INTERVIEW WITH DEBRA KODISH

INT: Today is April 20, 1998. My name is Sally Benson Alsher. I'm interviewing Debra Kodish, who is the founder and director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project. Debra, where were you born and when?

DEBRA: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, December 23, 1952.

INT: What do you remember about your grandparents? Do you remember them or where you told things about them?

DEBRA: I remember my grandparents, some of them.

INT: Tell me about your paternal first.

DEBRA: Well, that’s the more difficult story. The mother's side is the easier one. That’s the family that we spent more time with. They were both Hungarian Jews. It’s my grandfather’s family that my mother and our family have really been more identified with. It was the Gross family, George Gross, and he and six brothers and one sister came over from Hungary in the teens. He had died in 1950 or so but that family of the brothers and the wives and the one sister and the husband were very close. So that was really the family that when there were reunions or family gatherings, that was really the network that I more grew up in. I remember my grandmother and her house quite well and it was her neighborhood...she as one of the few remaining white people and Jews in an African-American neighborhood in Akron, Ohio in the late Fifties. There was just something magical about that house. You know how you remember smells? I just remember the smells of the dirt underneath the wooden steps in the back and the front porch and all the kids on the street I played with a lot, and I think very much we live where we live in West Philadelphia because that neighborhood was so comfortable for me.

INT: This was your mother's-

DEBRA: My mother’s mother. And my father-they were from Akron really. My father had a complicated story which you may not want to get into, but his mother had died having him and then he was adopted by the aunt. So in that family there was always a lot of stresses and they didn’t really approve of my mother for no good reason. So we never felt comfortable there. They were more orthodox. The house was always overheated. I remember the cousins as sources of torture. They would lock us in the bathroom. So it was really more my mother’s side of the family but it was a very Jewish world.

INT: What languages did they speak?

DEBRA: My father’s side Yiddish and my mother’s side Hungarian and a little bit of Yiddish,
but mostly Hungarian. It was very much sort of different worlds. And of course we wound up not
learning anything because my father really knew Yiddish and my mother knew Hungarian and so
they spoke English in the house. It’s a shame. Not an unfamiliar story. We know some words but
not a lot.

INT: What was your grandmother like?

DEBRA: She’s a little bit of an enigma. I think she probably didn’t have a whole lot of patience
with kids. She was a fabulous cook and I remember just sitting on a bench, a little chair in the
kitchen, and watching her cook polochintas. My Mom was not a good cook so I never learned a
whole lot about what she made but I later looked up recipes to try to remember those tastes. My
aunt was a fairly decent cook but I never really learned from her. Mostly the grownups would
talk and we would be off playing. I remember occasionally...it can’t have been often but I
remember staying there at least once and I just remember the Noxema on her face. It’s funny, the
things you remember as a kid. Smells. I really remember the smells.

And my grandfather—it was important to me, although I didn’t know him, they would
explain my bookishness in terms of my grandfather. “Oh, he would have understood.” So as a kid
I always felt a real sense of loss that I hadn’t met this person because he, and then my mother had
a cousin Milt Gross, and then there was a nephew who was a cousin more my age, a few years
older than I was, and they were the readers and the progressive thinkers in the family. So my
grandfather had been, I think, timid but definitely supported the activities of the Communist party
members and the ones who were more politically active. But it was Milt, this one cousin of my
mother’s, and both Milt and my Mom were really family historians in a way and were really
intellectuals. Not that they had fancy jobs, but they were real thinking people. So in some ways,
my way out of Cleveland and my way into who I would become were because of that family in
general but really Uncle Milt, who would sit down and explain anything you wanted to know. I
remember everything from discussions about the Vietnam War to just...I don’t remember
anymore specifically. My big memories from my family were Milt, who I would see at family
reunions and we always sort of stayed in touch, and then this cousin who was a few years older
than I who was involved in some political stuff.

We’re actually doing a project here in the folkarts of social change, so we’ve been
thinking about how people take positions of activism and everybody’s got an Uncle Milt. If
you’re inclined in political ways, there’s somebody. I used to think, “Oh, my Dad was a
milkman.” I remember when I was eighteen and I went away and I was in an overseas American
field service, and I thought, “Oh my G-d, my life is...” I thought I was doomed because I didn’t
have any kind of real intellectual grounding. My Dad hadn’t really finished...I guess he finished
high school but, you know, it was not...Here I was meeting all these people who had read
Markusa and they had educations and what did I know? Jokes from my father coming home from
the milk route. I just didn’t know how I was ever going to catch up. But it’s interesting talking to
activists, because you realize that not everybody has all of those people. It really does take just a
single Uncle Milt who’s a real...you know, a beacon but in any case, I’m not sure what your
interests are in all of this.

INT: Were your grandparents religious? Do you remember your grandmother, who you spent a lot of time with, being religious?

DEBRA: I wouldn't say a lot of time with her. My father's side was the side that was really frum. My mother's side was more creative. They were a little bit more assimilated. There were definitely major focuses on holidays.

INT: Did they keep kosher?

DEBRA: My mother's side didn't. My father's side did. And my mother's side...I remember it was really more holiday focused and they were more progressive. It was more of a less religious kind of family, more interested in sort of social issues, although not everybody. Some people were just trying to make it as Americans and they had fights with them all the time.

INT: Tell me a typical holiday.

DEBRA: It's so long I'm not sure that I...I have sort of dim, wonderful memories of like a picnic, and then there was the Arbiter Ring...No, I can't remember whether it was my father's side or it was some friends. There was this whole Akron cluster of families and my father actually was a cousin of my mother's brother-in-law, so there were some events where I can dimly remember all these folks being together and that stuff was important more as a memory of the kind of community which we didn't have in Cleveland. All these people lived in Akron and we lived in Cleveland. The more important thing is that we moved when I was in third grade from a very integrated sort of inner-city Cleveland neighborhood to the suburbs. My parents were trying to do what they thought was right and I was very happy in the other school system and we wound up moving into a really anti-Semitic neighborhood in Cleveland. There were maybe Jews four, five blocks away but we were greeted by “Jew” in big black eight feet tall letters on our garage door.

INT: Tell me about that.

DEBRA: I was in third grade. I can still remember vividly what it looked like. My Dad said, “Well, we’re not going to paint it. We’re proud of who we are.” And then the mayor came from this little town of Mayfield Heights and basically pressured my folks to have it painted over, and I remember thinking “I’m never going to forgive them for this.” You know how you have these like tiny little memories? I was really proud of them standing up. As a kid, you don’t really understand but they must have been so baffled by what’s the right thing to do. You’re new in this neighborhood. You don’t know what...but it continued. There were some kids, some Irish and I guess German and some Italians. It was the Irish and the German kids. It was all first generation immigrants just moving out of Cleveland. It had been a small town. You could kind of see there were three or four houses on the block that were definitely older houses from the Twenties, and
then there had been more like tract houses that had been built. It wasn’t a new suburb but it was definitely when I was a kid I could just take off and there would be fields and by the time my sister, who’s three years younger and less adventurous...it was all built up. So it was really one of those post-war booming suburbs at that point.

But that stuff really marked me because then some of the kids who had been responsible would send me hate notes in the library at the grade school, and the library was just this place that had been always a real sanctuary for me and to get these notes from these kids. And then the principal totally was intimidated by the kids. I remember everybody being brought in and the kids who had sent the hate notes started to cry and so he felt sorry for them. It was pretty good as a...I have a fifth grade and a second grader so it’s just funny seeing the kids at this age and realizing how much a kid processes. It wasn’t until my kids got to this age that I realized I have almost...my memories of this were so-I don’t want to say grown up, but I had such clear memories of all this stuff happening and of myself as an actor in it. It’s a real fairly developed consciousness at that age, whereas I look at my kids and I don’t quite think of them as having that. It’s a little shocking to realize that they’re really thinking about stuff.

INT: So that was very traumatic.

DEBRA: Well, it wasn’t really traumatic but it was definitely a key incident that really marked things that I cared about. I don’t like unfairness. I don’t like privilege. I sure don’t like racism and I don’t like anti-Semitism, but it was the sense that the school where I was really comfortable was this place where there were more African-Americans, and I wind up moving to this white suburb where I was just not comfortable. I don’t think I examined that for a long time but a lot of why I believe in public school and why we live in West Philadelphia has to do with just really believing that living in a diverse kind of community is something that I value, and also the times before we moved, both that community there in Cleveland and the community my grandmother lived in, was friendly. People were hanging out on the street. I played with everybody happily as opposed to this more Christian white world where it was not so friendly. That sense of how do you build a...without consciously thinking about it, looking for those kinds of comfortable communities where there’s a lot of interaction and people aren’t reacting to who they think people are that very much drove decisions. I certainly have good intellectual reasons for why I care about that stuff but I’m speaking more about these emotional feelings. This is really clear that those early feelings really affected this.

INT: What about other Jewish children in the area?

DEBRA: We didn’t have very many Jewish friends. When you’re a kid, your world is pretty much your street. It’s not very far. There were some Jewish kids who lived five or six blocks away and I saw them in school, but you play with the kids on your street and the kids on our street were not Jewish kids.

INT: So you didn’t live there because it was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood.
DEBRA: For my parents it was affordable. My parents weren’t trying to go someplace where it wasn’t black. They weren’t racists about that. They were trying to look for a place where they felt the schools were going to be good and they were intimidated into thinking that the schools that they were at were not. They didn’t want to be the only white family in the school, and I think they now too, or my Dad now—they’re very innocent folks. They really didn’t have a lot of...they had really great intentions but it was really easily...they never understood systems in their whole life and they were just trying to do what they thought was right.

INT: Let’s go back a little. Tell me about your father. Let’s start with your father. What are some of your earliest memories?

DEBRA: Well, my Dad is a milkman. That was a real...there were all these really great perks associated with that. He would bring home the...people would get rid of pets and my Dad would bring home the animals. He was really gifted with animals and with gardening and all this stuff. He was a really interesting man. It wasn’t the kind of world where those talents—where he might have figured out how to pursue any of those real gifts but he was a really hard working man. Really generous. Both my parents, really all they wanted was to have a family that...it was really very modest goals.

INT: How did they meet?

DEBRA: There’s a funny family story about it but I don’t remember the real story because the family story has displaced it. The family story is that my Dad came to pay his condolences because my Mom’s Dad had died and for some reason he knew my grandfather or he was across the street. For some reason he was on the block, on my grandmother’s block, and my Mom reached her hand across the street and pulled him over and that’s why he had his bald spot. That was hysterical when we were kids. But my Dad is still alive and not in great health right now. I’m trying to sort of manage that long distance to Cleveland. He’s a real loner, a very shrewd judge of character although not someone with a lot of education.

INT: Is he very religious?

DEBRA: My Dad really has a great scorn for pretense. He’s a great judge of character and we wound up, I think, going to Hebrew school until about second grade, at which point there was a teacher’s strike, and although we’re a strong sort of labor family, he was furious that there would be a price tag on religious education and we never went again. I don’t know, to this day, whether that was because we didn’t have the money or because it was just purely political reasons.

INT: So you weren’t bat mitzvahed or anything.

DEBRA: No, no, no. We weren’t involved in any kind of organized religion. I think a lot of my Jewish values though come from my Dad because just ethically, his sense of how things should be—he has a very strong sense of rightness and a lot of his proverbs, which were probably
Yiddish-were certainly Yiddish which we would hear in English cleaned up and translated, are things that I really… I fought for a long time, I think, because I hated it that I would bring somebody home and my Dad would, in thirty seconds, have got that person’s number. He and I were probably the most… we were very combative with each other. He was very much a perfectionist and I could never do anything the right way. A lot of this was around mowing the lawn. I had to mow it exactly his way, and of course I always had a better way. So I wound up leaving home early because we were always like this. But over time he certainly mellowed and I got a greater appreciation for just an incredibly hard-working...a lot of the things that I think of as... some of them are class values, just working class and not just Jewish, or not Jewish, but I think he really carried forth a sense of being a mensch and valuing things that are really ethical.

INT: Tell me about your Mom.

DEBRA: My Mom was a real mediator and she was somebody with intellectual yearnings. My Mom is more of a mystery because she died when my oldest daughter, Sarah, who’s eleven, was just three months old. You know how you don’t really get to know your mother... you don’t get to understand yourself in a way either if your mother dies before you really get to be a mother. It’s just a funny thing. And it was still fairly close to the time when I was... I had been doing things I cared about intellectually and it was a source of conflict still with them. They just really wanted me to get married and I just was not exactly happy. “Can you please stop pushing me-I’m never going to do that. This is what I’m doing.”

INT: Was she very religious? Do you remember?

DEBRA: Religious-religious. Neither of them were formally religious. I think because we didn’t have a lot, they were very good judges of the kind of emerging Jewish middle class who had pretensions and for whom we were no longer good enough, and because we didn’t have a lot of money in the family, we got naturally good instincts in terms of those kinds of slights. You could always tell that we were the ones that didn’t quite...there was always that. You could just tell. There was one cousin of my Dad’s who I think were also treated maybe a tad more... they had some kind of mental-I don’t even know whether it was just a very low intelligence or whether they had been birth... I just have very dim memories of this other family that were cousins that came over to our house once or twice. I know that they had problems and there was this hush-hush stuff about trying to figure out how to help them. But I remember realizing that we were treated a little bit like them, and that was probably the worst case of that kind of slights. But there were often... a lot of my mother’s side—there’s a lot of stories of slights and it was hard for my folks. It was painful to feel like… my Dad didn’t talk a lot in public because he felt like he didn’t talk right and so he’d have my Mom sort of do the talking. He was very quiet. Just very insecure. They were both very insecure and not for any good reason. And I’m a folklorist, so I think what folklore gives me is a way to pay attention to the alternative way that experience comes out in expression. If experience is only understood in terms of the expression that condense it, life happens but stories are what makes us divide it up into chunks and understand it. Well, there’s often alternative readings for how that stuff happens. I think for a lot of different reasons formal
institutions, and maybe it was because we didn’t have the money and maybe it was that it just a kind of people that my folks were not comfortable with, we wound up not going a formal route. A very clear sense that we were Jewish. A very clear sense that you should always judge people by who they are. Just things that I think of as very Jewish, ethical values and that seem right to me in a probably ethnocentric kind of way.

INT: Without that formal education, how did you come to think of these things as sort of Jewish values? Did you later read and realize that this was...

DEBRA: I certainly always thought of myself as being Jewish. I certainly read on my own, even when I was a kid. When I was worried, living in a Christian world, I was worried that I was going to go to Hell because I wasn’t going to Sunday school and didn’t know the right prayers, so I would get books out of the library and read to try to keep up, and I would just say some prayers thinking, “Oh, if there is some kind of G-d which I’m not sure, at least they’ll have to understand that I’m doing the best I can.” So I must have, as a kid, had that as a kind of issue, that if somebody else wasn’t taking care of me I better figure it out for myself.

INT: But you did have holidays and things, Rosh Hashana.

DEBRA: We did in a very minor way. My Mom was not a good cook and so things were not major but yeah, we had Shabbos. I can remember-I don’t think it was all the time but I definitely remember my Mom lighting candles. I think they raised us with a sense of there’s some Jewish values and this is how we do things and this is the right way, I don’t think I divided that up to think, “Well, is this Jewish or is this not Jewish.” I certainly, by the time I was older...I had a consciousness that I had a style that was definitely Jewish. I think in the Fifties it wasn’t like it was neutral. You were Jewish, especially in an anti-Semitic...in a setting where it’s not an entirely Jewish world. I don’t know that I really know how to answer that but I don’t think there was a time when I didn’t think that I was Jewish and a lot of how I thought about doing things...I’m argumentative, there’s how many questions...there’s so much about my way of moving in the world that seem just very Jewish. I think it almost feels like the question would be how would I not, not how would I. And then when I was in graduate school in Newfoundland I wound up doing a little bit of work with the Jewish community up there, more as a way to respond to their generosity, because people kept inviting me over for Shabbos. I think I began keeping kosher for a little bit so I could invite people over, so I could at least reciprocate. I think I had plastic silverware or something. I can dimly remember this. I must have been vegetarian or something too at the time. I can’t remember. So I definitely...I don’t think that was as much a kind of exploring as just feeling...it was more of an anthropological feeling that they were so generous and this was something that I could do that would be a way to in some way repay that generosity.

INT: Describe your house and your room?

DEBRA: My house now?
INT: No, growing up.

DEBRA: Well, we changed back and forth. Probably the house was not bigger than this first floor. It's a small, brick-I guess it's a bungalow. I can't remember my house types anymore. There were sort of three bedrooms. There was one room that had been kind of turned into a bedroom and then the kitchen and the living room were just sort of together. When we go there now it seems just so small. I don't remember it as being that small but you couldn't have a conversation without anybody overhearing. I remember that. The only thing I remember about one of the rooms was that it was knotty-pine paneled and I used to have nightmares and I used to think that the knots in the walls were...I used to tell myself, “That's what's happening. It's these knots in the walls that I'm seeing in a funny way.” I don't know that that figures large for any particular reason. In terms of Jewish stuff, I don't think that physically nothing particularly...pictures of family. There were all the pictures of my mother's side of the family up.

INT: Did your mother work?

DEBRA: She worked in various ranges of places. When I was little she worked so that she'd be home when school got out. I guess before that she must have worked in a night shift at a place that was called Tops. It's like a K-Mart kind of a place. And then she was a secretary in various places and wound up being secretary in the junior high school after I had left and was very happy in that because she loved having discussions with all the teachers and it was a better avenue for her intelligence than she had found before that.

INT: What was her education?

DEBRA: She actually had gone to college and I think had studied to be a social worker. Well, I know had studied to be a social worker and then I think worked for a year and for some reason really...I think she really didn't like it but I also think that my Dad was so insecure about his education that I think-although I don't think she wanted to go down the path of social worker, I think she would not have been able to figure out and she really loved my Dad and she just didn't know how to find something...so the school wound up being really perfect when she found it. And he didn't want her to work either because he felt like that was a comment on him again not being able to do-

INT: The breadwinner.

DEBRA: Yeah, you know. She had to fight, I remember, for that.

INT: Tell me about siblings.

DEBRA: Oy. Well, I have a sister who's three years younger and she lives in Cleveland. She spent some time being religiously involved and then wound up going sort of some other routes. It was just the two of us.
INT: What’s your relationship with her? Difficult?

DEBRA: Yeah. I don’t want to talk about it particularly. I don’t know that it actually does much use for you.

INT: That’s okay. This is your story so whatever you want...What other families had an influence on your life? You said your uncle did.

DEBRA: I think the key ones were my Uncle Milt and-(end of tape 1, side 1) Milt was the most significant, not only because he knew so much and was really intellectually curious—he was a teacher. He was a Communist party member and had done some work unionizing teachers in Cleveland and then wound up losing a job and had a very hard time in the Fifties. And I remember—it’s another funny family story—I remember when he was working on an ice cream truck. For years I would remember that as this great memory. Of course for him it was this real low point, but as a kid, can you imagine your uncle coming on an ice cream truck? It was so exciting. So finally I got old enough for Milt to tell me to stop bringing up that story because it wasn’t exactly his high point. But I really admired him and I admired his politics. There were certainly stories about the grandparents’ generation and like my grandfather going to Communist and Socialist party demonstrations and worrying about-

INT: Is that why they came here, do you think?

DEBRA: No. They didn’t come here because of political activity. They were very...they all wound up being furriers, some better than others, but they found a trade. They really came here more for economic opportunity. But they had a kind of political consciousness. Some of them, not all of them. My grandfather and my Uncle Milt’s father, I think, although I’m a little rusty on exactly who did what, but Milt, in the Sixties...I remember my Mom calling us “kids, kids, come look.” I don’t remember exactly whether it was with some of the bus riding, the freedom riders. “There’s your cousin. He’s being arrested.” And it was Milt’s kids. They were older. They were eight or ten years older than I was and for me, he was just really important because I appreciated his political analysis. He and his family were doing things in a way that my timid parents weren’t really, and also, from the time I was a kid he really took time with me and he took me seriously. That was a real door and I definitely went towards that, you know, sort of kept aiming for that little window. But I left home fairly soon. I was an exchange student to Finland when I was seventeen, really just for the summer but I stayed in a Marxist summer school and the world really opened. I had never been outside of Mayfield Heights until then. It was just eye-opening. And then after that I wound up going away to school in a very funny way. Our family didn’t know anything about college and I was going to go to Cleveland State.

INT: How did you do that when you were seventeen?

DEBRA: Well, how did I go to the American Field Service? It was just a program and I must have found out about it and just applied to go. I remember dimly...I don’t remember much. I
remember that I was afraid to go for a year. That just seemed like too much. So I only applied for the summer program, and then once I was there I was so sorry and I tried to get them to let me stay but of course they couldn’t do that. But that was just an amazing experience. It was actually interesting. I remember that...this whole thing is really irrelevant but I think my memories have more to do with class than with Jewishness, although I’m not sure they’re separable.

INT: That’s fine.

DEBRA: I remember once I was picked—before the process started you had to put in an envelope the amount of money that your family could raise to support you and the American Field Service chapter was supposed to raise the rest of it. We figured out what we could put in, and I was working from the time I was really little, both babysitting and then in a dry cleaner and the first Chinese restaurant in town. I just always had to work. And then when they found out how much money we could put forward, they tried to talk us into not going because it wasn’t enough. That was another point of my parents saying, “Wait a minute. That’s not what you said.” They had not been enthusiastic about me going and then when that happened they decided, “G-d dammit, this kid is going to get this chance.”

INT: They were timid in certain ways but not in others.

DEBRA: But I think...they were timid but I think they definitely had a sense of fairness and they might not have wanted me to go but once I was picked through a fair process, especially for things where “Oh, it’s not enough money.” That was definitely a sore spot. We were always not having enough somehow. That would have been a sensitive point for everybody.

INT: Tell me more about your childhood. What were your friends like? What was school like early on?

DEBRA: I remember the hate notes in the library from when I was in grade school. I was pretty involved through junior high school and once I got out of the immediate neighborhood. I never quite fit in. I wasn’t in the smart kids’ classes because the anti-Semitic kids wound up being in those classes, and so my parents and whoever made those decisions—there must have been some kind of a guidance counselor—decided I shouldn’t be. So I wound up not getting in the advanced track classes because they wanted to avoid the situation but it was such a terrible thing that I would wind up being in those classes that would be just kind of boring, so those kids wound up being a cluster of kids that were friends. But I sort of hung out with some of the smart kids but I thought they were too boring and then the more active kids were sort of too dull. I don’t think I really had a niche. There were definitely some Jewish friends but I don’t remember—

INT: Were there any clubs or organizations?

DEBRA: Oh, I was in tons of clubs. My parents thought I was entirely in too many clubs. I was in a million clubs. I look back now and I think how curious that I wound up doing what I’m
doing because I remember getting donations of things for the high school basketball team or the wrestling team or something like that from McDonald’s. I definitely remember getting something from McDonald’s. And I drew all the posters and stuff like that. But I never was good in art because those were always the kids who were really artistic. But now, you know, you grow up and you think oh, it just wasn’t the same kind of education where being creative and being artistic was something that I was always pulled towards but nobody ever told me that I was and I never got...I was always messy so I never won the poster contest. It’s been only recently that I started realizing, over the last couple of years really with writing, that what I love best about this work is the creative part. And I can look back and I can say, “You know, I was doing that even then,” and I never noticed it and somehow what gets prizes is such a narrow range of what counts as art. Now I’m old enough to not care whether it’s good or not. The point is that I enjoyed it and I was inclined in those directions.

And also just figuring out how to make things happen. I remember those things. I must have been able to do that then, and I was involved in all kinds of...I also remember that I desperately—I was always very enthusiastic, very high energy kind of person. I remember...klutzy. I had no physical...gym was like—I hated gym. So I couldn’t be a cheerleader because I just wasn’t coordinated enough. I remember in junior high creating a junior mascot. They had them in the high school but they didn’t have them...so I created this mascot which I became. I remember making the costume. You wish that you had a way to run that tape back and see it again from the other point of view because I think first of all, it’s amazing to me to think that I could actually make that happen, but I also think that I didn’t understand. I just wonder—did I seem really desperate? You just wonder how weird must that have been that this kid just created this stuff. It just seems so odd now whereas at the time, it happened and it became something that became an institution at the school and from then on there was this junior Willy, and then I created a cheering club with cards and all that in high school. So I must have figured out how to do that stuff. When I went to American Field Service, to the AFS, I came back and had just a real crisis. All of a sudden, all this stuff just seemed ridiculous. Why was I doing this? All of a sudden I had this wash of political consciousness and I got really involved in anti-war stuff and in environmental stuff and I remember-

INT: What was the field service about? Let’s talk about that.

DEBRA: AFS? It’s an international student exchange program. It still exists.

INT: Where did you go?

DEBRA: I went to Finland. And it’s students from all over the country go and they go to places in...I went to Finland so I would have known the folks who went to the European countries, but I believe it’s also Africa and South America but I really don’t remember. It’s still in existence. They send us solicitation letters.

INT: What was that like for you? That must have been amazing.
DEBRA: It was. My parents always said that was the point where they lost me, but for me, it was really the point where I began to find myself because there was a world out there and it was a really interesting world. I was pretty good with languages. I had a halfway decent ear and a real curiosity and I remember that everybody said how hard Finnish was but I remember really speaking. I was determined. I was not going to be just speaking English. I remember having arguments about the Vietnam War in Finland in Finnish and singing. Also, the folksong revival stuff was all going on then and I had a guitar so I had my guitar with me and I learned all these Finnish songs. Patched blue jeans. There were major fights with my Dad about-

INT: About the way you looked.

DEBRA: Oh yeah. Yeah. Because people were going to think that he couldn’t afford for me to wear...Overalls. I was wearing overalls. It was very difficult for him. We had really major fights. In some ways it’s a shame and I don’t think I’ve ever said that or thought that until now, because in some ways it was such an extreme door. I just wound up then spending the next decade really just not being home. I couldn’t find a way to kind of be whoever I wanted to be at home. My Dad was just very strict and they were good people but they just didn’t have a clue. They were scared. I wanted to do all these really scary...to their credit they let me. I remember going downtown to Socialist Worker’s party meetings and to Cleveland and being involved in the mobilization of the war and going to Washington for anti-war rallies. I don’t remember which one. I remember only going once on buses. And thinking about my kids, they must have really taken a deep swallow to just let me go off and do stuff, but they believed in these things. It’s just that they didn’t themselves...I think this is accurate. They just weren’t...I remember them being really scared when-I must have gone to D.C. another time because there was a Socialist Worker’s party meeting and I was at the meeting and somehow the coverage in the local paper included a picture with me, where I was voting. This was enough out of the Fifties that they were thinking this is going to be in my file and I’m never going to get a job. I was very peripheral. I was not...the people who wind up in leadership positions are people often who’ve got better education and class and confidence and all that. I was always just a worker bee. So there was really no reason for them to be worried.

But anyway, the AFS thing was my first real sense of there being just a world out there. My Dad used to joke that from that time on, whenever there was a choice of where I was going to go, I went as far away from Cleveland as possible and he was right. I wouldn’t have admitted it and I always had all these other reasons. I couldn’t figure out how to live close to home and still do what I wanted to do, especially in the Sixties where it just seemed like they were going to say no whatever I wanted to do if I really told them, so it was better for me not to just tell them and to just do what I wanted to do.

INT: What were some of your goals or aspiration when you were growing up?

DEBRA: Oh, I didn’t have goals or aspirations. I just knew I had to get a job. I think I wanted to...I remember reading Michener’s “The Source” and wanting to be an archeologist and then
deciding that you have to know too much and I couldn't possibly do that. And I remember thinking it would be great to know a lot of languages and be some kind of an international reporter or something but when I wound up going to college it's all a bunch of kind of goofy...I wound up going to Lehigh in Bethlehem, which is an engineering school. I didn't even know it was an engineering school. I was going to go to Cleveland State but by then we were fighting so much. After I got back-when I got back and kind of had this political...this sort of transformation. I remember the high school-there was like a student...there would be like a magazine kind of thing that people would do, a senior book or something. It was all kind of gossipy stuff and it was "when Debbie Kodish went from being rah, rah Mayfield to rah, rah radical." So it must have been shocking for everybody.

I'm sort of searching for the right word here but it was really...that was a real pivotal time. Even though I had these cousins and things like that, Mayfield Heights was a pretty conservative working class community, a lot of first generation ethnics. Very few people who had been to college, I think, I bet. And mostly the kids who were going to college were going to Kent State. Everybody was staying in Ohio and there were only a few people who weren't, and there was one woman, Linda Darling, who had been a couple of years ahead of me, who went to Yale when it went coed, and me-this is so typical of me-I was trying to figure it all out myself, because the guidance counselor was of course no help, I remember this concept of geographical distribution and I thought, oh well, I bet they're never going to get somebody from Cleveland, Ohio and Mayfield Heights, Ohio going to Lehigh when I saw this poster. I can remember the poster. It was like a girl swinging on a swing saying "Lehigh is going coed." So I wound up thinking I was going to the East to enlightenment. It turned out I was going to the edge of the military industrial complex. It was a real surprise. But it turned out to have a great English department. You're asking about career stuff and I wound up at a college that had no clue how to deal with women but certainly was not progressive politically. I found a bunch of friends who were, but not women friends, because the few women who were there-at least some of the men who were there maybe were there and didn't want to be there. They were more critical. But a lot of the women who were there-they were just the daughters and the nieces of alumni. So it was more the geology type, the people who liked to be out in the world more that I wound up making friends with.

INT: Did you have any gender discrimination before this?

DEBRA: I had no feminist consciousness at that point. I just had never been in a situation where I had models. I just didn't have any models for...I read stuff, but it didn't connect with me. I just didn't see my own blinders and I didn't see...there was actually an incident of sexual harassment at Lehigh that took me years to realize that it was sexual harassment because I was so blind to it, plus I was so insecure. I was scared I was going to get kicked out because I wasn't smart enough. I brought all the working class baggage of feeling like I was a fraud and I just had no confidence.

INT: What was that incident?

DEBRA: Oh, I don't want to go into it but it was at Lehigh and I'm just saying as an example
that I was just...there was no structure. And it turns out I later met a woman who was one of the first faculty members there, and we talked some and there was not...they had their own struggles. There just wasn’t anything organized. There was anti-war stuff there but there wasn’t anything that was any kind of women’s movement there. It wasn’t until...it really wasn’t until I was in graduate school many years later, and then my first graduate school experience was tremendously sexist. I responded to that by just going and doing tons of field work and by spending time in these fishing villages in Newfoundland, so I got a great education out of it but it wasn’t until I wound up in Texas in graduate school that I really found this women’s community and got some...it did a great deal for me both intellectually and it was just long overdue. I just hadn’t seen a whole lot of stuff that later I was saying, “Oh my G-d, how did I put up with all of that?”

INT: How did you get through Lehigh?

DEBRA: I did it very quickly and I got a lot of time...I managed to get all these little junkets so I spent a summer in Togo on a program called Crossroads Africa, where we made construction projects. We made bricks for a market. It was an amazing experience. That was the first time that I had ever been anywhere where people were coming up to rub my skin, where I was the odd person out, and that was just really important for just helping me understand racism or at least get some sense of cultural...of what it’s like to be the odd person out. Not that it was a situation where I was in any way oppressed. And I spent a semester in England. So I kind of figured out how to get things that would help me do things I was interested in. I was clearly interested in cultural stuff, although I wouldn’t have said it was anthropology. I wound up going into English because I started off in psychology, and this is the time when I started to take stuff that I thought could help me be a journalist but the teachers were horrible and so without having anyone to go to...I was following things I was interested in and I discovered folklore there. I had always been...I had been helping to run the coffee house and was doing folksong revival stuff but they had a really wonderful collection of classic folklore and there was one faculty member there who was a real great...had done some wonderful early work on ballads, and although he hadn’t formally listed in the field, I wound up doing some independent studies.

INT: Who was that?

DEBRA: His name was David Green. He had studied under a man named Bertram Bronson at Berkeley. I kind of informally found my way into the field of folklore and got a real head start because I began to know the literature just so well just from doing independent studies and stuff. But I left there not knowing...thinking I wanted to be a writer but not ever having been on the newspaper. You were asking about...I really think there’s class stuff about that. I just don’t think that I...I just didn’t have a framework for thinking that I was going to be something. I don’t remember my folks thinking that I should go to college or anything like that. I know my sister—it was assumed she wasn’t going to go to college and she took the vocational track. They knew I was smart but they still had me take a typing class because I was going to have to make a living somehow and it wasn’t such a sense that I was going to be something. So I just kept following things I was interested in, but I didn’t think I was going to be anything. I got out of Lehigh with a
B.A., thought I wanted to write, went to Washington, D.C. because they had the archive of folksong there at the Library of Congress. I thought well, I’ll get a job there and then in my spare time I’ll go and study in this archive, and I wound up...I had been a waitress. I put myself through school. Couldn’t even get a job as a waitress. Had a really hard time in D.C. getting a job. I remember people saying...I wound up getting a job selling cheese in a gourmet grocery store and I lied. I had sold cheese illegally in England at a little cheese store, and I had said that I was a manager thinking well, they’re never going to check this reference. I was flabbergasted that I couldn’t get jobs, because I had never been in a waitress in fancy restaurants so I didn’t have any references that were going to make sense to anybody. I had worked in Manners or Big Boy, that kind of thing. So after a year or working at Larimer’s and doing a little bit of some of the archive of folksong...I truly can’t remember. This was like ’71, ’72. It’s a long time ago now. I can’t really remember but I somehow wound up applying to go to graduate school and then I wound up in folklore, so something must have...but I can’t remember why I figured that out.

INT: And where was your next step?

DEBRA: I wound up going to Newfoundland. I had got into Indiana. I didn’t want to go to big cities, I think I remember, so I had applied to Indiana and to Newfoundland and I was all set to go to Indiana and then Newfoundland came through and I think my father was right. It was as far away...but also I figured that if I didn’t make it in graduate school, it was really beautiful and I could hike. I had this totally illogical...I don’t know what I pull out. It was going to be really rugged.

INT: So you got there-

DEBRA: So I got there, met this Jewish community somewhere.

INT: But you weren’t searching for that.

DEBRA: No. I think I was very just intellectually excited by the field. This was the first time that I had been studying something—it was the first time I was taking courses in folklore. I had studied it on my own for quite a long time, just through books and revival stuff, because I actually had a fabulous collection, have a fabulous collection of—just a very good library of folksong and folklore in general and had a number of great adventures of my generation of folklorists. I have one of the best libraries.

INT: What did you like about it?

DEBRA: I can’t even remember anymore. I think that I loved literature, but literature was just inaccessible to me. It was not about my family or anybody that I knew, and I think folklore was really a way of paying attention to the arts of ordinary people. It didn’t have that kind of class bias. It wasn’t all that English stuff. I think my real love of art and particularly of narrative and verbal art could find a home. And then—this strikes me as very Jewish—but my kind of intellectual
curiosity of like what does it mean and what are the patterns and how does it make sense— you
could do all that stuff. And especially, I guess initially the intellectual frameworks, were historic,
geographic, where does this stuff come from and how did it change over time and those family
histories just seemed fascinating. And then later there was structuralism and other ways of
looking at patterns and understanding meaning and significance. That stuff just really appealed to
me. I loved analyzing the stuff and trying to understand what it all meant.

INT: What about the tolerance for other groups, especially blacks. That seems to be a very
Jewish...Jews have always been known to support other minorities.

DEBRA: I wouldn’t say the Jews always do that.

INT: I’m stereotyping.

DEBRA: I had certainly grown up with experiences of not being treated so fairly for both
religious and class reasons. But in Newfoundland, it was pretty much a white, goyishe world, so
that stuff was less of an issue. Maybe it was more of an issue around occupation. There were
people who were...the whole country had just been resettled and this attempt to make work
because the fishing industry was really—people who were my age had grown up living in outports
without central education. It was understood as being very backward. Ironically, within another
decade, there was technology to have allowed people to stay in these communities. It was really
the beginning of the end of the fishing, the old sort of single family fishing boat dynasties.

INT: What was that like?

DEBRA: Oh, it was wonderful. It was so incredible. But I always thought of that as a real class.
There’s a lot of stuff that has to do with heimishness. I think that I would go home with a friend
of mine, Linda Slade, to a fishing outpost to which people had been resettled, Arnold’s Cove, and
we’d go visiting old folks and there was just a way in which it could have been Jewish. It was not
in the remotest way a Jewish community but the values. I’ve thought about this in terms of field
work and I think to a certain extent what good folklore work allows people really explore points
of comfort and try to understand what those are, but also points of discomfort. And I think, for
different reasons—I don’t know if this makes sense, but the comfort stuff—I definitely felt
comfortable in everybody’s kitchens. I felt much more comfortable there than I did in graduate
school where it was all these boys preening for the faculty. I got a real education by being out in
these kitchens listening to old folks tell stories and tell ballads, sing ballads, and I was genuinely
interested. But also it was the sociability and the community that people had and that they so
generously shared that really resonated for me. How could you not fall in love with a field where
you get to go and hang out in people’s kitchens.

To be certain, a lot of this stuff hadn’t been...lots of it hadn’t been recorded and people
were really pressed, but they understood the value of these arts, and they were seeing these things
be outmoded and they were certainly seeing these things put down and their kids were not

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interested. Their grandkids were not interested. And I genuinely love this stuff. To hear a ballad song where everybody is just with every word...now there’s this big poetry renaissance so people hear in a different way, but...I don’t know if it’s Jewish or what, but I definitely feel like there’s a couple of threads, like the little pearls on these threads, I would group these together and I would definitely group my grandmother’s house and Gracemount, which sounds religious but what was the public school, and Newfoundl and outports and my own neighborhood as those sociable places, and they’re sociable places where I could be actively involved in making community and in being part of all of that. So Newfoundl and was really tremendous like that, and it was also a kind of old-fashioned Canadian model of how you do scholarship, which was you just do it on your own. I did this thick Masters thesis. It was really a wonderful, wonderful chance to learn that made a lot of sense for me.

And then I went to Texas, because by that time I was enough intellectually grounded in the field that I really wanted a more theoretical framework and that was where some exciting stuff was happening. By that time, without knowing, I had somehow gotten myself into this field. I really fell in love with the field. And I was, by that time, interested in women. (End of tape 1, side 2)

INT: This is tape 2. I’m Sally Benson Alsher. It’s April 20, 1998 and I’m here with Debra Kodish, who is the founder and director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project. We were talking about your transition from Newfoundland graduate school to the University of Texas. Were you working at the time to support yourself to make this transition?

DEBRA: Yeah, I was always working. I would be at jobs in the archive. I taught in between. Every time I would go up to graduate school I would usually have a year in between where I would work someplace else or something, partly because I needed the money and also partly because I had enough doubt about whether I was doing the right stuff. We were just talking while the tape was off about what’s Jewish, what’s not Jewish-there were funny things in Newfoundland. There wasn’t a lot of...there were Jews. There were Jews who were peddlers. There were some Jewish families but it was a religious system where there were actually Catholic schools and Protestant schools and people used to say about Jews—“Oh yeah, that person’s a Catholic Jew,” by which they meant somebody who wore a Magen Dovid. Catholics wore something around their neck-although there are different theories about what was a Catholic Jew and what’s a Protestant Jew-maybe it was somebody who went to the Catholic school. But for me there, I think really it was that sense of...talking about neighborhood or community but I think I was really brought up to value values that have to do with being heimishe and with being a mensch and that is what seems really Jewish to me. That’s maybe where folklore also resonated for me. I could look for genuinely who people were and I could value that and you were mentioning Federation and I know we talked earlier about the fact that my family wasn’t belongers and probably they weren’t belongers because there were pretensions among people that made us not feel comfortable not having, but somehow in places like fishing villages in Newfoundland. I felt more comfortable and I felt like I was valued because I valued this stuff and it didn’t matter who I was. That feels like a very Jewish value.
But Texas-what did I do in between? I think I went off and I taught in Newfoundland for a little bit. Then I went to New York. I got a job teaching at College of Old Westbury, just a part-time job, and I had such little money. I wound up also working part-time at Barnes and Noble. It was very comical. I just had no money. It was fabulous living in New York though. I had never lived in New York. I got to see my Uncle Milt who lived in New York so it was great to spend some time with them. I just remember walking everywhere. But I wound up eventually then going to school in Texas, and that was really a fabulous time. It was a wonderful group of women, graduate students. We were just very good intellectual partners for each other and there was a real feminist consciousness and a much more political consciousness. So Newfoundland actually is still a very kind of goofy place in terms of sexual politics in graduate school.

INT: You said there was a Jewish community there though that you hooked up with.

DEBRA: In Newfoundland. Well, that was separate from school. Yeah, there were actually a lot of peddlers. In addition to my grandparents' generation, there was certainly in Newfoundland and...I guess pretty much just Newfoundland. I'm trying to think of other...but also growing up. There were definitely a few parents who had been survivors. The Newfoundlanders included some survivors but some people who had come over before. I did oral histories with them. I learned stuff but I think more I really valued, and I think of this because of my kids, I really valued the knowledge and the feel-almost the aesthetics—there was just something about...as my kids got older, I just became aware that there's just such a world that they don't have because we might have not grown up in an affiliated Jewish world, but that generation, with their multiple languages and just with the whole cultural gestalt of being Jewish, was something that I really enjoyed and responded to. I enjoyed the verbal wit. I enjoyed the argument. I enjoyed the different languages. And that stuff...I enjoyed the sense of humor. There's a lot of that that just drew me and in Newfoundland I certainly got to know people like that. You sort of mentioned that I wouldn't want to make it seem like it was just my grandparents that gave me a sense of that generation. I should just make it clear that I valued that and I think...I certainly valued it to a certain distance. I valued it where I could filter out like my uncles who were hopelessly conservative and would always be baiting me because they could always get me into an argument. And smart enough that they could outfox me.

INT: Were there members of your family who were involved in traditional Jewish things, synagogue belonging?

DEBRA: Probably, but it was so much not part of our life. I remember going to bar mitzvahs of my older cousins, but for me, the part that I remember is after all the American music ended, when the musicians started to play really basically klezmer stuff and the uncles would get out and do the kazatzke. This is such a folklorist mentality. What I remember is the verbal art and all the folk arts. The formal stuff—don't ask me about the formal stuff. The informal stuff is what I really valued.

INT: So your life might have been different had your parents stayed where they were.
DEBRA: What do you mean? Oh, in Cleveland proper? Well, everybody’s life would have been different. I don’t know that that would have made any difference. The family was in Akron. My life would have been different if we weren’t working class or if...I don’t know. I don’t know that that’s...I have no regrets. No, I’m just thinking really now—I hadn’t thought about it before. You’re asking questions about formal Jewish and as I’m talking, I’m hearing that really it’s the informal Jewish. It’s the folklore part that I always responded to. I never would have said that but obviously, because of the field I’m in, I think of that as being at least as valid as the formal stuff in terms of being both an education and-

INT: If not more so.

DEBRA: Well, everybody responds in different ways. There’s just different systems. This is another system. If I think more about the informal stuff, I’m more likely to kind of think of where that stuff grounded me.

INT: Tell me about the University of Texas.

DEBRA: Oh, it was great. It was a wonderful place to be. Austin is just a great town. I had my first women teachers there, and that was when I realized that I hadn’t had women teachers, and really, I think, that was the dawning of what feminist consciousness I have. I wound up doing a dissertation on women’s verbal art in Newfoundland outport and it was a funny time. It was the late Seventies and it was kind of...feminist theory and scholarship had certainly started but there weren’t a whole lot of tools for looking at the work that I was trying to look at. So I was really trying to come up with different ways of analyzing the stuff. In Newfoundland, all the collections had been done...there had been some women who had been recorded but the field workers had all been male so all of the field work for this entire province, and it was very rich in terms of folklore, had just a very curious kind of bias and I became very interested not only in the folklore forms themselves but I had done a Masters—the Masters that I had done...I had only been in Newfoundland for two, three years, something like that—two years, I guess—and I certainly didn’t feel that I knew enough—this seems also very Jewish—to write about Newfoundland. So I wound up going back to the work that I had done at the Library of Congress when I had been sort of volunteering there and the man who had first started that collection...I had indexed some of this man’s collection and nobody knew very much about him and it was really the first time that the American government had supported folklore. There had never been any...I mean anthropology of other cultures, yes, but American cultures or ethnic cultures? That wasn’t something you paid attention to.

So I wound up doing a Masters on Robert Windsor Gordon and the founding of the American Folklore Society, and I kind of did the same thing in Texas. I wound up going back to all those years of work in Newfoundland, actually because I couldn’t get money for dissertation. Canada wasn’t a foreign country so there was some kinds of grants that just weren’t available. I got a Woodrow Wilson women’s...a tiny amount of money. That’s like one regret I have is that I really never got a chance in any of my work to really have uninterrupted time to just do anything.
I really envy people who had the time to do that. I did what I could. I did this dissertation on women’s verbal arts and then a position opened in a very crazy kind of situation. It was a one year position at Penn in the folklore department and I wound up just coming here for a year. It was terrible. It was horrendous. I was the only woman in an all-male department. Barbara Kirschenblatt Gimblet, who you may know, did some fabulous work on Jewish folklore and a lot of other stuff too, had left. It was very much like walking into a divorce, I would imagine, where the mother had left and everybody really missed the mother. I was like twenty-eight, twenty-nine years old. A total baby. So insecure.

INT: At Penn, no less.

DEBRA: Even though I had actually been accepted to go to Penn in graduate school, but I still had this feeling that I wasn’t good enough to be there. The graduate students there just ate people alive. I was very naive. I had no political instincts. I was set up in a lot of ways. There were a whole lot of dynamics, subterranean dynamics, going on that I didn’t have a clue how to read. In some ways, it was a good thing because at that point I had decided that what I was going to do was teach, because that was kind of what you did if you were in graduate school, and I hadn’t stopped to think about whether I liked to do that or could do that or anything. I loved thinking about this stuff and I loved...I was a great researcher and just whatever...I was just fabulous at figuring out what there was to know and had a bibliographic mind. It was very sharp. It’s all gone now. But I loved that stuff. I really loved that stuff. But I was not...I don’t know how many working class folks are at Penn but I was really not cut out for that kind of environment. I just felt like not only did I not know how to cope with the politics, but I just didn’t even know how you were supposed to look or what you were supposed to do, and one year is not enough time to get any kind of grounding in it.

INT: Were there any mentors or anything that you had along the way?

DEBRA: No. Well, there was one friend. There was one person there who really was...John Swed had been there at the time and he was just incredibly decent. Well, I shouldn’t say no. Roger Abrams was a teacher at Texas and he was really involved in recommending me to this one year position, but not mentors...no woman faculty member who would have understood what was going on and been able to help or anything like that. There was a group of women at Penn who were all new in various ways that I hooked up with. It was SWAPO, Sane Women at Penn, and as women went through trying to figure out tenure or not tenure...and it was a group that existed for quite a while. I wound up then staying in Philadelphia. It was also a very bad time for jobs, so one of the reasons why I took the job at Penn was that I was terrified because I had no clue, having gotten myself into this academic stuff, what I was going to do. I had a very hard time getting dissertation support so I just wasn’t sure. And I didn’t have mentors. And I didn’t have anybody in my family who had...I didn’t know how to think about this stuff and nobody-there was nobody who really helped you. So the good thing about the stuff at Penn was that it really made me question whether this academic stuff was necessarily where I wanted to be. I was horrified. I was really horrified by the politics. Our group was very naive themselves and you’re
just trying to do the right thing and you try to be fair.

INT: What about discrimination? Did you ever feel discrimination?

DEBRA: I don’t know. I definitely remember in Newfoundland some anti-Semitism towards somebody who was going to be coming up there and teaching, and I remember getting on the side of this person even though I didn’t know this person, just feeling like that was wrong. But that year was just so short and it went by so quickly that I don’t think I had enough to figure/ground relationship. But then I wound up working in an off-campus field city program. It was a program here in Philadelphia.

INT: How did you get that?

DEBRA: There weren’t a lot of jobs and the choices were...there was a job to be a public folklorist out in Colorado or to work in this off-campus field city program. It was students from the Midwest who had come here and they spent a semester. I think I just didn’t want to relocate. I had just come from Texas to Philadelphia, and although I had traveled an awful lot in my life...when I was in Texas I did field work in Oregon. I would just at the drop of a hat go. It seemed to far to go. I’m sure I was pretty shell-shocked after that year at Penn, but also it was too far to go without knowing what I was getting into. It wasn’t a permanent job either. It was just very bad times for jobs. And I didn’t have, at that point, a sense of how to be proactive or how to do this stuff. If I saw jobs-I went through very conventional ways of looking. I didn’t call people. I just didn’t know. I didn’t have a clue of what to do. I kind of waited for jobs to come to me as opposed to in any way...

So I taught in this off-campus field city program for a number of years and a lot of local folks...Jeremy Nowack, who runs Delaware Valley Community Reinvestment Fund and a woman who is a linguist, Debra Schifrin. Anne Kaplan, who is in art. There were some wonderful people there who really cared about teaching and it was a great group of colleagues. Other things were not so great but it was a great group of colleagues. And that also introduced me to the city and I taught-I think it was called the Expressive Lives of Ordinary People or something like that, the Anthropology of Everyday Life or something, or the folklife. I don’t remember what it was called. These students-I would try to get them to understand the culture of the city. It was a blast because the students would have work placements in many different settings and for me, as a folklorist, the job-this is experiential education so they had to produce something in each of these work sites that would pass muster at the work site. It was a great process. Their work was to do something that would be both creditable and would be working at the workplace while what I was trying to give them was a framework for standing a little bit outside the workplace to understand and analyze what they were looking at at the same time they were producing it. So it’s applied ethnography of work. There’s plenty of scholarship about what this stuff is, but it was a really fascinating way to learn about the city and to be in lots of different settings. And that opened up Philadelphia to me in one way. I had students in the Defender’s Association and I had Child Guidance. It was just a really interesting kind of work in that way. That’s how I met my
husband. He was a workplace supervisor at the Port of History Museum and the Civic Center Museum and they had this incredible collection, which is at this moment being divided up among other Philadelphia institutions. Incredible collection. And we had an anthropology student from Kenya in common, and I just felt the collection was fabulous. He was great. He was really interested in what I thought about the collection. And in those days it seemed like...it was pretty clear who was intimidated by women who thought. I liked him right off the bat because he liked my ideas. And then it turned out we had both been at school in Texas. We hadn’t known each other. We had come here in the same year, so of course we had to go out and have a drink and find out about it.

INT: How long have you been married?

DEBRA: Twelve years today.

INT: Happy anniversary. So what then? What next? You’re doing this project.

DEBRA: So then a couple of things came up. I guess the biggest thing is that it was the 100th anniversary of the American Folklore Society that was approaching. My old friend, Roger Abrams, had since relocated from California to Penn and I had done this book on Robert Windsor Gordon. I was somebody who they thought of as who knew some of the history of folklore scholarship. He thought I should write a book about the history of folklore scholarship in Philadelphia, because it was 100 years. This was a town that was really important. And after having worked in all these GLCA settings, I felt pretty clearly that the real story was not about the organizations that had started to be interested in folklore 100 years before, like the Historical Society and the Library Company and the American Philosophical Society, the University Museum, because they look down on folklore now. If it was in their collections it was nothing that they thought of as being the major part of their collections. What was more interesting were all of the various ethnic revivals that had created other institutions that in different ways where interested in culture and folklore. They might not call it that but that was where the center of activity seemed to be.

So I wound up...it was actually Ella Kintori provided the opportunity-Ella from the Pew—it was at the Pew then—for Roger and I to talk about what might happen for the centennial. Ella provided the opportunity for the American Folklore Society, talking to Roger, and Roger provided the opportunity for me. In cooking it up, I got so interested in what I thought it should be that by the time it came for somebody to actually do the work, I wound up applying. I can’t remember exactly the sequence at this point but I wound up being laid off in a not very nice...I had gotten, for the first time, a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship to do a year of field work on a book on horse-pulling contests in Maine. I had done some field work up there previously. I was really interested in this stuff as working class response to all these agricultural reformers. It was really...The GLCA folks had to sign something saying “if you do this you can come back” or I couldn’t get the grant. They said oh yeah, sure, and then while I was away I got the word from friends that in fact I was going to be replaced.
INT: That must have been a disappointment.

DEBRA: It was really difficult because I couldn’t spend the time really just doing the work on the book. I had to be thinking about what I was going to do next. I had met Bob by that point so I really kind of wanted to stay around Philadelphia. There weren’t a whole lot of other jobs. This stuff seemed really interesting, but it was also a real—it was a real leap. This was a point...taking that leap and deciding to actually sign on to doing this stuff. I had never administered anything in my life. I had been labor my whole life. All of a sudden I was going to be management? I don’t remember when it happened but the really important thing about the folklore project for me personally was that it really taught me that you can do whatever you want to do, and I think people who grow up with privilege think that. But I had never just imagined something...when I look back, it sounds like there’s a lot of examples of things that I imagined and created, but I don’t think I was sort of present to myself while I was doing it.

INT: You didn’t look at it in the same way.

DEBRA: I didn’t. I didn’t think of it as something that I could control or that I was in charge of. You know what I mean? It was not a feminist or conscious thing before. I just did it in a way like with blinders, not seeing what I was doing. I just kind of cooked up. I saw stuff that I thought needed to happen. I really thought that...first narrowly, in terms of history, that there’s this whole history of attention to folklore and culture, but most of these people aren’t even on the map or aren’t in the book or aren’t on the time line. And then after the first three years, we created for the centennial of the American Folklore Society something called Philadelphia Folklore Month, and there were 120 organizations-no 121 events and maybe 50 some organizations—an enormous amount—in the month of October of ’89, when the American Folklore Society came back to Philadelphia for the meetings. At the same time we created an exhibit on Italian folk arts and crafts. We’d become tenants at the Fleischer Art Memorial, so we decided to do an ethnographic exhibit. It was kind of like the depth sounding. The breath was all filled up. We were talking about giving all these other groups an opportunity to get some attention to their history, and also a way of kind of reframing what counted as folklore. That really transformed me. That radicalized me in a different way because I could see how the groups that were more established and more mainstream were able to jump on this kind of publicity bandwagon, and I saw these other groups who had just incredibly significant work they were trying to do without a lot of resources.

So by the time the three years were over, on the one hand I wasn’t so scared anymore because I had managed to figure out how to pull this stuff off. Lord knows if I had known what I was doing. It was ridiculous. It was so ambitious. People always said to me, “Oh, that’s very ambitious.” After a while I learned to say, “Well, I better cut it in half if that’s what I’m going to try to do because I didn’t know the half of it.” If I had known what I was getting into I never would have been smart enough or brave enough to do it. Then that really hooked me and I think in terms of comfort level stuff, I’ve been so much happier working with grass roots community organizations and traditional artists and folks where there’s a progressive vision, because there’s lots of folklore in the city and in folklore month and in our workshops we’re open to anybody,
but when it comes time to figure out well, what are the projects we’re going to invest in or what are the projects we’re going to initiate or where are we going to really put a lot of our time into helping some other organization it’s because there’s some kind of progressive politics behind it. And also there’s some real connection to roots traditions, to these alternative kinds of traditions, and it lets me put whatever I’ve learned in as an investment into groups and people that I really believe in and I learn so much from all of them. So it’s a tremendously lucky kind of job for me to have happened into.

INT: How did this Philadelphia folklore project actually get funding and get started?

DEBRA: Well, initially it was for the centennial of the American Folklore Society. The initial grant was from Pew, for around $100,000, and I think of what some of the groups get for doing these big festivals, it’s a lot of money and I remember being just absolutely...it took so much for me to write anything that had that many digits. I kept coming back to Ella with these budgets and she would say, “You didn’t include this.” I’m such a poor kid. I wasn’t used to this. Oh my G-d.

INT: Here you’re spending all this money.

DEBRA: I couldn’t even imagine in those terms. My parents’ house was like, you know...

INT: So how did it feel though to be responsible for that?

DEBRA: Well, it’s incremental so you just get used to...but then after the first three years, we weren’t intending to last, but by that time I had decided that there was a lot of work to do here and there was a lot of need, and so we began to do work. For a number of years we were really able to raise...for every dollar that we had in our own programs, we were able to raise at least that much for other groups. It’s begun to cut down now because our budget is bigger and also because there’s less money and more competition and we work with a lot of other folks over time so there’s a larger pool. But we’ve always been committed not just to building ourselves but really investing in culture in the city’s neighborhoods. There’s definitely some real...some good triumphs over time, but it’s frustrating. Like Sisyphian. You kind of push this rock up and things fall apart. The National Endowment for the Arts gets totally dismantled. The political things that are really...the disinvestment in local communities at this moment in time is making it even harder for people to hold on to culture. This is very much something that connects back.

I actually wrote a little editorial in the last issue of our magazine. We’d been doing this project-Stacy who came through here is working on this project with first generation African immigrants here and we’ve worked with lots of other immigrant communities, but somehow there was something this time where...it’s not like I haven’t heard before people talking about wanting their kids to really not lose any knowledge of what culture they come from. I really didn’t have that bridge because the language was gone because my parents spoke different languages and for whatever reasons...there were enough family stresses. My father’s family was not kind and my mother’s family was wonderful but not in the same town. We didn’t grow up in
the middle of that real sort of support from community. Certainly there wasn’t anybody around helping kids to understand how this stuff could be something more than just old fashioned nonsense that’s holding people back. What happens with ethnic groups is people wait a generation and all of a sudden you want it and it’s gone and these incredible artists who really know all the subtle nuances of these traditions are gone. Our little interventions really have to do with trying to keep that footpath or that bridge there for people and accessible for people. I guess I believe it should be...it’s like an ecosystem, a genetic thing. It’s just critical not only for the people in the community but for everybody, to really want to have that cultural diversity. That feels very Jewish to me too, this sense of the fragility of culture.

INT: What about your family? You have children now?

DEBRA: Yes. I got Sarah and Ruth. Sarah is eleven and Ruth is eight. We joined a synagogue-I keep feeling like I have to say all these Jewish things-for the first time ever in my life.

INT: Why?

DEBRA: Because when Sarah was seven and we’re committed to public school and everything is very Christmasy and she just couldn’t understand why we couldn’t have Christmas trees and we just felt like in the absence of that generation of elders, we had to do something that was going to give her some kind of Jewish context.

INT: So you’re still searching for your folklore to some degree in the Jewish community.

DEBRA: I wouldn’t say searching. (End of tape 2, side 1)

INT: ...being Jewish in your own family and community.

DEBRA: I don’t think anything has changed particularly in terms of my Jewish identification or how my work reflects Jewish inclinations or values. What changed with the kids was a sense that we needed some kind of structure. There’s not the family members, and even if there...I mean we live in Philadelphia. Bob’s a Jewish family from Louisville. Mine’s a Jewish family from Cleveland and Akron. They’re not around. They’ll see them periodically. And as a folklorist in a way, I think I began to think about...we had created some rituals I really love. Passover-obviously it’s about narrative, freedom, how do you understand narrative, how do you live a narrative. Not only what are the stories that you want to pass on, but how do you act on political beliefs and what’s your obligation to that every year. So some of this stuff we had begun to do on our own.

About the same time that we were doing this, some other friends, who have kids the same age and we were all facing the same kinds of issues, and did some investigation just the same way—whether it’s a car or whatever—somebody does the research and with our next-door neighbors we checked out some different places and decided to join Mishkan Sholom because we had been married by a reconstructionist rabbi and I guess I should go back. We did that because I
was definitely not going to have a patriarchal person telling me...I didn’t want somebody else setting the rules. It had to be somebody who was going to let us have something that was feminist. And also, we really wanted to structure the wedding the way we wanted to structure it, so we found this wonderful...and I just didn’t want a man getting up and being in charge of that stuff. I really loved the idea of a community affirming the union, but there’s no way that we wanted it to be really traditional. So we kind of knew about reconstructionist because of this wonderful woman, Debra Bryn, and I liked the fact that it was a place that welcomed lesbians and mixed families in terms of race.

And then later, when we began to look for a synagogue, I did not want to go someplace where you were going to have to believe, because I’m a skeptic and I didn’t want to have to feel like you had to go there and just be a believer in a particular way. I didn’t want any kind of orthodoxy somewhere. I liked the idea of a place that had political progressive values and again, this other issue of a place that is not...there’s a side to Jewishness that can be just so exclusive and it was the same stuff that I think in many ways turned my parents off or had been impediments for my parents. I didn’t want to be in a situation where either for money or for ideology or for any way was going to keep people out, and so Mishkan seemed to be a good place for that and it’s certainly not perfect and a lot of the stuff that it looked like...there are definitely issues that are ongoing within that congregation and Sarah, who we started with, or started for, has since dropped out. But Ruth, the younger one, is there. It’s given a kind of structure.

Here we’re talking about community and it’s a funny place. You live in Philadelphia. Philadelphia feels like the community. I remember being shocked the first time I went to Rosh Hashana services there, I walked into this room of all these white people who looked alike. I had been living in Philadelphia for so long that I can’t remember being in a room with that many Jews. It was just very weird. But the Philadelphia community-Mishkan is the kind of place, because it’s progressive politically, that you go there and it’s people that you know or that you sort of know as well as people you don’t know, but there’s a way in which that’s connected to community and not in the same way that you were talking about it. It’s not trying to get to a community but it’s people who out of some kind of common ideology tend to be following a similar path.

INT: Do you light Shabbat candles?

DEBRA: Once in a while. We once in a while do. With the life as crazy as it is, Friday is just the night where there’s...I keep meaning to. I keep thinking what a wonderful tradition it could be but we’re so exhausted and there’s no food in the house by Friday so we wind up getting pizza and watching “Hercules and Zena.” That’s our Shabbat. So this is our Shabbos. We’re all in bed watching “Hercules.”

INT: That’s okay. That’s part of what it’s supposed to be anyway.

DEBRA: I don’t know. But the kids definitely...Passover and High Holy Days. They’ve got some
INT: Tell me about the community that you live in now.

DEBRA: We live in West Philly. It’s a mixed both race and class kind of block. You know how Philadelphia is. It’s block to block. It’s a row of two story twins, so people have managed to live on the...unlike the bigger houses in West Philly they didn’t get broken up so much. It’s just a great neighborhood. There’s a lot of kids out. It’s very funny. When we moved on to the street in ’85, the Matthew boys were out playing football and they were kids, and now their kids are out there playing football, or when there’s family gatherings and the Matthews across the street...Richie and Wayne will be out there playing football with the kids. I don’t think I realized it was going to happen so fast that these generations would pass. We’ve only been there twelve years but you really see those changes. But because it’s been more affordable, I guess, or they’re smaller so the older people can stay in them longer, you really get this wonderful sense of generations on the street. Kids are in and out of each other’s houses and our next door neighbors are particularly close friends. Our kids have kind of been back and forth with each other.

INT: It sounds like your grandmother’s house.

DEBRA: That’s exactly it, and it looks like it. When my Mom came to visit after we bought the house, she walked in the house and started to cry because it reminded her of my grandmother’s house. It’s probably the same era, a little bit different style. And I have the trunk that my grandfather came to America with, and I have this little metal chair that I used to sit on in the kitchen in my grandmother’s house when she made polishnatas. I have no idea how, as a thirteen year old kid, because I think that’s about how old I was when my grandmother died, I don’t know how I managed to get that stuff, because we lived in Cleveland and they lived in Akron. But the trunk...when it was too hot you couldn’t go up into Nanny’s attic and when it was too cold you couldn’t go up into Nanny’s attic, but when the temperature was all right you could go up into Nanny’s attic and go look in the trunk. There would always be something in there, and you’d come down and ask if you could have it. So I remember this little like metal iron, this really heavy little bulldog, a chatchke. My grandmother had all these chatchkes. And a ballet shoe that my mother had had. Who knew my mother had even had dance classes? And I think I have a picture of my grandmother on a work...from a button from when she worked someplace, like an employee ID thing. I have a couple of those things still. So that stuff is in the house. Actually, some of the chatchkes too but my kids have broken them. I should have put them away. I don’t know why I had them out. So with the trunk being there, and my Mom walked in...and the furniture is a little bit like my grandmother’s. So yeah, it’s my grandmother’s block.

I remember when we moved on to the block, some very good friends of ours, also Jewish actually, lived on that block and we were looking...we actually weren’t married yet. We were looking for a place to live and Sam and Laura heard that this other family was going to sell the house, so before it even hit the market we went and saw it. And I had just lived a block away for
about five years, so I definitely know the area and always thought it was a great block. We used to wonder whether people thought of white people moving back into the neighborhood or if a Jew was moving into the neighborhood at that point. I really...it’s also maybe a way to think about undoing that migration of Jews away from cities and from urban neighborhoods and from a commitment to a really diverse community. I don’t think it was that conscious but it’s definitely...I definitely believe in coming back to and staying and investing. What we do here is about investing in community. It’s about investing in cultural resources. I’m committed to public school and I’m committed to my neighborhood. It’s not hard to be committed because it’s a wonderful place to be and it’s got values that I enjoy. But that was such a mistake, that kind of white flight stuff in the Fifties. As I grew up and got to understand my parents better, I could understand how they got scared into it, how people who are basic and not racist people and who didn’t have a clue what to do right for their kids and who in fact were sure that they didn’t know the right thing to do, could get sucked into thinking, with all the blockbusting stuff, into feeling like their kids weren’t going to get a good education and that it was just not the right thing.

INT: Tell me about the education.

DEBRA: What education—for my kids or for me?

INT: For the kids.

DEBRA: We have doubts all the time. We’re very lucky. Being white families in the public schools give you advantages that everybody doesn’t have, so they’re both in a good school. Because of the desegregation process they’re able to be at Powell originally and then Sarah is at Greenfield. When people talk about schools, I think the measurements that people usually use have to do with test scores and achievement and that stuff is important but I grew up hyper-aware of privilege and the slights that come out of privilege and I see it now. You can see when people who...I mean not everybody but there’s a certain way in which people with privilege tend to assume certain things. I was on the other side of that so much that I work in a kind of work where my job is to keep figuring out what I don’t know and to make myself responsible for figuring out what I don’t know and to make myself responsible for figuring out how to be fair. Part of the point about folklore is that you’re not anybody else’s voice. You’re, if anything, figuring out how to clear out the underbrush so that people’s voices are going to be clear, and how to get oriented in terms of where folks are coming from. Well, the same thing with the choice about public schools in a way. It really comes out of a sense of there being different ways around getting to equity. It’s criminal that there can’t be money for public schools, and it’s also politicized at this point.

INT: Has it struck you this raw before?

DEBRA: I’m not nearly as active as I should be with that, partly because I get so drawn into other issues because of cultural stuff. There’s almost nobody who pays attention to folk arts or to folk culture, so those are the battles that I can’t leave, and then people that we work with in those
communities have got other issues that wind up...so I don’t think of myself as particularly effective in school reform stuff.

INT: Well, how do you set your priorities?

DEBRA: But to finish, what I think my kids get that you can’t get anyplace else is just a general sense of fairness. Everybody at Powell, whatever class or race they are, they’re a family and everybody knows each other. It’s a small enough school. It’s a wide spectrum of who people are in the world and that’s going to be my kids’ world. It’s going to be a very wide sense of what the world is and what issues people have and they’re going to see themselves in relationship to not being like everybody. They’re going to be coming in with who they are as opposed to a place which is very homogenous.

INT: And where there’s entitlement.

DEBRA: And where there’s no clue that there’s people outside that box. So it’s that framework that I think we’re believing in. It’s hard to know what the right choices are but I don’t know that we can make any other choice right now. It’s not like we don’t wonder all the time but I don’t see that there’s other options really for us.

INT: Is there the sense though that as long as you raise your children with certain values that you seem to have had along the way that they’ll be okay?

DEBRA: Well, I hope so. You hate to have your own ideology be...

INT: But you did okay. You still held on to certain things through your-

DEBRA: But I don’t think it’s...I think some of those values, you could say that I would hope that the kids would maintain the values of being fair no matter what the situation is. I think you could argue that if kids were going to a private school-I think it’s more than just values. I think it’s a kind of enacting your values in terms of your own life and if you value a diverse world and if you value public education, then that’s where you have to put your body. It’s kind of an old Sixties politics about that too. I don’t think it’s just values. I think it’s more about well, which side are you on.

INT: What do you think you’ve had to sacrifice to get to the point where you are now?

DEBRA: I don’t think I’ve had to sacrifice anything. I’ve been very lucky. I feel incredibly privileged to get to do work that I love.

INT: What would you have done differently if you could have?

DEBRA: I don’t know. I’m definitely...I feel like I’m changing at this point, that things are...I’m
beginning to think differently after having done this for twelve years. I don’t think that’s the
same question but I’m beginning; for the first time, to think, “Okay, it’s almost like raising an
organization as well as a kid. The organization is doing alright. It’s still got a lot of hard struggles
ahead because it’s hard to manage a not-for-profit, but I’m beginning now to think well, what is
it that I might want to do.” It’s been me and the organization like this...this is a visual cue that is
not working for the tape recorder, but it’s been a single path for the organization and me for the
last twelve years and I’m beginning to see these paths possibly diverging or at least I’m
beginning to ask these questions. There’s always been this theme of this working class kid who’s
been really insecure about stuff and all that throughout. I’ve always kind of done stuff because
I’ve had to and the way that’s kind of translated with this organization is that I’ve never stopped
to think, “Well, what do I want to do.” In fact, that’s always struck me as an incredibly sort of
self-absorbed middle class question to ask.

But over the last couple of years, thanks to actually some wonderful people on our board,
some really good friends, they’ve really been pushing me. Germaine Ingram-I don’t know if you
know her. We’ve worked together on a number of projects. The first time that Germaine asked
me to think...she told me I should think about life after the folklore project and I started to cry
because I couldn’t imagine and I thought, “Oh my G-d, what could I possibly do?” But now,
three years later, and we’ve been doing some strategic planning through the organization to try to
figure out where we need to be going and a lot of that...there’s a fabulous staff here. They’re just
incredibly amazing people. I’ve always tried to figure out how to let them be able to do what they
want to do in their lives and they’ve been pushing me too to think about...When they would first
say, “Well, you should take a month off,” I would say, “Oh no, no, no, it’s not possible.” I
wouldn’t say that I have regrets but I feel like now is more time, and at forty-five I need to start
thinking about if I want to do something.

INT: What would that be?

DEBRA: I don’t even know how to answer that yet but what I’m getting pretty clear about is the
part that I really love is the creative part and the visionary part. I love the hard work and I
miss...it’s not I shy away from the hard work of doing the visionary stuff but I’ve tended to be the
spark plug who created ideas or who listened and gathered and then figured out how to catalyze
and then had to give up that baby and go on to something else, and the other people get to do
that. We did a documentary on African-American women tap dancers, Germaine and I and Barry
Dornfeld, and it’s really in some of this work where that was the first real feminist project that I
got to do in a long time. I didn’t initially want to do it because I felt we really needed an African-
American woman dancer to be doing some of the research, but for a range of reasons we didn’t
wind up finding anybody else-I think money and timing-and I wound up being drawn into the
research and I forgot how much I love to do research. I found these wonderful things that nobody
knew existed. It was all that great stuff again. So I think I’d like to be able to do some things
where I can actually get deeper into a project.

INT: More field work.
DEBRA: Right. I've been trying to experiment and to be doing a little bit more field work in general, but that's not just more field work. That's also more depth and being able to be part of a project all the way through and to have the resources to do it. It's a small, not-for-profit. A lot of the times the way that I've balanced the budget is by doing extra work on my own. If we don't have somebody else to do it, I take it home and do it and I'm aware that I just can't keep doing that for a whole lot of reasons. So trying to have a little bit saner life is one thing that needs to change. But also this creative side. I've been doing more writing. I've been really enjoying thinking about myself as a writer, which I never did before. I've written forever but I've never stopped to think about what do I want to write and what is my voice and what do I have to say. So I want to do some more experimenting with that and I've been trying to do that. I don't have a lot of time to do it. But I loved doing the documentary. It was really amazing.

INT: So these are some of the things that you've discovered about yourself. What are some of the other things?

DEBRA: Well, I don't know discovered. This is more the path. This is kind of where the path is going. I've worked in a lot of mediums. Just this kind of job allows you to be or forces you to be a generalist, and for some projects it's appropriate to do things with sound and other times images. I love all these mediums. I love people's words. I love images of people's work. I've really enjoyed figuring out how to get those things out. But the documentary was just fabulous. You can fudge in a certain way with images or with sound or with words. And I don't mean fudge like make things up. If you don't cap something on the exact second, you can frame it in a way that you can get to what that person meant or what that person said that second before you happened to exactly get it, or something just is lost in context. There's lots of ways and there's other mediums that you can convey what that person wanted to have said. The documentary-it's just so many more things at once that it's even more rigorous. I really love that. I love the puzzleness of it. I love the elements. We did the documentary with a very skilled editor on an avid and digital system. I remember splicing tape for some earlier projects, and here it's just a picture of tape and you're splicing it. I really enjoyed that creative process. I love that medium. It's really an amazing medium to work in. So I don't know. I'm definitely going to be paying more attention to what particular projects I might be...but it will require getting a kind of management staff in here and it will take some figuring out, but that's more the trajectory. I'd like more time with my kids. I'm thinking about work all the time. I work way too much. It's a hard one.

INT: How have you managed to set your priorities then? How does that work? What's like a daily day? What time do you get home?

DEBRA: Well, there's an assumption that some of this stuff happens. It's the same kind of question as what are your goals or what did you want to be. This all feels like a kind of...it's what, in my life, I've thought of as more middle class ways of framing. It assumes that you have that kind of choice or can do that. There's lots of ways of understanding that. Some people would say that anybody can do that stuff, but I just want to kind of register that it never has felt like that
to me. I might have a set of what I need to do for this work, but the nature of working in communities with grass roots organizations is that things happen all the time. The less that people have means, the more likely it is that the neat plan is just not going to happen. You wind up paying attention to a different, more organic kind of process.

**INT:** Tell me about your life, Debra. When you go home every day after work-

**DEBRA:** Well, I'm thinking if I come in with my set of priorities for the day and I probably don't get to them. All the other stuff happens and I go home and try to do them.

**INT:** But do you sit down at your house and have dinners? Do you talk about things? What is that like?

**DEBRA:** You're asking me at a bad time because baseball season just started, so we will be now at the baseball field four days this week.

**INT:** Even that. Do you drive the kids? You have to do all this. So you're still into driving and-

**DEBRA:** This is actually a kind of nice community thing. There's lots of different families and lots of different folks out there. Most of the time, we're out of the door—it's pretty horrendous. Bob kind of packs lunches. We get the kids out the door by...Sarah has to be at the corner at a quarter to eight. Usually, I take Ruth to get some coffee because I've usually never had coffee and then we work on her...she has a speech impediment so we go over her R's in the car. And then I drop her off at school and then it's into work, and I'm usually at work by twenty after or eight thirty. Up until this past week really, I've been getting out around five-twenty, five-thirty, then zooming across to pick up the kids at the after-school program.

**INT:** And Bob is helpful?

**DEBRA:** Bob's amazing. He is much more there than I am. I'm the real goal-directed one in the family. He's just incredibly present to the kids. I think I'm better at imagining—not better, but I think I tend to imagine what I think should be in the world and Bob is really great at seeing what is, so he is just very great at kind of seeing where the kids are. I tend to make all the arrangements and know where everybody is at school and know the teachers, but he is better at sort of sizing up where they...well, not better. We're both at different angles.

**INT:** How difficult though was it to juggle career and what you were doing with children?

**DEBRA:** It's mixed. It's the kind of work which is just incredibly...it's just a wonderful kind of work. I have an awful lot of responsibility and I worry that I'm not present to the kids all the time, but I truly care about what I'm doing. The kids know all the folks...if a kid is sick, they come with me to the office here. A lot of people that I've worked with over the years know my kids and when we were producing "Stepping in Time," this review at the Arts Bank, my kids
were there at rehearsal. There are some things that are advantages and some ways that are disadvantages on the other. I don't know that my Mom was ever somebody who was real happy in what she got to do. She might have really made time for us but...so my kids might not feel that I've paid as much attention to them as they thought I needed to, but on the other hand, there are these other things that are kind of around. You know what they say about women of our generation—there's this great statistic about men always think they're better than their Dads because they spend more time and women always think they're worse than their mothers. I'm hard on myself so it's hard to feel that I'm doing anything right. I've definitely gone through times of thinking that I'm failing on all sides at once, but they're great kids and they're really happy, interesting kids. They have hysterically great understandings of folklore. You know what they say about women of our generation—there's this great statistic about men always think they're better than their Dads because they spend more time and women always think they're worse than their mothers. I'm hard on myself so it's hard to feel that I'm doing anything right. I've definitely gone through times of thinking that I'm failing on all sides at once, but they're great kids and they're really happy, interesting kids. They have hysterically great understandings of folklore. You ought to hear them talk about culture. It's hysterical. I don't even know where they got it. Ruth is like a little...she came in one day—I don't remember why she had to be here—and she was just writing out...she was bored at a meeting so she started writing down what everybody was saying with total understanding of transcribing. And they're great interviewers. I have to see that stuff and feel like well, I might not be able to...the one thing I would wish is that I wish I knew how to deal with their bickering. That's the one thing that I have no clue how to deal with. The rest of the stuff...eh, you fail in one and you...who knows? (End of tape 2, side 2)

INT: This is tape 3. I'm here with Debra Kodish. It's April 20, 1998. We were talking about the trials and tribulations of being parents today. What do you think it means to you to be Jewish and female in the twentieth century. I know that's a very broad question.

DEBRA: I don't have an answer to that. I'm a folklorist so I don't think there's any one way to answer any of that or even to...I just wouldn't know how to begin.

INT: Well, how do you look at yourself in terms of being Jewish and a woman?

DEBRA: It's just not a question that computes for me. I think a way to reframe a question that would be more answerable is that at this point in my life, probably more than other points, there's a more obvious kind of Jewish institutional involvement. It's very different from the Jewish world that my parents lived in for lots of obvious reasons. Times have changed. Those people are largely...that older generation is going. We'll be going to a family reunion in a few weeks. It will be in Detroit. Talk to Uncle Milt—he's going to be there. There's some elements from my childhood that are still somewhat intact of that family as much as it can be.

INT: How involved are your children with your cousins?

DEBRA: Not at all. My cousin Ron, who was important to me when I was a kid, has got a kid in Washington, D.C. and we've seen them occasionally. It's more Bob's family. My sister doesn't have any kids so it's Bob's family, where the brother and sister have got kids and we see them—though not that often. So they have some, but it's not...when you don't live in the same town it's not the same thing. So there's some elements that are old in terms of elements of Jewish identity. They've got some connection. My kids have got some connection to a synagogue and they know
what happens in the course of a Saturday morning service. So you’re asking about Jewish stuff, there’s elements in their life that weren’t there for me.

INT: Women’s roles have evolved and changed. What would be your hope for the future of women’s involvement in the Jewish community?

DEBRA: There’s not...the whole part-

INT: Jewish community, in your way of looking at it. It seems that even as a folklorist you would want your children to take whatever it is from that experience of Jewishness to integrate themselves, or some of the rituals. Not in a traditional sense necessarily.

DEBRA: I’m trying to figure out why these questions make me feel so uncomfortable. They’re generalizing questions. My experience as an interviewer is that abstract questions are asking for a different kind of an answer than something that’s concrete or descriptive. Maybe I can say a couple of anecdotes. One thing, in response more to your first one about being a Jewish woman now, it gave me a great pleasure and it’s something that appeals to my sense of irony that when I went to check out Mishkan and there was some activity going on in the place that it was then at, outside in the hall where all these young Jewish women, my age Jewish women, having these fabulous discussions about whatever political issue it was, and one thing I’ve always loved about Jewish synagogue life and Jewish community stuff-in Newfoundland I just remember the rabbi would be up there and some people would be trying to go through the service and you’d have other people just kibitzing, interrupting and everything happening in their own way. And there’s something about that noisiness and chaos that I always just loved. It was funny to me, but here I was thinking about joining the synagogue and it was the women who were responsible for those sidebar discussions. I don’t know. We have some friends who are Jewish and who are involved in political progressive stuff. We have some friends who are not Jewish. It’s hard for me to think through-what’s important to me is the kind of community that we’ve built here and it’s a very diverse community and it’s not only Jewish. I don’t like the politics of the mainstream Jewish community around a lot of issues.

INT: What about Israel?

DEBRA: Especially around Israel. They don’t publish anything about Mishkan because the generally pro-peace and pro-conversations and anti-demonizing Palestinians...all these sort of general Jewish questions, I find it-

INT: But the fact of the matter is, in some ways you’re a Jewish woman. You’re not saying I’m not and you haven’t tried to run away or hide from that. You might not be a mainstream-

DEBRA: Absolutely not.

INT: I’m not asking you to make you feel uncomfortable, but in some ways, passing these things
on, especially to daughters, what if your daughter...this is really just my impression. What if you have a daughter who turns around and ends up in a suburb somewhere or in a very traditional situation. Not that it could happen but who knows? Doing very traditional things. Having a huge bar mitzvah at some country club somewhere. Are you going to be someone who is going to be upset with that, even though that might become her folklore or whatever?

DEBRA: There’s a funny narrative. I used to joke that the one thing that I couldn’t stand is if my daughters would marry Republicans. But I think what that’s about is that I want my kids to be critical thinking people and good human beings. I want them to be able to really work for justice in the world in however way. But I don’t know what will come and I just find hypothetical questions not real helpful because I’m going to be a different me and that path...it’s not going to happen tomorrow that they’re going to be twenty-four years old and doing whatever. It’s going to be a path and there’s going to be different things along that path, and what might be right for them...I hope they’ll be able to do what’s right for them. I hope they’ll have better guidance than I did. I hope that they’ll have kind of kind mentors. I’m trying now with my oldest. I’ve got to learn to let her be more independent just in the littlest things. It’s hard to figure out even who this person is.

I just wouldn’t want to push towards an answer because I think it would diminish the kind of struggle and process that’s so critical, and in that struggle and process, I see my kids living in a world that is thankfully not exclusively Jewish, that is ethnically and economically diverse, and so these Jewish women questions also are trouble for me in that way because that Jewishness is a part of what we do. A big part of the Passover talk in our Hagaddah, which we wrote ourselves, is about how do you tell a story where the ending is...where do you start, where do you begin stories and how do you tell a story so that it’s a good ending for other people too. How come you tell this Passover story which doesn’t end with the pushing out of the people who were in this land? So there’s an exclusivity and a kind of a chauvinism that, like my parents, I think, I really reject. It’s just hard to think about how to...It’s like saying I don’t know what would have happened had I wound up marrying somebody who was not Jewish. It’s been very lucky because I don’t have to go through this but both Bob’s brother and sister have got Christmas stuff and not Christmas stuff. There’s too many variables to figure out. That path would have been so different. It would be a totally different answer.

INT: Bob is Jewish?

DEBRA: Yes.

INT: Tell me what you’re saying. Are you saying that you have taken then from being Jewish a lot of the sort of values and ideas that seem inherently...

DEBRA: But I think it’s not just...I never liked that reduced to cultural Jewishness stuff. I think that ethically and in terms of values in the sense of how you should be in the world, the sort of menschlichkeit stuff, I very much believe in—or I have no problem with and believe in a whole
range of things that come to me from Jewish tradition. I don’t like the patriarchal stuff. I love the discussions with feminist Jews and lesbians about problems in how the sort of patriarchal canon of Jewish life, both religious stuff and not religious stuff is there, so you’re talking about Jewish women’s stuff-those are not the most pressing battles for me. Occasionally if I’m there on Saturday morning and somebody is reading something in whatever portion, I may raise a question. It’s a wonderful group of people to read stuff together with because it’s a lot of thinking people asking interesting questions, some of which are feminist questions and some of which are political questions and some of which are not.

INT: Does it give you a spiritual context?

DEBRA: I don’t know. This whole spiritual thing is a whole other...I don’t even know what that means. I really don’t. I think that means different things to different people. I find there’s some elements of ritual that I find incredibly moving. Over the years since joining Mishkan, I really get a lot out of High Holy Day process in a way that I didn’t have a clue that this stuff could be just so interesting.

INT: Why is that? What happens? I don’t know a lot about Mishkan.

DEBRA: It’s just the liturgy, the stuff that you read and think about and the kind of questions that frame that ritual are just very powerful questions, sort of these reckoning questions, both judgement and yet moving ahead. There are things that are just so moving. Whenever the al chait...there’s just stuff that when you hear people saying things that you thought of for yourself...there’s just stuff that’s very moving and I like that coming to terms and taking account and this sort of fresh start. So there are some things that I suppose for some people is very spiritual.

INT: Tell me if there’s anything else that you would like to leave or a message or any other kind of thing you’d like to end with.

DEBRA: It’s hard to say. I think in some ways the questions have taken this in a way that are a little different than if I was going to tell my story, what would it be about. I felt like I’ve had to try to shoehorn things into a Jewishness. In a way it’s a way of talking about my experience that I just haven’t done. As somebody who does interviews and thinks about patterns and narrative, there’s been a framework here that I don’t really feel like I fit in, and so I’ve been trying to answer these questions but I feel like the center isn’t quite over there. So probably, had it been a little bit more open, and this isn’t a criticism-this is you’re asking for reflections so I’m trying to reflect back to give you a sense of framework and what might be a more natural or organic progression-I probably would have talked more about the folklore project and what we’ve been trying to do. It was a question that I asked to begin with about why was I on the list and if this is really about arts, I think we should have talked more about arts or about what’s particularly Jewish or not particularly Jewish. What are the kinds of achievements in arts of this organization? What impact has this organization had? I’m not sure that any of that stuff is really
INT: Can I come back some time and do that with you?

DEBRA: Maybe. You had mentioned something about some kind of publication. Probably it would be useful to know more about what the framework of that is and where the editors want to go with that as opposed to just this. On the one hand there's a little bit of a gravitational pull away from stuff because of having to set things into Jewishness as opposed to assuming that whatever I'm doing comes out of this Jewish background. So as opposed to having figure out well, how do I talk about that-well, I don't have the terms for that really. I feel like it's a little bit off because of that. And I'm also not sure that any of the early stuff is relevant. That just feels partly long ago and far away and it feels like there's a lot of focus on that as opposed to Philadelphia here. I guess my own interests in Jews and community might pay a little bit more attention to just what counts as community. I wasn't saying it very coherently, but I really wouldn't want to be shmushed into this sense of Jewish community.

INT: I don't think that's what this-

DEBRA: But there's also, I think, definitely a significant range of people who are Jews who are working in various ways in progressive organizations. It's the same thing with the Sixties. People who came out of the Sixties where they're saying, "Oh, they're not radicals anymore. Oh, they're not Jews anymore." But what's happening is that that stuff has really transferred to a different context. By having to always frame it in terms of Jewish makes it hard to kind of remain the whole. My sense of how weird it was to walk into this room of all these white people after so many years feels like that was a good element for me. It would have been maybe good to go from that and try to bring out some of the other communities. There's sort of curious elements of asking and not asking. Like growing up with Holocaust survivors, I just learned you weren't supposed to ask. You don't talk about that. Even my Dad from World War II-you couldn't even...when we were kids, if he was sleeping, you shouldn't like touch him to wake him up because he's still from World War II and would be so freaked out. He might grab you or something. So there was definitely all that war stuff that affected...it took me a long time working with Cambodians before I realized that it was okay to ask. I just didn't ask, and then these young Cambodian kids on a team were saying we want to ask about the genocide and we have to know this and it just hadn't occurred to me. I think there's other ways in which Jewish history has sort of interesting both connections to and filters away from understanding other people's experiences. Anyway, but you can never do anything in one and this is fine.

INT: Thank you very much. But really-

DEBRA: Well, it's somebody else's project so let them figure out what they want to do.

INT: But my feelings are that I think the earliest stuff, and not even getting into the specific questions one might ask, are probably much more important and more valuable than the other
DEBRA: But it’s narrative and it’s anecdote and it’s different...It would be interesting to see how people handle this stuff. Without a lot of context, it’s very...I can’t even remember specific dates or times. I probably could, but anyway...

INT: I’m not sure exactly what they’re going to do with it.

DEBRA: Does this include also the publishing part? Let me change this, because I really do want to see this.

INT: I’m going to tell them that you want to. But let me just say for the record that I thank you very much.

DEBRA: Okay, well then let me say for the record that this is talking about being able to do all of these things. I was thinking about this just in terms of audiotapes and research possibilities and excerpting some parts, but I really do...if there’s going to be a publication out of this, I do want to amend that and say that I really want to approve it before. I just don’t want to give a blanket...so I’m going to add this. (Amends contract)

INT: I wish that we had more time to talk about the project. I think it’s important and I think it’s really valuable and very valid for your particular interview. So if I can catch you on another time for a half hour, would you be opposed to me coming back and doing that?

DEBRA: We’ll see. Let’s just sort of see what...

INT: Well, I think it would be really important. I don’t think that there’s any reason not to do that.

DEBRA: I’d be curious. You can just give me a call. I would like to know more about what they’re going to be doing with it but let’s just see what...

INT: Okay. But you’d be agreeable, right?

DEBRA: Yes, I’ll be agreeable. I just have to get back to work. Thanks very much. (End of interview)