

Interview with Margaret Moers Wenig, class of 1978

Interviewer: Mimi Pichey, class of 1972

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Transcribed by: Abigail Ettelman, A.M. class of 2014

Side 1 – Wenig, Margaret - Oral History of Mimi Pichey

Mimi Pichey: [00:00:00] This is Mimi Pichey, class of '72, uh, interviewing Margaret Moers Wenig, class of -

Margaret Moers Wenig: '78.

MP: '78. Uh, this is May 3, 1989. Uh, Margaret, I just wanted to start off by asking a little bit about your family background, where were you born and raised and what were your mother and father doing? Professionally?

MMW: I was born in New York City, my parents had been married at the time for 10 years, my mother and father were both lawyers, my mother continued to work as my brother and I were growing up. I stayed in the city through 9th grade and just before high school my family moved to Westport, Connecticut, where I attended high school, public high school. They uh, my mother, around the same time, around 1970, 69, left the private practice of law to begin a career in academics, teaching first at St. John's University and then for many years to the present university of Bridgeport, near Westport where they lived.

MP: So you had very positive role model with a well educated mother?

MMW: Yes, to that I could add that her mother had also been college educated and taught French and Latin in the New York City public schools and my aunt, that is my mother's sister, was Ellen Moers, who was a scholar, literary critic, and she wrote, not long before she died, a book called Literary Women, which some people call or some people call her one of the

founders of feminist literary criticism. So yes I had plenty of feminist female role models, working women, that preceded me.

MP: And I assume that because of that and the high level of education in the family that it was, it was probably just expected that you would go on to college.

MMW: Absolutely expected.

MP: How did you end up deciding on Brown, how did you first hear about it?

MMW: I don't remember how I heard about it but deciding upon it was really fairly easy. I knew already in high school that I wanted to study Judaic Studies, I looked for the schools that had programs in Judaic Studies in the early 70s, there actually weren't so many, now they proliferate around the country but there weren't so many then, at least, not so many with outstanding reputations and Brown had one of them. I visited I guess the three schools that had the best nearby, Brown, Wesleyan, and Brandeis, and liked Brown the best, I applied early decision, was admitted early decision and never applied anywhere else.

MP: Now it interests me that you say you knew in high school what you wanted to do or what direction you wanted to go in, tell me about how that evolved.

MMW: Well first I'll tell you that I have a very poor memory and I wouldn't be able to make a claim such as that if I didn't have it in black and white. But in my college application, it says very clearly that I wanted to be a scholar of Judaic Studies. I may have mentioned the rabbinate, I'm not sure, but I know, at that point, that is when I was I guess 17, that I was already planning or considering to enter the rabbinate. At the time, I didn't know that there were no women rabbis, it never occurred to me that there weren't any women rabbis, I had never conceived of a field in which women couldn't enter, that was my Jewish naiveté, you know, the cockiness I guess came from my, my family background.

MP: Was your family particularly religious?

MMW: No, not at all. I was a rebel in my involvement in Judaism. My family had never belonged to a synagogue. That is, my parents had never belonged to a synagogue, I had no religious education, but – keep going? But when my family moved to Connecticut in 70 or 71, I don't remember, I suggested that the family join the one and only local synagogue and my parents said no. So I joined by myself as a 14 year old, which involved getting the Board of Trustees to bend their rules because they had rules against just that sort of thing so that families couldn't avoid the family membership fee and just enroll their children in the school for a much lower fee. Well, they bent the rules for me, I went to one year of Confirmation class, which is all that was left at that point, but I became very attached to the rabbi and [00:05:00] ended up going to adult education regularly there and to Shabbat services regularly, studies Torah with him Saturday afternoon in his home, uh, and a few other things, a few other experiences in my life I can point to which put me on this track, although I can't say I really know what the origin of it was, but I do remember also when I was in high school I had a math teacher who was an excellent mathematics teacher, but he also happened to be an evangelical Christian and he and I found ourselves on a walk marathon for some hunger cause one day and ended up walking most of the length of the marathon together which meant almost all day and he tried to convert me to Christianity, which apparently was something that he did to a lot of high school kids, but my reaction was to go home and say "Dammit, I'm gonna learn as much about Judaism as this guy knows about Christianity," which was a lot, he was very well educated. And we began an interfaith dialogue that actually lasted much longer than high school. He and I were still writing to each other when I was in college. But that added fuel to the fire, but why when I moved to Connecticut, did I want to join a synagogue? I really can't tell you.

MP: It's interesting that you felt so strongly about it that you actually went against your parents' wishes to a degree.

MMW: Well, that may have helped. I was 14 and when you're 14, you do want to do things that your parents don't approve of, and this was certainly one of them. And I might chalk the whole thing up to adolescent rebellion if it hadn't lasted so long. If it were just adolescent rebellion, I think I would have outgrown it, I can say that the woman who raised me, a woman named Molly

Lane, who was really the primary caretaker since both of my parents were working, was at least in later years a very religious woman and while she was a Christian, it's very possible that her religiosity, her spirituality rubbed off on me. But it's very hard to point to what the initial source of the motivation was.

MP: Now obviously when you entered college, your parents had some ideas of what they thought you should be doing with your education, what you might do with it after you –

MMW: Oh, they had very clear ideas of what I should be doing with my education. I should become a lawyer, obviously, I mean, they were both lawyers and that was, you know, the highest thing one could aspire to be, I think. Also, they enjoyed, there was a lot of legal banter around the house and dinner table, and I think, you know, they would have enjoyed just adding another person to that.

MP: But in a funny sense, I think a lot of Talmudic scholarship has a lot of the same qualities of the lawyerly examination.

MMW: It does and I did study a lot of Talmud in college and I did very well in Talmud in rabbinical school and my father certainly got a kick out of that and we still do talk a lot, as I'm writing sermons on issues that the Supreme Court might be taking up, for example, sometimes I will actually go to a law library and get a Supreme Court decision and read it and discuss it with my parents. That's happened with abortion, with Hardwicke homosexuality decision, with the Yonkers housing decision, what else? I guess those are the ones that I've most recently read. But truth be told, I didn't really want to be a lawyer, I didn't want to compete with my parents, I certainly didn't want to compete with my mother, who's a star in her field, and I also didn't want to play what struck me as an intellectual game for the rest of my life. I don't know how much of this family stuff do you want?

MP: I think that's probably enough, I, obviously when you made your decision, they learned how to live with that –

MMW: Yeah –

MP: And it sounds like you you've maintained good relations –

MMW: Yeah.

MP: So, they were pleased about you going to Brown?

MMW: They were very pleased about my going to Brown, they were not at all pleased about my going to rabbinical school and refused to provide any financial [00:10:00] support for it. I just want to say one more thing about not becoming a lawyer – my mother is a very principled person and her law career has really involved a fight for a cause, which has really been a feminist cause. My father on the other hand was a labor lawyer and at different times in his career has represented both labor and management and loved being able to argue both sides of any issue and it was never ever clear, still isn't, where he personally stood on any issue. And I think one of the things that I was attracted to about religion was while the Talmud and Jewish law certainly does hear both sides, it does not end up remaining neutral and I think it was my father's neutrality or his ability to play both sides that I wanted to avoid.

MP: So you entered Brown in the fall of 19...

MMW: 74.

MP: 74.

MMW: And right away in February in fact, the first week, in fact, the orientation week, became involved in Hillel activities, met women who were involved in the women's minyan, I don't know how long it had been going on at that point but immediately I started attending.

MP: For purposes of the tape, perhaps you should talk about what a minyan is.

MMW: Sure. A minyan in Jewish law is the quorum of ten men required to say certain prayers in an ordinary service. A woman's minyan is a contradiction in terms, women don't count in a minyan in traditional Jewish law. But this was a group of women who got together every Saturday afternoon, held a traditional Saturday afternoon service, including a Torah reading, initially they were very cautious not to do things which women ordinarily wouldn't be able to do, but quickly broke away from that restriction. But it was not all that radical a group, at least not initially, but it was a very supportive environment in which women could learn traditional prayer leading skills and Torah reading skills but I made a friend, a woman who was then a sophomore at Brown, Naomi Janowitz, we are still friends, it was with her, I guess that year in fact, I started writing, she and I together started writing a new prayer book for that woman's minyan. It really started one day when we were, I guess we were having a study session, which the woman's minyan did once a month in addition to our weekly services and we were looking at the prayer book and there was a line, "Happy are the men who –" whatever. And we looked around and we said, "There are no men here, why are we saying this?" Actually the Hebrew needn't have been translated in such an exclusive way but it was and we realized at that point that we were using a liturgy which wasn't written for us, and which certainly could use some adaptation for our purposes. And began adapting it. I think at that point another woman, Laurie Ruttenberg, who was a year ahead of Naomi who also has become a rabbi, as have I think about 5 women from Brown, all within the cluster of a few years. She was working with us at that time and we spent about 2 or 3 years on this project, which grew and grew and grew as we worked on it, it started out to be merely an opportunity to include ourselves and the matriarchs of the Jewish past in the liturgy but we ended up supplementing the liturgy with lots of original material and medieval Tachinot, written by women. We ended up changing all of the language that spoke about G-d to describe G-d as if G-d were female, knowing all the time that G-d is neither male or female, We have to –

MP: Using pronouns such as she, her - ?

MMW: Using female pronouns and speaking of G-d's womb and speaking in very female terms. Probably, [00:15:00] I mean, in retrospect, they may have been somewhat stereotypical terms, although we were careful to use images of strength as often as we used images of nurturing or

tenderness. But it probably was pretty stereotypical. But at the time, there were no other liturgies that we knew of, that we knew of, I mean, maybe there were some in small communities but there were no others that we knew of that spoke of G-d, in the Jewish community, I should say, there were Christian feminist worship groups that were doing this, but no Jewish groups that were speaking of G-d in female terms. And it turned out to be an extremely empowering thing for us.

MP: Would you say you were a feminist before you got to Brown?

MMW: Oh yes.

MP: Had the women's movement had a direct impact on you in high school or indirect?

MMW: The aspect of the women's movement that had an impact on me in high school was the self-help health movement, I remember when I was 14 or 15 going to a self-help demonstration. I don't know how I got there, since I couldn't drive at that point, somehow I got there and I remember seeing you know a woman who was part of the demonstration team up on a chair with a speculum in her vagina and we all paraded by and looked at her cervix which was certainly the first time any of us had seen a cervix. We all walked out of there buying our own speculums, going home and trying it out on ourselves. But –

MP: With a mirror.

MMW: With a mirror, right. And you know certainly the book *Our Body, Ourselves* as if it were the Bible, that was primarily the impact that the women's movement had on me in high school but I really inherited feminism through my mother's milk, though she didn't actually nurse me, it wasn't a popular thing to do at that time, but in effect, I was certainly third generation feminist in my, the maternal side of my family.

MP: But obviously the women's movement had had an impact on a large number of women so that there were actually enough to have a minyan.

MMW: Yes, although there were, not all of the women in minyan were strong feminists, some of them were fairly traditional Jewish women who just wanted to acquire these skills and actually didn't want to rock the boat too much. In fact, we often had from time to time we would have fights about whether or not to permit men to join us and to what extent to use this liturgy that a few of us had written. There was really a range of feminisms among the women in the group.

MP: So you went to Brown and immediately hooked up with Hillel and plunged yourself in Judaic Studies as well.

MMW: Yes, I was a Judaic Studies major and in fact when I was at Brown we had a tremendous amount of freedom. There were not distribution requirements and I took advantage of that and studied religious studies, not just Judaic Studies, but religious studies, as much as I possibly could. And it's, it could be argued that my college education was too narrow. And maybe distribution requirements or distribution encouragements are a good thing actually, I'm sure I, the pendulum swung in a far direction with me, I really did concentrate from day one, but it was a very exciting department to be in at that time. I studied a lot with David Blumenthal who is no longer at Brown, he's now at Emory, he helped us a great deal with the prayer book, he did an independent study with Naomi and Laurie and myself in which we read midrashim which are Haggadic non-legal Jewish texts that pertain to women, he also encouraged us to write our own prayers, and I wrote an undergraduate honors thesis with Jacob Neusner, but studied with a lot of people in the department.

MP: And you were very much into this, did you have many extra-curricular activities in addition or was it primarily centered on these –

MMW: Well, I was teaching all the time that I was at Brown, I taught for the first two years at the Friday School which was an [00:20:00] unaffiliated afternoon religious school for, actually many of the children had parents who were Brown faculty, and they met at Hillel. And then for the second two years, I taught in the religious school of Temple Emmanuel, which was the Conservative synagogue in Providence. I also was involved in, gosh, it's hard for me to

remember now what these committees were called, but a number of committees, student-faculty committees of the university that did things like curricular review and gosh I can't remember now what the committees were called –

MP: That's okay. But you were active in some of these academic review -

MMW: Yes, I was active in student government short of being an elected member, it wasn't called student government. I don't remember what it was called.

MP: Cammarian Club?

MMW: No, gosh, I told you I have bad memory –

MP: Well, we know what you mean. Uh, it was after my time, so. Now, I had some questions about actually your fellow classmates and how what was their reaction to your intense interest in this subject, which I don't think, perhaps I'm wrong, but at least in my days at Brown it was not a popular, greatly popular topic, which –

MMW: Which topic, Judaic Studies or feminism and Judaism?

MP: Judaic Studies and certainly when I was there, feminism was just coming to, into existence.

MMW: Well, there were a lot of Religious Studies, again, say I was not a Judaic Studies major, I was a Religious Studies major, there were lots of Religious Studies major, it was a very popular department when I was there. I mean, the department has since split into Judaic Studies department and a Religious Studies department and there have been a lot of problems there, which I think have scared people away, but it was a very popular department, there were lots of majors at the time, and I didn't at all feel unusual, I had a lot of people who were likeminded and even there were a lot of women who were interested in Jewish feminism. So at no point did I really feel alone in this activity, I felt very much part of a community of people who were all interested in the same thing.

MP: Would you like to comment at all on some of the things that you found in terms of the relations between men and women students at Brown, you you came to Brown a couple years after the merger between Pembroke and Brown, which I think was something of a transitional time in terms of more and more women coming on campus.

MMW: I don't think I, my class felt it was a transitional time on campus any more, we, there was really not a vestige of Pembroke left except for Pembroke campus, we really didn't know from personal experience of the separation. So I can't say that we felt like a transitional generation. Nor did I experience conflict between men and women at Brown and women students, at least those, myself and friends of mine, received a great deal of support from professors. Now there weren't that many female professors at the time, that I can say, and there weren't, I don't think there were any female clergy on campus. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe there was one –

MP: Bev Edwards?

MMW: Oh yes, Bev Edwards was there, you're right. but she must then have been the only one. Although I will say that the Hillel did hire as an assistant Hillel director while I was there a woman, Maxine Cronish [?], who was not a rabbi but she was somebody with a Master's whose presence was very much felt. And I was on the committee that hired her. And in fact there was another candidate who was very well liked by the committee but the committee felt very strongly that we wanted a woman. So it actually was a very good time to be a woman at Brown. It may be that now in the 80s there's sort of a backlash and women are having a harder time but then it was a good time. Although I do remember the Louise Lamphere case was being fought then. So we were aware of difficulties that women professors were encountering getting tenure and we were aware of the fact that there weren't many women on the faculty. Students were well supported.

MP: So by and large it sounds as though your Brown experience, you came into Brown knowing where you wanted to go, pretty much, and [00:25:00] Brown had the kind of curriculum, the kind of academic support, the kind of extra-curricular activities that you found for yourself, and a student body that was a warm atmosphere in which you could carry out your pursuits so that it

just propelled you further on down the road. Uh, now at what point did you decide you wanted to go into the rabbinicity?

MMW: Uh, rabbinate.

MP: Rabbinate, sorry.

MMW: Well, I think I really had decided before I got to Brown, so that there wasn't a point at Brown where I decided to go into the rabbinate. The only decision I had to make was whether or not to, at some point, either before or after rabbinical school, get a Ph.D. And I guess I was encouraged in that direction by professors at Brown and struggled with it a little bit but basically knew that I really didn't want an academic career but did want to go into the rabbinate.

MP: Now, your decision to go into the rabbinate, I mean, obviously you had a love of those ideas and a love of learning. Was there also a social work or social – some sort of goal there? What were some of the other considerations that you or threads that you -?

MMW: Well, one of the other threads, a very large one, was when I thought about what did I want to do with my life and how did I want to spend my 50 hours a week working, the diversity of activities that a rabbi is engaged in appealed to me a great deal. That is, I knew that I didn't want to spend all my time studying, I knew that I didn't want to spend all my time writing, though I love to do both of those, the opportunity to combine those things with counseling, with teaching, with teaching not only younger people but also adults, with community activity, with the wide range of things that rabbis are involved in appealed to me a great deal. I have always loved teaching, so I knew that that would be a component, I wanted definitely to work with people of all ages and one of the things that I was sad about as I watched my professors at Brown was they invested a great deal in their students and then after four years saw them leave and I didn't want to see that happen. I imagined a longer term relationship with the people that I was working with. And the rabbinate, congregational work, does offer that.

MP: Now, at the time, were there other women rabbis? Because as I recall nobody was, I don't recall there being women rabbis.

MMW: When I was in high school, there were not women rabbis. Sally Priesand, the first woman to be ordained a rabbi, was ordained I believe 15 years ago which would make it '74, right?

MP: So by the time –

MMW: By the time I had graduated. But I had never heard of her actually, I didn't know much about the Reform movement in Judaism, I didn't know much about institutional forms of Judaism at all, so I just didn't know. But at Brown, Jacob Newsner had encouraged two women to enter the rabbinate – Laura Geller, who preceded me by I think about 5 years –

MP: Yes, I remember her.

MMW: And Ellen Lewis -

MP: I think she [Geller] was class of '71.

MMW: Maybe. And Ellen Lewis who preceded me by a couple of years. And so there already was at Brown a tradition of women going into the rabbinate and there was a lot of support for that. So I really was not cognizant of the time when there weren't women rabbis.

MP: So by the time you graduated it was a distinct possibility because there were women rabbis.

MMW: Oh, definitely.

MP: It was not an avenue that was shut off to you that you would have to fight to get into.

MMW: No, not at all. Not at all.

MP: How did you decide what area, I mean, I, there's religion, of Jewish religion, there's Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, how did you, did you have to gravitate towards something, one of those specifically, before you chose a rabbinical school?

MMW: Oh yes, definitely, because you have to apply to a rabbinical school of a denomination. That was a bit of a tricky decision. I, Orthodoxy was not considered by me, largely because of its

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MP: That's the most religious.

MMW: That's the most religious, mostly because of its sexism. I was very tempted by the Conservative movement, but the Conservative movement was not ordaining women at the time, in fact, has only been ordaining women for I think 4 years now. Now I knew a lot of women who were studying for a Masters or Ph.D at Jewish theological seminary, which is the Conservative institution, [00:30:00] waiting for the time when they would admit women to the rabbinical school, and I guess I wasn't prepared to do that, I wasn't prepared to wait for an uncertain amount of time for an uncertain future. And ended up going to the Reform rabbinical school. I didn't really consider the Reconstructionist rabbinical school seminary, even though that was an option because it's very small, the movement is very small, the employment possibilities are much more limited, and I didn't think I would get as high quality education as I would at Hebrew Union College.

MP: What is Reconstructionist versus Reform?

MMW: Well, Reconstructionist is going through an identity transformation now so I, Reconstructionist, one might say is more radical theologically and more traditional in practice, that is, they look in terms of their behavior like Conservative Jews but initially their theology was much more radical than Reform. They eliminated the notion of Jews as a chosen people, Mordecai Kaplan, who was sort of the founder, wrote a famous book called Judaism as a Nation, he did not believe in a supernatural G-d, but the seminary really did not hold out much attraction.

As it turned out, I went to the Reform seminary and I'm very glad I did because I ended up more and more to the left, Jewishly, than I was when I was in college and would have not been comfortable at the Conservative seminary.

MP: So you entered, you got accepted right out of Brown and supported yourself through?

MMW: Well, yes and no. I was married three weeks after graduating from college, so –

MP: Aha! So we have to go back and talk about that.

MMW: So I had some help in the financial department from my husband, who was also a Brown graduate. He was, he finished Brown in 1969 and returned I guess in '75 after completing his psychiatric residency and planned to stay in Providence for the rest of his life and settle down there. He really had loved it. And we met and I ruined his plans.

MP: Well, how did you meet, on campus or through some religious activity?

MMW: Well, we met, we met through Naomi Janowitz, actually. Bob, my husband Bob Rubenstein, is the older brother of Jonathan Rubenstein, who when I got to Brown was the associate Hillel director. He and Naomi were very close friends, Jonathan had left Providence and Naomi sort of transferred her friendship from Jonathan to Bob and it's really through Naomi that I got to know Bob. But I would be dishonest if I didn't say that Bob is also the son of the rabbi in Westport who I had grown very close to in high school. Now, we did not meet in Westport and we did not meet through his family, most likely because there's almost 12 years between us and so his parents would never have thought of introducing us to each other, and it's a good thing, because I'm sure if they had, we would never have married. But I did know his family. So we were married and then went off to Israel for my first year of rabbinical school, which is in Jerusalem and we were there for 12 months. I had a very difficult time in that first year of rabbinical school. It was the first year really that I had ever been immersed in a sectarian institution. My involvement in Judaism before that had been not really through institutional channels and I, it was a shock for me. I also was not prepared for the difference in the kind of

education that a professional school offers, the different between that and the academic study of Judaism that I had grown accustomed to at Brown and it was very very difficult transition for me to make. I found rabbinical school very narrow minded and the whole atmosphere very narrow, and left after the first year, took a year off.

MP: But what was, was living in Israel contributory to that?

MMW: Not really, it would have been if we didn't know people outside of the HUC community, but because Bob was working, he was lucky enough to get a job working as a psychiatrist at Hebrew University in the student counseling service. So our friends were largely his colleagues there and a neighbor in the apartment building [00:35:00] we lived in, so we didn't feel confined socially there but I was spending 25 hours in classes, which I hadn't, I man, it was all day in classes, I hadn't done that since elementary school, it seemed, that was very hard to take, and there were many things taken for granted that I didn't take for granted, you know, a whole set of Jewish assumptions that I hadn't bought into yet.

MP: Including the feminist or anti-feminist or, I don't know what the right way to say that is.

MMW: It wasn't so much anti-feminist, that wasn't really the problem. It was more a host of other things, and the fault wasn't really the institution, the fault really was mine, I was an outsider and most of the people there were not outsiders, they had been raised in Reform synagogues, raised in a Reform movement, gone to Reform camps, had really been acculturated. And I had not been and it was difficult for me, very difficult for me.

MP: So the culture shock was not an American-Israeli culture shock –

MMW: No, not at all.

MP: It was more a –

MMW: Not at all, it was –

MP: Going into that particular Jewish training –

MMW: Institution, yeah. And I left after a year, I mean, technically I took a leave of absence, but I really had serious doubts about returning, and went to NYU as a graduate student in the Near East Language and Literature department, that following year when we got back to New York, really to bide my time, I didn't know what I was going to do, but during that year, my aunt Ellen Moers died and the rabbi who officiated at the funeral did a terrible job and I sat there and I said to myself, "Dammit, this is too important for it to be done poorly, it's just too important." And at that moment I decided I wanted to go back to rabbinical school.

MP: So you had taken a leave of absence from Hebrew –

MMW: Hebrew Union College.

MP: And they have, they have a branch in New York, Brooklyn –

MMW: No, they have four campuses, Jerusalem where all first year students [00:37:23]

Side 2 – Wenig, Margaret – Oral History with Mimi Pichey

MP: [00:00:00] This is side 2 of the interview with Margaret Moers Wenig by Mimi Pichey, May 5, 1989. You were talking about the demographics.

MMW: Yeah, the congregation was very small when I got there and almost exclusively composed of elderly people, people who were retired in their 70s and 80s. There were I think no more than 3 families younger than, 3 families younger than 65, only one had young children, the others were already grandparents or were about to become grandparents. And I was very attracted to this congregation, first of all, because it was in Manhattan and I had learned from my

student pulpit that I would have a better chance if I were talking to people who shared whole world of commitments and values with me. I was also attracted to them because here was a congregation in which the people were members, the adults were members not because they wanted to provide a religious education for their children, which is largely the case in suburban congregations, but because they wanted it for their own religious spiritual social intellectual reasons. And I did not want to spend my name running a religious school and passing out chalk. I was also attracted to the congregation because it had a long-standing tradition of discussing the rabbi's sermon following the service. Either the rabbi's sermon or some other issue that people brought up. It was really a very stimulating place to be. It had many German refugees it was located in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. It really intrigued me.

MP: So you took the job. Part time.

MMW: So I took the job, part time, right.

MP: And what has developed since then? What kinds of programs have you put in place, has the congregation changed in character, what kinds of things are you called to do upon on a daily basis?

MMW: The congregation has changed a lot, mostly in the last year, again, because of the demographic factors. Washington Heights is the last outpost of affordable housing in Manhattan and so in the last year especially many many buildings have gone co-op, many younger people have moved into the neighborhood, either to buy or to rent, there are a lot of Columbia people moving into Washington Heights now, a lot of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital people, a lot of Juilliard students and just a lot of people moving into the neighborhood. The congregation now is composed 50% of retired people and 50% of younger people, which is a tremendous change in 5 years. It was a change which initially some of the members of the congregation wanted very much and those were the people who saw to it that I was hired. That goal was not shared by the majority members of the congregation who wanted it to remain exactly as it was. They saw the writing on the wall, they knew that with new members would come a lot of change, they feared being displaced from their board seats or their committee responsibilities, they feared you know

changes in music and other rituals that they were accustomed to and so they resisted new members for a long time. But I guess many of them came to realize that if they continued to resist it, the congregation would die, simply disappear, and they also began slowly to see some of the new people as friends rather than foes. That is, social relationships, friendships began to develop, which took a long time. It really took, really took 5 years until the defenses started to wear down and I had a hard time there, not so much initially, but the second year was very difficult, um. It may be that [00:05:00] the president at the time and I tried to initiate change too unilaterally and too quickly, you know, too much, too fast. And when he ceased to be president and when I got a broader look at what was going on, we slowed down a little bit or at least began to make certain that any changes that were made were made with the full consent of the long time members who had invested you know 30 or more years in the congregation and who we actually tried to bypass in the first couple of years. And I could tell you that that's the stuff I wish I had learned in rabbinical school, it would have saved me a couple of years of pain, it would have saved the congregation a couple of years of pain.

MP: I don't know whether that's the kind of thing you can learn in an academic setting, maybe not.

MMW: You can learn it through people in the field though, you can learn it through supervision but there're really very exciting things happening there and I think one of the most exciting things are the intergenerational things that are happening. You want me to go into detail?

MP: Yeah, I'd like to hear a little bit more about that. I also wanted to just ask whether initially there was any resistance, especially amongst these older congregational members to your being a woman.

MMW: Okay. Let me answer that question first. I knew about it, but I didn't personally sense it. What happened was there were three candidates for the position that made it to the final round and were presented by the search committee board. We each gave talks to the board. The other two were men and I understand older than I am, and the board, without realizing what it was doing to elect by a plurality vote, elect a rabbi by plurality vote. The vote went 6-6-7, 7 for me

and 12 for the other two candidates. Well, those 12 were really votes against a woman or against me and I was elected as the rabbi. It's a very very unfortunate way in which to get a job. Now most of them had been at least on the surface smooth by the time I got there. There weren't overt problems except there was one person who resigned and didn't come back, but I think that the problems were lingering underneath. I think it took them a long time to accept me as rabbi, partly because of the fact that I was a woman, partly because of my age, honestly, and partly because the rabbi who had been there for 27 years who didn't immediately precede me, there were 2 rabbis of very short duration before me. But the rabbi who they really considered to be their rabbi, Israel Margulies, was still alive, was still somewhat involved, and they really saw him as their rabbi. So it took a while.

MP: Was there more resistance among the men than the women or?

MMW: No, probably –

MP: Vice versa?

MMW: Vice versa and in fact many of my female colleagues report the same thing. There was a lot of resistance among women who didn't work, you know, whether it be younger women or older women who for example, I remember early on talking about having the congregation set up child care for parents with young children so that they could come to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur services, and one of them women said to me, one of the older women said to me, "you know, there was no child care for kids when I was," she wasn't working, "but when I was home and you know both of us didn't come to services, one of us stayed home," and ... they, I also think didn't fully appreciate that I was there to earn a living and it wasn't a hobby for me. And it has taken me a long time, through many very difficult negotiations, very difficult negotiations to get them to realize that I need to be paid a decent living. We're much closer to that than when I started, –

MP: You're still on a part time capacity?

MMW: Still part time, although although my salary has doubled in 5 years. Now, now, finally I'm being paid for the hours I'm putting in, [00:10:00] now that that's happened, once they, there are a few things that I want them to do before I'm willing to become full time. I want them to get a secretary so that I and the volunteers are not doing that kind of work. I want them to get more space in the building that we rent, space from, and I want them to hire a student cantor, and then I'll talk about full time. But the working conditions are much better. At any rate, I want to talk about the intergenerational things that are happening there. One of them is that on many of the younger or some of the younger people who have joined the congregation are themselves children of refugees or survivors who have moved to Washington Heights partly because they are trying to reclaim the world that their parents lived in when they got to the United States. Some of these people were born in Washington Heights, some of these younger people were born in Washington Heights, recently in November we had a Kristallnacht service at which 3 members of the congregation spoke about their experience at Kristallnacht and at the discussion afterwards, one of the younger women in the congregation said to one of the women who had testified, "Thank you so much, Rosemary, for telling me these things, telling us these things because my parents had the same experience but have never spoken to me about it," at which point Rosemary said "I have never spoken to my children about it." Her children are grown. At which point she went home and got on the phone and initiated this conversation with her grown children that she had never had before. That was a very very moving thing. Similarly, there's a young man in the congregation who is gay and I'll talk more about that later because the congregation does have an explicit outreach to lesbian and gay Jews, but he is gay, he is now involved with a man who lives in Amsterdam and he would like to move to Amsterdam and live there. He cannot work there with American papers and he cannot get a visa to work in Amsterdam but he recently found out that because his mother was German, he could qualify for citizenship and with a German passport he can work in Amsterdam. When he found this information out, he came to the congregation on a Shabbat and at the discussion afterwards, turned to the congregation and said to them, in particular to the German refugees, "How would you feel about my assuming a German passport?" And we talked about it for an hour that night. And the following Friday night, preached about it, and following that, we talked about it for another hour. Those are just wonderful things. In a sense, these younger people are making contact with surrogate parents in the congregation. We also now have Hebrew tutoring program

people in the congregation who can read Hebrew to people who are learning to read Hebrew and most of those pairs are cross-generational, which is also very exciting to me. All right, now I'll talk about the outreach to lesbian and gay Jews.

MP: Just, just a question on numbers – your congregation has obviously grown in the last five years?

MMW: The congregation has grown, we this year finally broke the 100 mark, membership. While we have about 50 new members in the congregation, we have also lost a lot of people to Florida and to death. And that's sad, it doesn't make me completely happy that 50% of the congregation is new, I wish that those 50 were new but we still had the same whatever 70 that were there when I got there. That's a sad, sad part of it. And I know that that end of the spectrum will most likely not be replenished. All right, outreach to lesbian and gay Jews. One of the things that was very important to me was to make the congregation a place where lesbian and gay Jews could come and be themselves, not have to be in the closet when they were there. The congregation there were pockets of resistance to that in the congregation, but I really have to say that the people were surprisingly open. Basically, their fear was the congregation not be inundated by lesbian and gay Jews, but that wasn't a lot [00:15:00] different from the congregation not be inundated by new people of any stripe who might just change the entire character and they have in the end been very supportive so that we in our synagogue brochure explicitly say that we are inclusive of lesbian and gay Jews. We have, this will be our third year celebrated Gay Pride with a special Shabbat service. We have some openly gay, a number of openly gay members in the congregation, one of which was just elected to the board, nominated to the board, I should say, the election will be Sunday. And the congregation has contributed a lot of money towards AIDS, support for people with AIDS and I always speak of them very proudly when other colleagues of mine say that we can't do anything for gay rights because our congregants won't stand for it. I say to them, I say to them, "Don't be so sure you're right. Now, they may be more open than you think."

MP: Well, I'm actually pretty surprised that a group of primarily older people were open to this.

MMW: Well, I think that it helped that they liked the first openly lesbian and gay members of the congregation. It also, how can I put it? In general, they're a pretty liberal bunch of people on most political issues and, and, many of them have a relative who is gay, I mean, most people do, whether we know it or not, you know, 10% of the population is Jewish and 10% of the population is gay, chances are that you have a gay neighbor or a gay colleague or a gay nephew or a gay son –

MP: Or daughter.

MMW: Or daughter. And I think that that that also moved people, you know, in some cases people explicitly told me that they had relatives or friends who were lesbian or gay, in other cases, they didn't tell me explicitly, but I I have little doubt that that had some impact on them.

MP: So you have been involved in the congregation [**inaudible**], gives support, and I notice some things on your resume as well, you were involved with some other communities.

MMW: A couple of things – I am a volunteer for the Interfaith Pastoral Care Network, is that what it's called, of the AIDS Resource Center, which means that if somebody with AIDS is looking for a member of the clergy to, to counsel with, for another reason, if they are Jewish, they may be referred to me. There are also other organizations that are now doing that but there weren't so many 3 or 4 years ago when I started that, started doing that. I also have been have done a couple of liturgies around, surrounding the issue of AIDS. Last year at the Pratt Institute, which is a college and graduate school for people in arts and architecture, they had an all day teach in on sexuality and there was a service, which I was invited to co-lead with the Catholic priest there. And I will be doing a liturgy for New York Federation of Reform Synagogues event in two weeks and did one for one that Hebrew Union College did last year. And had done a lot of funerals or memorial services for people who had died.

MP: You've also been active in abortion rights.

MMW: I have, in fact, this, just this April, 22 people came under the Beth-Am banner to the march on Washington-

MP: That's [inaudible].

MMW: Which is an extraordinary number given the size of our congregation. They weren't all members, some of them were friends of members, but it was really a very large number and even the people who didn't go were very supportive of those of us who did.

MP: That's very exciting.

MMW: Yeah, that [00:20:00] is not new for my congregation though, Rabbi Margulies, I'm told, was an abortion rights advocate before Roe v. Wade, so they sort of take that for granted, that's not radical from their perspective at all.

MP: What kinds of things are you involved with on a daily basis? What's a day in the life of a rabbi like?

MMW: Oh, a day in the life of a rabbi is very diverse, I spend a lot of time at my desk which is at home, in a study that I have at home, corresponding with people in the congregation, you know, to keep committee work going or other things like that, preparing for services and sermon for the coming Shabbat or holiday, setting up this Hebrew training program that we have, I do work with people who are interested in converting to Judaism, with couples who want to be married, with – preparing funerals, which is not a daily activity it does take over when it happens, visiting people in the hospital. I'm involved in the Clergy Association of North Manhattan Clergy, acutally, I'm the only rabbi involved in it right now, um.

MP: And then you have just some regular office hours in Washington Heights where –

MMW: Yeah –

MP: People can just come to see you.

MMW: By appointment. It doesn't make sense for me to go up there and sit, so by appointment.

MP: Mhm. And what kind of space do you have, do you have a synagogue where, you said something about renting a space –

MMW: Yeah, the congregation until about 12 years ago, I'm not exactly sure of the date, had its own building, which it had rented for 20 years or more. When the landlord wanted to sell the building, the congregation had already been decimated and did not have the financial resources to buy the building, went in search of a place to worship and ended up sharing space in a Lutheran church, not all that far from where the synagogue had been. There are now three congregations occupying the building, the Lutheran church, ourselves, and an Urdu Seventh Day Adventist church. So we have the sanctuary Friday night, the Seventh Day Adventists have it Saturday morning, and the Lutherans, who own the buildings, have it Sunday. But we use the building and other rooms in it lots of times throughout the week for classes and choir rehearsal and meetings and sisterhood, stuff like that. But the space is not adequate to our needs at this point and it's just this year for the first time since I've been here, for the first time since they've been there, that the congregation has acknowledged that we need more space. Especially because we have started a family education program and now have some young children in the congregation, need a regular space for them and are beginning to see our way financially to having more space, but now it's hard to find space in the building, the building is pretty much occupied and you know used all the time. So we're hoping to be able to carve out some space there for ourselves, more space for ourselves.

MP: Well, it sounds like you're involved in quite a lot, the questions on this sheet are not totally relevant to the kind of occupation that you have, I guess I have one sort of wrap up question in a way, about how you feel that your education at Brown has effected your operation in what you're doing now. How it prepared you in some way or didn't prepare you. It seems to me from what you've said, you've been at rather continuum, so I'm not sure that's quite a relevant -

MMW: No, it is a relevant question, I think that my training at Brown has prepared me less for the pulpit rabbinate than it has for the teaching that I do at Hebrew Union College, which I really haven't talked about yet, but I am an adjunct there and have been for 5 years, I started out teaching *The Implications of Feminism for Judaism*, and have added to that *The Teaching of Preaching Homiletics and Liturgy*. [00:25:00] My studies at Brown have prepared me for that in a few ways, first of all, I was exposed to really fine teaching at Brown, a very high level of commitment to teaching. It was one of reasons I chose it, I didn't want to go to a school where the emphasis was on graduate education and the undergraduates were ignored. Which means that I now have very high standards for my own teaching. Sometimes I meet them, most of the time I don't. But I am always trying to be the kind of teaching that Jacob Neusner was to me, for example. But he wasn't the only one. So they were, those teachers were real role models to me in my work as a teacher. Also, the, I learned from my studies at Brown an open-mindedness, an open minded approach to the study of religion, which I carry forward in my own teaching. It has to, it has to be tempered by the needs that students preparing for the career in the rabbinate have and a dispassionate objective approach that you learn in the study of the history of religion is not always helpful for that. But at least I hope that it keeps me from being mired in institutional dogma.

MP: Would you like to say anything more about your teaching? It sounds like something you're very committed to as well. So I mean, it sounds as though you have a very exciting and interesting combination of teaching and being a rabbi for a congregation, but you also have a husband and two children and your children are now how old?

MMW: About to be 6 and a little more than 2.

MP: Ah, so how do you balance all this?

MMW: Well, I have 50 hours of in-home childcare a week and a husband who is very involved in his children's lives. And I really couldn't do it without those two other people, there's no question about it, work full time and be a full time mom. And and if you're working you have to

have the security that the people your children are with are the best people you could find for them, otherwise you drive yourself crazy.

MP: Is your family part of your congregation, do they come to sermons?

MMW: They don't come to Friday night services because those services start at 8 o'clock and that's not a time for little kids, besides, it's an hour from home and I don't get home until midnight Friday nights. We as a family belong to a synagogue in Brooklyn, which is where we go Saturday mornings. My congregation has services Saturday morning in people's homes but they're led by laypeople. My kids and my husband do come to my congregation when we do things in the afternoons. I do a lot of interfaith stuff, there's the pastor of the Lutheran church and I are very good friends and we do Martin Luther King Day service and Thanksgiving service. My family does come to that because it starts at 5, but they really can't come to the late evening activities. Maybe as they get older, they will be able to, although I must say that it is not easy for especially my older daughter to be around me when I'm working. She doesn't, she doesn't at this point in her life like seeing me in the pulpit. She would either rather be there herself, she's something of a performer herself, or she would like to have you know my attention on her, not divided amongst all of the people present there. So it doesn't work out so well for me to have them with me.

MP: But they do understand what you do, like what Mommy does when Mommy goes to work.

MMW: Oh absolutely, in fact, Liba, not infrequently, in kindergarten will pretend to be the rabbi, in fact, when she was in the 3 year old in nursery school, one of the kids was absent and during group time, she said, "Well, now we're going to have a funeral for Melanie," and she invited everybody to say something nice about Melanie. So they definitely know what I do. I'm not, I should say –

MP: Do they go to public school or a religious school?

MMW: Neither, I mean, at this, the older one, who's in kindergarten now goes to a private kindergarten, she will go to public school in September for 1st grade.

MP: Is there anything else you'd like to say, uh, that might be – okay, well, thanks very much and thanks for a very interesting –

END OF INTERVIEW