

Transcript – Cecile L. Kantrowitz, '30

Narrator: Cecile L. Kantrowitz

Interviewer:

Interview Date:

Interview Time:

Location:

Length: 1 audio files; 29:47

Q: (inaudible) and OK, let's start with talking a little bit about your family background, what did your mother and father do, and what was their education like?

Cecile L. Kantrowitz: Well, my father was one of the few Jewish men that went to a Russian university, and he completed his education when he came to Newark, New Jersey as an immigrant at – what's the name of the college? (break in audio) My memory goes, sometimes leaves me. What's the university in New York, Columbia?

Q: Columbia.

CLK: He was a cantor, my father. He was a Hebrew teacher. He [01:00] prepared for the rabbinate, but never got all the way because he was a Zionist, and the old Orthodox people in his day didn't approve of the Zionistic movement. I don't know whether you were aware of that or not. So, he became a cantor. We have a very great background about the Baal Shem Tov, who was a great mystic and a rabbi. We can trace our ancestry back. He gave a magic formula to an ancestor and said this formula would be good as long as the oldest son had an oldest son. And the Baal Shem Tov is of [02:00] the late Middle Ages, and it was the oldest son of the oldest son until my nephew had a little girl, and they came out from Brownsville when they heard she was pregnant, and my father was already dead, and asked if he had passed down the Kabbalah, and my nephew said yes, and he said you must forget it, he must never pass it on, because he had a girl, his firstborn was this little girl.

So anyway, my father was a very learned man, what they called a Baal Torah. I don't know how you are going to transcribe that, but his wisdom was sought from all over the world. My brothers

always wished [03:00] they had kept the stamps because they wrote to him from everywhere. And so, he taught – our name is Kantor-o-witz, and if you know anything about how names are given, it means son of a cantor. And he –

(break in audio)

Q: We were just interrupted for a moment.

CLK: Did you turn it off?

Q: Not yet. Now we can resume. Did your father encourage your education? Was it important for him that you go to a good school?

CLK: Yes. Now, it's such a hometown, is this my hometown?

Q: Sure. We're not going to go exactly by this. These were just guidelines about the kinds of questions I wanted to ask.

CLK: Yeah. Well my mother and father. My father was a Hebrew teacher, but very poor, [04:00] and he took, as a sideline, a matchmaker. [sings "Matchmaker"]

Q: So that was really a profession?

CLK: And he came – my mother had lost her father, and she was supporting the family, and she went into matchmaking. And so, she arranged a match between this young Hebrew teacher and a rich girl in her village, and the result was that they married each other.

Q: What's the Yiddish name for a matchmaker?

CLK: Shadkhnen.

Q: I knew I'd heard it before somewhere.

CLK: That's right. Now –

(break in audio)

Q: I guess what I was asking you before –

CLK: My high school – you want – oh, [05:00] you don't have a copy of this.

Q: No, I do, I have one right here. I just, I'm not going exactly by this because there are some things that I –

CLK: I went to Classical High School when it was something.

Q: Oh, in Providence?

CLK: Yes. I came to college. I'm a Jewish girl and my name is Cecile because my mother was very liberated, and I have a Hebrew name.

Q: Why was your mother – how did that reflect your name choice, that your mother was liberated?

CLK: Cecile Chaminade was the first woman to play on the public stage in Paris. She played the piano and she was the first woman that ever did, and my mother wanted me to be that kind of a woman, not particularly musical, but liberated and daring, [06:00] and she was right. She was.

Q: Why did you choose Pembroke? Was it just it was the closest and you didn't want to leave – you couldn't –

CLK: Well, we couldn't afford – you see, my mother – they were very poor. My brother went to Brown and he did it in three years, when they didn't have the – well, nothing. He just had to do – he had to pay the money, but I say we, everybody worked. And hearing about the admissions. I don't know whether you have this in there or not, but those were the days – oh thank you, dear, that they had quotas. You heard that there were [07:00] quotas. And so, it was unusual...

Q: That Jewish people would get into Brown. They only let –

CLK: That's correct. And both of are [Bolton?] scholarships. My brother was brilliant. And I came to Pembroke. When I came, it was the Women's College in Brown University, and it changed to Pembroke while I was there. And finances was one thing, although I got a scholarship from Classical High School. I always wanted to go to Pembroke.

Q: Did your parents have any expectations of you in terms of what your career would be after Pembroke?

CLK: None at all, but [08:00] they believed in education, and my mother went to night school, living in a four-room flat, five children, babies, there were five of us born in seven years, two boarders. They did all their own cooking because they were Orthodox and – oh yes, and went to night school. (break in audio)That's what the family felt about education, first priority.

Q: What did you have – were your parents interested in you studying any kind of Jewish history or religious studies, and that wasn't really available then?

CLK: No, I was expected to get that by osmosis, and I did. I went to Hebrew school, and my father taught, but never would he call on me. [09:00] You can't do that.

Q: Were there any Judaic studies or religious studies classes at Pembroke then?

CLK: No.

Q: None at all?

CLK: That's a fairly recent – it's interesting, though. I teach Yiddish here.

(break in audio)

CLK: (inaudible). That's my course. I'm the only resident that does any teaching, and I teach Yiddish.

Q: Is there a big turnout for that here? Yeah?

CLK: Quite. Well you see, most of these people were immigrants originally. However, in those days, the thing was to forget it. You didn't want to be a greenhorn, [10:00] and so they never talked their mother tongue. They all tried to learn English, and that was what they spoke, and it really is quite ludicrous. I remember hearing it as a child, and that is their problem. And this course that I give is – first of all, I expect to learn as much from them, or more, than they learn from me.

Q: How so?

CLK: Because it's really their mother tongue, and it isn't mine.

Q: Did you grow up with Yiddish in your house at all? Or did you – yeah.

CLK: Yes. We all spoke Yiddish. My father had read one of his favorite philosophers who said that the [11:00] bottom line of a definition of culture is knowing more than one language.

Q: What philosopher said that?

CLK: I don't remember now, but it's very true.

Q: Do you speak Yiddish and English and anything – do you speak anything else?

CLK: French fluent, German fluent – that was my major. We had majors and minors.

(break in audio)

Q: – concentration. Same thing, basically. OK, I guess we can start referring back to this. What were your memories of your first day at Pembroke about the courses that you were taking, how you felt, what expectations you had of Pembroke?

CLK: Well, I tell you. I am the sort that never says I can't do it, all through my life. [12:00] I became an expert in income tax, which I did until the time I died – came here, which is the same as dying. And I never had taken a course in math. I was Phi Beta Kappa at Brown. And then, I went to –

(break in audio)

CLK: I graduated in 1930, and in 1951, I got a degree, MPA, master of personnel administration, and it didn't help me for a raise. I was doing personnel work.

Q: Where?

CLK: For the state of Rhode Island. And I wrote exams. I corrected [13:00] exams, oral and written. I went, as a member of a panel, to other states to conduct orals, and was also a member of an oral panel. For the higher jobs, we would have oral examinations.

Q: My father does that at the State Department. He gives oral examinations.

CLK: Is he in the state of Rhode Island?

Q: The State Department in DC. I'm from DC.

CLK: Oh, I see. I had some connection with them. I helped set up the civil service system in Liberia. The Liberians came over, and it sounds like self-serving, I'm patting myself on the back. There was a husband and a wife and a chief, chieftain from the [wilds?]. And [14:00] they were very, very wonderful people, and they selected me to work with them to set up a new personnel system, and that was a lot of fun. (break in audio) before they left Woonsocket, I gave a reception for them in my home, and they were delighted. He was running for office and my local paper in Woonsocket had a big picture of myself and my husband, the three of them, and the mayor, and I don't know how many papers he ordered, wanted them to use for – (break in audio) And they were very nice to me, and we did set up a civil service system, it still exists. I was in touch with them for some time. [15:00] And as a matter of fact, a few years ago, I booked a trip to Africa with the NAACP, and they were going to come and meet me at the boat, and they're up in Liberia. I don't know if you know the map. And the boat docked in the southern part, and I couldn't go, I sprained my ankle. But the lady in charge answered when they called me, and she went down to meet them. As a matter of fact, she had met them because she was the president of the local chapter of NAACP.

Q: Were you involved with the NAACP?

CLK: My husband, who was a lawyer, was at that time. Later, my son was, and my grandson is. They're all three lawyers. And – [16:00]

Q: And your grandson's involved with the NAACP as well?

CLK: No. he's in the Army Air Corps as a captain. And he's a lawyer, judge advocate. Three generations, straight generations of lawyers.

Q: That's great.

CLK: And he and my son, the one that – you know my son is a judge in the superior court here.

Q: I didn't know that.

CLK: Rhode Island, my oldest son. That's a picture of him in the robe that I bought him. And there's a picture of my family there when he was made a judge, the large picture next to the (inaudible). But anyway, (inaudible).

Q: OK. Back to Brown – back to Pembroke rather, what was a very – who, in fact, was a very important influence on you at Pembroke? [17:00] Were there any particular deans or staff?

CLK: Well Dean Morris. I tutored her on many things. Public speaking, I challenged Brown to a debate. There was no debating either at Pembroke or at Brown up until that point. And so, they reacted and the subject, I think, was the – it was during Prohibition, and we debated the contents of alcohol in wine, what should be permitted and what should not. Very interesting, and they rallied.

Q: Did you beat them?

CLK: What do you think?

Q: (laughter) Were there any professors that you particularly liked, or deans, other than Dean Morris?

CLK: Oh, yes. [18:00] His name has to come to me. He taught Latin, had a female – high voice. Wonderful man. (break in audio) – had had four years of Latin at Classical, and I kept it up. It's a funny incident, you may want to turn this off.

(break in audio)

Q: That's okay, go ahead.



CLK: I didn't always do homework the way I was supposed to, and we took a class vote, whether we would have an examination on what we had already studied, or a new exam. And the class all voted to go over something. Everybody kept notes. Everybody knew what they had done, except Cel. So anyway, I wrote a poem. It was Latin poetry. [19:00] I wrote a poem, beautiful poem. (break in audio) – would I get away with it or not, it was perfect, perfect Latin, perfect rhythm.

Q: What was it about? What was it –

CLK: Oh, I don't remember now. (inaudible). (break in audio)

Q: You were saved from having to study?

CLK: Well, it would be too late at that point. But I couldn't do a whole year's courses. I shouldn't admit all this about myself.

Q: Oh, it's OK. We won't use it against you, I promise. You were talking about challenging Brown to a debate. How were your other interactions with Brown, coming from Pembroke?

CLK: Well, in my day, when I came – first of all, they gave us caps to wear. [20:00]

Q: That distinguished you to make perfectly clear that you were from Pembroke and not Brown?

CLK: And nobody wore them. And in order to come on campus, we were supposed to wear hats and white gloves.

Q: And skirts, of course.

CLK: And I – well there were no pants. Nobody wore pants. Don't forget, we're going back to the late '20s, and (break in audio). And anyway, I was the first one that rebelled against that, and

to this day, I don't wear a hat. I spent four years not wearing a hat winter or summer, and it was a sacrifice because I burn very easily, and my skin was very fair when I was [21:00] (inaudible).

Q: No, it's OK. I mean –

CLK: (inaudible).

Q: No, I mean, I'm more interested in your interesting stories. I mean, a lot of just factual stuff we have on record. Let's see, OK, how about curricula and career counseling. Were there any classes that were restricted to women, or was there advice that you had about what jobs you could get upon graduation?

CLK: Well, I really didn't know. German was my major, and I had planned – my German professor took his sabbatical year for my freshman year, he and his wife, Professor Mitchell. And that was the year I met my husband.

Q: Your freshman year at Pembroke?

CLK: No, it wasn't my freshman year. This was – he took a sabbatical year, and that was going to be my senior year. [22:00] It was a prize. Only the best German students, the Americans who studied German, German students in that sense, student of German, all expenses paid.

Q: Oh, you took a sabbatical with him.

CLK: We planned it. He took the sabbatical that year because there were rumbles, this was – I graduated in 1930, and in 1929, 1930, there were rumblings about how they treated Jews. And besides, I think they were fond of me. And he had gone to the university (inaudible) university anyway, I took his advice on that. But met my husband [23:00] and we fell in love, break in audio) got married, or let's get married or something, and I'm famous for saying we'll get married or nothing, and so anyway, we planned to elope, and I couldn't elope because we went (break in audio) my license.

Q: Where were you now?

CLK: Providence, and I was only 20. My husband came from Massachusetts, and his license because you know, you had to be 18 then in Massachusetts.

Q: Was he 20 also?

CLK: No, he was a lawyer, practicing. He was 27. And so I had to get my father to come. There must be catalogs. He had a bookstore [24:00] (inaudible).

Q: It's OK, we can come back to it. Let's move on to talking about rules and regulations, you mentioned with the beanies, more along those lines. What other things were you supposed to do? what were the women of Pembroke supposed to do? What kind of regulations were there?

CLK: Well, the girls that lived there were under very strict regulations, and I'm not too familiar with that because I was basically – I lived at home. And relations between male and female students socially, in the classroom, they were miserable to us. (inaudible). My advanced English and German courses were given only [25:00] at the university and as a matter of fact, I took a course in words, semantics, with George Willis Benedict, imagine how my memory goes back. (inaudible) course. And we used the (break in audio) I used Yiddish for my thesis. And I wrote a thesis.

Q: What was your thesis on?

CLK: What – the origin of words, and how many languages we owed our language to. It was German, and a lot of Latin words, and I had to (inaudible).

Q: Was it easy to use – did you have use the Brown library, and that was no problem getting access to that?

CLK: No, it was easier than the Pembroke library.

Q: Why?

CLK: The library was up on the third floor of Pembroke.

Q: Yeah. Was it as big at the Brown library or not as big?

CLK: [26:00] No. Socially, male and female students got along very well, and in the classroom, the same thing held true. If you were smarter than the men, they hated you, even though they wanted to date you. And we didn't share the library too much. That was really their territory. We used the library upstairs.

Q: (inaudible) interested in did Jewish students tend to date each other, or were they pretty integrated in?

CLK: Integrated.

Q: Is that the same with black students, or there weren't really enough to –

CLK: None. Many, and we were under a quota. Jewish students were under a quota, too. My brother had come in the year before I did, and [27:00] was told that it was under a quota. And they were – to this day, you know, the presidents are ministers of the cloth. Baptist ministers. It's in the bylaws, did you know that? At Brown.

Q: All presidents have to be Baptist? I don't think the new one is. Vartan Gregorian, he's Armenian.

CLK: Armenians could be Baptists. Well, if that changed, that's without my knowledge.

Q: Yeah, I think it changed.

CLK: Well, that would be interesting to find out.

Q: Yeah, you should – there's some excellent stuff written on and by our new president, he's really fabulous. He'd be worth reading up on.

CLK: We were not restricted from classes. We took biology. And believe it or not, [28:00] you know it's a joke, that the little freshman girl does her work. She has to do the skeleton and can't find one bone. And the professor looked at her and said, (inaudible) very successful social life if you think there should be a bone there.

Q: That's funny. Were there any women who acted as role models for the Pembroke women? Were there any particular deans that everybody looked up to as role models, or faculty ?

CLK: I'm trying to think of her name. It wasn't dean – not Dean Maris, but another dean. Darling, darling woman . You could talk to her as you would to your mother, even more so. And (inaudible) find her.

Q: Yeah, I can [29:00] look that up.

CLK: I can't think of it right now.

Q: But the girls really liked her?

CLK: Yeah I liked her very much. And counseling was somewhat – I can't remember that we had – that I had counseling. That could be because I was so strong-minded and knew what I wanted.

Q: Did the administration send off a kind of message about the types of careers that they sort of thought were appropriate for Pembroke women?

CLK: Oh, they had all these talks and everything. And you went to them, and you went – you came back. And they tried to restrict us from classes.

Q: Tape just ran out.

- END -