INTERVIEW WITH LITA COHEN

INT: I am conducting an interview with Lita Indzel Cohen, who is state representative for the 148th district. I'm at her office at 1010 Fayette Street in Conshohocken. The first question that I'd like to ask you, Lita, have you agreed to record this interview?

LITA: Yes I have.

INT: Your full name and the date and place of your birth.

LITA: My full name is Lita Joan Indzel Cohen. I was born in Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia, December 20, 1940.

INT: I guess the best place for us to start would be to talk about your parents and your grandparents.

LITA: I only had one grandparent, my mother's mother. The other three grandparents had died. In fact, I'm named after my father's parents. My father's parents I knew very little about them. Actually, I don't know a lot about my father either. I know he was born in Poland and came to America when he was five years old. Somehow they settled in Pittsburgh. He had lots of brothers and sisters. I only met two sisters when I was sixteen years old and we took a trip to Pittsburgh, but he really didn't have contact with his family at all. I do know that his father was a pawnbroker in Pittsburgh. They were very, very poor and my father tells me, and of course as you get older, legends become much better. For example, we all heard that our parents—snow was so deep it was up to the roof. I do know that my father worked from a very young age. He told me that he sold newspapers, Sunday newspapers. There was evidently an area where prostitutes were in Pittsburgh, where they all lived or hung out or something, and he sold them Sunday newspapers and he was ten years old and they would give him a dollar, which obviously in those years was a lot of money.

But my father was brilliant. He was a mathematical wizard. He finished high school at the age of fifteen and went to the University of Pittsburgh on scholarships. Actually, he was on a pre-med scholarship, but because he was so poor and he had to go out to work, he ended up being in the meat business. He worked in Indianapolis for a while and then came to Philadelphia and worked for the Old Girard Packing Company down on Delaware Avenue, at Market and Delaware. He was the vice-president and comptroller of the business, using his mathematical skills obviously, and succeeded very, very well.

He met my mother—I think it was on a blind date—and all I know about that is she tells me, and he confirmed, that he's not a drinker although he was a smoker, I have to say that. For some reason he got very, very drunk, horribly sickening drunk on their first date, and my mother drove him to the city dump when he got horribly sick, and I said how could you go out with him again?
But they ended up marrying after a five year courtship, and I was born a year and a half later. My father was in his early forties when I was born. He always worked very, very hard his whole life. My father was a Republican, always a Republican. In fact, we always teased him that he was the only Jew in America that out of four chances never voted for Roosevelt. Having said that however, my father always did look at Jewish names on the ballot, and if there were Jewish names on the ballot that came first, even before Republicans.

INT: Where was your father born?

LITA: In Europe.

INT: In Poland?

LITA: In Poland. I have no idea where. I don’t know anything about it.

INT: And you don’t know the date or anything.

LITA: I don’t know the date. He said he was born on Christmas Day. Actually, I guess 1900. And his name was Joseph, which we always thought was interesting to have a Joseph being born on Christmas Day, but that’s all I know. As I said, he was in the meat business and what I remember most is my mother kept a kosher home until my grandmother died and I was three when my grandmother died. She had lived with us. And then she did not keep a kosher home. On Thursday nights my father used to bring a ham home from the packing plant and our Shabbat dinner—we always had Shabbat dinner—ate in the dining room, white tablecloth. My mother always had kiddish wine and always lit her candles and she could make a Virginia baked ham to beat the band.

INT: But not on Shabbat?

LITA: Yes. Friday night. On Shabbat. Friday night. And to me there was nothing more delicious than taking a piece of challah, putting butter on it and then putting a slice of ham on it. Of course, I think about it now I can’t even talk about it because we keep kosher both in the house and outside of the house. So it was very, very different. My mother was one of eight children. There were two boys and six girls.

INT: What was her family name?

LITA: Her family name was Banks, which is a very significant Philadelphia family. Her parents were born in Lithuania.

INT: She was born in the United States?

LITA: All the children, all her siblings, were born in the United States. Her parents were married
here in Chicago. I don’t know where they met. They did not meet in Lithuania. They met here. My grandparents were both very, very educated people. My grandfather was very musically talented, musically oriented. He was in the shoe business, wholesale and retail, and evidently did a lot of traveling. They tell me he was a very, very wealthy man and lost every nickel during the Depression.

INT: You didn’t know him. He had already passed away. You said you had one grandmother that you knew.

LITA: Right. And I really vaguely remember.

INT: Well, you were three.

LITA: She lived with us. I remember, I guess, her presence. I only know her from pictures. I don’t think in my memory I could conjure up really physically what she looked like. Evidently, my grandfather lost all of his money in the Depression, but absolutely everything. My mother was the fifth child, two boys and then the rest were girls. The boys went to college. The first son went to Temple, was a graduate and then he married and lived in Hartford, Connecticut. The second boy was the most famous of all, Billy Banks, William A. Banks, who was a Damon Runyonesque kind of character. Everybody in Philadelphia knew Uncle Billy. He founded the Young Republicans of Philadelphia, I guess in 1918, when he would have been around twenty years old. So genetically, we’re a Republican family. But Billy was the founder of WHAT and WWDB radio stations. Billy didn’t get married until he was seventy-three years old. He also lived with us, as did my grandmother and a maiden aunt who didn’t get married until I was ten or thereabout. But I was very, very close to Billy. Billy had probably even a more significant influence on me than my father. I was his pal. I hung around with him all the time. He was dating a lady who was the buyer for Gimbels and she used to travel on shopping trips and she always brought back the latest California clothes for me. So that was wonderful. I was always very, very well dressed but those were probably among the only new clothes that I had because of my mother’s siblings. Most of them had children and I was the baby, and I’m an only child, so I always had hand-me-downs. I had more clothes than anybody because I had jillions of hand-me-downs, but then I had always the new California clothes. As I said, Billy took me everywhere.

He was the top producing salesman at WIP radio, working for Ben Gimbel, and one day, he says, that Ben Gimbel came in and said you’re working on commission and you’re making more money than I am. I can’t afford to pay you anymore. So Billy said, fine, I’ll just go out and buy my own radio station and that’s what he did. He bought WHAT and was given WWDB because nobody wanted FM and WWDB is smack in the middle of the FM dial, a 50,000 watt station. It was golden. Billy was the first person to invest in UHF television. He was one of the original owners of Channel 17. He bought a tower—had built a tower actually—one of the Roxborough towers and his was probably the first one up. He was just... he was futuristic. But even more important, Billy was the first person to hire a black on the air. He was the first person to hire a woman to do air work. He had no prejudices. He was good to him employees, and
because I hung around him so much and always hung around the radio stations, I learned these kinds of very positive things from him.

INT: Is that Mary Mason?

LITA: Mary Mason, yes. Portia Perry he hired. Louise Williams he hired, who I now serve with in the House of Representatives. She is Louise Williams Bishop and she is a reverend actually. Still does air work six to nine in the mornings. Billy gave everybody their chance and I could name a million people, familiar names. John Facenda. Kay Starr, lots of people in show business and radio, television, that he hired. He gave them their first Job. Georgie Woods.

INT: It must have been exciting for you.

LITA: It was very exciting, and everything comes around because Georgie Woods lives in White Marsh in my district and he’s now my constituent. So it was always very, very exciting, and Billy is really the one that says “she goes to law school.” My father said no, you have to be a teacher like your mother, but Billy said “no. She wants to go to law school and she will go to law school.” Billy was kind of the patriarch of the family. What he said went. And when I wanted to spend a summer in Europe in college, Billy said she has to go, and indeed I went out of a group from Harvard. Anyway, let’s go back to my mother.

INT: You had said something about the boys in the family that went to college. What happened to your mother?

LITA: Not as a girl. Six girls. The only girl that went to college was my mother, and indeed, she may be the only one of the sisters that finished high school. That’s possible. My mother not only went to college, she got a Masters degree from Temple in education. She not only did that, and they’re all sort of tall. My mother is tiny and everybody knew little Frannie. She really, to this day, and she’s ninety-three and we’re not allowed to tell anybody because that’s what it said in the Exponent and she got angry. She’s ninety-three years old and she’s as spunky as all hell. She’s just incredible. She worked her way through college because she was good with her hands and I don’t know who taught her how to sew but she went...there was a convent near her home. She went to the convent and she did the sewing for the nuns and in return they taught her how to play the piano. She taught K-3 but she was also the music teacher. She sang beautifully. She played the piano incredibly.

INT: Do you know where she taught?

LITA: She taught at the Wolf School at 82nd and Lion, and probably it’s now I-95. It was right by the airport. She bought her own car, and she tells me on snow days, because in those days kids walked to school, so they didn’t close school, but she lived in West Oak Lane and had to go all the way down to the airport-she picked up all the men teachers and she picked up everybody and she drove. And as I said, she did everything on her own. She took trips when single women
didn’t take trips.

INT: You said your father was in his early forties when he married?

LITA: He was five years older than my mother.

INT: So she didn’t get married-

LITA: Until her mid-thirties.

INT: That was very unusual for that time.

LITA: Yes, because she was really a totally devoted teacher. So devoted that in those days, as soon as you got pregnant you had to leave. You couldn’t teach. So when she got pregnant she lied to her immediate supervisor. I think she was in her fifth month and she said she was in her second month or something. I don’t know. The supervisor waited to tell the principal and took off a couple of months and the principal waited to tell the district superintendent. She worked almost until she delivered because everybody wanted her to stay and so everybody who did some reporting took off a couple of months of her pregnancy so they thought that she was just pregnant and she was eight or nine months pregnant.

INT: Did she go back to teach?

LITA: No, she didn’t. She became a full time...it wasn’t done in those days. She became a full time mother, and really was a totally-she devoted her whole life. She taught me how to read. I started playing the piano at age three because she taught me. She spent all her days and nights with me, and as I said. I’m an only child. We were and still are incredibly close. Every day was a delight with her because every day was an adventure, but the most important thing was education, and when I said when I was ten I want to be a lawyer...my mother taught me women are people too, and that’s absolutely kind of my credo through my life. She said women can do anything men can do and we are people, and she was always great fun. I think my favorite times with my mother were Saturdays because she would take me...she would schlep me from West Oak Lane to Germantown for piano lessons and we would walk about half a mile to a bus, a trolley. We would take two trolleys and a bus and then walk, walk, walk to the piano teacher and then if I had a good lesson, which of course I did every Saturday, then my treat was we would then take a couple of trolley cars into town, that long trolley on Germantown Avenue that went into town, and if I had a good lesson we would do something but if I had a golden star in my little book, then we would go to the theater. We went to the children’s concert. We would go to very fancy restaurants. We would shop. We would go to museums. My father worked on Saturdays so Saturdays was my whole time with my mother. It was just wonderful.

INT: And you did grownup things.
LITA: We did grownup things and we did kid things and we laughed. She was just incredibly fun, just loads and loads of fun. She was also very observant in her own way. Judaism, G-d, religion was very, very important to her. As I said, she stopped keeping kosher but I went to Hebrew school and went to Sunday school.

INT: You always had Friday night Shabbat.

LITA: Always had Friday night Shabbat at our house in the dining room. That was always very important. My parents were probably three day a year Jews.

INT: Did you belong to a synagogue growing up?

LITA: We belonged to Emmanu-El in West Oak Lane. That was very important. But my mother particularly always came to all the Hebrew school stuff and I was never allowed to miss. She would take me on the trolley and take me home on the trolley. I do remember Jewish holidays at synagogue, and those holidays, like Purim, were always fun at synagogue. My parents would take me. Pesach was absolutely the best. Now my mother and all the sisters-there were row houses in West Oak Lane and we all lived within a couple of block range of each other, but my one aunt, who had married a gentleman who was born in Rumania and he was very, very European, that's where we had Pesach, at my Aunt Irene's house. And because it was a row house and my uncle was orthodox, it was great the way they set up the Seder table. It was my uncle at the head of the table and then the men at the head, and then going down-it was like a rectangular long...it went from the dining room well into the living room, and then the women were next and then the kids, and there were about ten kids and I was the baby, and the kids were seated in terms of age, so the older children were next to the women and then it went to the younger children and of course. Lita Joan, as they all called me then, was the very last and I sat at the foot of the table, mainly because I was a horribly mischievous child. Terrible. Not bad but devilish. And my Uncle Phil, who ran a very tight ship, could keep his eye on me at the end of the table.

INT: You said you were an only child but you're talking about your extended family. You didn't know your Dad's family but your mother had this very large family and you had lots of cousins.

LITA: Lots of cousins and we were all together all the time.

INT: For Jewish holidays?

LITA: For everything.

INT: Friday nights too?

LITA: Not so much Friday nights, no, but for everything. When I would walk home from school for lunch, my Aunt Irene was always there telling me to go to her house or my other aunt's house or somebody's house if my mother would not be home. We were always hanging out together.
What is now Einstein Hospital used to be the Jewish Hospital and there were these wonderful hills and on snowy days we'd all get our sleds. And again, it was great being the youngest because a father would pull the sleds and the oldest child was first and he'd have to hold the sled of the next child, and everybody went up to pull a sled except for the last one, me. I was the youngest. Not only didn't I have to pull a sled, as I was being pulled along the streets to go sledding at the hospital, I could just reach out and make snowballs and throw them to everybody in front of me. Of course they would stop me. Stop it, Lita. So we were all together always. We always celebrated Hanukkah at another sister. My father would always go out and get us silver dollars, and each kid had a silver dollar. What ever happened to those silver dollars? I wish I had them now.

INT: They're worth a lot of money now. Much more than Hanukkah gelt.

LITA: That's right. And then every Christmas my mother would have a big birthday party for my father and make her wonderful big ham. What I think is so fascinating—every Christmas Eve I hung up a stocking all through college, and I would leave notes for Santa, which of course was my father, and my stocking would be filled. I'd get a little bit of money. I'd get pencils. I'd get very funny kinds of gag gifts. As I got older I would leave ice cream for Santa Claus. In retrospect, being Jewish, I kind of wonder why we did that. I don't know.

INT: It would be interesting to ask your mother if she remembers.

LITA: I don't know.

INT: You didn't have a tree?

LITA: No, we had no tree. We lit Hanukkah candles every single night of Hanukkah. I did absolutely nothing Christian. I always had lots of Christian friends but I hung stockings and I think it was more for fun than anything else.

INT: Because it sounded like your parents were observant in their own way.

LITA: In their own way. My mother did not have, because no Jewish girls were educated at that time. My father went to what was cheder in orthodox. He grew up orthodox, but after we moved to Lower Merion, my father was one of the founders of Adath Israel, a conservative synagogue.

INT: Oh, so was my father.

LITA: Oh my gosh. What was your maiden name?

INT: Cooper. My father was Sidney Cooper.

LITA: Of course. Okay.
INT: And actually we left, and I’m back at Adath Israel now.

LITA: Well, I went when it was where Main Line Reform is now. It was an old house.

INT: I remember that too. And then they built the one on Old Lancaster. When I got married my husband wanted to be reform so we joined Main Line and when we retired I said to Barry, there’s no reason-my brother is at Adath Israel, my mother is there, so we moved.

LITA: We were married at Adath Israel but now I’m at Har Zion.

INT: Your neighborhood where you grew up-was that a Jewish neighborhood?

LITA: No. I think it was a mixed neighborhood.

INT: And where did you go to school?

LITA: I went to the Pennell Elementary School and then moved to Merion and I went to Bala Cynwyd, what was then called junior high school and Lower Merion High School.

INT: Which was probably not very Jewish.

LITA: There were three Jewish kids in my class when I got there. By the time I left high school, I guess almost half the school was Jewish. It had a real quick change, and actually that was one of my early experiences with anti-Semitism, in Bala Cynwyd. Not in school. When we moved to Merion Park, our neighbor across the street, it was before houses were central air conditioned so we’d open up our windows, my neighbor across the street finally had to move because she just used to open her window and scream get out, Jews, you don’t belong here. My junior high school principal I think was very reticent about Jewish people coming into the school, although I have to say that his daughter was my friend and still is and still is a constituent, and she’s one of the most extraordinary woman. She’s right out there and she’s probably as hateless as a person could get. She is wonderful.

INT: Who was the principal there?

LITA: Mr. Kirkpatrick.

INT: Let’s go back about your education. We talked a little bit about...you just told me about your elementary, your secondary education. Let’s talk about your religious training.

LITA: I went to Emmanu-El very, very early. I don’t know what grade I started but it was early grammar school and I went two days a week. I did not have a bat mitzvah-by then I was in Merion-because my father didn’t think it was right. Girls shouldn’t do those kinds of things.
INT: Actually, I was one of the bat mitzvah classes at Adath Israel and they did them on a Friday night and they did like six girls together.

LITA: How old are you?

INT: I’m forty-nine.

LITA: I’m fifty-seven.

INT: There already were bat mitzvahs but they weren’t common at all.

LITA: Some girls did have bat mitzvahs. I wanted to and my father absolutely put his foot down and said absolutely not. He wasn’t real big on women doing those kinds of things.

INT: It was kind of new for a lot of people.

LITA: But I knew as much as the boys. I was confirmed at Adath Israel. I went all through Hebrew high school at Adath Israel.

INT: At Adath Israel or Gratz?

LITA: Adath Israel. So I went after confirmation. I did not go to Gratz. But then at Penn I started taking religion courses.

INT: You went to Penn-

LITA: Undergraduate. At Penn, an undergrad, I started taking a lot of religion courses and then I did my own independent reading and I started getting interested in Judaism. And then when I got to Penn Law School I really got interested, and then I started reading about Israel.

INT: When you were at Penn, did you live at school or did you live at home?

LITA: Just my junior year.

INT: What was the significance of Hillel then? Do you ever remember going?

LITA: I never went to Hillel. Brought my own matzah during Pesach. No, I did not go.

INT: One of the questions I have is, and I think you’ve touched on it before, as a child or an adolescent, what were your aspirations? You mentioned that you wanted to be a lawyer when you were ten years old.
LITA: I always wanted to be a lawyer and I always wanted to be in politics. I always wanted to serve. I always wanted to run for office. Not specific, but I wanted to run for office in high school. I was on Student Council in high school and always went to the mock UN things, went to Harrisburg, did all kinds of things like that and all through college I did the same kinds of things.

INT: We talked a little bit about your parents, their parental attitude about education. Your father didn’t want you to be a lawyer, but wanted you to have an education.

LITA: Absolutely.

INT: He wanted you to be a teacher like your mother.

LITA: Exactly. I grew up with what I call the G-d forbid theory. Of course all women get married and have children, but G-d forbid something happens to your husband, you have to be able to go out and earn a living.

INT: Right. And a teacher is a great thing. I had that same thought from my father.

LITA: So I had to take either six or twelve credits to get what was called an interim certificate, so I did take education courses just to get my certificate so that I could be a teacher and of course it expired a year or so after because I didn’t do anything.

INT: What could you tell me about your parents’ attitudes about non-Jews? You said you had a lot of friends that weren’t Jewish.

LITA: They were always welcome in my house, but I was told that I could not date non-Jews. You saw someone once and then a second time and a third time and the fifth time and by then it’s too late-you’re in love. They said marriage is difficult enough without having the problems of mixing cultures. I never went out with anyone who wasn’t Jewish. I once had a blind date with a young man. He was absolutely incredible. He was wonderful. His father was Jewish and his mother was not and he was not raised as a Jew, although he felt that he was Jewish. Never Bar Mitzvahed, nothing. Most of his friends were Jewish. I wasn’t allowed to go out with him again and we always, in those days, listened to our parents. I don’t think it was bigotry. I think it was practical more than anything.

INT: It was the way things were.

LITA: And the way things were. So that I, more than a lot of my friends, mingled in the whole total community. My Jewish friends didn’t have non-Jewish friends but I did and if you will, some of my closest friends were not Jewish and I was very comfortable. I would go to Christmas Eve mass with my friends. I would participate but I always knew who I was. I didn’t have a problem. I was not uncomfortable.
INT: I know from looking at your curriculum vitae, that after you went to college you went to
Penn Law School. You went immediately?

LITA: Immediately.

INT: You still lived at home when you did that?

LITA: I lived at home.

INT: Tell me a little bit about the make up of your class when you went to Penn Law School. My
last interview was Betsy Cohen.

LITA: She was a year behind me.

INT: So she was saying that there were, I think, four women in her class.

LITA: Yes. Actually, the reason that I went to Penn Law School-(end of tape 1, side 1) In those
days, you didn’t send virgins away. You had to leave them close to home. So I went to Penn Law
School. We started with six women, we ended with four. And that was a unique experience. So
I’ve really been one of the guys for a long, long time because I was a political science major,
which was a Wharton major from Penn, so I was always in classes with men and at law school I
was always with men. After a while, you don’t realize you’re the only woman sitting in a room.
When I got out of law school and we could talk about my checkered past later, it’s no big deal for
me to walk in a room and there are a hundred men there. I think probably, and just as an aside,
the only big deal was when I was very, very pregnant with my first child and I had to give a
lecture to a bunch of accountants, and I was standing with no rostrum in front of me and it was
just Lita and her belly.

INT: It makes you feel naked.

LITA: It does make you feel naked. I don’t know if the dress was clinging or what, but it was
very apparent that there was a lot of movement in my stomach, and I was looking out to the
audience and they were either taking notes or watching my eyes, and then all of a sudden I saw a
sea of faces looking down at my belly because everybody was watching the movement. That was
probably the most uncomfortable that I’ve ever been, when that happened, and I was just afraid
that I would be standing there and my water would break. Just watching all of these people
watching my belly was really just bizarre.

INT: Tell me about what happened after you graduated law school. I’d like to know your first
job and the work climate and feelings of anti-feminism, anti-Semitism.

LITA: We have to backtrack for a while. When I was in law school, it was my first trip to Israel,
which was 1964. That was before Jerusalem was liberated, and that’s when I came home really,
really very, very interested in Judaism. Before that I had been dating a young man who came from a kosher home, who did not eat non-kosher out, and he started to get serious and I said to him I could never keep a kosher home and I want you to know that, and that was really, I guess, the breaking point. And then I went to Israel and that was a turning point for me.

INT: Was it any kind of special trip or you just worked in a kibbutz?

LITA: No. I just went on a bus tour. I could only describe it as America in George Washington's time because 1964 was-

INT: I was there in 1965.

LITA: It was very inspirational to me, and that made an enormous difference in my life. After law school—I started dating my husband in my last year of law school and they weren't hiring women.

INT: Is your husband an attorney?

LITA: Yes he is. He's a partner at Fox Rothschild.

INT: And his name?

LITA: Stanley Cohen.

INT: You met him at law school?

LITA: A blind date. While I was in my third year of law school but he was a blind date. He had gone to Temple. He was out and in the Coast Guard and poor and didn’t have a job. Now, that’s a great recommendation for a Jewish princess from Lower Merion to be fixed up with somebody in the service, a Temple grad. Here I was at Penn. Poor, no job, from West Philadelphia. In retrospect, it was probably love at first sight. We had a blind date on a Friday night but Saturday night I started going steady with somebody else. But I remembered him because then I broke up with the other somebody and my law school club, of which I was the secretary, of course, because all girls are secretaries, was having their annual big formal dinner dance and I had just broken up with my one beau. Who was the last person I went out with? Stanley. So I called him and we went and as they say, the rest is history. Almost.

But I did well in law school and I couldn’t get a job. I went to an interview with one federal court judge, and the federal court was then at 8th and Market Street and the judge said to me. ’I’d love to hire you. You’re really qualified, but I can’t because I leave here at five o’clock. My law clerks work until midnight and I would not rest easy knowing you were walking the halls of this building alone, a female, and leaving at 8th and Chestnut and finding your way home. And I said, let me worry about it. But he said I can’t. I can’t hire you. I went to another federal judge
who had two years before me a female law clerk, and the law clerks change every year. He said I’m very sorry. You’re the most qualified but I can’t hire you because I had a woman. My law clerks change every year. I’ve had my secretary for thirty-some odd years. There was horrible rivalry and jealousy between the two of them. I can’t hire a woman. Then I would go to law firms and they’d say I can’t hire you because I know, you train a woman for a year, you get married and you have babies and I’ve wasted a year and all of that. It was during Vietnam that I would say yes, but you’re going to hire a man and he’s going to be drafted, so what’s the difference? Aren’t I a better bet? And actually I’m cheap labor and I probably wouldn’t ever want to be a partner, so I’m not going to push in. Aren’t I better? No. I got a job in a law firm only because I had an interview on a Monday. The day before, Sunday, Stanley and I went to a friend’s wedding and I don’t know what happened but we had a disagreement and we broke up, so Monday I went to the interview and I got the same thing about you’re going to get married etc., and I said I never want to see a man as long as I live. I just broke up with somebody. That’s it. Never again, because I want to be a lawyer and I want to get elected in politics and I never want to see another man. I never want to get married. And that was great. He said fine, start Monday.

INT: Was it a small firm?


INT: Can you say the name?

LITA: Levy, Mandel and Miller. Mitchell Miller and Sam Hirschland. and they were wonderful. They were great. They were terrific. I started Monday, and the first thing I had to do was file a paper in City Hall. Now, this is bashert. If you never believed in it, you would. Stanley Cohen has never been in City Hall in his life, and probably hasn’t since that one Monday. And City Hall is a big place, and there I was and there he was and we just bumped into each other. It was a very uncomfortable and awkward hello, how are you, what are you doing. Would you like to have dinner tonight? Yes. We were back together. And I learned you never say never again. And that was how we got started. I was working...they didn’t have space for me. I was working in the library. Also, I think when I came in, that was September when I started to work. No, I guess it was August. I took the Bar. I passed the Bar. We got engaged in December. The day I came in with my engagement ring they congratulated me and said well, you know, you’re working in the library and we really need the use of the library and there really is no room here for you, so that was devastating.

INT: It’s amazing how times have changed.

LITA: So I didn’t exactly get fired but I sort of did. And I just didn’t work until my wedding but was job hunting and again, went through the whole thing. I got married in April, came back from my honeymoon-had a wonderful time at my honeymoon-came back having to face unemployment with a husband that was earning $5000 a year, knowing full well that I had to work.
INT: Was he at Fox Rothschild then or not yet?

LITA: He was working for one other man and then they merged into Fox. I then did get a job. It was a non-legal job, or a job offer, at the Veteran’s Administration on Wissahicken Avenue, but I also somehow got a job for what was then PHA, public housing, but right after I got the job it was merged into HUD.

INT: So the job was aberrated?

LITA: No, the job stayed. I was a GS7 and I made more money than Stanley. I made $5200 a year. So between the two of us, $10,200 we were just rich as anything. And we saved every cent except my lunch money and every Friday I went to the hair dresser and every other nickel went to the bank. And I even got, I remember in those days, Stanley gave me $20 a week for food and we ate home every night because we were scrimping, and of that $20 a week I saved $10. We were independent. He’s always been independent. My parents would try to bring...my father would try to bring meat. At that point actually I kept kosher and that’s, I think, where-

INT: Was he kosher?

LITA: He did not grow up kosher either, but after I returned from Israel I just decided that when I get married I want to keep a kosher home, because I love dishes, so that always helps too. We kept a kosher home from the start. I call it cockeyed kosher because at the time I had separate dishes and separate silverware and one set of pots and pans. I never read labels, so I didn’t understand that some things had dairy or some things had lard in them and you couldn’t...

INT: So you ate Oreos?

LITA: I ate Oreos, right. Now it’s vegetable shortening. I never read labels because I just thought if you don’t eat pork or shellfish then that’s okay, but I didn’t keep kosher outside of the home. I did not. So my meat was expensive. We didn’t often eat meat. We ate a lot of fish because fish was really cheap in those days. So then I worked at HUD for fifteen months and I was horribly, horribly bored, incredibly bored, and someone told me that someone at the school board was leaving for maternity leave so there might be an opening. And I lucked out. I went to the school board and found an opening there and that was just a wonderful job. I was assistant council of the school board and wrote legislation, did a lot of trial work. It was just a real legal job.

INT: That had political overtones.

LITA: Yes. I was there with Dilworth and Shedd, so it was really just wonderful.

INT: How long were you there?
LITA: I was there for about four years. Then I had a baby, went out on maternity leave for a couple of months but worked from home on special projects, went back only three days a week and I was in agony. Just in agony. I would get to work at nine o’clock. It only took fifteen minutes to get to work. At the time we lived in Wynnewood Heights and the job was 21st and the Parkway. I would go home for lunch and my baby slept and slept and slept, so I would give him his breakfast, put him to sleep. The babysitter would come. By the time I came home he was just getting up. I’d give him his lunch, I’d play with him, put him to sleep and I’d be home by 4:30, so he really wasn’t without me a lot but I was miserable. I was just miserable. Luckily, I got pregnant shortly thereafter and it was a difficult pregnancy so I just had to quit. So I was home and I liked that.

INT: One thing that we didn’t talk about—we talked a lot about some problems that you found as far as finding a job as a woman. Did you find any problems as a Jew? Did you come across anti-Semitism in the workplace?

LITA: Yes. Not working for the government, because the government hires everybody. Not really working at the school board, I didn’t, because the school board had everybody also, and neither Mark Shedd nor Richardson Dilworth would tolerate any of that. Obviously, they never knew what was going on in all of the different offices, but the atmosphere that they created was so ecumenical that they never did.

INT: But when you were looking for a job?

LITA: No, I think it was more anti-women than anti-Jewish. I did see it in community activities.

INT: Can you talk a little bit more about that? What do you mean you saw it in community activities?

LITA: I saw it but overcame it. I was always active in the Young Republicans, starting in high school and in Lower Merion/Narberth there simply were no Jews. I found some hostility, not overt but you could kind of feel it.

INT: Some discomfort.

LITA: Discomfort, yes. Even in law school, in one class the guy I sat next to said I never met a Jew before. Well, I have two arms, two legs...

INT: I don’t have horns.

LITA: And you experience it. I see it even today in the House, certain snide comments that are made. At this point, I consider the source, I guess.

INT: I don’t want to jump around too much. You stopped working full time when you had your
second child, and we will talk about your family. What we're going to have to do unfortunately is stop, because we're going to need lots more time. (End of tape 1, side 2)

Monday, April 13th, and this is the second part of my interview with Lita Indzel Cohen. I've just reviewed where we left off, so we're just going to start fresh here. Where we are now is the children. So why don’t you tell me about your children.

LITA: My favorite subject. I had mentioned before that I had my son and then went back to work and sort of juggled motherhood and professional life, and I really was never happy. I always felt horribly guilty every time I left home and then I would come home for lunch and go back and then went home, and I felt horribly guilty, and then I realized I’m really happiest with Reuven, because he was the ideal child. He never cried, never complained, smiled, never threw up. He was just…it was really delightful and I absolutely thoroughly enjoyed mothering, and I found that he opened up a whole new world because you start talking to your children and identifying things and seeing things…bus. A bus would go by and I’d say bus, bus until you just see the world through different eyes. I stayed active in a lot of different things and I’d take him with me wherever I went. I did not have a babysitter so I took him with me. When he was first born, Milton Shapp was running for governor and Stanley’s office had represented Milton, so I campaigned, even though I was a Republican for Shapp, and I went door-to-door with my Shapp material wheeling my baby carriage, and it was great because I could store all the literature in the carriage. So that was fun and it gave me time to be with my baby while doing that. Then we moved here to the house, Reuven was under a year and I was pregnant with Shoshana and I was still trying to juggle work and then I realized when it became a difficult pregnancy that I had to leave. I really truly understood that I love mothering, and we had great fun in here because I would have him help me, and this is this year old child and then fifteen months or whatever. We would do little projects and it was great being here because it’s very convenient here and that’s why we moved here. I could get on the bus with him or walk to the train station.

INT: So you’ve been in this house-

LITA: Some twenty-seven years. And I could walk to the supermarket, walk anywhere wheeling my baby carriage and my baby carriage was my grocery carrier as well. So I could spend all day with him and do what I had to do as a housewife, mother, etc. And really, when Shoshana was born, I would take my carriage and my two babies and get on the bus and we would just ride to Bryn Mawr, walk around Bryn Mawr, come home. In those days Stanley worked on Saturdays. He’d drive me in and we’d go to Wanamaker’s and I’d go from floor to floor in Wanamaker’s and just do what I had to do. I found we used to call our children luggage, because you pick up a suitcase, you pick up a child, and they were luggage for years and years and years. So I had a lot of fun. And then what I did is I started working from home. I did a few things. There was-and I don’t even know if it still exists but Paralegal Institute in Philadelphia. I graded papers for them.

INT: I think it still does. If it doesn’t exist right now, it did five years ago.
LITA: I did some non-profit corporation work, so I formed several non-profit corporations and I did agency adoptions. I would not do private adoptions because I had heard too many bad things, but I did agency. I hooked up with an agency that was bringing children out of Korea and I did those and then Vietnam opened up and we could do this because I could visit the parents at night and my husband would come home and babysit, and then it was really just once, when we had to go to Norristown to court for the hearing, and all the other work I could either do from home or if I had to use the library to do something I could take my babies with me. So it kept me busy doing—at least keeping my mind occupied and letting me feel like a lawyer. All I wanted to do was earn $500 a year so that I had enough money to buy my husband a present or buy presents for people that I wanted to buy and it just made me feel independent.

INT: That’s terrific.

LITA: So that’s what I did, and then I was appointed. I had a couple of divorce masterships appointed by the court and I sat on arbitration panels and my mother would come and babysit. If I were the chairman I would take my babies with me. So they really got used to being in public, being with grownups, and behaving. Even when we would go to synagogue, we always brought books and toys and cars and food and everything, so they were always occupied. In those days I was driving a station wagon. Actually, I did till last year. And I was always afraid that my wagon would be condemned by the Board of Health because the easiest way to keep children quiet is either you give them little hand games or food, which of course is all over everywhere. So I was really able to keep active. Then in 1973, so Reuven was three and Shoshana was a year and a half, I was appointed to the planning commission in Lower Merion.

INT: That was an appointment?

LITA: That was an appointment. I was the first woman ever appointed to any commission in Lower Merion. It was an old boys club, and one of the senior members of the commission said if you appoint a woman...and I had a feeling that this woman was not only a woman but she was a Jew, that seemed to be underlying and maybe it’s just my paranoia creeping up. It could be, but I don’t know.

INT: So what did he say?

LITA: He said if you appoint a woman I refuse to serve. So I got appointed and it was the custom at the planning commission that when a new member came, all of the members would rise in their places around the table, shake the new member’s hand and then seat the new member. So I got there and they all stood up and this man was there and I thought gee whiz, this is terrific. He changed his mind. Obviously, everybody convinced him. So I went around the table and I shook everyone’s hand and when I got to him I put my hand down. He looked at me, he turned around and he walked out and he’s never been heard from since. And then he subsequently sent his letter of resignation. So I feel it was his loss and I had the opportunity of serving.
INT: How did you come to be appointed?

LITA: I was always active in the Young Republicans out here. I had mentioned I was the Pennsylvania College vice-president. I was the Lower Merion secretary and then the county secretary of the Young Republicans. So I had kept my Republican connections and when I moved out here I was the quintessential volunteer, again stuff that I could do at home. Stuffing, sealing, licking, stamping, going door-to-door, giving out leaflets, standing in Suburban Square giving out material, so that I knew everyone and I was friendly with the president of the board of commissioners, so when an appointment came up on the planning commission he called me. And also, the party chairman was my law school classmate and always kept badgering me and I kept saying I can't do it, I can't do it, I have little children. So when the planning commission came out I was assured that it was one meeting a month and I could do that. It was at night. However, it was looking at all the properties and this was the Seventies and Eighties when there was lots of development in Lower Merion, so that's how I got the appointment. Lower Merion, at the time, was very...well, it's still very political but it was very Republican. Now it's political bipartisan. So again, I would take my babies with me looking at all the properties. Put them in car, we'd get out, we'd walk around, see the terrain, the environmental factors, etc., and I stayed active in the Republican Party through those years.

INT: How many years did you serve on the planning commission?

LITA: Twelve years, from '73 to '85, and then in '85 I ran for commissioner. I was asked to run and I worked to make it so that my incumbent commissioner wouldn't run because he knew I'd run against him in a primary, and what I did was I called all the committee people and I asked for their support and they said they would support me and I came right out and I said I'd like you support if I run against the incumbent in the primary, and they said absolutely. So then I called the incumbent and I said I would like to be the commissioner and I don't know whether or not you're running but I want you to know I have the support of the committee people, so he said oh no. I'm not running and then I ran. I've always had an opponent, every year that I've run, and they've always been active because my commissioner's district was 70% Democrat.

INT: That's interesting.

LITA: And there had been a Democratic commissioner before.

INT: Was that mostly outside of Lower Merion, like in the Conshohocken-

LITA: No, no. Just in Lower Merion. So I ran once and then I ran again and loved being a commissioner.

INT: So that was two terms.

LITA: Two terms. That took me from '85 through '93 because I was elected to the State House
in '92 and I served double, as a commissioner to finish out my term and then as a State Rep, which was just a mind boggling year. And during my time...actually, in 1976, my uncle owned two radio stations, WWDB and WHAT.

INT: We had talked about him.

LITA: He got sick in 1976 and asked me to come into the station. Reuven was in the gan, in kindergarten, at Schechter, which was a whole day but Shoshana was in nursery school just from nine to noon at Main Line Reform, which was where Schechter was, so that was easy for me. And I was thinking about going to work and I thought maybe I’ll teach in law school. I had had an offer from—well, I guess it’s now Widener Law School. It was Delaware then, I guess. I thought well, teaching is great because I could teach Monday, Wednesday, Friday-Tuesday, Thursday or something, for a time but I know what will happen. The days I’m teaching, those were the days when somebody has got a strep throat or an ear infection and then what am I going to do, or those will be the days that I have to serve a latke lunch or be the bus mother for a field trip someplace. Can’t do it. So my uncle said he really wanted me and I was his favorite even though I was the baby. I was his favorite. I went to see him in the hospital. He signed over his power of attorney to me and he said I must come to the station, so I said well, I want you to pay me on an hourly basis and I think I was making $15 or $20 an hour, because I knew I’m going on as the bosses’ niece and I don’t want to make a lot of money, and I kept a log of how many hours.

I would drop Shoshana off at 9:00, I’d get to work at 9:15 and I’d leave at 11:45 to pick her up at 12:00, and sometimes I would take her back to the radio station with me. Other times I would just mother at home, or if I could drop her off at a friend I’d run back or something, but that’s really all I worked. I just loved it. Then, of course, the next year she was at Schechter full time kindergarten so I was able to work from eightish to threeish. They went by bus. Oh no, they didn’t. I guess I had to drive them the first couple of years. They were at Main Line Reform and then they were to where the Kaiserman Y is. Actually, they’re back there now. And then they were in a few buildings over there and then Reuven graduated and went to Bala Cynwyd. Shoshana finished a year over where the Bala Library is and where Schechter was for many years. When they were at the JCC they got bussed and that gave me the opportunity to work more, and they were older and I was able to take them again.

INT: When you were working at the radio station, you were doing political work?

LITA: I was still on the planning commission and I ran for commissioner, so I was doing all of that. I went to the radio station as house counsel, as general counsel. I ended up as the chief operating officer and executive vice president.

INT: How long did you stay there?

LITA: I stayed there from '76 through '83. During that time I was still political. I was greatly involved...and I was also involved at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Center. I started there in
'79 when Gary Maddox and Larry Bowa and Mike Schmidt came to us and asked us if we would do a radiothon for Child Guidance. And Muriel Shapp, who was, I guess, at that time the former first lady, she had always worked at Child Guidance, so she was involved in it too and we did a twenty-four or a forty-eight hour radiothon and we set up a jillion telephones in the radio station and people would call making pledges and we auctioned off Greg Luzinsky’s hat and somebody’s bat and we got a lot of goodies to give away.

INT: So you were at the Child Guidance in what capacity?

LITA: I was the director. We did such a nice job that they asked me to be on the board, which I did, and I remember going down to Child Guidance, which is adjacent to CHOP, to Children’s Hospital, and of course a lot of the meetings, if they were in the afternoon I’d bring my children with me and I always brought books and again, food and all kinds of stuff and it was real good because at Child Guidance we were always in a room where there was a blackboard and the children went wild, drawing all kinds of pictures. They were just so good. It was fun. Actually, with Reuven I once tried a case in bankruptcy court. He was real small. I took his big pram. I had this wonderful Prego pram because I always wanted one of those, wheeled him in and of course there weren’t lady lawyers then, let alone pregnant lady lawyers or ones with babies. And I remember just wheeling him in and I was questioning a witness in federal court and he started to whimper and I just picked him up, I changed his diaper, never missed a beat questioning this witness and gave him a bottle, held him in my arms holding the bottle and as I said, never missed a beat. Questioned the witness.

INT: And the judge was fine with that.

LITA: The judge was fine with that. It was so much fun. I don’t know if I had mentioned, just because I’m thinking of it, because they didn’t have pregnant lady lawyers. There were a couple of judges in City Hall when I was working at the school board pregnant. I did a lot of litigation and it was great because they’d see me waddle in and I was so happy to be pregnant that I was in maternity clothes when I was about thirty seconds pregnant. The school district could be 100th on the list and they would change the list around and call me first so I never had to sit in a courtroom all day and wait. They would just take me right away. I think they were so nervous that I was going to drop the baby or something. Anyway, so I was active at Child Guidance, I was active as a commissioner and then working at the radio station.

My uncle then died in 1979 and estates can’t run businesses and that’s what we were doing because he had left the business to my aunt, to his sister, because she had worked at the station. She was really unable to manage it, and we realized that there were other sisters—there were eight children in my mother’s family—and we had to sell. You can’t be in a holding pattern in a business because the holding pattern is really a down slope and you can’t invest and the radio business, of course, is very competitive so you have to invest a lot of money in advertising and all kinds of campaigns. You have to pay good salaries to talk radio hosts, and we simply didn’t have the luxury of doing that. So we knew we had to sell. I was active in the radio business. I
became the director of the Pennsylvania Association of Broadcasters and I was active in the NAB, the National Association of Broadcasters as well. So it was really just a...I love radio and it was just a wonderful time and great exposure because I could see what radio was and where its future was, not only in Philadelphia but on a national basis.

I also started...we had a disc jockey named Sid Mark who did “Friday with Frank” and “Sunday with Sinatra” and people kept saying for years, Sid, why don’t you syndicate? Why don’t you syndicate? So I said to him let’s syndicate, and he said but we don’t know anything about it. And I said yeah, but there’s only way to find out and that’s to do it. It was in the early days of radio syndication. So he said you’re nuts. I said I know but let’s do it. We called Mr. Sinatra and he became a partner with us, taking a third of our gross right off the top, and that was part of the most exciting of my years because I had to fly to Los Angeles to meet with his lawyer and that was an incredible experience. I was out there for a couple of days at a convention and when I pack to go away, it’s always my feeling you never know when a plague is going to hit the hotel and you’re quarantined for a month. So there I was out there for four or five days and I had enough clothes and enough suitcases to last a year. And I had to check out of the hotel and I can’t schlep into Frank Sinatra’s lawyer’s office with 800 suitcases, so I got in a taxi and I said to the driver, just pretend you’re from New York. Get me to the airport, I’m going to check my luggage, and then get me back here. And he did. And I was back on time and I walked in calm, cool and collected and there is Frank Sinatra’s lawyer, standing there, and I didn’t realize it was the lawyer in a shirt opened down to his bellybutton and gold chains all over the place and bracelets and rings.

INT: Not like any lawyer you’d ever seen.

LITA: I’m used to Philadelphia lawyers who wear vests even in 120° temperature. It was just exciting. When Sinatra was performing in New York or Atlantic City and Sid would go down to do an interview, we always did events and took people to the show so it was a very, if you will, show biz kind of existence and I got really involved in the syndication aspect. I’m very proud to say we were very successful. I’m very proud to say that we, not Sid Mark so much because he was really just the talent and I was the chief cook and bottle washer. I did everything. I made every mistake that anyone could possibly make. It was remarkable, because I had no clue what I was doing, but I never made the same mistake twice. So that was good. Then in 1983, I left the radio station. We brought in a professional manager who did those kinds of things and Sid and I went into partnership with Sinatra, a three-way partnership, and all I did was syndicate Sinatra, and that was exciting. And then we developed another show, so we worked with Tony Bennett, Pia Zadora, Vic Damone. That genre of star. And again, it was fun. It was show biz. It was running to New York trying to sell the show and running all over the country placing it in different radio stations, so it was a very exciting time, but again, my principle was I’m home when the kids are home. Whenever they’re home, I’m home, and I’d always fly into my house, strip down, throw on a pair of jeans and be sort of, oh, take a nice deep breath and the kids would walk in. Hi. So Mom was always there and they never really knew that I worked. I mean they did, because I would drive them places, but I wasn’t away.
INT: It didn't interfere with Mommy. So that was definitely your top priority.

LITA: That was always my top priority, and if someone were sick I'd be home.

INT: You were lucky. It seems like you were able to do so many other things around it and you weren't lacking for an exciting career.

LITA: Exactly. And in Reuven's senior year of high school they played twenty-eight soccer games because they were the state champions. I missed one game of twenty-eight. Went to every game, every track meet, every tennis match, every whatever. Actually, that was the game he broke his nose. He came home full of blood. The one day I wasn't there and he gets a broken nose. So that was a very exciting time. So from '83 to '88, five years, I just did the Sid Mark and the Sinatra stuff, and then it started to get to me. I had so many offers. I placed the show on 188 radio stations across the country.

INT: I knew it was around but I didn't realize to that extent. Wow.

LITA: Today, as we speak, in 1998, it's probably on about 50 stations, but then it was hot. And I had had it well over my head with Sinatra and we had offers to do other programs and Sid didn't want to do it and I said you know what Sid, I have to branch out. So I sold my interest to him and I went into business for myself, and again, I had never...when I got to the radio station in '76, they had been losing money for years and years and years. And I don't have a Wharton background or anything but I'm a good motivator, so I took the exact same people that had been there for twenty, twenty-five, thirty years and I was able to motivate them and we started making a lot of money at the radio station. We really did very, very well. As I said, the same people. It was just giving them responsibility, motivating them and telling them they could do it and not to worry. Let's spend some money to make money, and we spent money but we made money which they had never done. So I then, again, went into business for myself. I had never done that before.

INT: So what did you do?

LITA: I syndicated radio programs. I was practicing law only to the extent by then of doing some arbitrations. I really didn't like taking cases on my own, just mostly arbitrations, small little non-profit stuff, but primarily mothering and syndicating programs, and I syndicated Arlene Francis and I syndicated a veterinary show and Steve Crowley, who at the time was the money editor of Good Morning America. He wanted to do radio. And then somehow somebody called me, a fabulous new thing. I have a big band show, and I thought well, if I've done Sinatra--it's the same radio stations. I'll do that. So I did the "Big Band Jump." I became an owner of that show as well, and that was again very exciting. I started out with an electric typewriter. I went to Sears and bought office furniture and hired a secretary, and this was really with no firm contracts, nothing.

INT: A lot of guts.
LITA: Well, I really had more chutzpa than brains. I'm sure of it. I'm absolutely convinced of that. And that sort of followed me throughout my life. In fact, today I just gave a speech at the Jewish Community Relations Council on the City Avenue corridor project, which I will get to, because that's what's going to be on my tombstone, that I'm the mother of the City Ave corridor, and I was asked how do you translate that to export it to other suburbs adjacent to cities and I said I had more chutzpa than brains, and if you have, you never take no for an answer. So I started this business and I did that and mainly the Big Band Show, that was really my show, and again, that was very exciting and very successful, and I did that from '88 through '92.

INT: You were township commissioner during this time.

LITA: I was township commissioner. Then I sold the business because I had a primary, so in early '92 I just, at that point...and I had moved out of the office and brought my business home because I thought I could do the same thing at home. Why am I paying rent and everything else, and why am I paying a secretary when there was very little secretarial work to do? So I moved home and I could be a full time commissioner at home, and what I did from home every day, I either got in my car, on my bike or in my sweats and put sneakers on. I walked through my commissioner's district, which you can do because there are only 5000 constituents. And I loved it because I knew everybody and I knew their birthdays and their mother-in-law's birthday and everything. That was really exciting. Wherever I went, my constituents were there. So I loved it because you’re really in touch with everyone. Literally you touch them. So I moved my business home and I could go to the kids’ games, have my business, be a commissioner, all from home, so I didn’t waste time getting dressed. I could do laundry or make dinner or something.

INT: It was very efficient.

LITA: It was very efficient. Actually, it was efficient, I remember, when the kids were little even, doing my non-profit corporate work and my adoption work, I remember one day sitting in my den, in my easy chair, with my feet up and I was in my nightgown with my hair in rollers and nursing my baby and talking to a very important person about forming a non-profit corporation, taking notes and nursing, and I thought you know, they talk about the telephones that you could see the person. I said to myself, can you imagine if this man would see this very professional lawyer with her hair in rollers, her nightgown pulled up to her neck so she could be nursing her baby and it was so bizarre.

INT: It wasn’t a great image.

LITA: Not exactly what he had pictured, because every time he met me, of course I was always in my lawyer’s suit and everything else. (End of tape 2, side 1) In 1992, my predecessor decided to retire and there were a lot of people interested in it and I very aggressively went after the job, and I remember meeting with...well, let me backtrack for a minute. In the radio business there are a lot of Jews, so I did not find anti-Semitism in the radio business. I found hesitancy with women, because a lot of places where I went there were not women executives, so once again, I
was the only woman of authority and I was probably the only woman director on the Pennsylvania Broadcasters, or certainly one of few nationally. But for some reason in the radio business, I never felt anti-Semitism, and you could sort of feel it in your gut. You know when it’s there. You can’t put your finger on it but you know.

INT: It’s not usually as overt as it is when this gentleman said that if she comes on I’m leaving.

LITA: Exactly.

INT: You might say how much of that was that I was a female and how much was a Jew. You don’t know.

LITA: I’ll never know. But I think I know. It was probably 50-50. At any rate, I remember making an appointment with one of the local party chairmen. We were sitting at Hymie’s and having breakfast and my husband said I’m going with you, because I needed really his endorsement. We were talking and I’m doing my presentation and he looked at me and he said well, you know Lita, some people don’t like your um, um, your style. And I thought, you know, you schnook. Is that the best word you can come up with? And I said to him you mean because I’m Jewish? And he said oh, absolutely not. Um, who do you think drove—I think it was Norma Shapiro. When Norma ran for school board, who do you think drove her around? I drove her around.

INT: Some of my best friends are Jewish.

LITA: Right. So at that point I was just livid and my husband saw that I was about to really dump it on him and my husband looked at him and said look, to show our commitment, here’s a check for $10,000. This is the first check going into Lita’s campaign account. This proves how serious she is. Well, I kind of looked at Stanley and I didn’t know if I was going to hit him or fall on the floor first, but that $10,000 was given and that was...and $10,000 for a state House race, in 1992 even, was a lot. But I gave up my business and it was the perfect time for me because Reuven was graduated from Brown University.

INT: You know, we skipped over.

LITA: We skipped college.

INT: Yeah. The kids went to Schechter.

LITA: Schechter, then they went to Bala Cynwyd then Lower Merion. Reuven got out in ’88 and went to Brown and Shoshana got out in ’89 and went to NYU. And I thought gee, the kids are away, I’m home free. But that’s not true because they come home for vacations often and we often went up there. Particularly I went because I had my own business by then. I went to New York a lot because that’s obviously the advertising center of the universe and so I saw Shoshana
once a week. I would do my business and then I always made sure I had lunch with her or dinner or something and then come home. So it was fun and we’ve always been very, very close. Very close. And I really attribute some of it to nursing her because we just had a physical bond right from the beginning.

INT: You didn’t nurse Reuven?

LITA: I did not nurse Reuven, and I really just attributed it to nursing for six months and just being more close physically, and to this day, she’s twenty-six years old and a day doesn’t go by that I don’t call her at least once. So Reuven got out of Brown in ’92 and went to New York, wanting to study to be an actor and then Shoshana got out of NYU in ’93 and stayed and went to NYU to take a Masters in French.

INT: So what do the kids do now?

LITA: Actually, Reuven eloped with the lady he had met at Brown. She is not Jewish. That became very, very difficult. Very difficult for me. She has actually no religion and Reuven also has no religion. They’re married now a little over three years. I find that very, very difficult for me. They have no religion and I find that more difficult than if he would have come to me and said I’m going to the Presbyterian church or I’m converting and becoming a Catholic or whatever. The mere fact that they have absolutely nothing, that they observe nothingness, is very painful to me and I find it very difficult.

INT: And they live in New York?

LITA: They now live in California, because three years ago Reuven decided...he really didn’t have the fire in his belly to be an actor. He’s a wonderful, wonderful writer. For a time at Brown he was going to be a writer, and he did nicely at Brown. His freshman year he was captain of JV soccer and then he gave that up in his second year to be a big brother, so I’m very proud of him that he did that. We used to go up there. He had a nice little Hispanic child, so it was real good for all of us.

INT: So he’s in L.A. He’s a writer?

LITA: No. He went to law school. He’s now graduating next month from USC Law School and the end of his freshman year he did a summer clerkship for a federal court judge who is probably next week going to be confirmed to the federal court of appeals, so this summer he’ll be working at Simpson Thatcher, which is a monstrously large New York law firm, and he also worked for a large law firm last summer out in New York, and then he’ll go back to Los Angeles for a year to do his law clerkship for the judge and then I don’t know what he’ll do. I don’t know where he’ll go, and he doesn’t know either.

Shoshana went to NYU as I said, was a French major, took a Masters in French and now
she's finishing a global policy MBA at Fordham. She got married two and a half years ago, and she married every mother's dream, what every mother of a daughter wants for a son-in-law, I got lucky and Shoshana married Seth who she met her fifth week at NYU when she was seventeen years old, a freshman, and he was a senior and he said when he graduates he wants to marry her. So they were together. I think on their sixth anniversary they got married, and of course then it was my only wedding and I just had a wonderful time and we just had great fun and I'm very lucky because he has wonderful parents. We go there Thanksgiving and they come here for Pesach. We're alike and that makes it wonderful, and Seth has nice brothers. It's just a wonderful family. I'm an only child and my husband has two sisters who are the best in the world, so I'm lucky because they're my family. My family, after my Uncle Bill died, kind of fell apart so we're not in contact anymore, so it's really my two sisters-I call them my sisters because they are my sisters. I talk to them. Stan rarely talks to them but I talk to them two, three times a week and we're real close and so I'm lucky that I have this family.

INT: We talked a little bit about Jewish education. The children went to Schechter so I'm sure they were bar and bat mitzvahed.

LITA: Yes. At Har Zion. There was no place for them really after Schechter. Har Zion-they put Reuven in a class his age, of course, and he was very far advanced. He finally ended up in the...and he was in Medrasha Hebrew High School with high school seniors and he was in eighth grade and just socially it didn't work, so both kids we had tutored at home for a while, but there's just no discipline. If I had it to do over again, I really would have kept them at Har Zion and now there are programs, or I would have sent them to Gratz. I really would have and I think if I regret anything, it's not sending them to Ramah, but they're both really good athletes and Ramah is not known for great sports. But if we would have sent them there when they were young they never would have known the difference. We sent them to summer camps that were very athletically oriented and so they became fabulous athletes, but I really feel that they fell away from their Judaism because all they had was what was at home and if I regret anything, and regret really a lot, it's not taking them to Gratz, forcing them to continue some kind of Jewish education. Is that the reason that Reuven married out of the faith? I don't know. You know, it's all mazel. I don't know. Shoshana...Seth comes from a kosher home. Shoshana and Seth keep a kosher home. They come here for meat because meat's too expensive so I order the meat and they say you can't beat that price, or they go to Poughkeepsie to Seth's parents and raid their freezer and take their meat. So I don't know. The kids come. They alternate, Shoshana and Seth. They will go to Poughkeepsie for some holidays and here for some holidays and they always come to shul with us. So they know and they know my Judaism is very important. And when we joked before about the party chairman and some of my best friends were Jewish, it's really interesting that our best friends are religious and not necessarily Jewish, but our closest friends are religiously observant, be it Catholic or whatever.

INT: That was my next question, to talk about your closest friends.

LITA: Most of my closest friends are Jewish, but we are friendly with some couples that are not
Jewish but they’re religious, and I think, to me, it has an effect. So we were at ’92. I had a severe primary and that’s where I think anti-Semitism really reared its ugly head. My opponent is Catholic, so the primary issues were choice, that is abortion and school choice, and it just...there were fliers put out on Sunday on the windshields of the church that I’m a baby killer, those kinds of things, and the anti-Semitism just ran rampant.

INT: And of course they must have talked about how you didn’t believe in G-d because you didn’t...

LITA: Right. So I was just your general baby killer, heathen kind of terrible Jew from the Main Line.

INT: Your district is partly Conshohocken.

LITA: Conshohocken, White Marsh. My opponent had been the president of the board of supervisors in White Marsh so they all knew him up there so that was foreign territory to me and very difficult for me to go and to make inroads. I got 40% of the vote in the Conshohocken-Plymouth-White Marsh area in the primary, but I guess 90 something percent of the vote in Lower Merion, so I got a total of 70% of the vote in the primary. I usually maintain that 70% throughout the elections. I’ll never do better than 70% because 30% of my district is really strongly anti-choice, pro-voucher.

INT: Devout Catholic.

LITA: And also gun. The gun folks as well and I am very anti-gun. So although I always say that the caveat is I will protect my hunters and collectors and sportsmen because they’re responsible people even though I hate guns, but these are the people that don’t abuse guns and respect guns and I won’t, in any way, do anything to diminish their freedoms and their rights but otherwise I’m really anti-gun. So I was elected in ’92. Clinton carried my district. Marjorie Margolis Misvinsky carried my district, first Democrat congressperson, although Specter did carry my district, but everything else went Democrat. Thank goodness my people split their tickets so ’92 and ’96 were tougher elections because Clinton was at the top of the ticket and some people just can’t split their ticket. Some people will vote for a Republican or a Democrat. They could be an ax murderer but as long as they’re of that party then they’ll do that. So that was...those elections were difficult. I am now totally consumed with my job. It is the most wonderful job because...

INT: So your leisure is your work.

LITA: My leisure is my work and my husband has to drag me away. You can’t be everywhere—yes I can. You don’t have to go to everything—yes I do. And it’s so fulfilling. It’s so exciting. We have literally saved lives. We’ve saved people’s lives. We’ve changed their lives but we kept them alive physically and it’s wonderful, and if I can do that then I’ve succeeded.
INT: What are your plans for the future?

LITA: Well, I will always work on my pet project, which is the City Avenue Corridor and I'll just touch on that briefly. In '86, '85, '87, as a commissioner, I saw that the golden mile was becoming a little bit tarnished and so we started small people-to-people meetings in people's living rooms, parlor meetings, our neighborhood civic associations with the Wynnewfield residents' association. Our town watch with their town watch. Our police never ever talked to each other. It's Philadelphia's problem. They started talking to each other. Now you'll see Philadelphia police cars over here and our cars over there.

INT: I'm familiar with the project but go over it because we want to get it on record.

LITA: It is the first special services district in the nation that exists between two municipalities.

INT: I didn't realize that.

LITA: We've been written up in Newsday. There was an article about us. It's just...we've gotten a Pew grant. The governor is giving us a half a million dollars. It's just so extraordinary that we can do this because it's a model for all suburbs adjacent to cities because we see it here, in other parts of Philadelphia, they're war zones and you can't go there. Crime has been cut by 1/3. It's below the 1970 line. Houses in Bala Cynwyd and Merion are incredibly expensive and in Wynnewfield you can't touch real estate now in Wynnewfield because it's so desirable. You're right by the city. And your car is safer at Lord and Taylor in Bala Cynwyd than it is at Lord and Taylor at King of Prussia. So we've worked on this and applications are up, up, up I don't know what percent at St. Joe's because it's now in a great neighborhood. Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine-their applications are off the wall or through the roof because it's a nice neighborhood, so it's wonderful. It's very, very exciting. What are my plans for the future? Well. I pledged to serve five terms, which is ten years. I'm now running for my fourth term, 1998, and I'll run again hopefully in the year 2000 and serve and that will give me my ten years. By 2002 I'll be sixty-one years old. Lately I started thinking about running for lieutenant governor. I'm not sure.

INT: So you're thinking about state politics. You're not thinking about national politics. Or you're not sure.

LITA: Well, I'm sure not. That's a definite no on national. I had been asked several times to run in either party or both parties for Congress. I think that's probably the worst job in the world. I had been approached to run in the year 2000 in the Republican primary against Rick Santorum and I really gave that a lot of thought and I could raise the money because I'm great at raising money. My first race in '92 I raised and spent $126,000 for a job that pays $47,000, so I can raise money. That's not a problem. If I were ten years younger I'd probably do it because Santorum really, although he's mellowed, he's got some more extreme viewpoints concerning personal choice, although his votes on Israel are good and nationally I think that's...
INT: The abortion issues are bedlam with him.

LITA: The abortion issue is bad and he’s a little bit more conservative-a lot more conservative than I on a lot of other issues, but to me, on a national level, the key issues are really twofold, and one is war and the other is Israel, because if you think back, has your life really changed, be it Carter or Reagan or Bush or Clinton? Our lives really haven’t changed, and I don’t think that a president has that kind of local impact on us, unless they do something really extreme, like FDR was able to really change the world and change the nation. So the U.S. Senate would appeal to me, but running in both a primary and a general, no, and taking those puddle-jumpers all through the state at age sixty-two, no. In 2000, I’d be fifty-nine. And then John Heinz died a block from my house and I remember those little planes, so I’m not comfortable with that kind of thing. And by then hopefully I’d be a bubby so I would hopefully enjoy that. So I would like to serve till 2002 as a state rep, think about running for lieutenant governor, because right now I’m in a position where I have-I don’t like to use the word power-authority, and the ability to deliver because I’m on Appropriations, I’m on Judiciary, I’m now the chair of task forces. We are writing the divorce code and the adoption code. It’s very important work and I’ve been able, through my seniority, to deliver to my constituents, so by 2002-and I’m speaking all over the state now on all these different issues.

INT: How many Jewish people are there in the state House?

LITA: I’m the sole Republican in the state House. I’m sorry. In the Republican caucus I’m the sole Jew. I’m the only Jew in the Republican caucus, which is the majority caucus. In the Democrat minority caucus, there are, I guess, four or five in the House. In the Senate there are two Jews, one Democrat, one Republican.

INT: And how many women?

LITA: We’re ten percent women, so out of 203, we have 20, 22, something like that women. So there aren’t that many women at all and certainly not many Jews. People from the Alabama portion of Pennsylvania, as James Carver would call them, they look at me like I’m some kind of pariah. On the other hand, I’ve earned their respect. I’ve earned their fear because I’m a Penn graduate and that’s like...they look at Penn as we look at Harvard. So they won’t mess around with Lita and I just worked hard to earn their respect. I could talk to these people. We could air our views, knowing that they’re different sometimes and we all say and do stupid things but at least they know that I’m really not an idiot. They think I’m off the wall. For example, one thirty in the morning we did-I don’t know what bill it was—it was grandparents’ visitation bill, and somebody came up with an amendment not to honor same sex marriages performed in other states, because Hawaii was working on it at the time, and never mind the constitution of the United States full faith and credit, where states are supposed to give full faith and credit to things like contracts performed in other states. If you move to Iowa, your Pennsylvania marriage is valid. You don’t have to get remarried in Iowa. So the comments that I heard—I was in absolute tears. My heart was pounding. The comments that I heard on the floor about gays and G-d and
the Bible says, and one representative got up and said-this is one thirty in the morning and we’d been working since ten o’clock the morning before-he got up and he said well, where I come from, wherever it was, we know men are men and women and women and we know the difference. And a big cheer went up and they applauded him. They were banging their feet and their desks. The next thing I knew I was standing in front of the microphone and the speaker said, the lady from Montgomery, and I realized he’s calling on me. And I muttered a couple of things like family values, statistically, partnerships, same sex partnerships have fewer divorces and fewer breakups and I went on and on and what if and it took me a year to figure out what I should have done is interrogated that speaker and I should have just asked him are the sheep nervous in your district?

So I find it’s not just that the Jews are different kinds of people but gays are and any non-G-d fearing Christian right is a sinner and bad and unacceptable. The Christian right in Pennsylvania is very strong, very powerful. And some of them just don’t understand. There have been resolutions put forth proclaiming May the something or other as march for Jesus, and they don’t understand why wouldn’t you...and I went to the sponsor of it and he said well, I signed the resolution recognizing the 50th anniversary of B’nai B’rith.

INT: They don’t understand that they’re not the same thing.

LITA: They don’t understand they’re not the same thing, and recognizing a 50th anniversary is not the same as an overt action of getting all of us up to march for Jesus. So you get that kind of thing.

INT: We’ve touched on this all along, but I just want to throw a few things to see if we’ve missed anything. We talked about community. Are there any clubs or private organizations or boards that you’re on that we haven’t talked about yet?

LITA: Well, I’ve stayed away from Har Zion because Stanley was the president and he’s very active in Har Zion and he kind of does the Jewish stuff. I was on the Schechter board for a while.

INT: When your children were there?

LITA: Yes, I was president and actually one of the founding members of the Golda Meir Hadassah, which is a professional women’s Hadassah. And in ORT, I’m a life member, as are my kids of Hadassah. I’m on the civic association board. I’m on loads of boards, lots of communities, and again, I ended up as the vice president of Philadelphia Child Guidance Center. Most of my board memberships are community. I’ve been recognized as the person of the year from the Montgomery County Association of Retarded Citizens. That’s another one of my pet projects, special needs people, and in fact I’ve gotten national awards. As a commissioner I started special recreation programs for special needs people. We have playgrounds in Lower Merion and recreation programs in Lower Merion for everybody but special needs people, so we started them and Stanley and I, to this day, will take a busload of young people to a baseball
game or a football game, a basketball game, the circus or something like that. And then I was honored as Women of the Year last year from the March of Dimes. I’m drawing a blank right now but I sit on a lot of community boards.

INT: One more thing. We did talk about what this oral history project is and the focus of it is to examine the unique impact Jewish women have during these evolving times, and I want to give you one last question and see if you can add anything that we haven’t talked about. I guess that is how difficult it’s been to integrate being a woman and being Jewish in the 20th century.

LITA: That’s a toughie.

INT: We talked a lot about it so I don’t know if you have anything else to add.

LITA: I’m me. I tell my husband, look, I’m a bull in a china shop and that’s me and you have to take me as I am. I talk too loud, but that’s the way I talk, and when I try to speak softly, when I remember you must speak like a lady and speak softly, it’s not Lita. So I am what I am. And I just happen to have been born female and Jewish and that’s it, and blessed to have had this extraordinary mother and wonderful uncle and privileged economically so that I could do the things that I wanted to do. I really get annoyed with women, and I remember in 1992 when Marjorie was running and I was running, we went to a fundraiser for Barbara Boxer, and when Barbara was running in ’92. It was in town somewhere and Marjorie stood up and she said we have to elect more women, and every one of the women in the room shook their heads yes and I said excuse me, I’m running and I say absolutely no to that. We have to elect competent women, and if we don’t, then none of us will ever get reelected and Marjorie was not reelected, for two reasons. She was not competent and she lied. (End of tape 2, side 2)

INT: This is the beginning of the third tape. I think we lost a little bit of the last tape, but basically what we were talking about was the integration of being a woman and being Jewish in the 20th century, so if you don’t mind just picking up that question.

LITA: I think that I’m me, I’m Lita Cohen. This is how I was born, this is who I am and what I am and I think as the century goes on and now we are approaching a millennium, eventually it won’t make a difference as long as we’re competent, and I think that that’s what counts. There’s always going to be hate existing. There’s always going to be people that are prejudiced against redheads, against tall people, fat people, short people, funny people, sad people, whatever, but if you can do the job then that, to me, is the most important thing. And sometimes it’s difficult. In law school it was more difficult being a woman. Not so much being Jewish but just being a woman and there are places where it is more difficult being who you are, but it always...it annoys me. Number one, that women particularly have lost their sense of humor, and we Jews and blacks also. Minorities. We’ve all lost our sense of humor and I think that that’s dreadful. I speak to a lot of women’s groups and some of them are really just boring because they’re so busy, they expend all their energy just kind of complaining and bitching about the fact that people aren’t nice to women. If they’d only make those energies positive and say okay, you know, this is a
man's world and it's an old boy's network but hell, I'm going to go for it anyway, then we'd accomplish. We could own the world and not the men.

INT: It's certainly true.

LITA: Absolutely. So it's a matter of being competent, having a positive attitude. We are what we are. All men and all women are really not created equal. There's no doubt in my mind about that. We don't even get conceived equally. We don't take our first breath equally. So you're dealt a certain hand of cards. Well, play with that hand then and do your very best with what you have and enjoy. Just smile and it makes a difference.

INT: Well, I certainly enjoyed this interview and you've been wonderful. I think we've covered most things. Is there anything that you can think of that you'd like on the record that we've left out?

LITA: Well, we didn't talk, I guess, about my commitment to Judaism today, and it is very, very important to me and I always told my children the only grandchildren I will recognize are Jewish grandchildren. Every once in a while when I have doubts, I say well, why do I have to be Jewish anyway? Big deal. What is the harm if the Jewish people just disappear from the face of the earth? And I've never really been able to answer that, probably because I've never asked the rabbi and he'll give me a good answer. I'm sure. I'm not even sure that I want to hear the answer but I know it's the right thing and I am truly committed. I think my daughter understands when she'll tell me that one of her girlfriends has a boyfriend and she doesn't even wait for me to ask the question is he Jewish. She'll immediately say to me, so-and-so has a boyfriend and yes Mom, he's Jewish. and in fact she was out last week with a girlfriend and met the girl's new boyfriend and the girl said go back and tell your mother that he's Jewish. All her friends know that to me it's very, very important.

INT: Which is why it was a big problem with your son.

LITA: Exactly. And I think it's continuity, because being Jewish is fun. We have so much fun at our Seders, at all of our holidays. It's nice to be Jewish. It really is. And again, in the House I was asked I know you don't worship Jesus as a G-d but you do believe in Jesus, and I said no. But he is a central part of your religion? No. Those kinds of questions and finally he said well, what do you think about Jesus? What is Jesus to Jews? I said he's like Aristotle, he's like Socrates, he's like Churchill, he is a major figure in history that we have to know about but he was a man and historical figure.

INT: It's a little scary that these people are educated and they don't understand what this means.

LITA: I know.

INT: We have friends who were away and she said something about believing in Jesus and her