An Interview with Alice Kessler-Harris

Tony Michels, Lara Vapnek, and Annie Polland

Alice Kessler-Harris is a towering figure in the fields of women's history and labor history, fields in which she has played a leading role since the 1970s. Over the course of her long and influential career, Kessler-Harris has published numerous articles and books that explore the interplay of gender, class, and social policy. Her book *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (1982, 2003) is widely regarded as a classic. Kessler-Harris continued to explore the nuances of women’s experiences in the workforce in books such as *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (1990, 2015) and *Gendering Labor History* (2007). Kessler-Harris’s investigation of women’s work led her to examine how ideas about gender shaped social welfare, a subject that she explored in greatest detail in her 2001 book, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America*. Her most recent book, *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* (2012), used the life of the controversial playwright to examine the cultural politics of the twentieth-century United States and to consider the relationship between history and memory. Kessler-Harris is currently the R. Gordon Hoxie Professor Emerita of American History at Columbia University and Professor Emerita in the Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

Kessler-Harris has had a significant impact on public history as well. While researching her dissertation, Kessler-Harris discovered the fiction of Anzia Yezierska, an Eastern European Jewish immigrant writer who found great acclaim in the 1920s but whose work had fallen into
obscurity. Convinced Yezierska’s work was important historically but also resonant for contemporary audiences, Kessler-Harris devoted herself to finding a new publisher in the 1970s and thus introduced hundreds of thousands of new readers to Yezierska’s work, now a staple of both academic courses and also English Language Learners courses. In 2016, Kessler-Harris worked with Columbia University and the New York Historical Society to have her first book, *Women Have Always Worked*, become the basis of a massive open online course (MOOC).

In addition to her impressive list of publications, Kessler-Harris is known as a generous mentor and a leader in the historical profession. As a faculty member at Rutgers and at Columbia, Kessler-Harris took an active role in educating graduate students and in supporting them as they pursued a variety of career paths. Among her many professional activities, Kessler-Harris pushed for greater inclusion within the historical profession by working to establish the Coordinating Council of Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP) and serving as chair of the American Historical Association’s Committee on the Status of Women. She has also served as president of the American Studies Association (1992–93), the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA, 2008–10), and the Organization of American Historians (2011–12).

The editors of *Jewish Social Studies* wanted to interview Kessler-Harris as someone who did influential work on Jewish women and Jewish workers early in her career, but did not choose to focus on Jews as her primary subject. We thought it would be interesting and valuable to hear her thoughts about Jewish history as a field and how her own experiences led her to an early interest in Jews but also led in other directions.

This interview has been edited for style and clarity. 😊

**Lara Vapnek:** In previous interviews you’ve talked about how particular professors and mentors inspired you to study history. How did your experiences of being born into a family of Jewish refugees in England, in 1941, make you want to learn more about the past?

**Alice Kessler-Harris:** Well, the family connection, in some ways perversely, made me want to learn more about Jewish history, and that’s because the specifically Jewish experience was not part of my growing up. My parents, as I’ve often said, were refugees. They were smuggled out of Prague through Poland by the Communist Party and its networks. They left in April of 1939, after the Germans had entered Prague, and they were able to leave because my mother’s family was heavily involved with the Czech Communist Party. My parents, along
with another sister of my mother’s, got out that way. When I was growing up, during the war—I was born in England in 1941—we lived in a refugee household which included Communists who were not Jews. We spoke Hungarian, my parents’ language, at home; and German, as a part of the refugee community. But Jewishness, even after we moved to Wales in 1947, was not part of our upbringing. I knew we were Jews at some level, but the religion wasn’t an active part of our daily culture. What was part of the active tradition was the politics. My parents were refused readmission to Czechoslovakia after the war, not because they were Jews but because they were the wrong sort of Communists, and I always knew that we had been allowed to remain in Britain by an accident of sorts. The Jewishness entered when my mother died in 1951. I was not quite 10 years old. My brothers and I had been sent off to live with some other friends of the family while she was ill. We were brought home on the day of her funeral, after the burial. I asked if I could take flowers to the cemetery and of course was told Jews didn’t bring flowers to cemeteries. That was when I began to explore what it meant to be Jewish. I discovered the local synagogue and provoked my father into sending me to heder. When the teacher, the melamed, discovered that I had two brothers, that was that. He knocked on our door and persuaded my father that he had to send his sons. The three of us attended heder for a couple of years.

Annie Polland: Together?
AKH: All of us together.

Tony Michels: Was that in Wales?
AKH: That was in Wales, in Cardiff. And it was a very traditional heder, you know, no translation, no understanding, just read the Hebrew and mouth the words.

AP: Were there other girls in the class?
AKH: No. There were only about seven or eight children in the class. It was a very small group, but everybody else was male. They couldn’t very well exclude me because I had initiated the contact, but it was clear that I was not an important presence. That happened almost simultaneously with the appearance of one of my mother’s sisters, my Aunt Erzsi, in our household. Erzsi had been responsible for getting many members of our family out of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. She remained in Budapest, not wanting to abandon her mother, who refused to leave. Erzsi survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. When my mother died in 1951, Erzsi, who was then in Israel, came to live with us. At that point, what it meant to be a Jew hit home. I knew about the concentration camps before that, but only vaguely. Erzsi talked
about our grandmother, who had died at Auschwitz. I was 10 years old when I listened to Erzsi describe how she and other Jews had been systematically rounded up. I learned then how close my family had come to annihilation, how close I had come to not being. I couldn’t avoid the question of what it meant to be Jewish after that. And Erzsi told us other stories about our family. We learned from her of our uncle—my mother’s oldest brother—who as a 19-year-old had joined the Béla Kuhn uprising in 1921. He was executed when the uprising failed, and that, according to Erzsi, accounted for the family’s commitment to communism. I’d never learned those stories from my mother, but Erzsi told us all those stories about family history.

LV: So Erzsi was this person that appeared on the scene when you were 10? You had never met her before, but you had heard about her . . .

AKH: Exactly. I’d never met her. Although I knew about her largely because my father insisted his children spend Sunday mornings writing letters to all the scattered relatives.

AP: Did she resemble your mother?

AKH: No, not at all. Not at all. My mother was a very gentle woman. She spoiled her kids, was beloved by the neighbors for her phenomenal baking. Erzsi, and I don’t know whether this is pre or post the concentration camp experience, was a tiger. To us, as children, she seemed not just strict but rigid. She commanded us and we had to obey. She repeatedly reminded us that she had survived the concentration camps, and she would survive the experience of three small children. When she said it was bedtime, we closed our books and disappeared—not a minute later, but right then. If we didn’t eat the last morsel on our plates, she reminded us that in the concentration camp she ate potato peels. Mindent megenni, she would yell at us: “eat it all.” We were tormented, my brothers and I, by this survivor aunt who didn’t have a gentle bone in her body at that point. It was 1951 or 1952. She had survived the experience [of the concentration camp], survived a sanatorium. She returned to Budapest, where she was rejected by the then-Communist regimes where her friends were now in power. It was not a good time for Jews, Erzsi told us, and so she immigrated to Israel. Israel had been her salvation. I learned from her what it meant to be a Jewish refugee; that we were refugees because we were Jews.

TM: Who made the decision to send you and your brothers to heder; was that one of your relatives or was this something you wanted to do?

AKH: This is one of the stories I tell. I did. I wanted to learn about being Jewish. There was one big synagogue in Cardiff, the Cathedral Street Synagogue. One day after school I went to the synagogue just to
see it, and somebody said to me, “What do you want little girl?” I said I wanted to learn about being Jewish, and so this person took me to the person who I learned was the melamed, the teacher. His name was Samuels, Reb Samuels we called him, and Samuels said to me, “What do you mean you want to learn? Are you a Jew?” I was blonde, and female, an unlikely candidate in his mind. Then the story came out, and a few days later he showed up at my home. We could hear him yelling at my father: “What are you doing? You’ve got three children and you’re not teaching them how to be Jews.” My father, who was an atheist, was furious, furious with me for doing this to him. And of course, my two brothers, one a year older and one a year younger than I, were also angry. My father was basically shamed into sending us to heder. Erzsi arrived several months after that. She actually was very pleased with the development because, although she too was an atheist, she believed that we should know something of our Jewish heritage, which was the source of the murders in our family and our displacement. Under Erzsi’s pushing, I joined the local branch of Ha-bonim with a friend who was also the daughter of immigrants. Ha-bonim was a Jewish socialist Zionist organization—I think originally founded in England—which functioned something like Girl Scouts for Jews. It was there that I was introduced to something of Jewish culture. We learned Israeli folk dance, celebrated holidays, did summer camps.

**TM:** *When did you join Ha-bonim?*

**AKH:** I must’ve been 11 or so. Cardiff has a very old Jewish population, but we were not part of that. We were part of a small, secular, refugee community. Perhaps luckily, the mother of my closest friend, Nora, was not quite as hostile to religion. Nora’s mother—also an atheist but nevertheless more tolerant of religion, leaned on Erzsi to send the three of us to synagogue with her two children. She didn’t go, but she insisted that on the High Holidays, the five of us—Nora and her sister and my brothers and I—go. Erzsi supported this. My father would have said no, but he was powerless to oppose two strong women.

**AP:** *So the five children go to High Holiday services. Your father didn’t go, Erzsi didn’t go?*

**AKH:** No, no, no, but we were sent, not to the Cathedral Street Synagogue but to another, smaller synagogue filled with refugees like us. And, of course, that was not only a negative experience—I mean at that point we’d learned enough Hebrew to be able to follow things—but it was a synagogue in which the women were segregated from the men. So I’m separated from my brothers and feeling vulnerable, and then kaddish comes. I remember standing up to say kaddish, and all
The women around me pushed me down. I know I’m supposed to stand up and say kaddish, but they’re pushing me down. I still don’t know to this day if it was because I was a girl, if my mother had been gone too long, or why. All I remember is the awful feeling of a community of people pushing me down when I wanted to say kaddish for my mother who was gone. So the whole Jewish experience was fraught.

**AP:** Could you sense any class issues in the congregation, differences between the established Cardiff Jews and the newcomers?

**AKH:** I can’t answer that question because I never was more than a visitor on the High Holidays. We went only when Nora’s mother made us go. Nora and her sister were with us, but not their mother.

**LV:** One of the questions that we initially were thinking about is how your European background shaped your politics. You had firsthand experience of World War II, which many American Jews did not have in the same way, but I’m also thinking about different experiences of communism. In the American context, there were so many Jews in the Communist Party or in leftist politics who were silenced during the Cold War. But as I hear you tell the story, I’m hearing something different about communism. The Communist Party helped your family get out, but then there was a sense of betrayal after the war, which was maybe a little bit different than the American Cold War context.

**AKH:** Well, there are two pieces of that. One is that my parents were refused repatriation back to Czechoslovakia because they were the wrong kind of communists. They were so-called Czech nationalists and not Stalinists. So they were refused readmission, and my father then became bitterly anticommunist. And there were still several members of the family, including one of my mother’s brothers, who got stuck behind the Iron Curtain and never got out. He and another brother had been in the Czech Army of the Resistance, and in the confusion of everything ending, one of the brothers (my uncle Miklos) went back to live in the old family place. By then the borders had changed and the house was in the Ukraine. A second brother returned to Prague, where he eventually met up with his sister, Erzsi, who had returned there after a year in a Swedish sanitorium. They emigrated to Israel together in 1948. By the late forties, my parents knew very well what life was like behind the Iron Curtain. They had no loyalty of any kind to structural communism. What we call “really existing communism” had betrayed them. What did persist was the value system, which I, to this day, remember. The noncompetitive values, the sharing, the conviction that they were in this world to make it a better place. Maybe some of that was the war: they wouldn’t have survived the internment camps, or the refugee household in which we lived for the duration,
without sharing everything from ration coupons to food, to clothing and information. My mother was very good at that. She was just the kind of person who baked every day and took the baked goods to whoever needed them. So there was that piece of it.

But then of course the second piece is that after my mother died in 1951 and when it was clear that Erzsi would leave after a couple of years, my father thought it would be better to be where there were relatives. He had a sister in Trenton, New Jersey. So he decided he would try to bring us all to America. But of course, anticommunism was rife in America, and McCarthyism was ascendant, and he knew better than anybody that you had to keep your mouth shut. So in that crucial period, 11, 12, 13, 14, the early adolescent years, there was not only no discussion of communism but there was a legitimate sort of anger about what communism in practice had done. Erzsi use to describe communism in Czechoslovakia in the interwar years as a haven. It was the most beautiful time, she would say, because the Czech Communist Party was a real social party with its own commitments and its own loyalties. Communism wasn’t a dirty word in my family. But as soon as my father recognized that if he wanted to go to America, all conversations about socialism and communism ended. In a way, to be Jewish was easier.

**TM:** Can I ask a follow-up question about Ha-bonim that connects to both Israel and to Czechoslovakia? How long were you a member of Ha-bonim? How was your experience in it?

**AKH:** I was in Ha-bonim for about three years. Despite the pro-Israeli propaganda, Israeli folk dancing, etc. Ha-bonim was a good place for me because there I met with other children of refugees. Except for my friend Nora, and a couple of younger kids who were the children of my parents’ friends, most of the people I knew were not Jewish, and nobody I went to school with was Jewish. Ha-bonim gave me a sense of community that I hadn’t experienced before. But I remember it now as only cultural; that is, I remember the dancing and the music and the singing and the learning of Israeli folk songs. It was a period in Britain when people my age, kids, still didn’t know that Israel was a country. My brothers used to have street fights with kids when they would play: How many countries begin with I? There’s Ireland and Iceland and Italy and Israel. And people used to say, “What’s Israel? It’s not a country.” So the Ha-bonim experience was an experience of a solidarity of a kind, of being part of something in a country in which we were always unique. We were unique because we were foreigners. We were unique because we were Jews. We didn’t celebrate Christmas or Easter, but we didn’t celebrate Hanukkah or Passover or anything else either. We did know that there were other Jews somewhere, and that was actually
quite helpful. After a while, though, Nora and I just dropped out. We started camping together, and I guess that was a substitute.

AP: Was there a romanticization of Israel, an idea that in this country there’s oranges, acceptance, and a socialist political viewpoint?

AKH: Not a romanticization, not in my experience, because Erzsi had just come from there, and she had lived there for the past couple of years. She had gone with a brother and sister-in-law and their one-year-old baby. The four of them lived together in one room, and Erzsi used to say it was quite awful. My uncle was a dentist, so he got himself on his feet pretty quickly, but still there was no housing, and Erzsi, as I say, was a tyrant. It must have been horrible to live with her. And indeed my cousin Uri (now 70 years old, who was this little boy) and I laugh about our childhood memories of Erzsi. Erzsi’s vision of Israel was not romanticized. They had gone there because there was nowhere else for them to go. They knew they had to get out of Czechoslovakia because of the antisemitism, but Israel was the only open door, and her vision of Israel was one of relief and pride in the building process. I remember clearly, one day my father brought home a couple of beautiful oranges. Erzsi looked at them and said bitterly, “They must come from Israel. In Israel, all the good oranges get sent abroad.” They didn’t get the good fruit. They got the leftover fruit, at least in her memory. In her mind, the possibility of creating a socialist country predominated, and I did hear about the Histadrut and about the public services as well as the sacrifices. But socialism was only in its early stages then. Later, when I used to visit her quite frequently in the late sixties and early seventies, after she went back to live there, she focused on the wonderful progress that Israelis had made. She lived in her own apartment then, on a street lined with flowers. She pointed to the still-active Histadrut and to the engaged socialist spirit. I think by then Erzsi was ready to believe that Israel had been her salvation—and that of many Jewish survivors.

AP: And maybe she got some good oranges.

AKH: Good oranges, and good figs too.

TM: Did you not imbibe any of Ha-bonim’s socialism in Wales? Was socialism not something that was stressed?

AKH: If I did I didn’t remember it, but remember I was a kid and I was already a socialist of some kind, so it might just have felt like a reflection of my existence. And the Labour government, of course, was in power in Britain for much of that time, so we already had national health, and the big industries had been nationalized. There was not that sharp division in Britain between socialism and capitalism. I didn’t notice the socialism in Ha-bonim, but I can’t answer that question.
AP: I’m wondering about the world of books. As you’re growing up in Cardiff and you’ve lost your mother, what role did literature play in your childhood?

AKH: Pretty much the only books in my parents’ house were German and Hungarian, mostly German. German books were not publicly displayed, for obvious reasons, but when they read serious literature, that’s what they read. But I read what British kids read. My parents were planning on staying there. They weren’t going anywhere. They liked living in Wales, and indeed it was very good to them in lots of different ways. The idea that we should assimilate, we should actually become British, was very important to my parents. So I read “Golliwog” stories and Kipling, and Enid Blyton’s adventures of the five and all those stories we now recognize as racist. I read William [Brown] stories. And then of course, as I grew a little older, Jane Austen, the nineteenth-century panoply, George Eliot, everybody. That was the literature that played its role in my life. I wasn’t reading socialist or political literature of any kind that I remember.

AP: Did you want to read books with girls or women as the subjects?

AKH: Both. Both. Boys had the good adventures and they made trouble. Girls—there weren’t so many good girls’ stories. I mean, as a kid you must have done the same. It was a racist, imperial country. I can still remember the first black person I met, he was Jamaican and a boarder in my friend Nora’s house. She and I both, at the age of 10 or so, in the living room, stretched out our hands and touched his skin. We wanted to know what that color skin felt like. We’d never seen that. It is hard to understand now, but the environment in which we grew up was very British—not English, but British as the Welsh understood it. To be Jewish in that environment was already to stand out. And to be female was also to occupy a marginal place. Grammar school was divided into boys and girls. I was at Cardiff High School for Girls—the best high school for females, but it couldn’t hold a candle to Cardiff High School for Boys, where my older brother went.

Here’s another Jewish story. Every school day began with an assembly, the first part of which was a religious service. In the first months at Cardiff High, I went to the assemblies and took for granted that I should simply ignore the religious part. But very quickly, I learned that the handful of Jews in the school conducted their own little service in another room. After the 10- or 15-minute religious service, the headmistress would stop and say, “Just a minute while the Jewish girls take their seats,” and in would march the seven or eight of them, each taking a seat with her class, while all eyes turned to watch them. When I saw this happening—I was 11 by then—my heart sank from
not knowing what to do. I knew about being Jewish; but I also knew we were not religious. Yet this was not about religion. I would have to announce my outsider status to the whole new school. It took me a while before I drummed up the courage to join “the Jewish girls.” Finally, when I did, it took some energy to convince the Jews that I was one of them because of course I knew very little about being Jewish.

LV: That you weren’t just trying to get out of the assembly.
AKH: That’s exactly right. But that was what the culture was like. In this entire school of five hundred or so girls, I would say seven or eight of us stayed out of the larger assembly. One of the senior girls, a prefect, led our morning services. I didn’t understand them, but I was never sorry to have made the decision to out myself.

AP: It’s just amazing, because so much of the Jewish identity was what you weren’t.
AKH: That’s right.

AP: Except for that moment, when you go to the melamed, but then it’s a matter of not being one of your brothers.
AKH: That’s exactly right. That for me was the great disappointment. They didn’t really want me.

AP: But they did take you.
AKH: Yes, well, he had to because I had come and wanted the education. I had introduced him to the family. He couldn’t very well exclude me.

LV: And how did that change when you got to America, that experience of Jewishness?
AKH: Event number one was on the boat. We were on the Queen Elizabeth, in third class, but on the Queen Elizabeth for the five-day ocean trip. Every morning my father sat us down and said, “This is what it means to be a Jew. You don’t eat bacon, you don’t eat milk with meat. We learn about separate dishes, and about keeping Shabbat. My father makes sure we know the basic prayers. His sister, who was sponsoring us, kept a kosher household. She wasn’t an Orthodox Jew in any sense, but she was a practicing Jew, and she had raised her adult sons that way. Two of her three grown sons still lived at home. My father didn’t want to be embarrassed or ashamed by his three kids who didn’t know anything about being Jewish. So we come to America, and we move in with Aunt Regina, and of course immediately, it becomes clear that we don’t know anything at all. She is completely horrified. My younger brother was then about to turn 13. My older brother had never had a bar mitzvah because my father didn’t believe in such things. But in America, he knows that my
younger brother will have to have a bar mitzvah. It is all arranged in my father’s style. Otto, my brother, is taken to a synagogue where he reads his haftarah and then comes home. No party, no celebration of any kind. So, in America we are immediately immersed in American Jewishness. In America there are lox and bagels and Jewish delicatessens, and what the heck is a Jewish delicatessen, and why do you have to have eaten corned beef only on rye bread, and all that stuff just hits us. But the other thing of course is that in America we are very poor. We had no money. The currency controls meant that my father couldn’t bring anything with him, and it took him a long time to figure out what he could do for a living. He’d been a shoe designer, and he’d been running a shoe factory in Cardiff. But in America that turns out to be impossible. We are really dirt poor. And the Jews in the public school—Trenton Central High School, perhaps 10 percent or so of the students—were not like us. They had more money, to start with, and their values differed.

AP: Second and third generation . . .

AKH: They’re second generation, their grandparents had immigrated for the most part. They already live in houses of their own, and by our standards they are quite well off, and they act like second-generation Jews. For us, it’s a huge shock because in our little Jewish community we were all part of each other’s families, nobody thinks twice when somebody eats in somebody else’s house. It’s not physically close, but we know who the friends are, we know that when something happens, we call x. But in America, we’re basically on our own, and even though there are lots of Jews around, even an aunt and some cousins, they’re not anybody we understand as like us. So the Jewishness, in a way, is reversed. Although it’s no longer an unspoken part of our identity, being Jewish identifies us as part of a group to which we don’t feel we belong. What does make us belong? Here’s the great irony. In Wales we had been foreigners, outsiders; in America we are British. We have British accents, we come from Wales, the Welsh accent is a very distinguishable soft accent, and everybody loves it. So suddenly we are the cat’s meow, now we’re British. Now we’re more British than we ever were in Britain. And of course, that’s what gives us our entrée, and we’re teenagers, late teenagers. That’s how we identify; that’s how we imagine ourselves. So you want to know about Jewish identity? I didn’t feel “Jewish” on either side of the Atlantic. That’s why when I first got Tony’s message, I said, “I’m not sure I’m the right kind of Jew.”

TM: It might be a good time to discuss your academic career. How did you develop an interest in history?
AKH: Right. I was just 16 when I started my freshman year at Goucher. I didn’t exactly choose Goucher. Sarah Christie, a vice principal at Trenton High School, chose it for me and arranged an interview and, I think, a scholarship so I could go there. Just by chance, I was assigned as an advisor a young historian named Rhoda Dorsey. She was an assistant professor, I don’t know how old she was, thirties probably, with a degree in American Studies, from Minnesota. Minnesota then had—I only learned this later—one of the few American Studies programs that actually thought about culture in historical context. That was the program that produced Allan Trachtenberg, and where Leo Marx taught for a while. Rhoda Dorsey was of their generation. Anyway, she took me on. She was my advisor. Now remember, I was a new immigrant, a motherless child, and I’d spent my life looking for mothers. Rhoda was rigid, and she was stern, but she was a great teacher, and she held my hand in a certain kind of way. I was pulled toward being a history major not by any sort of desire to find my background. Indeed, she was an American historian. But one of the things I most enjoyed was that I was actually learning American history, which I had never done before, and I was good at it.

In the middle of that experience, I met and then married, between my junior and senior years, a nice Jewish boy. I was 16 when I met him; he was applying to medical school and still a medical student when we married. He had two parents, a loving stay-at-home mother, a younger sister, and a real house in Baltimore, all the things that made a real family. And he was Jewish. It was the first time I felt that I could actually be an American Jew—he offered what I craved: a real family that went out for dinner together every Friday night. I taught at a Baltimore high school for a year after I graduated from college. As a junior teacher I was assigned to a mentorship with a woman named Rebecca Liebman, who was one of the few Jewish members of the DAR. She was the great-great-great-granddaughter of a southern Jewish slave-holding family. For her, I was a dream come true. I was the right kind of Jew because I wasn’t prost. Prost is the right word. It means vulgar or crude. By then I’ve begun to develop a Jewish identity, which I care about even though I’m still not sure what it is.

My husband Jay decides to take an internship in Brooklyn; I write to the New York Board of Education to ask how I can apply for a job, and they reply that without a master’s degree I can only teach as a substitute. In Baltimore that meant daily assignments. I didn’t then understand that in New York I might actually have been assigned to a school. So I went back to Goucher, to Rhoda Dorsey, with a question: “I have to get a master’s degree, where should I go?” She said to me,
“Don’t go to Columbia; it’s a moribund institution. Don’t go to NYU; you won’t learn anything there. Go to Rutgers.” Rutgers at the time was populated by students of Merle Curti, products of the University of Wisconsin. Its faculty at the time included Warren Susman, Joe [J. Joseph] Huthmacher, who was an early immigration historian, Rudy [Rudolph] Vecoli, who was also an immigrant historian, and Charles Budd [Pete] Forcey, and Lloyd Gardner. So I go to Rutgers and discover that I love graduate school; I complete the master’s degree in a year because that’s what I thought I had to do. And at the end of the first year, they offered me a fellowship.

AP: How many women were in the classes?
AKH: It was the first year of the Danforth Foundation fellowships, and there was one woman (Linda Skinner) who had won that fellowship. She left after the first year. I recall only one other in my cohort, Jean Scarpaci [now called Vincenza Scarpaci]. A sprinkling of women had been admitted to the classes ahead of me—one of whom had received a fellowship, and then, notoriously, run off to join her boyfriend in Italy. At least that was the rumor. The population was decidedly male, and of course there was nothing like women’s history there, and the only female faculty were located at Douglass College—a bus ride away. But there was a strong social/intellectual history program, and exceptional immigrant history. After I won the fellowship, I negotiated with my husband to stay in graduate school. I start to study Yiddish then—it’s at that point that I think I decided to combine my enthusiasm for American history with an exploration of what it meant to be Jewish in America. It wasn’t Hebrew but Yiddish that I felt I needed to learn. I’d had enough Hebrew to recognize all the characters, and I had grown up speaking German. So Yiddish becomes a language that I try to master. My first lessons were with my husband’s aunt Ruth. And then I went to the Arbeter Ring shule and I read Forverts every morning on the train just to practice. And pretty soon I could read Yiddish. And then of course there was the dissertation. I had early on decided that I wanted to work on the 1890s: depression, hunger, socialism, anarchism, those issues were all part of my growing up. But the decision to focus on Jewish workers came later. They seemed to me to be the vector of change. I was fascinated by the massive Jewish immigration of that period—though I probably would have denied the personal engagement if anyone had asked.

AP: And that in some ways weaves together several questions, or strands of identity, right? Because although it’s a decidedly different context, you’re addressing the leftist politics of your youth, you’re filling in the Jewish identity
through the history and the language. And by focusing on American history, you’re becoming an American.

**AKH:** Exactly right. It was very satisfying, probably the most satisfying period of my life to that point—working on this dissertation where I’m actually reading Yiddish microfilm, because that’s what it was then, in the New York Public Library, *Di arbiter tsaytung*, all these 1890s publications, *Dos abend blat*, and I’m happy as a clam because I can spend eight hours a day burning my eyes out reading this. I was completely taken with it. And you’re right, it did satisfy my yearning for “roots.” I could learn about what it was like to be a Jew in America by becoming an American historian. The decision to learn Yiddish was the turning point. I could easily have become a Europeanist, I had all the languages.

**AP:** What did the advisors say? Was it okay to do a dissertation on Jews in the 1960s? Did you get any resistance from your advisors saying you should look at more mainstream topics?

**AKH:** Yes, I did get resistance, and if you look at the dissertation you’ll see that it’s couched in the language of reform: Who’s doing the reforming? Non-Jews of course. And who’s getting reformed? The Jews. It’s not a very good dissertation. I don’t hold any stock in it. But in a way it tells the story of my own struggle. I wanted to be an American historian—probably mistakenly, I wanted to explore America’s impact on the Jews, not the “self-experience” of the Jews. Pete Forcey, who was first my advisor, and then Warren Susman were on board with that. I don’t remember Rudy Vecoli exercising much influence, though he was on my committee. Huthmacher was uninterested in Jews, which was a great disappointment to me, so I didn’t work with him at all. I think now that the dissertation is an amalgam where I tried to combine what people thought I should be doing with what I really wanted to be doing. It’s a bit of a mess.

**AP:** But it led you to where you needed to go. So in that case it’s a perfectly wonderful mess.

**TM:** Alice, can you recall how members of your committee tried to dissuade you, or if not dissuade you then express concern about your interest in Jews as a historical subject?

**AKH:** So the way I got the dissertation proposal through (we didn’t have a formal proposal mechanism then) was by saying that I was trying to write a book or a dissertation that would parallel the Lynds’ study of Middletown in the 1920s. I was going to think about the transformation that occurred in the 1890s and about the way in which reform and reformers intersected with new immigrant populations. The Lynds were everywhere in the sixties, and that seemed perfectly
reasonable to everybody. But then, of course, as I started to do it I realized that the largest majority of the incoming population in New York at that point were Jews, and then I needed the Yiddish, so it was in the course of doing the dissertation that I learned Yiddish. I got the proposal through and then was pretty much left alone. My own advisor, Pete Forcey, went away for a year, and then he moved to Binghamton. Warren Susman, who was an intellectual historian, took over. He and Pete both read chapters as they emerged, and both commented more on the reform tradition than on the immigrants. Vecoli, who didn’t read anything until the very end, persuaded Susman that this was really original work and worth doing. It was original work. I don’t think anybody else had then read all those microfilms. To be fair, while I was reading them, I kept encountering students, graduate assistants of Irving Howe, who was working on World of Our Fathers at that point. They were sitting next to me reading Yiddish microfilm. And of course, many of them were fluent in Yiddish. They’d grown up speaking and reading Yiddish, and there were six of them to my one, going through all this stuff at record-breaking speed. I was furious with them.

TM: If I could just ask more pointedly how the skepticism of some members of your committee was expressed. I ask this because I’ve come across interviews with others who were in graduate school in the 1950s and 1960s, and they say they were advised against writing on American Jews because this would limit their opportunities in the job market. Did you hear that sort of comment from members of your committee?

AKH: Yes. But remember, I was a woman, and nobody ever expected me to get a job anyway, at least not a good one. And if I did, they wouldn’t care where it was. In other words, there was much less investment in somebody like me because not only was I a woman but I was married, and I had a child by the time I finished. My daughter was born in 1964, and I didn’t finish my dissertation until 1968, so I was not a top priority for anybody. I could do whatever I liked as far as they were concerned. To give him full credit, Pete Forcey, who continued to be involved throughout the process, encouraged me to go my own way. Pete had a Princeton B.A., an M.A. from Columbia, and a Ph.D. from Wisconsin. He saw mine as a kind of Merle Curti dissertation, focused on the writing (for which I’ve been grateful all my life) and left the rest to me. I can’t say that the rest of the faculty cared very much.

AP: When people don’t care, it gives you more freedom. And also, there is something about the strength of character and conviction you would have to have in your own work.
AKH: Strength of character, perhaps, or just being left on your own to find your own way. You just follow a path that seems right and reasonable. But I do think sometimes that the not caring made that dissertation such a mess. About a year after I’d finished the dissertation, Pete Forcey, who had been at Wisconsin with Herb[ert] Gutman, introduced me to him. Gutman was then still teaching, I think, at Buffalo. I sent him the dissertation, which he read from beginning to end. A bit after, he was in town and invited me out to lunch. Remember that I’m a total stranger to him. It was Gutman who told me what the dissertation should have been and what I needed to do if I wanted to make it into a book. He shredded the dissertation, but he took it seriously, and because he took it seriously I could see where I had to go. I never went back to the dissertation, but honestly, I think it was my luck that I met Herb Gutman then. I became—an acolyte—but Herb actually took me on, suggested my name for conference panels; mentored me, critiqued my work, introduced me to the profession. He was a mensch. I owe him for that.

AP: Did he encourage the work on women? Because one of the things that the dissertation lacked was a focus on women. You’re not to blame for that of course, because of the context of the time, but then when you decided to include women, how did Herb Gutman facilitate that?

AKH: Perhaps Gutman was only peripherally involved there. It was the women’s movement that turned me toward studying women—Jewish women. I’ll tell you the bottom line. I’m reading all of this microfilm, and I come across Emma Goldman. It’s 1893 and she’s standing on a platform in Union Square and orating in Yiddish, saying, “If you want bread, go take it.” The newspaper headlines are replete with Goldman stories. And I think, oh, that’s interesting. I xerox her Union Square speech—at that point an expensive exercise—and then set it aside. I still have the photocopy. It’s somewhat faded and illegible. But at the time, I put it aside and didn’t think twice about it. I didn’t think it fit in my dissertation, which focused on Jews in the labor movement. Now I am embarrassed to note that I wasn’t clued in to women at all in that period. I had already read Anzia Yezierska at that point, but she didn’t seem to fit into the dissertation either, so I read her for the sheer pleasure of it.

But after I defended the dissertation in 1968 things changed. There was a women’s movement all around me, my marriage was on the rocks; I joined a consciousness-raising group; and in 1970 I became a single parent. I lived then, as now, in New York City, where everything was happening, and I became part of the action. I discovered
the newly organized Coordinating Committee for Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP), which was then not about women’s history but about the situation of women in the profession. It was cofounded by Gerda Lerner, a pioneering historian of women, who would, after that, become a major influence in my life. It was then that I looked back at the dissertation and realized that I’d completely excluded women. I was already teaching, at Hofstra, by then, and dabbling in women’s history classes. It was a bit of a blow but I knew I couldn’t possibly publish the dissertation, or publish even an article from it, without going back and working on the women. It was the politics of the moment that sent me back to work on female labor organizers. I’d been working on Jewish labor, and when I began to look for women, of course, I found them. They were threaded through the late 1890s and early 1900s. My first published articles were about Jewish women labor organizers. I felt then that I had it all, I could focus on socialism, women, and Yiddish culture all bound together. I felt completely at home. I did not then and don’t now see women’s history and labor history as two different fields. For me there was a coherence in the set of issues and problems that made sense not just of women but of the period of the 1890s and the early 1900s.

LV: Those early articles are wonderful, and they’re also very critical of the labor movement. Looking at those early organizers, you really called out the sexism in a way that I’m not sure anyone had done before. How did the rest of the labor-history community respond at that moment?

AKH: There’s a full circle here, and it goes back to Gutman. I started working on the women after I met Herb. He was interested in working-class culture, so he couldn’t not be interested in women, though he covered them up with language about the family. The turning point came when I delivered the paper that became “Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union” at a conference at Binghamton University in, I think it was 1973. I’ll never forget this conference. Gutman was in the audience. I think he probably put me on the program. Anyway, the audience included Gutman, Mel[yn] Dubofsky, David Brody, and a couple of big-wig labor historians. As soon as I gave the paper, I was roundly attacked by Dubofsky, among others, who asked “Why are you doing this? What’s the point?” But Gutman stood up and in his hyperbolic way announced, “This is a very important paper because it gives us access into the minds of the people who are organized.” It was a paper for which I had mined Yiddish lullabies and folk songs, many of them sung by women. His defense silenced everybody. I don’t think it changed their minds, but
it silenced them. Then Gutman suggested I send the paper to Labor History, which was then the only journal in the field. A version of the paper was published there. And then it was as if the world changed, because by then it was already 1975 or so. There was a women’s history movement and labor history was a substantial field. This piece seemed to bring the two together. It didn’t matter that it was critical of the labor movement. There was lots of criticism of the labor movement, around issues of race especially, and exclusionary qualities of trade unions. That piece seemed to open up a conversation.

AP: That point about sources is important too, because in order to get at the mindsets of some of the workers, and I would say even women, the Yiddish newspaper is wonderful, but it’s also limited because you could be looking at those 1890s newspapers in Yiddish and not see it unless you’re looking for it in different ways or interesting ways. I remember going to the Forverts for November 23, 1909, and there is no mention of Clara Lemlich’s name. They talk about a young woman, a short woman, but it was really about Feigenbaum taking over. All the secondary sources were about the women leading it, but if you were to read the primary sources, the picture that comes out is still one of men leading and organizing and orchestrating.

AKH: Yes. I think that’s actually right, the women were ignored in the public sphere. But I had some Yiddish and I could read the letters, and by then I had come to know the folk music, and I’d read Morris Rosenfeld and so on. If I hadn’t had Yiddish, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. [Rose] Schneiderman writes mostly in English, but when she writes to Pauline Newman, she writes in Yiddish. So you don’t get that inner conflict unless you read Yiddish.

AP: Did other labor historians at the time know Yiddish, the way that you knew Yiddish? Did Gutman know Yiddish?

AKH: Gutman not only grew up in a Yiddish-speaking family but also was a product of Camp Kinderland, which was a Yiddish lefty camp. Dubofsky, I don’t know. I don’t think he did.

TM: No, he didn’t.

AKH: It was really Gutman who was then into that whole work culture of different groups and how you handle those differences. None of the young people I know knew Yiddish. It was unusual.

AP: It gave you an edge.

AKH: Yes.

TM: As you were doing this work, there were three fields emerging: women’s history, labor history, and Jewish Studies were gaining momentum in the
seventies and into the eighties. Were you ever tempted to somehow go into Jewish Studies, however you might have conceived that? Or did it seem too far afield? Do you recall what your thoughts were at the time? I ask because if you look at your publication record and the research you’re describing, one might think you could have just as easily gone into Jewish Studies as labor and women’s history.

**AKH:** It was not tempting, and I think that’s perhaps because I was trying to understand the history of the U.S., not the history of a particular group. Labor history was tempting because it pushed me into trying to understand socialism and the radical movement, which I was part of in the sixties. I was already involved in civil rights, demonstrations, etc. So the labor history was part of that, and the women’s history was also political for me. I was, as I’ve tried to explain, not just an ambivalent Jew but an awkward one at best. I had no Hebrew language training. As I remember, Lionel Trilling called us non-Jewish Jews, but I’m not non-Jewish in his sense. I’m deeply Jewish in the sense that I am the child of Holocaust survivors. My extended family was scattered over the earth, and into ashes, as a result of the Holocaust. I identify as a Jew, but I was not interested in pursuing Jews as an explanatory factor in American economics or politics. In contrast, I feel deeply that unless we understand the history of the working class in its multiple dimensions, unless we understand the history of women in all their diversity, we cannot understand American history. I think about Jewish history sometimes as antiquarian history. It’s great to uncover this material, and it’s fascinating, and it makes an instructive story. I applaud the people who do it, but what does it teach us, what does it explain? There are people who do Jewish history, my colleague Rebecca Kobrin is one of them, who approach it in a broad explanatory way. I admire that. And I admire historians like Paula Hyman and Joyce Antler who imagine Jewish history in the context of women’s history. Tony, I put you in that category because the history of socialism is at the core of your work, with Jewish socialism deeply intertwined within it. But at least in the seventies, it wasn’t how most scholars approached Jewish history. And so I wasn’t tempted. I wasn’t critical of it. It just wasn’t me. So why was I drawn to Anzia Yezierska then?

**AP:** I’ve been waiting to ask this question!

**AKH:** I discovered Yezierska when I was working on my dissertation. Her novels and short stories, which deal with the experiences of a young immigrant girl and woman, resonate. After all, that is who I am. Her books, written in a sort of Yiddishized English, are all in the New York Public Library. At the end of each day of torture at the microfilm
machine, I give myself half an hour to read her—a treat before taking the subway home. Within a few months I’d read pretty much all of her published work, and I wanted to take some of it home. I chose *The Bread Givers*. The NYPL was willing to make a photo-offset copy at a price—they couldn’t open the book widely enough to xerox it—so I had my very own copy. By now it’s 1968 or 1969. So why did I fall in love with her and what did I think of her? I think her work reflects the struggle of every immigrant, and particularly every immigrant female, to live in the world in which she finds herself while remaining part of the tradition that fostered her. Yezierska rejects Orthodox Jewish prescription for women; she turns away from the religious practices of her father and his rigid control over family to seek her own path. And she succeeds—not without pain—but she succeeds. It’s hard not to imagine this as my own history. I am, after all, a motherless child who has disobeyed the wishes of her own father, then faltered and sought to please him. Maybe this is a stupid explanation, but Yezierska provides a model of the search for an authentic self without underestimating the special sacrifices required of women who take that path. It is complicated because while on the one hand Yezierska offers a helping hand on the road to independence, on the other she ties me to the goal of “becoming a person,” as she would have put it. She provides an answer to one of the hardest questions I faced in my early years: how does an immigrant kid dare to imagine becoming an American historian?

There is more: because all of Yezierska’s work is deeply rooted in the Jewish Lower East Side, I feel when I’m reading her as though I can more fully understand that part of the Jewish experience. In 1966, 1967, 1968, when I discovered her, there was as yet no resurgence of ethnic pride. Everybody’s still trying to assimilate and to make good in America. I’m new at this game, so I am completely struck by the way Yezierska’s characters live, the way they move beyond their neighborhoods and into the world, the way she manages to get herself an education that enables her to make something of herself. I certainly see myself in her, but I also see the self that’s lost. That is, the self that is non-Jewish, is British, in other words. Just as Yezierska doesn’t want to lose the Lower East Side in her past, I don’t want to lose the British in me. My childhood, my heart, my soul are in some sense still in Wales—though my family was in no sense rooted there. Yezierska raises in me all the fears of the displaced immigrant, the sense that I will have to formulate a respectable past, an appropriate persona, simply in order to survive. That was the deeper pull of Yezierska. And then I have to say that writing the introduction to *Bread Givers* pushed
me into asking, What does it mean to be a Jew, to really be a Jew? What is it about being a Jew, about being a Lower East Side Jew, about being an immigrant that is so character shaping? Yezierska answers this question with in-betweenness that W. E. B. Du Bois recognized and that I think I have always had.

**AP:** To go back to the point about Jewish history, one of the things that I think Jewish history does for the world is to provide an understanding of migration and change and movement. And I wonder if that’s where some of these things come together in a certain way, because the movement is also about rupture—rupture and adaptation and what you saw play out in your own family. What did your father think of your path in history?

**LV:** Like Yezierska, you had to negotiate the struggle to be an individual, versus the family claim.

**AKH:** My father ... he was delighted that I had graduated from a good college. Happy that I married very young. He could handle the master’s degree, that, in his eyes, would give me the opportunity to support myself in case anything happened. When my daughter was born, in 1964, he celebrated. But when I got the Ph.D., he took a step back. He refused to come to the graduation. And about a year after, I divorced the nice Jewish doctor who had provided legitimacy for my erring ways—and he was flummoxed. In his view, I had overstepped the bounds. I had gotten myself a degree. I was overeducated. I wasn’t a good wife anymore. When I asked him to come to my doctoral graduation, he said, “When you have another baby, I’ll come to the bris.” Now he was a very kind man, and he had sacrificed his life for his children. He just had reached the brink of what he could handle. So I knew after that I was on my own. I was no longer married, a single parent, and I had disappointed my father. Now I had nobody to please but myself. As awful as that was at some moments, it was also liberating. I was free to pursue goals that had earlier been illegitimate. I plunged into not just the work, the women I was then researching, but also the professional culture—the American Studies Association, the OAH [Organization of American Historians] and the AHA [American Historical Association]. I became part of first one woman’s committee and then another, because by then my woman’s consciousness had been raised. In 1974—I took a leave from Hofstra to teach at Sarah Lawrence with Gerda Lerner. Two years later, I returned to Hofstra to plan and direct a college degree labor program in the lower Manhattan headquarters of a trade union. I still didn’t think of labor issues and women’s issues as different and separate. I was now moving in the direction of being who I was, I think.
**AP:** There’s an interesting iterative process, I think, between what you’re working on and researching and how that also filters into the strength to live your own life a certain way, and that in turn allows you to move forward with the path that you think is right.

**AKH:** I think that’s true. But what’s also true, and what I think about a lot, is that this was the point at which I began to meet and become close friends with other Jewish women academics. Gerda Lerner was a refugee, like me. I came to know Blanche Wiesen Cook through our political involvements. Linda Kerber played a path-breaking role on the women’s committees. The thing is that I was, for the first time, becoming engaged with female historians—all of them Jews of a sort, and all of whom were on the road to becoming successful historians. Their Jewishness mattered in ways quite different than it did for me, but for none of us was it the central thread in our work. I was entirely comfortable with this group. And that was very important. I could be a Jew and go about the world’s work, as it were. I could begin to meld the multiple identities inherent in being a twentieth-century Jew of a certain very tormented kind.

**TM:** I’d like to ask you about Jews and the political left. You’ve expressed some tension between Jewish work and the world’s work, as you put it a minute ago, but there’s also some tension between being a Jew in the world’s work and being a Jew on the left.

**AKH:** Yes and no. For me, socialism with a small s gets translated into what you might call *menschlichkeit*—in other words, the sense of sharing, cooperation, collectivity, solidarity, a world in which we’re all in this together. That is what I got from my childhood and my sense of what it was to be a real person. And for me, as I think for my father, that’s what Jewishness meant. I think that’s what it meant for Yezierska too. I think that was the main pull of the women’s movement for me. It wasn’t about equality per se with men. It was about joining a community or creating a community in which there were common values. Feminism was about achieving a community in which all women—I know now that sounds naive—but it was a community in which women could share, could support each other and in so doing change the political environment so that women of all backgrounds could thrive. For me, being on the left was completely consistent with being Jewish. Feminism changed, as you know, very dramatically. “Lean in” feminism is not my kind of feminism. I have a hard time with it, and I have a hard time with so-called compassionate conservativism that separates mothers and children. So there’s tension between and among how one imagines one’s politics and being on the left and being a Jew. But
there's also a fundamental link for me between the values of tikun 'olam [repairing the world], of tsedakah [charity], of inviting the stranger in, and my sense of what we call democratic socialism. I try to infuse my teaching with these values. How do I support people, how do I help them through what they want to do? How do I help to create a world, a community in which individuals can move at their own pace in their own way? I think that's what Judaism is about for me. It's not about formal religion, not about going to services. When we make Passover seders (which we do every year for the kids and grandchildren, and nieces and nephews), my husband starts it out by talking not about freedom for Jews or escape from Jewish slavery. He starts it out by talking about the idea of freedom and then segueing to freedom for everybody and asking how we get there. I see the tension in practice, but in the bottom of my heart it doesn't exist. I don't see feminism as competitive. I do see capitalism as destructive of humane values. I think it's the most individualized system and therefore the most prone to self-aggrandizement and greed. I see the instinct toward community and cooperation that I identify with socialism as a goal. I think that's a goal for all of the politics that I've been involved in.

For me, the conflict rotates around Israel. I am a Jew, I'm a Jew on the left. I loved Israel when it was in its socialist phase. I value Israel because my family wouldn't have survived as a family without Israel. I understand the importance of having a place where Jews can be free, can go settle and so on, but I cannot bear the notion that Israel is so destructive of the lives of Palestinians and other peoples who don't belong within their circle of identity. I can't bear the ways in which Israel has so narrowly defined its community that it can, without thinking twice, destroy other peoples, not just material lives but their hopes, their dreams, their humanity. And that's the conflict for me. That for me, being a Jew on the left, has always involved hoping Israel would move in a more inclusive direction. But being on the left in America today means condemning Israel, supporting BDS. I can't do either of those. I belong to a group called Ameinu whose goal is to see Israel survive and thrive, and to see Palestinians survive and thrive as well. I remain hopeful that there is a way to get there, even as I despair of the corruption of the current Israeli government. I cringe at the emerging antisemitism, fostered in part by Israel's ruthless occupation of what it calls the territories. And I am editing this interview on the day that 11 Jews are being buried in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings. I am frightened and scared by the current atmosphere of hate. I don't know how to be a Jew, a good Jew, and at the same time to be an advocate of democratic socialism—which is where
Israel was headed when I was a kid and which, in my view, was derailed by an excessive and narrow nationalism. I find myself drawn to Israeli cousins who remain in Israel because they believe their voices matter. But I do feel as if there is a fine line between advocating for the continuing existence of Israel and advocating for the values of the democratic left. I cannot support organizations like the National Women’s Studies Association or the American Studies Association, which supports movements like BDS, whose ultimate aim is to destroy Israel. But I also cannot remain silent in the face of an Israeli government that continues to ignore the humanity of the Palestinian population. Then again, our own government is fostering values that I fear and detest. Under those circumstances, do I think as a Jew? Or do I think as a human being? That’s a sad and confusing place to be right now.

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