading one.

01:16:19 Q: That's true, but it won't be the end of the interview, because we have other stuff to talk about. But. This isn't a documentary; it's just the transcript. People can read it in any order, it's going to get in there. (Slyomovics laughs) So we don't have to worry about the flow, it's not like—it's the first cut of a book, we could always be rearranged, when we do the documentary on “The Amazing Life of Susan Slyomovics.” Okay, the last words of the book, in the last chapter

of the book, "Compensation for Settler Colonialism," you write, "I advocate for Jewish Israeli reparations to Palestinian Arabs, underpinned by the Palestinian right of return, in order that my Holocaust post-memories may be put in the service of imagining a world, a region, and myself in new ways." Do you want to speak to that?

01:17:15 Slyomovics: (both laugh) You have to ask me a more precise question. (laughs)

01:17:22 Q: Well, what does it mean to you to put your "Holocaust post-memories," to being the child of survivors? To put that into service?

01:17:34 Slyomovics: Okay, that's a better way, okay. Yeah, that was a kind of schmaltzy ending, right?

01:17:39 Q: It was a beautiful ending. (Slyomovics laughs) And it wasn't schmaltzy in the slightest.

01:17:45 Slyomovics: Okay, good. (laughs) Well, Marianne Hirsch, who I'd mentioned earlier, has this concept of post-memory, which is about people who experience events, or feel they have experienced events and remember things, which they themselves have not experienced. And that, to me, you know is one of the encapsulations of American Jewish life. You know, you're born here for the most part, most are born here, including myself, under you know, extraordinary privilege. A lot of us have lovely jobs, lives, nobody's bombing us, killing us, we don't even have to go to the draft, you know, all of these things that if you—what I used to do is I would compare

my life and my mother's. At seventeen I'd go off to Barnard. At seventeen, she goes off to Auschwitz, right? I had to stop doing that at a certain point, and I did somewhere in my—I think it was my going to Egypt stopped it, you know, This has got to stop; I'm not my mother. These are *very* different, *radically* different lives, and choices. And those kinds of post-memories can be used. I'm not saying get rid of them, but I don't want—for me it's instrumentalization if it turns the organized Jewish community, because most of my American Jewish friends are nothing like this. But it turns the organized Jewish community with its alliances with right-wing Israeli parties; it twists all of these institutions. When I went to Berkeley, the Berkeley Hillel was okay. The UCLA Hillel is awful; it's an arm of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They don't care about UCLA students, although they certainly claim to. They are a propaganda machine. And I think they should be listed as lobbyists, all of these Hillels. They don't allow people who disagree, you know, who advocate for non-violent means of stopping the occupation; they vet people. I don't remember the Berkeley Hillel with my grad student years as *anything* like this, at least the early years, until [Menachem] Begin got elected, then all of those things changed. You could start to see the change. So it just seemed to me that they control the money, the institutions I care about, which are universities. And you know, this is another way of looking at that past; it's saying, you know, “I come from a religious Jewish family. I come from school in Israel, and Hebrew university, rabbinical school. I come from a particular tradition, which is unbelievably rich and does not see the Holocaust as interpreted by the Israeli government as the sole determinant of what it means to be Jewish in the Diaspora.” So that was one reason to write that book, to bring these things together. I'm certainly not the first, other people have written, you know, seen these kinds of connections, and write about them differently. But my interest was monetizing suffering. You *can* pay back, financially. I mean, that's the Marshall Plan, isn't it?

01:21:33 Q: Right, and even if it's not sufficient, you're saying it's necessary.

01:21:36 Slyomovics: It's enough—it's necessary. And it changes the two parties, you know. My grandmother would never set foot in Germany, but my mother would, and she said to me, "It's a different—" She went back in 2001 for the first time. She said to me, "It's a different Germany. These aren't the same people. It's generations later. Of course I can go back."

01:22:01 Q: Do you think it's possible for there to be a different Israel than the one we're experiencing today with the [Benjamin] Netanyahu government?

01:22:09 Slyomovics: There is always hope.

01:22:13 Q: (laughs) Let's stop for a few minutes now for a break, shall we?

(They break and resume)

01:22:44 Q: After a short break we're resuming Susan Slyomovics's interview. So Sou-san, talk a little bit about your—Sousan is Susan's Arabic name—talk a little bit about your stay here at UCLA, and what it's like to live in Los Angeles.

01:23:03 Slyomovics: And my son.

01:23:04 Q: Oh, and talk all about your son.

01:23:08 Slyomovics: Okay, I think I mentioned this—I got pregnant at forty-one, and you have no idea how happy I was. You know, it's pretty late. He was born in forty-two, in Providence, Rhode Island.

01:23:22 Q: He was born when you were forty-two, yes.

01:23:26 Slyomovics: Sorry, he was born when I was forty-two, in Providence, Rhode Island. He was born zero, right? (both laugh)

01:23:35 Q: I believe that's the way it works, although in Skandar's case I'm not sure. Precocious child.

01:23:41 Slyomovics: Yeah, he's twenty-two, he's finishing an MA in acting at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, of the University of London, founded by Elsie Fogerty, headed by [Dame Judith Olivia] Judi Dench, and he wants to be an actor. He thinks of himself as an actor. He's returning to LA—I'm very happy—in September, next month, [to] see if he can make a career of it.

01:24:10 Q: How did you choose his name?

01:24:13 Slyomovics: Oh, yes. Well, the sonogram—they told us it was a woman, a girl. A female. (both laugh) I had asked not to be told, and you know, in 1992, I guess it was, they weren't doing—Oh, I don't know, such deep medical research into gender, so it turned out you just eyeball a picture, and afterwards when I asked them, "Why did you tell me it was a female" when it came out male," to our great surprise. She goes, "Well, sometimes you know the fetus will cross its legs," because they're just looking for a penis, that's all they're doing, so my kid inside the womb was a trickster even then. (Price laughs) So we had all these names picked out that were women's names, and out he comes and we have seven days in which to record it, after which point we actually have to go through the paperwork; otherwise the hospital will take care of everything. So we discussed it, up till the seventh day, and we kind of compromised because he's half Jewish, half Muslim, half Arab, half Canadian, half Algerian, and so we were looking for a name, and we came up with a version of my grandfather's name, my mother's father whom she loved very much, and we'd always heard about him. And his Hungarian name was Sándor—my brother was given his Hebrew name—and Sándor is—his nickname was Sony [Interviewee note: pronounced Shonyee], and—endless names, yeah, he had another name, Samuel, he's listed in the—you know, tracking him down through the Germans, the Nazi archives, was incredible, because you know, there's so many variations on first names. And so we decided we would take Sándor, which means Alexander in Hungarian, but give him the Arabic version of it, which is Skandar, and then his middle name would be my husband's father, who I never met, who had died, and that would be sort of to accommodate both families, and so that became his name. But my mother called him Sandy, her version of Sony, her father, and she was very, very close to him, very. Adored him. And he in fact—it was mutual—his first year at college he actually went up to—my folks were living in Vancouver—he went to the University of Victoria, for their BFA

program in theatre, and he chose it because he wanted to be near his grandmother, and as a Canadian citizen the tuition was very low; it was only six thousand dollars, and you know UCLA is—(makes noise) All of these American universities are expensive.

01:27:14 Q: So he has citizenship in two countries? Three countries?

01:27:18 Slyomovics: Dual Canadian and American, and my husband took out the paperwork to make him an Algerian, but he never applied for the passport or anything. But that's how I learnt the genealogy of my husband's family; they're Janissaries, and Janissaries, as I explained to my son, are the samurai of the Ottoman Empire; they're sort of mercenary soldiers, and a lot of them were Christians, some Jewish, converted to Islam. And the town my husband comes from is the border town of the Ottoman Empire in Western Algeria, because Morocco was never under the Ottoman Empire. And everybody there knows which Janissary they descended from, and they have incredible paperwork that goes back five hundred years. You know, it's kind of blue bloods, right? And so when my husband wanted to make him Algerian, the family went to the municipal archives in Tlemcen, the town they're from, and there's an archive just for his family, and they are descendants, according to the family, of the great navy commander who is known in the west as Barberousse, or Barbossa, so the name is originally Barbossa. My husband did a beautiful graphic novel on it, which I have to get you to download, on his so-called ancestors. Now my husband doesn't believe it; he says it's bullshit, but the rest of the family does. They're Janissaries, they go back to Istanbul where this guy, Khayr ad-Din Barberousse, has his mausoleum; this is where they come from.

01:29:03 Q: So although his name is Berber, he's not a Berber?

01:29:06 Slyomovics: No, he's not a Berber. He's a Janissary. The French cut the name; they reconfigured all of Algeria, because they applied, you know, [an] ID card system, so that every household, head of household, had to be enumerated, you know photographed, counted, and so they just changed people's names arbitrarily; what they had done, in fact, to the Jews in France, like a name like Dreyfus, they did in Algeria.

01:29:40 Q: So tell us a little bit about being a mom, and Skandar's upbringing.

01:29:47 Slyomovics: Oh, he's the best thing that ever happened to me. I got more focused; I used my time better. I got dragged out of the academy and my research, I was a hockey mom, I was a theatre mom, I mean it just took me—and you know, met, I met some wonderful people, got, you know, attached to the community where I lived; I wasn't just like this floating academic above these institutions that I inhabit for a short time. I got a little bit of—a little anchored in places that I've lived.

01:30:23 Q: And what is the best thing about being a mother, and what is the worst thing?

01:30:28 Slyomovics: The ages of thirteen to sixteen. The dark side, I call them. (both laugh) I don't know; they turn into monsters, hormonal, I don't know what it was, but by sixteen he was reasonable, and when he went off to college I know my husband and I were relieved. (laughs) No empty-nester feeling. (sighs) You know, (laughs) a difficult hormonal moment, plus he's an

actor, and he's wonderfully melodramatic, but he's sane and lovely and sweet, and curious, and just a pleasure to be with.

01:31:06 Q: Let's talk about your time in LA, and at UCLA. And among your duties you were in charge of an institute that focused on the Middle East.

01:31:18 Slyomovics: Yeah, it was the [Gustav E. von Grunebaum] Center for Near Eastern Studies; I stepped down December 31st, which is good because it's a huge amount of work. January 1st—you know, I'm sixty-five, right? January 1st this brilliant young colleague, early forties, takes over, and I'm relieved. I'll still head the faculty advisory committee for a while with the transition, because I got to know—I like bureaucracy, and I like making them work on behalf of me, my fellow academics, students, whatever, and so I headed what was called a Title VI National Resource Center, and for the Middle East there were—now there's much less thanks to the crazy cuts our Congress has put through, and they're cutting things like Fulbright, and they're cutting all sorts of important overseas research funding, they've cut the NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] seminar that took me to Granada this summer, all of these seminars will not be continued, because of course you can study the Alhambra of Granada in Illinois; why do you need to go abroad? They're cutting everything in international education, and they're national securitizing it, so if you want to study Arabic, you know, you can go off to these defense institutes, and they're cutting it from the universities that—you know, funding for it, or federal funding, and putting more onto the universities. So we have a quite wonderful Near Eastern studies department at UCLA. I don't know, I think it's close to eighteen faculty, it's very good, one of the good ones in the United States, and we get along. And there's a separate Center

for Near Eastern Studies which is, again, federally-funded centers in area studies—these are post-World War II entities—and the idea is to bring people across all the divisions, departments, everybody together for these kinds of intellectual events, so I had wonderful funding until UCLA lost it while I was on sabbatical in France. I mean it's a hundred-page application; I like doing these things, I like making it work, writing what I've done. And we would have, I don't know, I think sixty events a year, speakers, in addition a dozen conferences, the conferences would become publications; I did several museum exhibitions, I had concerts, I brought orchestras from North Africa here. It was just a lot of fun. It brought together everything I like to do, you know, have a party, make it academic, talk a lot, you know, publish it so it's not a waste of everybody's time. Or, I pioneered with several colleagues at the center to podcast all our talks, to videotape things, so that anybody can download it. I worked on a three-year project, so again it's open to the public, and a lot of people use it—teaching high school students, you know, the beginnings of five different—eight or nine Middle Eastern languages, you know, How are you?—all of these kinds of things, different methods of teaching it online. So it was just—there was always something going on; I was very busy, but it was busy, good busy.

01:34:59 Q: Well, what would you say of your time heading this institute was your proudest moment?

01:35:06 Slyomovics: Oh, just about any conference I did. Those were all good. Publications.

01:35:12 Q: Hard to pick one in particular that stands out?

01:35:14 Slyomovics: Yeah, yeah. I mean, there's several that I—the one I liked the best—because I managed to integrate everything into one, and it was called, “Clifford Geertz in Morocco.” Now Geertz had gone from the sixties to the eighties in Morocco, and he had started—and a lot of his students, including one of my professors had all gone off to this one little town called Sefrou, which is south of Fez, and they had all written a great deal about it. And you know, it's not common to have that many Americans go and study different aspects of the same town; we're too individualistic to do these kinds of group things, but he was kind of a magnet. And I'd been to Morocco in '69, and he was there in Sefrou when I was there, and had my eureka moment of wanting to come back, and, This is what I want to do, kind of thing. And so I brought the municipal orchestra of Sefrou, from Sefrou, Morocco, here, again you know, with the help of all sorts of organizations that really came on board for it; I did a museum exhibition because Geertz had brought with him a photographer who had been a fashion photographer for *Bazaar* or *Vogue*. You know, it was a hippie time in Morocco, you'd just go. And he had taken magnificent photographs, which are not really—most of which were not available but a few of them appeared in Geertz's book. So I brought him, and we had an exhibition at the Fowler [Museum at UCLA]. We had a conference. Geertz had died the year before, so it was his anniversary; he was a towering figure in American anthropology, and anthropology of Morocco, secondarily. So let's see—I had a museum exhibition; I had this fabulous concert bringing Muslim and Jewish musicians—the Moroccan Jews who were here joined, and you could see them singing together, it was quite beautiful; I had an exhibition; and I had a really nice publication that came out of it. So that's the kind of thing I like to do, that sort of synergy, if you're going to do something, you know, see all the ways you could make it happen.

01:37:29 Q: What kinds of courses are you teaching at UCLA?

01:37:32 Slyomovics: I teach visual anthropology, documentary photography, which I do a lot of. Um, anthropology of North Africa, thematic courses related to Israel-Palestine, Middle East literature and film. I'm teaching a course this fall, a graduate seminar on cities of North Africa in the Eastern Mediterranean, case studies, historical stuff, a wonderful class on *One Thousand and One Nights*; it's one of my most popular, in which I make the students perform the tales as a way of making them read the stuff and remember it. (laughs) A class on literature of Islamic Spain, because I'm in two departments and they don't overlap; it's like having two jobs. I'm in a Near Eastern languages department, where I teach Arabic literature, oral literature, whatever (laughs) I could come up with; they're really nice; they let me do what I want. One required class, which is the introduction for freshman and sophomores, introducing them to the modern Middle East—you could fill up a novel—from Morocco to Iraq. And then in anthropology, I teach visual anthro, I want to teach legal anthro, and I teach regional classes for the Middle East and North Africa. There was one other Middle East anthropologist, but she was Sudan and Africa, and she retired, leaving me to cover this huge expanse, you know, you look at the history department and you specialize on French revolutionary history, right? And I'm expected [to teach] from the sixth century to the Modern, you know? It's just crazy. But we got another brilliant anthropologist who started this year, young, works on this stuff, so I can toss everything and know he will continue, and he's taken over a lot of my classes so I can try things out as I edge into retirement and into the sunset.

01:39:37 Q: We talked a little bit about your experience as a woman at Brown and MIT. As a woman professor at UCLA, have you encountered anything worth noting?

01:39:47 Slyomovics: No, my departments are both excellent, really good people, good colleagues. The administration—I think the problem has always been my politics, not—although being a woman means one more reason perhaps to go after you, because one of my colleagues is treated differently, and I said to him, "Why are you being treated differently than me?" And he said, "Well, I'm one of the guys; that's why." But it was not as important as—if you do any kind of programming critical of Israel, you're labeled an anti-Semite, anti-Israel, you're kept off of—for example, there's a search on the Holocaust—to replace a chair in the Holocaust, and the donors weigh in and they say, No Susan Slyomovics, even though I know more than most of the people who are on the committee. You know, so it will be because your politics are wrong, and this is a very, very, very Jewish campus. You know, there's a large—a huge Hillel, huge Chabad; they anchor northeast, northwest campus respectively. Holocaust chair, Sephardic studies chair, Yiddish something or other, money for Yiddish, Yiddish music, um, Center for Jewish Studies, Center for Israel Studies. Lots of donor money poured into these things, whereas the interest is actually on the Middle East, you know, on Arabic, on the region from Morocco, to all the wars we're embroiled in, you know, up to Afghanistan; I did a conference on Afghanistan, too. It's just interesting stuff I'm allowed to do. And it was federal money, so you know, the university had nothing to say one way or the other. We lost it two years ago so things are different; there's a new configuration that I don't actually know how it's going to work.

01:41:52 Q: So politics and the establishment Jewish lobby may be more of a factor going forward?

01:42:01 Slyomovics: Yeah, Jewish Israeli government propaganda; there are students here on what's called Hasbara fellowships. Hasbara means propaganda; they're given fellowships in order to promote Israel, attack anybody who is critical of Israel, and I've experienced quite a lot of that recently. There are all sorts of shell game, shadowy organizations; name changing of organizations that promote right-wing Israel lobby stuff. And my students—you know, I teach an Intro Modern Middle East, and every week I ask students to write response papers, and they write about how they're afraid to open their mouth in class. These are Muslim, Arab American students; this is not the case for Jewish students or Israeli students. I will have a student argue over a grade, if I mark them wrong that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel; under American law it's not the capital of Israel.

01:43:06 Q: We don't have an embassy, an American embassy—

01:43:08 Slyomovics: No, we actually had a Supreme Court case last spring, where an American Jew whose daughter—maybe he's not an American Jew, but maybe, I don't know, he must have been—his daughter, or his child, was born in Jerusalem, and the passport says Jerusalem; it doesn't say Israel, because it's a contested city. So he went to court to put Israel on her documentation, and the court ruled that [Barack] Obama—whose executive order overturned the Congress, which voted to move the capital to Jerusalem, and he vetoed it—that he still has the right in certain foreign affairs matters. And so it was an interesting legal thing that took place

this, maybe in April. Which saved me. (laughs) I could point to *X vs. X*, says that Jerusalem is not the capital of Israel.

01:44:05 Q: God bless documentation and archives.

01:44:08 Slyomovics: No. God bless our legal system. Not always, but in this case, man, it helped.

01:44:14 Q: So how does that feel to be attacked as an anti-Semite? How do you cope with it?

01:44:19 Slyomovics: Don't give a damn.

01:44:21 Q: Really?

01:44:22 Slyomovics: No, why should I? The Internet is full of people being bullied and attacked; I'm not unique. I don't read it. I'm not on Facebook. I have one of the most wonderful jobs. I'm privileged. As long as I keep things academically substantive they have no recourse. We've been sued—I've been sued; the UCLA has to for—I was sued once by the—or threatened with a suit, that would be more accurate, by the Zionist Organization of America for unbalanced programming. Who does these kind of frivolous lawsuits? So, you know. I list everything we've done, we've done the percentages; in fact, Israel-Palestine is not our major interest, especially given the Arab uprising since 2011, Turkey, the Gezi Park thing, what's been going on in Syria. I mean, Israel-Palestine has not been at the forefront these past several years. But you know, every

time Israel (sighs) goes into Gaza and kills, and has another Gaza war, and the ongoing siege, so, we always have something about that. But it's always—

01:45:39 Q: The mowing of the lawn, that's what they call it; they go in to mow the lawn every few years. That's the IDF's [Israel Defense Forces] expression for it.

01:45:47 Slyomovics: Well, I—maybe. I first read about it in a Mahmoud Darwish poem, about a 1956 killing—Israeli killing Palestinian citizens of Israel, which ended up as a major reparations case, and they said that in 1956: mow the lawn. So I guess it's long-standing; I know it from that magnificent poem. No, I mean, Jesus, I'm tenured, I love my job. I'm in two really good departments. My colleagues have always encouraged me, wished me well. What more can you ask? I can walk to work in LA! I never have to get on a bus. I mean, it's perfect, the weather here. Oh, no evil eye. (makes noise of spitting three times ritualistically) You settle these things, God.

01:46:43 Q: (laughs) *Kein Ayin Hara*. [Interviewee note: Means “no evil eye” in Yiddish] So, Susan, how much longer do you think you'll be teaching at UCLA, and what are your plans when you are set free? Or what are your projects, since you have so much freedom, what are your projects in the next few years?

01:47:01 Slyomovics: Well, the plan I sort of worked out of this summer with my husband, because we had a cancer scare that, fortunately, the nice docs at UCLA caught my husband's tumor in time, we believe. But we started to think about—I never even thought about retirement

until this year. So because my son's twenty-two and under the Affordable Healthcare Act, he's covered till he's twenty-six, four more years, as long as I work full time at UCLA, so I'm definitely here for four years. Then UCLA has a program, and I don't know if it'll continue, and I don't know the details, but it's something like for two years, if you sign a contract that you're going to retire in two years later, for that two-year period you teach half time and are paid full time; that's because people here don't retire. I've gone to retirement parties of people who are eighty-five; you know, they're barely making it through. I mean, that's twenty more years here, and that's not something I want to do. I would love to go back to Tangier, there's an American Research Center there. They don't pay a lot of money, I don't even know if they pay anything, but you get free housing in the walled Arab city, and you run some of their programs, it's an academic position. And I would love to live there. And Skandar wants to take over this apartment, he likes it, kind of the apartment he grew up in. And we'd come back and visit. But that's what my husband and I want to do, actually.

01:48:43 Q: Well, I hope you do it, because I would love to visit you there.

01:48:45 Slyomovics: You're coming, you're coming, of course.

01:48:47 Q: (laughs) And in terms of research projects and writing projects, what's on the board for you?

01:48:53 Slyomovics: Well, I started another book project on Algeria. Algeria becomes independent in 1962, and all of the settlers, a million—the number given is like a million three

hundred thousand, they all leave, more of them, not all, but there's this huge influx out. And it includes settlers of European descent who had come from 1830s, or whenever, 1850s on. It includes Algerian Jews who were native to Algeria but are suddenly reconfigured because they were given French citizenship, a very rare case of empire actually giving a native citizenship. And so they become settlers in a very interesting flip, so they leave, 90 percent of them, to France, not to Israel. And then you have Muslims who fought on the side of the French who left with them, so a huge population leaving, and taking their objects with them. You know, church bells, and statues, and exhumed bodies even. You know, bringing their ancestors back. And they're called repatriated, even though most of them have never been to France. You know, a lot of the European settlers were from all over the Mediterranean, and were given French citizenship. The Algerian Jews are certainly not repatriated, and certainly not the Muslims, right? So the French called them repatriated, and gave them compensation for their lost property. But there's huge amounts of stuff that they took with them, including their war memorials. So I'm tracking all of this stuff: the French Foreign Legion, which was based in Algeria, brought their stuff, was reinstalled in France. So I started tracking property, because it's still a very contested issue. And what happens to the cemeteries, because in 2011 the French and Algerians finally came to an agreement about what to do with all of [these] Christian and Jewish cemeteries that were now in the middle of the cities that they needed the land for, so they worked out an acropolis; there are former settlers who come back to visit their family and take care of the cemetery. Settlers are suing the Algerians for their property, back since 2000. I mean, the cases are never-ending of property and compensation. So I'm continuing, again, with this—what I started with compensation, but I'm applying it to settler colonialism directly now to see what happens in the aftermath, who cares, who fights it through which courts, what they're contesting,

what they're memorializing, the pilgrimages that—for example, you take a statue of the general who conquered Algeria, and you bring him back to France, say, it becomes a place of pilgrimage in France where it never was in Algeria. And the Algerians will put in its place a statue to the martyrs of their revolution. So I'm triangulating, going back and forth between the two countries to see what happened to the urban space where these incredible French artifacts of settler colonialism once stood, what happened to them in France, and what have the Algerians done with that aesthetic and artistic legacy. So that's a huge project and I've been writing about it.

01:52:29 Q: And you and Nadjib are able to travel freely in Algeria now?

01:52:35 Slyomovics: Well, I always have to get a visa, which is expensive, but I get it automatically as his wife. And his family have said to me, Take out Algerian citizenship so you can move freely. So maybe we'll do that; I'm not sure. And then there are all of these things that happened, you know, now that you're a senior academic I get invited to spend a few weeks somewhere here or there; I spent a year in France last year on a European Union fellowship. And you know, I'm looking for those kinds of things so to keep talking, presenting my material, being part of a scholarly group. So I'll be in Denmark in December; there's a huge, wonderful conference on contested property, *anywhere in the world*. So I'm apparently the only one talking about the French Algeria, and there will be people who will be talking about Palestine, they'll be talking about, you know, Kosovo, or Bosnia, you know, what happens—what happens in the aftermath of reconfigured geographical borders to people, to objects. So I'm looking at art stuff.

01:53:44 Q: Oh that's really important in this era of ethnic cleansing.

01:53:48 Slyomovics: Yes, yes. We've had so much, yeah. And I still want to keep on translating; I have all sorts of poems and—I like translating poetry, so, from French and from Arabic, and Yiddish. So I keep doing a few every year and publishing them in obscure places. So there's the translation thing I want to do. I want to keep following the Morocco thing with my friend Fatna. I went this summer to the Alhambra, which—this NEH conference, these seminars that will be *discontinued! Are you listening, Obama? Bernie [Bernard] Sanders, anybody??* You know, all of these things that are being, *cut, cut, cut*. So it opened up this whole new world of translation for me; there's a lot of beautiful poetry that could be translated again, you know, that I would love to do. I want to study the Talmud again, go back and do—there's a thing where you study—I think it takes seven years to go through the entire Talmud, one page a day. That's the thing. One page every day, you study it with a group. And I would love to do that again, because I've only done a few of the tractates. So I've got tons of stuff I want to do.

01:55:03 Q: Well, that would be very interesting as an anthropologist, to look at it as an example of—and to look at it from the point of view of legal anthropology. It's law, law, law—

01:55:15 Slyomovics: Yeah, I don't know—oh, it's all ___ laws. It's casuistry in many cases. Sometimes—you know, there are times, sort of like leading questions, where you know what they want to get at, what the principle is, and then they have to figure a way to make the text conform to it, so you know, if there's one word in this verse of the Bible, and *one* word, the same word, in this verse of the Bible, even though that verse, those two verses mean entirely different things you can relate them conceptually.

01:55:49 Q: Well that's called the Brandeis Brief. (both laugh)

01:55:54 Slyomovics: Is that right?

01:55:54 Q: Where do you think he got the talent from? (laughs)

01:55:56 Slyomovics: Is that true?

01:55:57 Q: Yeah.

01:55:58 Slyomovics: You know, I mean that was one of the big battles; in fact I wrote a paper at Jewish Theological Seminary for—what's his name? Ginzberg, I think. Very famous scholar of Jewish legend. Louis Ginzberg, I think—

01:56:15 Q: Yes.

01:56:16 Slyomovics: Or was it Louis Finkelstein? (gasps) I can't remember anymore which one it was.

01:56:22 Q: We'll Google it later on.

01:56:23 Slyomovics: No, go look at the paper; I kept it. And it was the battle of Shammai versus Hillel.

01:56:29 Q: Oh, yes, with the chickens. Do you remember the chickens?

01:56:33 Slyomovics: There was that, but I took other cases, not that famous one. Because Hillel was expansive, you know, in order to bend the law towards certain principles. For example, “an eye for an eye” can only refer to damages and reparations; it doesn't mean what the Bible— Rabbinic Judaism cuts it out. It's about money, you know. (laughs) And Shammai said, “No, we have to go by the meaning.” And in those days I was an Shammai-ist; I made the case for Shammai in the paper, and now I'm a Hillel-ist. I follow him; I'll bend the law—

01:57:09 Q: Well that was a huge step in terms of civilization and humanitarianism.

001:57:17 Slyomovics: Sure, sure. Of course, of course, or getting out of the cycle of vengeance. “An eye for an eye” has to be monetized; (laughs) it's got to be changed into damages towards—which is what customary law did in the Hammurabi code; it was around for a long time. “I will pay you, because I raped your daughter rather than you raping my daughter or killing my daughter. Let's end this cycle of violence.”

01:57:46 Q: Well, we could end this interview on that note, unless there's something that we haven't touched on that you'd like to talk about.

01:57:54 Slyomovics: I don't know, I think you covered a lot.

01:57:56 Q: We've covered a lot of ground. (both laugh) A lot of ground.

01:57:59 Slyomovics: My whole life encapsulated in a few hours; you've done a good job.

01:58:03 Q: Oh, thank you, Susan. Wow, that's quite a compliment coming from you. But I'd like to say that this has been thrilling for me, because I thought I knew everything there was to know about Susan Slyomovics, and I've learned so much. (Slyomovics laughs) It was really great, thank you so much.

01:58:18 Slyomovics: I want to see your interview now.

01:58:21 Q: Oh yeah, right, it's nowhere near as long or as interesting.

01:58:23 Slyomovics: Are we going to be allowed to see other people's interviews?

01:58:25 Q: Of course.

01:58:25 Slyomovics: Do we need to get permission? I don't want excerpts; I want the whole. I want to see your whole thing, for example.

01:58:30 Q: No, no. Actually every one is getting transcribed, and every one will be in the Barnard Archives, and they're making it a priority to digitize them—not the videos themselves, because that takes up too much bandwidth, but all the transcripts, so not only will you be able to see them, but you won't have to travel to New York to see them; you'll be able to see them online.

01:58:50 Slyomovics: So I could see the entire video online, not the transcript.

01:58:54 Q: No, the transcript, not the video. Because the video takes a lot of bandwidth. And also we'll be doing something, it remains to be seen what, with excerpting, organizing around themes, something to make it more accessible to a general public in time for the fiftieth anniversary of The Bust. (laughs)

01:59:20 Slyomovics: Which is when?

01:59:21 Q: Which is 18—2018. So let's turn off the tape, and I'm so proud to be your friend, Susan.

01:59:29 Slyomovics: (laughs) Thank you, me too. So I've got three years to get myself back to Barnard, huh?

01:59:38 Q: Wow, we only have forty-four minutes left on this, amazing!

end of interview

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