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Interviewee: **Illith Rosenblum**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Illith Rosenblum
July 20, 2012

SARAH SCHULMAN: Tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

ILLITH ROSENBLUM: Okay. My name is Illith Rosenblum. My age is sixty-six. We are at my apartment on 251 Elizabeth Street in New York City.

SS: And today's date?

IR: And the date is Friday, July 20th, 1012. No, 2012.

SS: 2012.

IR: There you go. I'm messing it up already.

SS: That's okay. And out your window we have two former city buildings that were vacated four years ago and are now empty.

IR: Empty. It's one big building, actually.

SS: So, Illith, you were born in Israel, right?

IR: I was born in Jerusalem. In Palestine, actually.

SS: And where were your parents from?

IR: My mother was from Switzerland, and my father from Germany.

Well, a shifting part of Germany, Poland.

SS: What part is that?

IR: I think it was probably Poland at a certain time. It could have been Russia at a certain time. It's like Silesia.

SS: Like Galicia?

IR: That is right. I'm not really—yes.

SS: When did they come to Israel?

IR: They came to Israel in the thirties, early thirties, '33.

SS: So they came before. Oh, right at '33?

IR: Yes.

SS: So they missed all of that.

IR: Yes. My father was warned to leave, so he left, and his brother was already in Israel. I think also a sister and his mother and he left.

SS: And why did your mother leave Switzerland in '33?

IR: My mother, she left, I think, for—she went with the Maccabiada, the second Maccabiada, I think, a Zionist— you know, or maybe to leave her family.

SS: But I didn't know they had big recruitment from Switzerland.

IR: No, there wasn't a big recruitment.

SS: That was unusual.

IR: She left with her sister, I think, yes.

SS: So that means you were born in what year?

IR: '45.

SS: So, wow. That's an incredible time to be brought up in Israel.

IR: Yes.

SS: So I'm wondering, looking at that period, can you think of messages that you got about community or about responsibility that may have led you to become an activist later or that maybe you rejected in order to become an activist later?

IR: No. I think there were a lot of messages about social responsibility and building up a better world and building up a new country and a new nation, and very idealistic and very committed to helping others and bringing the whole thing up.

SS: So you grew up with a lot of refugees as a child.

IR: Everybody was a refugee. Everybody was from somewhere else.

SS: But also postwar refugees. Probably as a child, you must have—

IR: I wouldn't have known that. I don't know that you know that.

Everybody—yes.

SS: Or people who just came out of DP camps or their children.

IR: Yes. So there were—yes. But it was a very strong emphasis on being Israelis, because I guess we were the first generation, I guess. Well, not really. I mean, there were Jews living in Israel before, but we were, like, the first generation of the immigrants. Yes, refugees, immigrants, whatever you want to call it.

SS: So when did you start to think that you were a person who was not going to be living there for the rest of your life?

IR: Early. Probably in my teens, like twelve, eleven, twelve.

SS: What was that about, do you think, looking back?

00:05:00 IR: It was a sense of enclosure. Also, I grew up in Jerusalem. At the time, Jerusalem was—not that I knew a difference, but it was a very small city. It was divided. It was always very far and complicated to get from Jerusalem elsewhere, to Tel Aviv, for instance. It was a very small society, small, and everybody knew the business of everybody else. That sort of—

SS: But what was it about you that made that not acceptable to you, whereas to other people it was acceptable?

IR: I don't know. I don't know. I think it's probably more feeling oppressed in my home, I don't know, more than the society at large. And then there was also the society, it was very—I don't know the word, but you had to conform. It was very conforming. To be there, you have to be there for the country, you have to go to the army, you have to go to the paramilitary exercises, you had to—yes.

SS: Did you go to the army?

IR: Yes, but again with the thought that I would leave, so I didn't want to, you know, have any debts so to be free.

SS: When do you think that, like, an internal sense of feminism or a need for feminism started to emerge in you?

IR: That was much later.

SS: Later.

IR: Much later, yes.

SS: So the need to leave was separate from that.

IR: Yes. The need to leave was a wish to leave the house. It was more family dynamics that I felt like I had to leave and—

SS: So what year did you leave Israel?

IR: I left '65.

SS: '65 and you came here?

IR: No. I went to—no. I went to—well, my goal was to spend a year in Paris and learn some French, because that was my second language, unfortunately. And before that, I went to—I went to Grenoble. It was a summer, so I was going somewhere until I would go to Paris in the fall, and then I was in Geneva, and then I met this Swedish guy in Geneva. And then I went to Paris and did what I did in Paris. For a year I studied French, basically. I worked a little bit and studied French, and then I reconnected with the Swedish guy that I met in Geneva, and I went to Sweden. Then I stayed in Sweden until I came to States, '78. So I was in Sweden from '66 to '78.

SS: So you were in Sweden through the sixties, basically.

IR: Yes. Seventies and sixties in Sweden. These were sort of—yes, I don't know. I think San Francisco was more fun. But Sweden had its—

SS: So how did that transform your sense of yourself as a political person?

IR: So in Sweden—well, there were many different things. In Sweden, the person that I met, he was a communist. His whole environment, you know, his whole friends and mother, and they were all Lefties. I didn't know much politics, much about politics. So when I came to Sweden '66, I actually was there during the '67 War, and then I went back to Israel for a year. But then I already had, you know, some kind of understanding about politics from having met those people, and then when I went to Israel, '67, or it was '68, '70, maybe, and there was the war in the Sinai, around the Sinai border, and it just became really clear to me that peace is not on the agenda for Israelis,

00:10:00 because they kept discussing, oh, this kilometers or that kilometers. It was like all smoke screens, and I was convinced that there is no interest in making peace.

Then I went back to Sweden. So, yes, I guess meeting the people. I mean, and before that, I was also in France during the big—

SS: Soixante-huit?

IR: Yes. It wasn't there '68. I was there '67. But in '66 there were a lot of strikes, student strikes at the universities that exempted the foreigners, of course. But there was already things happening on the streets and so forth.

Then in Sweden there was a very active anti-Vietnam movement and demonstrations, and I met a bunch of Americans who deserted, who moved to Sweden. So that was like the new Left in Europe at the time that was concerned with anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist work. And then Israel, Palestine always in the background. It was always there, and in Israel in the time there wasn't much happening, except for Matzpen

SS: What's Matzpen?

IR: Matzpen was the very first non-Zionist, leftist group, the very—yes, early Buber.

SS: Was that out of the Communist Party or was that separate?

IR: It was, yes. There were maybe Trotskyites, so it wasn't really the — I'm not quite sure. But that's the people that I knew they were still—they were there acting and agitating, but that was the group that I met there.

SS: So you went to New York directly in '78?

IR: Yes. So then there were—like, even in Sweden there was a start of the Feminist Movement in Sweden. It was very straight. It was all about being a mother for how many children. I remember meeting, “I’m a mother,” and, “I’m a mother.” I said, “Oh, god, that can’t be just it.”

So I came to New York around April ’78 on a sort of exchange program. I was working in Sweden. I was working in environmental. It’s very long story.

SS: We’ve got a lot of time.

IR: Okay. So to support myself, I went to school. I went to university called college, I think, is the corresponding first degree. I went in Sweden, and to finance myself, I worked part-time in a genetic laboratory taking care of aquarium fish for a friend of my friends there who was writing his dissertation on quicksilver and mercury in water and fish. It was really early, early, early, early environmental work, really early. It was like—I don’t know.

Then I didn’t want to study biology and the sciences. I needed to have more—I needed to have studied other stuff before, and so I chose to study what people studied at the time, was social anthropology and economic history and so forth, so I was in the social sciences. And when I finished my first degree, my boss at the laboratory, he moved. He got a big position as a biologist at the Swedish Water and Air Pollution Research Institute, and I came to him and said, “Well, what happens to the people? If the water is polluted, then what happens to the people?”

Then he said, “Well, why don’t you come and find out?”

00:15:00 So I started doing research in something that later was called environmental impact assessment, but all this we just made it up as we went along. That was interesting, and I got involved with the very first oil spills studies and looking at fishing communities and how it affects the fishing communities, the oil spills. We went different places around the world, doing those impact studies, especially when there was no more oil to be found in the sand, so the biologists and the chemists couldn't really take samples, and I would go and talk to the people about what happened and about the fishing and so forth. So it was the first very early ecology. I mean, ecology just came out as a word, as a concept at that time.

So after a while when the field started blooming, I started feeling a little bit uncertain about what I was doing, and I got this sabbatical from this institute to come here. I looked for different places, but I ended up coming here to the environmental psychology program and to the human ecology program in Rutgers and the environmental psychology program in CUNY. So I came to see what people are doing here and give talks about what I did in Sweden, like my research. I did also research on sweet water, on lakes and acidification of lakes, which was also early, early stuff.

And here I found the feminist. Okay, so here I found the Feminist Movement. A year later, Maxine Wolfe came from her sabbatical in Denmark. When I came to the environmental psychology program, she was away. Then she came back and we befriended each other, and we started to look around politically what we can do, and we found all kinds of Feminist Movement groups. We thought it would be more

interesting to introduce Marxism to feminists than to introduce feminism to Marxism, to the Marxists. So we were active in different groups.

SS: So which groups were you in?

IR: So there was CARASA [Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse], the abortion—

SS: Weren't you first in a left wing group, like a Trotskyist group with the word "worker" in the title, right, in Brooklyn?

IR: Yes, yes, there was—we were in different places, and then what I remember was CARASA and then there was—I just thought of something. There was a Woman-to-Woman. Didn't we do Woman-to-Woman?

SS: Yes, we did that.

IR: Yes, we organized that ourselves. Let me see. So how late have we come to? So it's the eighties. My year was over, and I didn't go back to Sweden. I was trying to find work here in what I did before, but it was not possible because I didn't have enough academic degrees. I had a lot of experience that nobody had in doing fieldwork and research, but I had a B.A. It was like, "What are we going to do with you?" They just couldn't place me anywhere, because you needed a Ph.D. to fit into those positions, and I wasn't interested. I wasn't interested in redoing what I'd done before, and spending time and the money that I didn't have writing up what I already knew and understood in terms of ecology and in terms of how society affected by environmental pollution, and it's just like I have already—I understood that already. I was interested in new things, so I dropped that.

Due to feminism, I mean, feminism—I was at that time, I'm thinking about it today, was really deep. Feminist theory was really deep. It wasn't about equal rights. It wasn't about doing the same as a woman. It was about something completely different. It was really about a whole new relationship to the world, like everything—it's like the first time I heard about Marxism, like understanding the world in terms of classes. Now it was like a whole—without throwing that away, a whole new way of turning your head around and seeing, and the whole world just fell in a different place.

There was a lot of criticism about language, and I understood that part of—the ecology part was always part of it. It was always part of my interest, and I understood that we are not going to relate differently to the environment as long as it's outside of ourselves and so forth.

00:20:00

I started thinking that maybe the problem was in language, separating things that actually you cannot separate, that in nature are not separable like the apple from the tree. Like it's one thing, it's not separate. But in language, it's separate. So then I thought, well, maybe in a different way I can express those feminist, ecological, justice issues, and I got interested in doing visual arts of maybe this way. So I started doing artwork and did my little Xeroxes and was writing.

SS: Did you go to the Feminist Art Institute?

IR: Yes, I went to the Feminist Art Institute. That was my first—yes, and we did, like, visual diaries. I had no idea what this could be, and it was amazing. Ah, visual diaries! Wow! We can express—right, right, that's how.

SS: Who were your teachers?

IR: Nancy Azara. Nancy Azara gave the visual diary. That's what I did. Then I did some other. I took some other classes at the—what's the name of the school? It was on 23rd Street.

SS: SVA?

IR: Yes, School for Visual Art. But I just took little classes here and there. Xerography, that was very advanced at the time. So, yes, and all the while I knew Maxine, and the work was always a way to put out political thoughts or ideas. And at the time, due to the Feminist Movement, there was a lot—there were a lot of outlets. There were the bookstores. There were the little festivals. There were—yes, a lot.

And then I also met Lise Weil from—who did *Trivia* and wrote for her magazine about Rosa Luxemburg. So I brought more the Lefty perspective to feminism or to that feminist context. Yes, we're almost there. It's '78—no, '87. We're almost there, '87.

SS: So what brought you to ACT UP?

IR: So, Maxine, basically. I'm trying to think. Well, before that, of course, there was AIDS, people getting sick and dying eventually and, like, friends. I was then with Roberta, and friends of hers got sick, and we used to go to the hospital. It was a so scary, like what do you do?

SS: You were close to Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff, right?

IR: Yes. So Wagstaff, it was Sam, basically, that was the first person I saw in the hospital, and it was just like we didn't know. Like, how are you supporting,

how can you support, what can you do? Eventually she went to some meetings of, I think. I forget even what it was called, like support groups.

At the time, even, I remember, I thought that it was environmentally. I thought it was Agent Purple rather than Agent Orange. I thought, “oh, it’s all man.” “What happened?” “Where could it have come from?” and I was thinking about – But it brought up all the issues that we were going to completely working with all the time, which is like the body, sex, immigrants, xenophobia.

SS: So when you got into ACT UP—

IR: So then, yes. What happened, I think, Maxine told me about the first demonstration, which I didn’t know about, I didn’t go to at Wall Street. But then the second or third, there was something in City Hall. I think that’s the first one, the first time I went, was a demonstration at City Hall. Or shortly after, I think. I don’t remember what the issues were, was the issues. Then I started coming to meetings. I heard about the meetings, so I started coming to meetings, and then I was just like—

SS: Because even though you had been politically active all those years, you hadn’t been a militant in that way. I mean, you hadn’t been totally identified with an organization.

IR: No, no, completely, no, no. No, I always stayed—yes, exactly.

00:25:00

SS: So what was different? What was different?

IR: I think that what was different was the scope, that it was like this—that it wasn’t like one thing. It wasn’t like one issue, although it was one issue, because it shed light on all those dark corners that I was always involved in and interested in, and it

brought out those dark corners. I think today I'm thinking differently. I'm thinking of other aspect that might drawn me to it, but that's with an understanding that came maybe two, three years ago. It's not what I—so I can talk about it.

SS: Yes, tell us.

IR: That's not what—I didn't operate in those terms at that time. At that time it was really because it was I was interested in public health, because I was interested in the environment, I was interested in immigration. Because I was an immigrant, I was interested in racism, worked for racism, interested in feminism and the body and sexuality and everything, and it was like everything was right there.

Today what I think, which has to do with some years ago, two or three years ago, I came back from my longest stay in Israel, and through some friend, and so I connected to somebody who was working on affect theory, and something she said just lit a light in my being, and she was talking about shame. And I understood that this was the hole that I fall into when I am in Jerusalem, when I go to Israel. This is like a hole, like a hole of shame, and that it's something that obviously I've been working on, responding to all my life, which was maybe why I left, you know, the house. Then later when I'm thinking about ACT UP and I'm thinking about AIDS and gay sexuality and sex generally, and us being shamed, stigmatized, shamed and shaming.

And in a way, I mean, I wasn't thinking unless—until I got your email, I didn't think about ACT UP. I was thinking more about my militant work in Israel, like doing the checkpoint watches in 2000, like year after year seeing the people going through the checkpoints, and just solidarity work with Palestinians. An Israeli is imbued

in shame from both sides. Do I look at them in their humiliation? Am I witness? It's just like very controversial. So, anyway, so that's like somebody would, I would say, that's on the lower order. On the lower order, I think it's the affect issue that maybe drew me into the –

SS: That's interesting, because ACT UP, we used to say, "Shame, shame, shame."

IR: I know. It's shaming.

SS: But don't you think that it was a shame, that they should be ashamed?

IR: No, no, exactly, exactly. Yes, yes, yes. No, it was a great way of working with that. I mean, it's like such debilitating feeling, emotion. It's very—so how do you—yes. Both you are stigmatized. You are shamed for being who you are or for having this sickness, and then on the other hand, you are acting out or acting through it, basically, and the shame of the others. Yes, of course, of course.

SS: But that's one of the standard paradigms that originally motivated feminism, gay liberation, was that people who were actually doing something good were told that they were bad, that there was a paradigm flip, right? So that there's nothing wrong with being gay, but we were always told it was wrong. There's nothing right about being straight, but they're always told they're right. So now we're saying, "Hey, we're not necessarily wrong and you're not necessarily right."

IR: Right, exactly—yes, yes, yes. It was just pulling from under that rug in a way.

SS: Exactly. So when you got into ACT UP, where did you situate yourself? Were you on a committee or did you join an affinity group?

IR: I was, yes, in many different—I mean, I don't remember the chronology.

SS: That's fine.

IR: I know there was the Women's Committee, maybe pretty early on or not, maybe not so early on.

00:30:00

SS: Do you remember why there was a Women's Committee?

IR: Well, because there was not addressing—like AIDS as an illness wasn't addressed for women. I mean, there was no information, and basically AIDS was gay men, gay white men.

SS: But the reason, let me explain why I'm asking you that. Usually in politics when there's a Women's Committee, it's because the women in the group don't have any power. But in this case, that wasn't the case.

IR: No, No

SS: Women in ACT UP were different than women with AIDS, right? So women had power in ACT UP, and they were using that power for women who didn't have power, which was women with AIDS. It's a different construction.

IR: Yes exactly. It wasn't to make ourselves feel better in the organization, if that's what you mean. That wasn't—no, no, no. It was like it was, shall I

say, issue oriented? It was like there was—at the time there were, like, a committee that dealt with prisoners. There was a committee that dealt with immigration, which I worked with. There was a committee that dealt with women, to bring information out to women and also in terms of prevention and in terms of treatment, because there was nothing really made adaptable for women. I mean, everything was pretty standard. That's what I remember, to cure—

SS: I want to focus on the immigration work inside ACT UP, because very few people have talked about that. We don't have a lot about that. What was the committee? Who was on it?

IR: I don't know if I remember that.

SS: You don't remember anybody? What were some of the issues that you were concerned with?

IR: I'd have to take time to think about it.

SS: Because I know there was a ban on people with HIV coming into the country. I don't know if that was something.

IR: There was, and then there was—I don't know if—I'm trying to remember what happened with the Haitians. There was something with the Haitians, or they couldn't come in or they were detained or they were—

SS: Right. Haitians were detained at Guantanamo.

IR: There you go, yes.

SS: That's right, around HIV.

IR: Yes, yes.

SS: And you were involved with that?

IR: Yeas, there was something.

SS: With Betty Williams?

IR: Ah, yes, maybe. Yes, yes, yes. I'm really—I mean, even people that went in my affinity group, eventually I don't remember the names. I'm really bad. But certainly that was—and in prison too. It's just like in the very beginning, like, it's not like we could do a lot, but we talked about what can we do. Then eventually some people went and—

SS: Were you meeting with Haitian organizations?

IR: No.

SS: So the work was inside ACT UP.

IR: Inside ACT UP.

SS: And then other people were the liaisons?

IR: Yes, yes.

**SS: And the prison group, were you working—was it the Riker's—
with the New Bedford Hills?**

IR: Yes, both. we were in Rikers, Rikers Island. Eventually, also, and also I mean, I just touched different—different—then there were always the general demonstrations and the general meeting that was always going on as well, so that was just additional involvement. And then later on, after the Women's Committee, I think, a committee that I really worked more extensively was the needle exchange. The needle exchange, I did it down here.

SS: What did you do exactly?

IR: We went out twice, twice a week, or at least once a week, sometimes twice a week, and before that, we would meet at Rod [Sorge's] apartment, and we did the kits.

Then we did something totally insane, which I completely appreciated, deeply appreciated, was we marked the needles, and then from the different location of the needle exchange, and then when we collected the needles to give new needles, we took them home and we turned the bucket around, which is like insane, insane, and we separated the different—the blue, the red, the yellow. I don't remember. We separate them to see where people were coming from or where they got the needles and who they were, in a way to get some research data.

00:35:00

And what I mostly appreciated is that we didn't use the people who came to get clean needle as research objects by interviewing and doing what one does usually and using them for one's own publications. So we did that at our own risk of dealing with those dirty needles. They were used needles and—

SS: And what did you learn?

IR: I don't remember the statistic. The statistics was we learned—we got some good data that was later presented in the context of harm reduction. That wasn't the term then, but the term that came up, that it's less harm. Basically, we traced how many—what was it we were looking for? We were looking for to see how many used needles—well, actually, we asked of them to bring the used needles, and then they got as

many fresh ones. I think what they found out or in the end was whether it's the group—who gave out the needles. I don't remember what it was.

SS: What streets were the distribution places?

IR: We were on—was it Rivington? By Clinton. I remember by the school there, we were sitting out there, and then we would go on Wednesday – that was on weekends, because the school, and then on weekends we went to Tompkins Square Park and sometimes under the bridge, the bridge that goes from Chinatown. There were homeless people.

SS: Because people were living under that bridge, yes.

IR: Yes. So we were going there.

SS: And at that time, Tompkins Square Park was when the tent city was there, right?

IR: Yes. We would go there. But most consistently we were in one spot there on Rivington. It's Rivington? Rivington or Stanton? Yes, by Clinton Street.

SS: Because in those days there were no restaurants there.

IR: There was. There was.

SS: What one?

IR: It was the corner. It was like this Hispanic—I don't remember.

SS: Oh, the Comida place.

IR: Saved our lives. It used to be cold, and we used to go and get our little whatever, café con leche. Yes, I remember that. That was very important.

So there was, yes—there was, I think, when I—that was the last involvement I had in committees, and then there was the affinity groups. There was Queer Nation?

SS: That's interesting. You think Queer Nation was an affinity group of ACT UP?

IR: What did we call ourselves? At CDC we were an an affinity group, with Randy [Snyder] and Maxine [Wolfe] and Gerri [Wells] and—

SS: The Costas?

IR: Costas was one. But then once we changed the name—

SS: Oh, you changed it? Okay.

IR: Nation. It was something because I didn't like "Nation." So I remember, was it—yes, could it be Queer Nation was an affinity group?

SS: That's interesting.

IR: I think so that it was. Check it out.

SS: Before Queer Nation was founded, before the organization—

IR: Yes. There was no—yes, yes, yes.

SS: Yes, right.

IR: Before. Before.

SS: That's interesting.

IR: I think. Yes, so we did the regular stuff that was happening like that. And actually it was ACT UP that got me to yoga because it was a lot going on. It was really a lot. And I thought, if I want to do something for myself, my body or something,

I'm not going to—I'm like at least twenty year older than everybody. I felt it even then. So it got me to do the yoga. But it also had me neglected my life, basically. I worked as a freelance bookkeeper. That's how I made my money. I feel it now.

SS: What about care groups? Because I know you had a bunch of people who died in ACT UP.

IR: So, well, the first were, you know, more private, before ACT UP.

00:40:00 Then I was around with Gerri's brother.

SS: Gerri Wells' brother.

IR: Yes, Gerri Wells' brother. And I sort of just regarded myself as support for the support, you know, to her, but I was in the hospital a lot.

SS: Can you just explain what the conditions were at that time in a hospital? Like what did it mean for someone to be in the hospital?

IR: I don't know. I mean—

SS: What kind of treatment was there?

IR: I don't know. I don't know. Because, I mean, it was probably the second time I was in the hospital in the United States. I didn't know what to expect or what it would be like. Basically, I visited to cheer him up, but I don't know what kind of—I wasn't the direct—right there. I wasn't there and so on. I was there to go with Gerri or to say hi. I even forgot his name.

SS: I don't know his name.

IR: Then there was one experience, and then another experience was with Jon Greenberg, who was at home mostly, and had people at home take care of him. And

I felt very inadequate. I felt very inadequate. I went and did, but I didn't know what I was doing.

SS: Were you close to him?

IR: Yes, we were — we were friends when he was, when he was still feeling good. And then when he was really getting rundown, I sort of changed shift with whoever was there, Risa.

SS: Oh, with Risa Denenberg?

IR: Yes.

SS: Because he had very strong ideas about what kind of treatment he wanted—

IR: Right, right.

SS: —and it had a big impact on his health and his—

IR: I couldn't tell that either, because there was no comparison. I don't know. Maybe today or maybe if you knew more, if our people did something else, it's hard to say.

SS: Well, if you look back historically, the people who were doing the most—not AZT, but the people who did the most informed pharmaceuticals, they're alive now.

IR: Yes.

SS: And the people who refused all of that, most of them are not alive now.

IR: Right, yes.

SS: So it was very hard to beat that virus on your own, basically.

IR: Yes. There was no way of knowing.

SS: Right, of course.

IR: There was no way of knowing, yes. And AZT was, I guess, like the dosage was so, so intense, that it probably killed many too.

SS: Oh sure.

IR: I mean, the medical aspect of it, I didn't get into it so much. I didn't feel like I had enough background to deal with the—

SS: What was the relationship like between the women in ACT UP and the women with AIDS who were working together? Because every one of them is dead now except for Marina [Alvarez], right? Everyone has died.

IR: Yes.

SS: So what was that relationship like?

IR: Well, I don't know personally the relationship. I just know that at one point—and that's again on the higher order and more, in general, speaking. At one point, which also there were several things that caused me to leave ACT UP eventually. One of them was a discrepancy of that mindset that we are all people with AIDS, and at one point it was really important and really helpful. And then further down the line, I sort of felt that this is not right. It's not right. We are not all people with AIDS. I mean, we are all people living with AIDS and there is AIDS in our environment, and some of them have it inside and some have it outside, but we are not—and there is a divide, and that as

long as we are trying to huddle under that, there was an ambivalence, and I was disturbed by that.

SS: And where did you see that breaking down or what were the contradictions ?

IR: It was more when. As time progressed, I saw the interest sort of shifting away, that people who had AIDS inevitably had other issues than us who didn't have the virus, and it wasn't addressed. As far as I could tell from what was happening on the floor, it was not addressed and it wasn't looked at and said, "That's right. So you have to do your thing, and when we have to do our things. We are not the same." So that was one thing.

00:45:00

SS: And what were the issues that that was expressed around?

IR: I don't remember. It's so long. It's so long ago.

SS: I think what you're saying is really interesting. It's not like everybody with AIDS was in the same position in ACT UP. I mean, people had different—they split, too, right?

IR: Probably, yes. Possibly, possibly, yes. I have to think, well, when Randy, of course. We were around Randy.

SS: Who's Randy?

IR: Randy—

JH: Randy Snyder.

IR: —Snyder, yes. I actually went to Paris again. I haven't been to Paris since the sixties. I went with Randy in a wheelchair, and David and another friend of ours, '92, maybe.

SS: What was David's last name?

IR: David Usher. He's still around. And Randy, again, I don't know what medication he was on. I don't know what he was taking. I wasn't that direct—I mean I was there, there, there, there, but I don't know anything—I mean, today I would be more informed about the body and medicine after, I don't know, twenty years of yoga. But then I didn't have that.

SS: But '92 was a bad time, because there was nothing to take, really.

IR: Yes, probably.

SS: So you tell me if I'm accurate in how I'm understanding you. You started to see something in ACT UP where people with AIDS had different needs than people without AIDS, and it wasn't being addressed.

IR: Mm-hmm. Also the need for activism, I mean needs, yes, definitely.

SS: But you don't remember the specifics.

IR: I don't remember, no.

SS: So did that make you decide to leave?

IR: No. Then there was another incident that I thought that it was time to move on, and that was at the memorial for Vito Russo. It was in a hall, but I don't remember.

SS: Cooper Union.

IR: Cooper Union, was it? Yes, in Cooper Union. And that's when I understood that we had a leader, which I didn't know before.

SS: You didn't know Larry Kramer was the leader?

IR: No, no, no. Now I know. I didn't know that. I mean, I knew he was there and I totally admired the work in GMHC, whatever they did, and it's not that. It's just that I didn't know, and that he really pointed the finger at us, I felt like. He was standing there and blaming us for Vito Russo's death. And then I thought—I mean, on one hand, I know that the person who is grieving, to sort of step away and give a lot of space for whatever comes from that person who is grieving, but I don't know. I felt that was like we did so much, we worked so hard.

SS: So you worked so hard—

IR: I put aside my whole life for I don't know how many years.

SS: And then you walk in the room and Larry Kramer says—

IR: And then I walk in and my leader is telling me it's my fault.

SS: We killed Vito.

IR: Yes. "It's your fault." I said, like, okay. So that was another—and then there was—yes. Then I stopped understanding the organization and my place in the organization. And that was around '94. I don't know what year that was, '94. And then needle exchange got—

SS: What year did Vito die?

JW: '90.

IR: Ninety? Wow. So I stayed on for a long time after, but then still I sort of remember that as—

JH: Why did you take that personally?

SS: Yes.

IR: Yes, that's what I said. It's funny that I remember that and that even though I'm telling myself, just, you know, it's like a person that's having all those emotions and don't take it personally, I did. I did. I don't know. I did. I felt like, what I've been doing all the time? What are we?

SS: Chopped liver?

IR: But also I think when I left, the needle exchange was getting money and a place, so I felt my job was done there in terms of holding it.

00:50:00

SS: Why do you think ACT UP fell apart?

IR: I don't know. Did it? It did, I guess. I mean, I don't know. When do you think that happened, or when would you say?

SS: '92, '93, that's my experience. When would you say?

IR: Yes. Interesting. So it's around the same experiences.

SS: I want to ask you something about Rod [Sorge]. So he was a very beloved person in ACT UP.

IR: Yes.

SS: And he was an active drug user, and he made a decision to continue that way, and then he died.

IR: He died after already. I don't remember. Do you remember a day, a year?

SS: Do you remember when he died?

JW: '95, maybe. [January 28, 1999]

SS: Did you have feelings about that at the time? I know you were pre-harm reduction, but you had an ideology of harm reduction.

IR: Not necessarily, no, no. No, that came later, the idea. Actually, it was from a presentation in a court case. I don't know, maybe the judge came up with it. I don't know who came up with "harm reduction." We didn't. I didn't know him personally like that. I didn't know—I mean, we were in his apartment. I heard that he is using drug, and I understood that people had experience with drugs, whoever was in the needle exchange, but I wasn't that close to him. Did you talk to Gay? Is she still around?

SS: She kind of has, I would say, Alzheimer's. I saw her, and she cannot remember anything.

IR: Like me, no?

SS: No, no, she really can't. She really can't.

IR: No, because I didn't see her name.

SS: Gay Tuckman, was that her name?

IR: Walkman. Because she was very close to—

SS: No, she's not interviewable.

IR: Oh, what a pity. I'm so sorry.

SS: Yes, but Zoe [Leonard] did give us a lot of testimony.

IR: Zoe should know—yes. Did Zoe do—she wasn't with us in the needle exchange, but, yes, she must have been around in with the group. But I know she would. I know Zoe. Who else?

SS: Have you stayed friends with people from ACT UP?

IR: No. So it's interesting. Well, I see some people sometimes. I mean, I'm still very fond of everybody if I meet them, like Steve Helmke and his boyfriend. When he was still a carpenter, he helped me fix the apartment when I moved in, and he came to yoga a couple of years. I don't remember. When I see him—I went to his graduation. I see Gerri at Whole Food. But I don't know, like, going out and seeing people. Interesting, I know. It's very interesting.

It fell apart, but I think really part of the issue was that, what I said before, that there was this understanding that wasn't connected to the reality, that we are something which we were not. But maybe the committees continued much longer than the—I guess.

SS: You came in as basically a hard-core Leftist, right? You had ideology, you had read Marx, you had been in other movements, you had come through, and you came in and you said yourself you saw what it meant. But many people just came there for their own health.

IR: Right, right.

SS: They had another motive, which is fine.

IR: Yes.

SS: But that's a coalition.

IR: Yes, exactly. So then once that was addressed, maybe, then people didn't see—oh, I don't know. I don't want to try and explain something I don't really—I didn't know.

SS: Yes, we're just talking about it.

IR: Yes, yes. I felt like I'm sort of shifting away. And then there was also the art part that was interesting to me. I mean, there were lots of things that were interesting to me. It was endlessly interesting.

SS: Did you connect as an artist inside ACT UP?

IR: Not really, because people were so much—I mean, the artists and the graphic designers who were there, they were professionals. I was just like starting to do—and there's another thing. There was another aspect that I didn't share with people. I was just ten years here, and it doesn't even have to do with this. I don't have that sense of entitlement that people had or have, Americans have. And that was another discrepancy for me.

00:55:00

SS: But that's interesting, because you're coming from two countries who actually have better health protection for citizens than Americans do, Sweden and Israel.

IR: Right. Yes. What I meant is like I meant—what I was referring to was that united in anger and going out in the streets and demanding, demanding, demanding in that sense, totally for good reason, absolutely. It's not like—it's just that I'm lacking that. So there I got tired. I got tired of the anger. I couldn't just live with that one emotion, and it was very demanding. It was very hard for me personally, that

even though I did all the demonstration, back and forth and up and down and whatever. The shame was very hard for me. It always asked more of me than I felt it's asked of other people. That's where the entitlement comes in. It's always asked of me to be there in public and to—

SS: So I just have one more question.

IR: Sure.

SS: Is there anything else that you think we should be discussing before I ask you?

IR: Let me see. Well, we made it to '95. No, I think that was about the time.

SS: So this is a question about hindsight, not what you felt then, but what you feel now. Looking back, what would you say is ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

IR: I don't even know if I can enumerate all the achievements. I think that there were a huge, enormous number of achievements.

SS: Tell us some.

IR: The whole health, the health issue, the healthcare issue, the drug trials issues like the placebos and not placebo, and pulling sexuality in the American public, pulling the sexuality out. Doing like this—we did it, too, safe-sex education, sex education in schools, everywhere. There was like, oh, it was such a hidden issue in America. I was coming from Sweden, you know, where all the violence can be shown in

films, but you can't show sex in films. In Sweden, it was the opposite. You couldn't show the violence, and sex was like you eat, you have sex, whatever.

So, the sexuality issues. The gay/lesbian issue, coming out, showing, coming out into public. I don't know. So there was the diversity of people, the diversity of issues, a combination of art. The Lefties are really boring, boring, boring, so that was like a really amazing, amazing—all those—like using the technology and the art and the aesthetics of the time and making it.

The actions on the street, going out in the street. Yes, not for a political party or for a revolution but for a— Now that you said it, see, I wasn't even thinking, of course, demanding healthcare in this country. Of course.

SS: Do you have a big disappointment about ACT UP?

01:00:00

IR: I think what happened, it's not ACT UP, but I think that what happened, I see today, I didn't see it then, it's the becoming corporate, how everything became corporate. But we didn't know that that's where it's going, I don't think, unless you were really farsighted. But we didn't know. Now every organization, every group, every affinity group that moved into the world became corporate. And that's what killed everything, I think. But that's not ACT UP's fault. That's the structure's fault, that we didn't, or the people who went into it didn't wake up to see that, no, we don't want to be corporate; we want to be cooperative. We want to bring in, not to be—and very soon after it, as soon as they became corporate, it doesn't matter if we were in the beginning in housing work or if we were in the beginning of even the harm reduction.

Later I couldn't get a job there. It doesn't matter that we made it, but it became—to be successful and to get somewhere in the world, you had to become corporate. And then it's out of reach for people like me, like people who were foot soldiers and not CEO's.

SS: I have one more thing I want to ask you. There were so many Jews in ACT UP. Do you think that that affected the way the organization went, how we behaved as an organization?

IR: Hmm. I don't know. That's very New York. How did it look ACT UP in San Francisco or in other places in New York? It's interesting. I don't know. Maybe.

SS: Because really who else would march into St. Patrick's Cathedral, right? Jews and angry Catholics. There's something in the alienation. You're saying entitlement, but I'm also seeing alienation.

IR: Alienation, yes. But wasn't that the gay issue? But they were not all gay.

SS: Right.

IR: Possibly, yes. Possibly, but it's also very—that's New York. It would be interesting if you get information from ACT UP Atlanta or San Francisco, if the whole scene looked differently.

Yesterday I went to listen to War, the group War.

SS: What is that?

IR: From '69. It's a group.

SS: Oh, the music group War?

IR: The music group War. They were at the Queens—

SS: So they're all seventy years old, right?

IR: They were amazing. They're amazing, amazing, amazing. They were under the Queens Bridge in the park. But what was interesting is that I really picked up how different they were, because they are a West Coast group, and how the music, how the tempo, and it was so different. Anyway, that was apropos. So it will be interesting to compare.

SS: Okay. Great. Well, thank you, Illith.

IR: Thank you.

SS: Thank you. You're the only person who said ACT UP became corporate, and you're totally right. Totally right. You're the first person to say that, that the whole scene—

IR: The scene, yes, and then you had no access anymore. It closed and so what are you going from—there was no continuation.

SS: Well, the fact that you couldn't get a job in harm reduction is the key. That is it.

IR: Or any of the places, yes.

SS: Any of the places that we started.

IR: That we started, we couldn't go in.

SS: Because the people who make change are not the people to benefit from it.

IR: I guess not.