INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA WEISBERGER

INT: It’s July 21, 1998. This is Barbara Trainen Blank. I’m interviewing Barbara Weisberger with the written consent of the interviewee. Let’s start with kind of the basics, the date and place of birth and something about your family.

BARBARA: I was born in Brooklyn, of all places, on February 28, 1926, which at this point makes me seventy-two. Hard to believe. I lived in a very upwardly mobile area in Brooklyn, because I had a fantastic grandmother, a true matriarch who led a fairly large extended family. We were a very close family, close both in feeling and proximity. I feel that a great deal of the way I approach life is because of my Jewishness—it’s hard for me to talk about it in its particulars, because it just seems to be entwined with the way I react, the way I think, the way I act. My strong sense of self can be attributed to loving parents. My mother. My father too, although my mother was a quite extraordinary, bossy lady who opened up a great many possibilities for me and for my sister too. The things she dreamed in her life, she lived in us. But going back to where I was born and talking about that background, it was of course just all Jewish. Strangely though, because it was so culturally Jewish, and so homogeneous, all religious activities and events seemed to be part of the natural daily and annual course of events, not separate or specialized. For instance, on Jewish holidays schools closed, because hardly anyone would be there.

INT: You went to public school?

BARBARA: I did. As a matter of fact, the school I attended was in a section of Brooklyn called Midwood. It was a very lovely area. It’s still not that bad. I don’t know about the group of people who live there now, what the mix is, but at that time it was 99% Jewish. It had fairly large, single homes and tree-lined streets. It was where one could be sure my grandmother—this was my father’s mother—would expect to be. She arrived in this country a few months after her husband. I think my father (her first-born) was a few months old or my grandmother was pregnant with him. I’m not quite sure, but he was born in 1901. By the way, he is still alive and will be ninety-eight in April, 1999.

INT: And what about your mother? Was she born here?

BARBARA: My mother was born here. My heritage on both sides is Polish. My mother, Russian-Polish. She always used to say Russian-Polish and I never understood why. I thought it was either Russian or Polish, but now I quite understand because her parents were born at the time that Russia actually owned that area of Poland, in a place called Lomza, a bit north and east of Warsaw. I think both her parents came from the area, but I know her mother did, because I’ve done a little research; I felt the need to find out more about my roots. I’ve taken the more difficult side first, I’m afraid, which is my mother’s, because my maternal grandfather’s name was changed and I have had a terrible time searching to find out my maternal grandmother’s real
maiden name. She had two brothers who settled in Montreal, and I found cousins there about five years ago. Besides, Lomza was actually Lomza-Gobernia, (the Russian word for state or county). I found that out from YIVO, when I started to do some research. It is actually like a state in which the major city is Lomza and dozens and dozens of small towns and shtetls surround it. So I don’t know if they actually came from Lomza, the city. Probably not. Why wouldn’t my mother say Lomza instead of Lomza-Gobernia? It probably was a small town or shtetl that was wiped out in the Holocaust. I don’t know; I haven’t been able to trace it down yet, but I will.

My father’s family came from Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now part of the Ukraine. But my roots are really quite Polish. Jewish, and probably orthodox, although my grandmother never seemed like an orthodox person. She never made a fuss. I think she just did things and didn’t make a fuss about it. We were never too conscious of it. It was just part of our life.

INT: Do you have any siblings?

BARBARA: Yes, the one sister mentioned earlier who is three years younger.

INT: Did you have any kind of formal Jewish education at all?

BARBARA: No. And that is interesting because when I was a child, it did not seem a great consideration for girls. It was before the bat mitzvah type of mentality. I started—which bridges to the rest of my life—I started studying ballet when I was five and a half years old. That was sort of a religion, and I spent my after-school times on subways and at classes.

INT: Was that something that you wanted to do, or something that little girls did?

BARBARA: I don’t think it was something that little girls did. It was something that my mother’s little girl did. She always loved ballet and vowed that her daughter would do it. It was she who opened that door, and I happened to be very fortunate because I went to a local school in that area—Avenue J, right off Coney Island—and there was a wonderful teacher who had a neighborhood school. So it kept on going. I think my mother and I were very lucky. I certainly was, because I had some talent and I loved it. If that were not the case, it would have been a great, great disappointment and I think I still would have had to suffer through it for my mother.

INT: What about your sister? Did she take ballet lessons too?

BARBARA: She didn’t take ballet, but she did take violin lessons. I remember that the teacher came to the house. My sister would practice and my mother, who had studied violin, would yell out, “No, it’s flat, it’s sharp!” You could practice violin at home but to study dancing, you had to go to a studio—in the neighborhood when I started at five and a half, but when I was eight, in 1934, an important year not only in my life, but in the history of American Ballet actually, I became George Balanchine’s first child-student in this country at his School of American Ballet,
which was at least an hour from home each way on the subway.

INT: How did that come about?

BARBARA: I always think about my life and the connections of my life through the course of American ballet, and a lot of it came about because of certain circumstances-being at the right place at the right time. There was some design, of course. I was eight, and my teacher was an extraordinary inspiration, ambitious for me but always reinforcing. She wrote something at that time in which she said “I walked in on a beam of light,” and that’s how she treated me. My mother wasn’t the proverbial “ballet mother.” It’s interesting. The teacher was always right. My mother was my most severe critic. In any case, by eight, I had advanced quite a bit and my teacher already was making opportunities for me. I guess that’s probably the best way to describe it. She read about Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, who were opening their school called the School of American Ballet. (Their company then was the American Ballet.) She called the then-administrator, a woman by the name of Ouroussov, who said she’d be delighted to see us, but they didn’t have children’s classes, although they would soon. My teacher wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You have to see this child. Just let me bring her in.” So I auditioned for Balanchine, Lincoln Kirstein and the other teacher named Vladimiroff, and they took me. There were no other children, and I took class with the then American Ballet Company. I watched Balanchine create Serenade, his first masterpiece in this country. I was in that class. It’s amazing to me. I was eight years old! I only stayed less than two years. It’s hard for me to remember too much about that period. When they finally did start children’s classes several months later, it was for beginners and it wasn’t the place for me. I found myself, an eight-nine-ten-year-old child, together with all those beautiful, “older” women. They must have been in their teens or early twenties. My mother said I used to get dressed in a corner of the dressing room and have her hide me. My original teacher finally realized that it probably wasn’t a good place for me. For a long time, my mother kept a letter from Balanchine urging us to come back, but it was too difficult. My teacher took me to the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School where she had studied, and that’s where I continued until I was close to fourteen.

INT: Did you have a sense of your own talent at that point? Were you thinking of professional dancing?

BARBARA: Dancing had become like my religion, like my Judaism. It was part of me. It was just there. I guess I must have realized that I was talented, because I was always aware that I was the strongest in the class or the one the teachers always looked at and cared about. I suppose so. I didn’t go through a lot of the stuff that some kids have to; to be intensely competitive. In a way that made me a bit lazy, although I remember that my first teacher was very tough on me. She had a temper, but she was very beautiful and I always loved her despite that. (She died a year after Balanchine died, in 1984.) She used to curl her tongue in a certain way and I knew the explosion was coming. I still remember that. I remember taking the class to the point where my toe shoe linings would get bloody. But in those days, we studied other kinds of dancing. Folk, Indian with Uday Shankar, who was a great artist. I still remember his wonderful hand
movements. I took Spanish dance with Angel Cansino, who was Rita Hayworth's uncle. She was a Spanish dancer named Rita Cansino. Those were the years in which the seeds of what we think of as American Ballet were sown. This veers off from the Jewishness aspects.

INT: I’m going to bring you back to that in a minute.

BARBARA: It’s interesting to know how the indigenous American ballet was greatly influenced and touched by vaudeville and musical theater. My teacher was at the Metropolitan Opera and danced in the operas. There were scarcely any companies as we know them now. It was quite a different world. What did she do? She went to Broadway theater. She was in “Blackbirds of 1929,” and danced with James Cagney. It veers off base a bit, but it’s interesting to know about the roots of American ballet. My life, my professional life—which we will come to—either by design or happenstance, absorbed into the flow of every major movement in American ballet, starting with the School of American Ballet (SAB). I do feel it is defensible to say that indigenous American ballet started then, and it was influenced greatly, perhaps a little before that, by the Littlefields in Philadelphia, who had the first “home-grown” ballet company in this country. They had dancers and their school was an extraordinary training ground. Dorothy Littlefield taught that first children’s class a few months after I came to SAB, and the dancers from Littlefield were 75% of Balanchine’s first American Ballet. Dorothy and Catherine Littlefield studied with Balanchine in Paris. When he arrived in the U.S., or soon after, in the Thirties, Balanchine called Dorothy Littlefield and complained that he saw very few good dancers. “Maybe you can suggest some?” She invited him to come down to Philadelphia, which he did, and snapped up all the best dancers for his company. Later, in 1939-40, the next wave of Littlefield dancers were taken into Ballet Theater, which is now American Ballet Theater.

When I moved to Wilmington, Delaware, at just under fourteen, I studied with the Littlefields until I graduated from high school at sixteen. It was then that my life took a turn that radically changed its expected course—perhaps for the better in hindsight, but it didn’t seem that way at the time. It was the middle of the war years, with no options open to seek a professional job in dance. Compressing those years between 1942 thru 1947—after much persuasion, and not without some interest on my part, I entered college, first at the U of Delaware for my freshman year and then to Penn State for the balance, which I completed in two years. I graduated in June 1945, at nineteen, and two months later married the young man who factored seriously in my life for three years. Two years later we divorced and I moved back with my parents who had moved to Wilkes-Barre in 1943. That’s how I landed in Pennsylvania. The Wilkes-Barre and Philadelphia aspects are probably worth discussing because this interview and project is about Philadelphia women.

INT: I wanted to ask you two things. One was you mentioned that Judaism was a very integral part of your life. Did you at any point stop and think about your Jewishness in connection with a career in dance? I imagine that there were very few Jews.

BARBARA: Actually, that’s not so. There were quite a few Jews in proportion to the general
population. I never thought about it, but looking back, there were quite a few in the ballet, and there were a great many Jews in early modern dance days. Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow and others. They were really coming out of the tradition.

INT: That was a Modern Dance tradition though.

BARBARA: But also a Jewish one. Probably more secular, political Jews, many who were involved in the roots of socialism in this country. They’re secular but have strong Jewish identifications. It’s interesting. It came from the movements at that time during the Depression, in the Thirties. I was a child and it touched me, but not in the same way. My parents were not political Jews. They came from quintessential immigrant stock, not from well-educated families, but very sassy. My grandmother, and I told you about her...when I think back, was amazing. I don’t think she was a peasant. Her parents were probably shopkeepers: dry goods, or something of that sort. My grandfathers came from a long line of Polish tailors on both sides. Both grandfathers. One was a tailor, one was a furrier. My father was in retailing, in merchandising. His first job was as a buyer for big department stores like Gimbels and Bloomingdales, and in other cities. Shepherds in Providence, Rhode Island when he was very young. At the height of the Depression, he had a prosperous wholesale fur business in New York. He ended up with a very successful retail shop in Wilkes-Barre for years until he retired. As I told you, he will be ninety-eight soon and going fairly strong.

INT: Where does he live?

BARBARA: He lives in Wilkes-Barre. He was in assisted living until a few months ago, but now he needs more care. His memory is certainly not very good but he’s in darn good physical shape. His blood pressure is 118/65. I wish mine was. He’s going to stick around a while.

INT: What about your mother?

BARBARA: My mother died in 1988. She was just short of eighty-six. I have good genes. I hope they work.

INT: My other question was: it sounded as if with all the dancing lessons you were taking, you probably didn’t have too much time for friends.

BARBARA: That’s another strange thing, because as I look back I think I had a very good social life. I went to parties. I was very popular, especially with boys, even through grade school. I remember that I had many friends. I think going to ballet school gave me another leg up. There are difficulties when you’re growing up about your self-confidence and all those things that happen to young people. It’s tough. But my dancing was always a very special thing. It was very consuming and yet it did not seem to stop me from having a social life.

INT: And you went to public high school also in the same area?
BARBARA: I went to high school in Wilmington, Delaware. I finished junior high in Brooklyn, in Rapid Advance (seventh and eighth grade completed in one year), so I was under fourteen when I started tenth grade. My father took a position in Wilmington, Delaware, and I ended up going to high school for two years there and graduated when I was sixteen. Then my parents, since there wasn’t much for me to do, finally coerced me to go to college and I guess I didn’t fight too hard because it was something that basically interested me.

INT: So it was your father’s business that took you to Wilkes-Barre?

BARBARA: Well, actually, I was in college when my father moved here. It was really coincidental that I went to Penn State. Majoring in elementary education was nothing but a “fluke.” They asked me what I wanted to do, and when I said dance they looked at me as if I was crazy. I asked about theater. Well, the students in theater majored in Speech. Speech? Well, what would you like to do in speech? I asked, “Well, what is there to do?” And they mentioned a few things including speech therapy and speech correction. I said that sounds fascinating, and then they ended up saying that if I want that, I would have to major in Elementary Education. So I ended up in elementary education with a second major in psychology. It so happened that the speech correction program at Penn State was considered the second best in the country according to the information I received. Number one was Iowa State. Since my parents had moved to Pennsylvania, it seemed very logical.

INT: And did you continue with your dance classes through college?

BARBARA: No, nothing. That’s why the path of my life switched. Nothing. All I can tell you is I gained twenty-five pounds in the first five months, as many young people do, and I was so upset with myself about that I didn’t think about dancing. I didn’t even want to participate in sports. Everybody thought I should be a good athlete, which of course is entirely wrong, because when you dance you’re not supposed to be using wrong muscles. I did take modern dance as part of a Physical Education requirement, and I showed off all my turned out legs and pointed feet. We had a redhead modern dance teacher, an older woman with a chiffon drape, who always reminded me of a redhead Martha Graham type. In my first class with her, she looked down at me as I sat on the floor with my legs turned out and my feet pointed and said, “You’re a ballet dancer, aren’t you?” I said yes, very hopefully, and she looked at me, said “Humph,” and never looked at me again. That was in the old days when modern dance and ballet never the twain shall meet.

INT: So the last time then that you actually took classes was when you were in Wilmington?

BARBARA: In Philadelphia. I commuted daily to take classes in Philadelphia with the Littlefields. It’s only about thirty miles away. I took a train. Went through high school taking no lunch hour. Went through both lunch hours taking classes so I could get out by 2 p.m., when my mother would meet me with a sandwich and a piece of fruit and I’d take the train to Philadelphia and the 10:05 p.m. local back. I even was accepted into a little company in Philadelphia at that
time. The company was underwritten and directed by a young and beautiful society woman, Mary Binney Montgomery, who was devoted to ballet. I'd like to expand on this juncture in my life and the general state of dance in this country, because it was so crucial to what followed. I mentioned earlier that the few companies that existed when World War II began, disbanded because so many of the men were taken into the service. (End of tape 1, side 1) It was a far different world. That is the major thing, because I'm sure I would have stayed in dance if the opportunities were similar to what they became in the Sixties. I'm sure I would have been in a national company. The fact that I wasn't is mostly about timing. But the other part was my own ambivalence. I loved to dance, but I don’t know whether I loved performing. I didn’t particularly like preparations—makeup, costumes, etc. Besides, if I wanted to pursue a career after high school, I probably would have had to live with my grandmother in Brooklyn and see what I could make happen when I was sixteen years old. My parents weren’t too happy about that scenario. Mother really thought I could still dance at nineteen when I left college, and she was right. I could have. I was only nineteen and I could have still danced. But the opportunities even in college weren’t there, and even if I could keep some connection, it was just...the timing was wrong. For many things in my life the timing was right and, in retrospect, maybe it was right then too.

INT: Tell me about your marriage.

BARBARA: My first marriage?

INT: I didn’t even know until now that there was a first marriage.

BARBARA: He was a young man. I went to my first formal dance with him when I was fourteen. I knew him, but it revived when he was one year ahead of me at the U. of Delaware. He graduated a year before I did. I was in Penn State and it was sort of an on and off again long distance relationship. Today, I probably could have gotten a job, lived where I wanted to, had other alternatives. I remember my father saying that if I was going to get married, do it fast. He was so afraid I might do something “improper.” Marriage was the way you settled your life. It was what I came from, what the mentality was. It was a strange anomaly in a way, because with it all, with the kind of mother I had, who had high aspirations for her daughters; in my case it was my serious involvement in the ballet...that wasn’t too usual at that time. I’m making it look as if my parents were old fashioned, unenlightened. They were not. My mother should have gone to college. She should have had a career. But her life wasn’t that. Girls didn’t do that. She graduated from high school, worked and then married young. She was a beautiful woman. I often think about how much her children meant to her in her life, her dreams, dreams she transferred to her children, to me mostly. And, my mother taught us to stick to things. You didn’t hop around, you did the best you can, you even did better than the best you can.

INT: Was she willing to give up on the idea of you being a dancer?

BARBARA: It’s funny. Yes, I think she did because the situation she was faced with if I were to go on to be a dancer wasn’t terribly fascinating. It was very tenuous. She didn’t know what
would happen. Dancers still were kind of questionable. As a matter of fact, one of the things that rather turned me off and made me decide to go to college happened when I was studying with the Littlefields. I think I was about fourteen, fifteen, or close to sixteen, because I was nearing graduation, and Catherine Littlefield had invited me and two other girls in my class to dance in a Broadway show she was choreographing, “A Kiss for Cinderella.” It was a James M. Barrie play. I remember that Catherine’s mother (everyone called her Mommie) played the piano for class. She talked to us like daughters and suggested that if we wanted to get someplace, we’d have to sleep with a few men. I didn’t like that idea. The world then—it seems like centuries ago, but it was the Forties, during the war, and it was a time when the choices weren’t there, not only choices in terms of relationships but choices in terms of how you could guide your life, certainly if you were going to be in the arts.

INT: And the man that you married—I don’t know if you want to mention his name or not for the record.

BARBARA: His name was Sol Spiller.

INT: He didn’t go into the service then?

BARBARA: He was in the service when we married. He graduated as a chemical engineer in 1944, and had been deferred up to that point. He was sent to Washington as an officer in the Naval Research Laboratories. I graduated in June of 1945 and we married in September. We were married only three or four weeks when he was released. The war in Europe had already ended and the war in the Pacific ended just before we married. What he actually did, as a matter of fact, was help to speed up that end, because he was working on some kind of radar that identified kamikazes. Anyhow, he was out and there we were. I had just gone to Washington and started to teach as a substitute. It dawned on me that he should make use of the G.I. Bill and go back to school for graduate work. So we eventually moved, first with his mother in Wilmington and then to Philadelphia, where he went to Penn Wharton School. I taught school while he did a year of graduate work. He got his Masters in industrial management and his first position was in Dover, Delaware. Even if the marriage had been a good one, certainly the circumstances didn’t lend themselves to enhancing it or helping us get through. I was just very unhappy. There was something gnawing at me. In some ways I think he knew that.

INT: How long were you married?

BARBARA: A little over two years and I was home. My mother was right behind me. It wasn’t as if my mother was either not involved or on the fence. She knew I was unhappy and she really kept me from wavering, because it was very difficult. It seemed very difficult, although happily, I didn’t have any children and I was very young. I was only twenty-one.

INT: You were only twenty-one when you got divorced. Divorce was fairly uncommon in those days.
BARBARA: That’s right. Doing it and having the guts and heart to do it and pushing through when your life was in a sort of limbo was very tough. What happened soon after I returned home changed my life. There was a woman who had a dancing school, a friend of my mother’s. A Jewish woman.

INT: In Wilkes-Barre?

BARBARA: In Wilkes-Barre. Hilda Man Hertz. Quite a remarkable woman. She had one of these smorgasbord schools that had everything: tap dancing, personality singing, etc. She had those recitals that went on for five hours. You’ve seen those schools. Some of them still exist. It absolutely shocks me. But she didn’t have ballet because she knew that was serious business. She pleaded with me to teach for her, promising me students, everything I needed, and never relented. I had few alternatives, because I arrived home in the middle of the year and there were no open positions in the elementary schools. So I said okay, I’ll try it. She provided twenty to twenty-five students right off and I began. Of course, a great deal becomes clear in hindsight, but even then I knew that teaching was my calling. I was with her for five years, and during that time I met my present husband and we were married.

INT: Where did you meet and what’s his name?

BARBARA: His name is Ernest Weisberger.

INT: I don’t think we said your maiden name?

BARBARA: Linshes. Originally, it was Linshitz, but when my father moved to Wilmington, the “itz” became “es”. From what I’ve been told, my grandfather Linshitz took his mother’s maiden name to avoid the conscription, and her name was the name of a Polish town-Lenchecz, or close to that—which happens to be the setting for a book called “The Brothers Ashkenazi.”

INT: I read that years ago. So how did you meet your second husband?

BARBARA: He was in Wilkes-Barre. Remember, I was twenty-one or two, a good age. I could date college boys and older men. Ernie Weisberger had been out of the service for a while. He was thirty-one when we were married.

INT: And what was he doing professionally?

BARBARA: Still searching for a permanent niche. He had been separated from the service in 1941. He had gone to Dickinson Law School in Carlisle, interestingly enough, completed his first year and was drafted before December 7th.

INT: Before Pearl Harbor.
BARBARA: Yes, stuck in service for five-and-a-half years. When he returned to Wilkes-Barre, he was very anxious to get married and move on. After various other business ventures, he finally began his own company-Marvel Kitchens, manufacturers of custom kitchens and cabinetry, and Betterhouse, a regional retail outlet. The company had a national network of dealers and made a high-line kitchen cabinet. He retired in 1992 or '93.

INT: So you’ve been married now how many years?

BARBARA: In November, 1999 it will be fifty years! Gosh. There are some things that shock me. When I say how old I am or how long I’ve been married or how many years I have been out of college; in '95 I had my fiftieth college alumni reunion. My age is not kept secret. I tell everybody how old I am very freely. They usually say, “Don’t tell everybody how old you are because you don’t look it,” and I say, “Well, that’s why I tell them. When they stop gasping, I stop telling.”

INT: Do you have children?

BARBARA: I have two children. I have a daughter who was born in June, 1951, and a son who was born in July, 1954.

INT: Are they married and do they have children of their own?

BARBARA: Both married. My daughter has one daughter who is twenty, and my son has two children, a daughter, sixteen, and a son, nine. As a matter of fact, I recently returned from a trip to Europe. My sister and I went to Venice, Florence and Paris, and we took our three granddaughters, my sixteen and twenty-year-old, and her sixteen-year-old, and we had a wonderful time. I’ll show you pictures later. But getting back to my early years in Wilkes-Barre and the return to ballet. In 1953, I opened my own school, the Wilkes-Barre Ballet Theater, after I married and knew I was going to stay there. That was the stepping stone. I was also very active in the Regional Ballet movement, which actually led to the proliferation of professional companies begun in the early Sixties. Regional Ballet developed from the late Forties through the Fifties and early Sixties. There were teachers like me all over the country, who were doing practically the same thing I was: Atlanta, Boston, and Dayton, Ohio. Somehow or other we found each other. It was actually a woman in Atlanta who was the first to start in the Southeast (U.S.), and my colleague from Scranton and I organized the first Northeast (U.S.) Regional Festival in 1959. I also was doing a great deal of choreography. In fact, those were the seeds that led me to Philadelphia and the start of Pennsylvania Ballet.

INT: So there were many kids taking ballet across the country as well as at the school that you started?

BARBARA: By that time, this amazing Regional Ballet movement had started, the roots of what was to come. It’s interesting because Balanchine and especially Lincoln Kirstein sneered at what
they perceived as provincialism. It had to be in New York, otherwise it was not worth attention. But in 1961, Balanchine came to the festival in Erie, Pennsylvania, and he was stunned. So many people involved. He couldn’t believe what was happening. He had come to see my Wilkes-Barre company in 1960, with Diana Adams, one of his ballerinas from the New York City Ballet, who was going to be the Festival adjudicator. That’s how it worked. Adjudicators went to the different companies in various areas of the country, and then they arranged programs. That year Balanchine arrived with her, came to my school in Wilkes-Barre. He remembered me; he knew of my teaching because I used to send students to his School of American Ballet.

Once during that period I walked into an elevator in New York and he was there. I hadn’t seen him since I was thirteen when I danced in operas at the Met. He had used me in the operas when children were needed, but I hadn’t seen him since, and now I was a grown woman; but he remembered me as if it were yesterday. I was in my mid or late twenties and I practically choked when I looked up and saw him. Actually, my important connection with Balanchine was not, of course, from when I was a child. It was later that he became so instrumental in my life. He was like a professional father. An enormously generous man.

I was talking about the Regional Movement as being the precursor, the groundwork of the great proliferation of national companies, and Balanchine factored greatly in the whole idea. At this time—though not widely known—the Ford Foundation and its legendary arts and culture program leader, W. McNeil Lowry, was looking for a way to become involved in support of American ballet. Actually, I had met Lowry in 1960 with a friend of mine, Josephine Schwarz, who was the artistic director of the Dayton Civic Ballet. She took me to meet him in our efforts to get some money for Regional Ballet. There was something happening, and it had to do with Lowry who was investigating where and how the Ford Foundation should proceed. He knew there would be a great infusion of money in two areas: one in theater, Regional Theater, and one in ballet. He was very close to Lincoln Kirstein and loved the New York City Ballet, so it was clear that would be central to whatever he did. But he wasn’t sure at first as to where and how the money would be doled out. The final decision was that it would go to retrench, strengthen professional ballet, both existing companies and burgeoning ones. And I was there, before any awareness of a Ford involvement. Many times in my bios or articles about me, it is assumed that the Ford Foundation and Balanchine asked me to start the Pennsylvania Ballet in 1961-62. I knew Lowry and I knew Balanchine, but the Pennsylvania Ballet was pulled out of the earth two years before I received a Ford grant.

INT: We’re talking about now the formation of the Pennsylvania Ballet?

BARBARA: Right.

INT: Let me backtrack a little bit and ask how this idea came to you.

BARBARA: That’s what I’m coming to. There was a confluence of things that were happening, things about both my personal and professional lives. Something arose when a father of a former
pupil who had moved to Philadelphia contacted me. He and others were very disenchanted with the ballet scene there, and it was pretty much of a desert. He asked me to come and help. I couldn’t help—I had my school, I had two young children—my children were quite young at that time—and a husband. I didn’t see how anything could happen, but there was something in the wind, both inside me and in the field. Balanchine—with Ford Foundation money, which no one knew at the time—began a series of three-day teaching seminars that continued on an annual basis over three or four years. As I found out later, these seminars were important steps to the eventual huge infusion of support at the end of 1963 to six national professional companies—including the Pennsylvania Ballet and the School of American Ballet. The first seminar I think was 1960. Teachers from across the country were invited and I, of course, was there. Several of us were invited to Lincoln Kirstein’s home for cocktails and Balanchine spoke to us. This was after he had been in Erie, at the Regional Ballet Festival, and was so mesmerized and interested. Erie provided one of the funniest moments: he saw this crowd and was absolutely carried away. He said we all belong together and we could have strength in numbers. “If Hoffa could do it, so could we.” That was Balanchine. He was a funny, childlike man who spoke in metaphors. But later, at the cocktail party, he said, “This is a vast country. I cannot even absorb the talented dancers in my own school. We must have other outlets. We are turning out more and more good dancers, well-trained dancers, and there aren’t enough professional outlets.” In fact, there were less than half-a-dozen bona fide professional companies at that time. Balanchine added, “I can’t give money, but I have ballets, I have costumes, I have music.” He offered but never forced himself on anyone, either his ideas or his works. After he spoke, I went to him, very innocently really, and I said, “You know, Mr. B...” I was putting things together in my mind: “If you’re really serious about this, the place to start is Philadelphia.” Then he looked at me, put his hand down and patted my head and said, “Well, Barbara, my smart ballerina, you must do it.” And that’s how it started. That was the turning point. If I could choose the moment the Pennsylvania Ballet was conceived, that was it.

INT: What made you think Philadelphia?

BARBARA: It was accessible and I had a few contacts there. Besides, the door seemed to be open. In a way, I didn’t pick Philadelphia—it sort of picked me, but it seemed logical and there didn’t seem to be too much to compete against. I had studied there. It was where the Littlefields had the first truly American-bred company, the only city in the United States that really had a history of ballet since the early nineteenth century; the first American-born great dancers: Mary Ann Lee, Augusta May Wood, George Washington Smith were all Philadelphians. Supposedly the first professional ballet performance took place in Philadelphia. So it was logical, it was accessible, it was large enough. Nobody asked me to come, so it was terribly hard. Nobody said, “Here’s some money, Barbara, come and make a ballet company.” No. I just began.

INT: How’d you start? You came in and recruited dancers or first you looked for...

BARBARA: Balanchine was very helpful. He suggested that before I started the school—which came before the company—before I formally started the School of Pennsylvania Ballet, which was
the seed of the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, we should get started with something that already existed. And with his good offices and his name, he opened the doors to the Philadelphia Lyric Opera. I had all the dancers I wanted, went to the School of American Ballet, choose all that I liked. (Years later, he told me when I tearfully asked him why he was so good to me, that helping me was a debt repaid to the Littlefields.) We did opera seasons with the then Philadelphia Lyric Opera, '61-62 and '62-63. Two dancers stayed with me, and we pushed ahead to open the school. In that first year, we held on with bloody fingernails. Dead and we wouldn’t admit it. Locked out of the studio. Some people gave us a little money. I raised about a thousand dollars, some a gift from a former patroness in Wilkes-Barre, a thousand dollar loan but she never took the money back. I put in about $750 and someone in Philadelphia contributed $1000. We moved into a former photography shop on Walnut Street in Philadelphia where the rent was five hundred dollars a month. And we started with three thousand dollars.

INT: What gave you the courage—some people would say the chutzpah—to think that you—

BARBARA: My Jewishness. It was chutzpah. It was a willingness to make a commitment and to build the walls of commitment, not only to the idea but to people. You couldn’t let them down, and that’s the way you protected yourself from giving up. No money. We weren’t paid. I wasn’t paid. My husband was not in love with this idea of my being away so much. Believe me—I split my life. How I ever did it? I had a completely schizoid existence.

INT: So you were back and forth between Wilkes-Barre?

BARBARA: Not daily. I rented an apartment for the two girls who stuck with me. They slept in the bedroom and I slept on the living room couch. I spent three or four nights in Philadelphia and the rest in Wilkes-Barre, or vice versa.

INT: How old were your children at this point?

BARBARA: Well, let me see. This was in 1961-62, so my daughter was ten, ten or eleven, and my son was seven or eight.

INT: So your husband had the yeoman’s share of the child care.

BARBARA: He had a good part of it, yes, and the rest was made possible fortunately because we lived in a community that was an extremely organized one. I don’t know how it is in Harrisburg. My children had religious education and they participated in sports. And my husband was very willing to assume some responsibility and he was a very warm person. I was fortunate in that regard. He was also no fool. I think if he pushed me into the corner, I don’t know what I would have done. But it was I who did the going back and forth. It was I who had this schizoid life, not the children, and they had a very organized life which was very helpful. (End of tape 1, side 2)
INT: Are you observant?

BARBARA: To some degree. My husband comes from an orthodox Hungarian upbringing. We keep a kosher home. He sings the Sabbath prayers and we have Sabbath dinner. My daughter and her family came and when my father was able to, he joined us. My son and his family live in Houston, Texas. We have a wonderful family time at Passover, observe the High Holidays. I always have the traditional break-the-fast Yom Kippur meal, and the whole family comes-about thirty people. Those kinds of things. But I don’t go to Temple religiously; only once in a while. I’m a member of the Sisterhood. We’re members of the Conservative synagogue. We don’t adhere to all the rituals, but I feel very Jewish and I know I am. It’s part of my life and it’s something I find, as I said, I find joy in. I’m concerned about that being missed in my grandchildren. I don’t see it there.

INT: Are your children married to Jews?

BARBARA: No, not either of them. My daughter-in-law was not Jewish, but she converted, so my grandchildren are all Jewish. My daughter is Jewish. Her husband has not converted but he is extremely supportive. My granddaughter had a bat mitzvah and even went to religious school up to confirmation when she was fifteen. I try very hard to say, “You’re missing so much,” but they’re not going to live my life. They’re not going to live the life I remember. I didn’t offer the influences. It wasn’t the time. Certainly my husband and I did what we could, certainly it was Jewish and it was identified as that. But the statistics are out there. If my daughter married a non-Jew, my granddaughter isn’t going to feel too many qualms about doing it. I don’t know. At least my children retain their strong identity openly, and their children were raised and are being raised as Jews. But for another generation—I don’t know.

INT: I was thinking that there certainly have been a lot of Jews in the arts and the generation that you mentioned—Sophie Maslow and those people kind of drew on their Jewish roots, but many of the Jews in the arts are...recently I think there’s been a bit of a comeback, but probably when you started out, I bet that most of the Jews that you ran into were very secular. I’m guessing, because that was kind of the period of the Sixties that people didn’t identify.

BARBARA: Their professional lives were certainly secular. I don’t know what they did personally. That was one thing that cushioned everything, because the major point was how talented you were, what kind of person you were. That sounds like a lot of mouthing but that was true. If you were talented, fine. That was it. It didn’t really make that much difference. And unfortunately, I think a lot of great, great geniuses were anti-Semites. At times I felt that Balanchine harbored some ambivalent feelings about Jews.

INT: He was Russian.

BARBARA: He was a Russian Orthodox, a very mystical man. Only one thing he said that amused me. He was lamenting the fact that some of the dancers he had in his company were not
spirited, and he said, “Look at these Jewish girls and the Italians. They should be...where are they? You know, where are they? The English girls are more alive.” That surely wasn’t anti-Semitic.

INT: A stereotype.

BARBARA: I didn’t take it as an insult. At least he thinks Jewish girls should be alive. So that was it. (Tape shuts)

INT: So let’s go back then to Pennsylvania Ballet.

BARBARA: I was thinking about some of the questions that you asked earlier about my motivation—what drove me both as a child studying ballet and as founder of a ballet company and national project. It seems to me that as a child, dancing was a natural, perhaps instinctive focus; even through my strong-minded mother led me to the water, thank goodness I wanted to drink. Many mothers are convinced their children are prodigies when they spontaneously dance to music or in front of the TV. But it seems that something special about what I did was obvious even at three, when my mother took me to dancing school in Providence, Rhode Island, where our family lived for one year.

It terms of my adult career, I think, as in any life, it was a case of choices made and grabbing moments at certain crucial junctures. Teaching was a calling—still the thing I love best. However, in the final analysis, I would say my most important contribution to the field was my willingness and capability to build “families.” Without sounding vainglorious, I had those qualities plus the fortitude and commitment—so essential especially in entrepreneurial stages.

I remember being interviewed. I think I gave you that tape. At the end the interviewer pulled a Barbara Walters—how do you want to be remembered? I asked if she meant when I’m dead. I responded that I’d like to be remembered when I am dead as I am remembered when I’m alive. I meant that I’ve created possibilities and life enhancing environments in which people could do things they wanted to do and have the talent to do. I think that’s what’s important. I believe, since this is geared to Jewishness, though I have no specific data about this—it was always my heart that had a sort of Jewish strength, the idea of family, of supportiveness, of making things happen, of courage. To me, those are traits that belong not only to Jews, but particularly to Jews. And also traits that belong to women. So I have a two-edged sword.

In the personal part of my life, what really saved me was the schizoid existence that I led, especially while I was with the Pennsylvania Ballet. My life was split and I wanted to retain that. I wanted to avoid difficulties for my family, my two children and my husband as much as possible, so I didn’t talk much about my life in Philadelphia and I tried not to bring the tensions home. In a way, that saved me, because when I look back, the intensity of the life, of the professional life—if it had been whole hog, if it encompassed every part of my life, I don’t know how I would have managed. I tried to keep all the parts of my dual life compartmentalized.
Looking back, I don’t know how I did that; perhaps because I was younger and so driven. I certainly didn’t have much time for anything in between, I can tell you.

INT: Do you think that you might have done differently today if you were starting out, because I think women today—the approach is more to integrate rather than separate, or do you think that even today it would be helpful?

BARBARA: I did do that though, even though physically I was away for a few days. First of all, remember, for quite a few years, through all my marriage, even from the previous marriage, there was never a time that I didn’t work. I always worked. I didn’t have children in my first marriage. This one I did, but I worked and had my school in Wilkes-Barre, and it was a school that started classes at four o’clock in the afternoons. We were kind of geared in. We had a wonderful housekeeper. I had a husband who was very involved and very affectionate and warm and was able to be involved domestically, so that was very lucky. Going to Philadelphia was another step, and there was more physical separation for longer periods of time. But then again, my children were a little bit older. My first child was born when I was teaching. I taught until six o’clock, and I think she was born at seven o’clock the next morning. And my son too. I kept on working and always planned that my children would be born in the summer. I was very lucky because my daughter was born on June 23 and my son’s birthday is today, July 22. I could stay off for the summer and go back in the fall, which I did. I wasn’t a hausfrau who suddenly went off someplace. There was some kind of flow.

INT: Did you think of yourself as a pioneer at that time? Not in dance, but as a career person, balancing your family?

BARBARA: Women were beginning to work, but it wasn’t quite the proportions that it is today. Actually, it wasn’t taking a job for me; it was something I had to do. As I said, it would have been a very difficult problem had my husband been needy and given me ultimatums. But he didn’t do that. He would have preferred that I didn’t do this, I’m quite sure, but he was also very self-sufficient. I remember vividly after the terrible flood that we had in the Wilkes-Barre area in 1972, my husband’s brother and his wife, who had a much worse situation than we did, came to live with us for a short period of time. The flood happened ten years after I started the Pennsylvania Ballet, and this sister-in-law was extremely critical of me. She thought I was very selfish. She didn’t say that, but I knew how she felt about my leaving my husband, etc. I used to tell her, although it may sound like sheer justification, that he doesn’t need me all the time. I know what kind of person he is. I was not trying to manufacture some way to assuage my own guilt about it, but I really felt he was not the kind of man who needed me there all the time. After staying with us for three or four weeks, my sister-in-law conceded. She said, “You know, I used to think you were really a selfish person to do this and I didn’t believe what you said, but I understand now. You’re right. He doesn’t need you all the time.” It’s not that he’s a cold hearted...he is the kind of person who did not find this a great weight on his life. Interestingly, most of my men friends often said that they were very proud of me and what I’ve accomplished and they think it’s absolutely wonderful, but they sure as hell wouldn’t want their wives to do it.

16
But Ernie Weisberger did not react that way. It did not hurt him. It did not weaken him—the marriage was more important, the children, the family.

INT: What about the children, though?

BARBARA: I made sure that I was there as often as possible, and I was really home a great deal of the time. We had a wonderful Welsh housekeeper who was great with the kids. We had her for thirteen years. She was there when my son was born. My daughter was a year old when she came and she stayed until she was close to fourteen. This kept things fairly normal. The children wanted to be with their friends and had a very full life, school and religious school and a social life. They were very happy.

I have mentioned feelings of guilt several times in our conversation. Of course it was there and I hoped my children were not deeply affected. I never had any strong indications that they were. The only time that I remember was my son, who I think might have been ten at the time and had basketball practice at the Jewish Community Center. He had to be there one time and he was quite annoyed when I couldn’t take him. “You’re the only Mommy who doesn’t take car pool,” he blurted. That’s the only time I ever heard anything. But his Daddy was the coach and it gave some balance. I was fortunate that way. I don’t know what would have happened if my husband pushed me into a corner, because it was something that I had to do. That sounds very dramatic and corny, but it’s something I had to do. I think, as I look back, he was wise enough to realize that, and he’d rather have a happy wife not always around than a resentful one who was.

(End of tape 2, side 1)

INT: It’s kind of hard to condense your career into a few words, and I don’t want to give it short shrift, so I was wondering...over the period at Pennsylvania Ballet and then we’ll talk a little bit about the Carlisle Project. I’m not going to ask you how you want to be remembered, but what were the major contributions?

BARBARA: I want to emphasize something about the course of my professional life because I think it’s relevant and perhaps interesting. The events that brought me to this point were part of an interlinking chain; some events were happenstance—being there at the right time—and some I made happen. Although I am immensely proud of being Balanchine’s first child student—in 1934, soon after the School of American Ballet opened—and showed great promise as a young dancer, my major accomplishments were not as a performer. That fact, as I said earlier, was a result of circumstance and in retrospect, by choice. So it really is as a teacher and an artistic director, a builder and a leader, and as a choreographer. But even then, I put choreographer last because I never had the opportunity to develop it. I was prolific during the years in Wilkes-Barre, but with the schizoid existence to begin with, and the need for somebody to do the things that had to be done to keep the company alive, like fundraising, and all the other practical duties, there was just no way for me to also do the choreography. I did teach and I did as much as I could, but one of the things that had to go was the ability to be in the studio. The thing I regret most about my professional life—certainly the rest made up for it—is that I lost an identity, and after a while,
separated from being in the studio—most people visualize the artistic director in the studio, rehearsing and staging.

INT: What took its place, just administrative types of things?

BARBARA: I didn’t lose the decision making, the choices of repertoire, the choices of dancers. I was still the “boss,” but mainly I was the leader. It is difficult to describe what a leader truly is. It’s what missing now, I’m afraid. It was like the center. When you talk about leaders, there are broader ramifications. I think they certainly move beyond the arts, although values are extremely important in the arts; they are all about values. In business or in other commercial pursuits, you can’t see them quite so clearly. They exist, of course, but they are not so palpable. In any case, I think leadership has to do with values, and I think it’s the personality and the morality, the ethics, the sense of what’s important, the choices that are made, that a leader imbues into an organization that goes beyond simply a title. What is the difference between leaders and managers or even leaders and artistic directors? I could be an artistic director because I made artistic choices. In an arts organization, that becomes very muddy. It has to do with who sets and personifies the mission—what are the roles. There is a dichotomy built into an arts organization that created the great problems that have been faced in recent years, and that also created the problem that finally happened at the Pennsylvania Ballet in 1982, when I was taken to the brink and thrown over.

INT: Tell us about that.

BARBARA: It was a bad...it was a terrible time. It was a time when I did not have the strength to fight. My daughter was diagnosed with MS. My husband’s business was tenuous. There seemed to be a cabal, in a sense. Like all people who had bad things happen to them, you think there’s some kind of a conspiracy. But it was pretty close to that. In my mind, it was a group of people who empowered themselves to make wrong, and in some cases, inhumane decisions. The Pennsylvania Ballet had developed into a prestigious organization. It was always considered in the top three or four companies in the country in those years. It had a multi-million dollar budget, a healthy season of performances and close to 14,000 subscribers and massive financial problems. Nothing was sacred in the face of them. Many destructive things were happening, and even now as I think of them, I am saddened and sound as if I’m terribly sorry for myself. But I was terribly sorry for myself and sometimes horrified when I think about what happened at that time. It was secretive. It was graceless. It was destructive and it smacked of all the things that we’ve talked about: sexism, ageism and more.

INT: Anti-Semitism?

BARBARA: No, it was not. It was not that.

INT: So essentially, the people of the board-
BARBARA: I'm putting everything on that side. There were things I really was not very smart about. I really was not...I assumed too much. I assumed that everybody felt that the importance of the company itself overrode any of our own personal agendas—that there was a respect for that. I was wrong. There was no understanding. There had been clues in 1978, which was four years earlier. At that time, there was a movement to put me out in left field. I was being viewed by some as the reason for all the problems. It was scapegoating. Even then, starting then, I began to see the handwriting on the wall. I was tired. I had a lot of family problems. From there on in, they took advantage and I didn’t react very wisely. But I did get through the sort of uprising in 1978. I still had friends on my side who helped and supported me through it. One manager had left and we had, at that point, I thought a handleable deficit. I was a member of the Board’s search committee to find a new Executive Manager. From about May of ’78 to about October we were without people holding the fort. Financially, my wrists were slapped and I was told that a lot of the problems were my fault. The previous manager said he couldn’t get anything done because I “stick my nose in.” Of course I was sticking my nose in when things weren’t right. It was my responsibility. I’m sure there are other scenarios that might sound very reasonable and it’s not merely a matter of placing blame. Nevertheless, events continued to deteriorate and spiral downward until the final resolution—for me—in 1982, when I was asked to take a leave of absence—without pay—and I resigned.

INT: Let me ask you—I didn’t raise this point before but was there ever a consideration of the family moving to Philadelphia?

BARBARA: Oh, no, no. My husband had a business. He had a plant and a business. I wouldn’t think of it. I wouldn’t bring my children to Philadelphia and not see them. At least when I was home, I did nothing else. I was there with them.

INT: So in ’82 you were out of a job.

BARBARA: They gave me an option of taking a leave of absence with no salary, and I asked what that meant. Then at the board meeting, one of the board women said she hoped that I’d help with the fundraising, and that sort of clinched it. That really choked me. She didn’t mean it cruelly. I didn’t think she was even thinking about it, but it exposed what they thought of me. I was a volunteer. That’s all they think of me. I’m a volunteer. I’m good at fundraising. I’ll help them fundraise. In the meantime, you’re responsible, Barbara, for making this situation. It was devastating. I cried myself to sleep for eight months. Now I can look back and recall some funny stories. I don’t know if I mentioned this but I’d love to have it on record. Balanchine called me to New York. He immediately took all his ballets from the Pennsylvania Ballet repertory. I found out he really disliked my artistic associate, Ben Harkarry, so he was happy to do that as long as I wasn’t there. The Ballet received a letter but didn’t make it public until they were forced to. But it meant that they had to get a Balanchine person back into the artistic leadership. In New York, while waiting to see him Balanchine, Lincoln Kirstein (I don’t know how many people know of him, but he was one of the greatest intellects in the arts, across the board, and he was the one who brought Balanchine to this country in 1934; he died a couple of years ago) saw me. That was
sixteen years ago and I looked ten years older than I do now. He called me into his little office with a low couch, gave me some Aquavit and looked right in my eyes and said, “Now what’s the matter with you?” And I said...if anybody looked at me sideways I started blubbering...”Those terrible people,” crying and complaining about what they did. He put his hand up to stop me from continuing and said, “I don’t want to hear it. Those bastards did for you what you couldn’t do for yourself.” I asked, “What is that?” And he said, “They made you a Jewish Joan of Arc.”

INT: They turned you into a martyr?

BARBARA: In a way. A martyr for a cause. I didn’t understand that then, but he sensed that I wasn’t going to creep away, that there was something in me that would use this as an incentive to go on, and that’s what I did. What I finally did when I could clear my mind was to realize there were forces at work, of which the Pennsylvania Ballet was a prime example, a very shocking example. After all, I was a founder. There had been musical chairs and board involvement in the switching of power balances. Was it about the art? Was it about civic institutions existing for themselves rather than for their true purposes, like a bunch of real estate, forgetting that it was about people, and in this case about art and about artists and about creativity and work? And audiences. It was all of that. My state of mind prevented me from looking at dancing, but what I could do was to try to understand, to search, research, and try to find answers—or at least reasons. It was the arc that eventually led to the Carlisle Project. What I realized was whatever the forces were that could create situations like the ones at the Pennsylvania Ballet needed to be understood and alleviated. It became a cause, and I think in that regard I could see what Kirstein meant. Soon after this happened, there was the first Roundtable Conference of the newly formed Dance USA—the national service organization for professional dance. There had been previous service organizations for professional dance, but this was a new incarnation and moving with greater strength and purpose. The first conference was in San Francisco. I didn’t go. I couldn’t. What had happened at the Pennsylvania Ballet was a banner, a focus. This is what’s happening. You artistic directors, you professionals in the field, take back your companies because they are moving in a dangerous direction. Unfortunately, it continues to move in that direction to this day. Companies still exist, but there has been enormous change. There always is change—the farther away from the original state, the more you can change, and I’m not saying all change is for the worse. But certain sensibilities which affect the whole heart of the matter are not the way they were. And even what happens on stage really is affected by that. The heart and spirit of the Pennsylvania Ballet, in my estimation and in a lot of other people’s estimations, were deeply affected by the sad and painful events of 1982.

INT: To try and summarize, two things I want to ask you. Let’s talk a little about the Carlisle Project, but I also think it’s important to talk about your influence on the dance world through mentoring or teaching, and I think those are two separate things, of people like Marcia Dale Weary and others who became...

BARBARA: That was in the earlier part of my life.
INT: I don’t think we mentioned that, so I think we should mention that you had a tremendous influence on many dancers through teaching.

BARBARA: The most heartwarming aspect of my experience in dance, and the greatest source of joy, is the knowledge that I have touched and influenced and been a role model for so many dancers—students, performers, choreographers, as well as administrators, designers, technicians, musicians. I attended the most recent Dance USA Roundtable last June ’98, and I’m sure I had taught or directed or hired every other person there. That’s about longevity, of course—but I’ve always been in the fray. The founding of the Carlisle Project is a prime example.

INT: Let’s explain that a little.

BARBARA: Getting back to the arc that led to the Carlisle Project: In the post Philadelphia Ballet departure period, I did come to the conclusion, after delving into the problems, that what really was wrong—or at least what I could attack—was what had fallen in the cracks. That had to do with process, with the creative process, with the art and artists, the training and the opportunities for professional development. All these were getting lost, because attention was constantly about product and about the financial-bottom line-matched up with the kinds of institutional responsibilities to a community, both local and national, like audience development, bridging cultures, community outreach—all kinds of buzzwords. Funding sources were not giving money to art or even viewing that as the most important thing. They now had a more global and encompassing view of where and how money had to be given and how they could evaluate whatever the criteria would be. How do you evaluate? The basic difficulty here is that you cannot evaluate art the way you evaluate a commercial product. The dollar is not how you evaluate. You don’t put dollar assessments on quality. How do you do that? And dealing with an arts institution is exactly about that puzzling dichotomy. There lies the big problem. The Carlisle Project started to fill that need, and assisting Marcia Dale Weary in Carlisle was the way we were going to start our venture.

INT: For the record, we’re talking about the founding artistic director of the Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet.

BARBARA: Marcia Dale Weary, the great teacher of classical ballet, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

INT: Which is probably one of the leading training grounds for dancers.

BARBARA: Certainly among the top three or four, I would say. A legendary teacher. I was her first guest teacher in 1959, when I had my school in Wilkes-Barre. My respect for her and our relationship makes me proud. She always reminds me that many of the things that she does and does so well she learned from me. That, to me, is one of the great gifts. So the Carlisle Project built around some of the goals that she had by using her dance students and bringing in others who would be the beautifully trained bodies to be used, if I may use that word, for choreographers who were coming in and doing experimental work. The balance of the original
proposal to the Ford Foundation was really on extensions of curriculum and trying to bring into the ballet field that kind of openness to choreographic enrichment. (end of tape 2, side 1) That’s the reason, but not the only reason. I left the Project’s gates very open-ended, and that was very fortunate. In a document about the Carlisle Project’s years from 1984-1996, I wrote in my commentary: “Although there were many gratifying visible results of the Project’s teachings and career advancing opportunities, it was the less tangible aspects that, in essence, overrode specific successes. Our programs rarely failed to create an atmosphere of personal warmth but professional rigor; of camaraderie but undiminished competitiveness; of freedom from commercial burdens but intensely pressured work schedules and deadlines. The Carlisle Project was, in fact, a crucible fueled by human values, idealism and priceless information that no doubt have been absorbed and will be passed on by those who participated—now Carlisle Project missionaries.

INT: How many people went through the program in those nine years?

BARBARA: I think I have them listed in our closing publication: there were 159 choreographers, close to 300 dancers, about 35 teachers and mentors, about 9 or 10 composers, about 30 musicians and instrumentalists, and all kinds of staff. Return far beyond its cost, because there’s one thing people have to remember. You don’t have to spend a lot of money on ideas. When you’re talking about process, you’re talking about ideas—you’re not talking about productions-things that have to be constructed. What was important was that there were very few who came whose lives were not affected and changed in many ways, and the stories I could tell are heartwarming. But funding for art became harder and harder to get and foundations don’t stay in for long periods of time. I was grateful for the wonderful years but I couldn’t spend my life fundraising anymore. You see, the program didn’t produce revenues. We hardly had any earned revenue, like box office or monies for performance. It wasn’t that kind of program. Applicants couldn’t pay to come. They had to be selected, and when they came, even though they may not have received money at an initial stage, they had no expenses. They had everything taken care of, from their transportation to their food.

INT: So there was no income.

BARBARA: No. One of the participants said, “You’ve invited me to come. I don’t have to pay for my transportation, my room, my board. I’m going to get all the time. I’m going to be able to choreograph and do what I want and fail or do something wonderful and have these gorgeous dancers to work with? And I don’t have to pay anything? You’re going to give all this to me?” It rarely failed to create an environment in which people were restored. It was invigorating. It was stimulating. They talked with each other. It was just a remarkable thing. I didn’t have everything in place when I started. It was something that evolved organically, but I knew what the goal was. I knew what the mission was, and it was to fill that emptiness in the dance world that I was beginning to see and which I see even more now. That’s why I hate to give up this ship.

INT: What now, though?
BARBARA: That’s what I’m saying. I’m trying to keep the same center, the same concept alive, and try to do it in another form. My new project will be called Carlisle Project Encore. I pray that I’ll be able to get support, because its concept is more important now than ever. I’ve added some “research” programs that can utilize the professionals who are going to participate as a living laboratory to find some answers to the major problems that we’re facing now. Things happen to us. Decisions are made at political levels and by heads of foundations—maybe we can contribute some answers to those problems.

INT: So how are you filling your days now in addition to seeking reincarnation of the project?

BARBARA: I spend a lot of time writing, thinking it through, gathering, and sometimes spending some time now trying to get support for it. But I’m not doing as much as I did before. I sort of konk out. I take life a little easy. I’m lazy. I procrastinate. Working out of my house allows me to do that.

INT: You need to write your book.

BARBARA: I’ve promised myself to do that many times, but I hate to admit in an oral history that’s going to be around forever, that I am an absolute electronic cripple. My husband and I even took computer lessons and we are hopeless. So everything I do, because I’m slowed up a little bit naturally, I do just a lot less and it takes a lot more time. But I’m seventy-two. I’m driven because I know I’m healthy. At the moment I’m not so healthy but I’m generally healthy. I feel that I want to keep my mind going and I think that there’s so much that I have learned and so much that I care about deeply that I can still give this effort. Some of the things that are happening are scary. Times have always been a little scary. Each generation thinks the next is in trouble. My mother said that to me and I’ve said that to my children. We keep on saying that as generations pass. Sometimes they are glorified in the past and sometimes they’re made worse. But there will always be change. This is a period of change, and my philosophy is while this change is going on, we can take some small steps and salvage certain things that are the most important in the end, to keep us alive, keep our adrenalin flowing until some answers come, until the bigger answers are found. In my mind, the idea of what foundations are doing is “fixing the chairs on the deck of the Titanic.” They are addressing many huge philosophical questions, but in the meantime, artists and arts organizations are depleted and struggling to stay alive.

INT: That sounds very Jewish to me. I mean, I don’t know if you see it that way but—

BARBARA: Of course. Of course. That’s why I love being Jewish, when I understand finally about why I think Judaism makes great sense. It’s about what you do now. It’s what you do when you’re alive. It’s how much you make of your life. It is your obligation to do that. It’s not because you’re tainted when you were born or that you’re going to find your peace someplace in your afterlife. Maybe that’s true. I don’t know. But now is the time. You have to do something. If you can do it. Don’t give up. And laugh at adversity. Laugh at yourself. I love that. That’s certainly Jewish and that’s certainly why I like to be with Jewish people. They laugh at the same things I
I love some non-Jewish people who say, “But I’m not Jewish,” and I say, “But you have a Jewish heart.”

INT: Was there anything, before we conclude, that I haven’t asked you that you feel were important to say? And also, are you receptive to revisiting this interview at some future point if it’s necessary?

BARBARA: What do you mean revisit?

INT: I don’t know. That’s what they ask in here.

BARBARA: Do they show this? This comes to me?

INT: Yes, that’s part of what you’re going to be-

BARBARA: Are you responsible for editing all this?

INT: No, I’m not.

BARBARA: You just send the tapes?

INT: I give in the tapes. They duplicate, they do a transcript and then you get to see the transcript. (Tape shuts)