In Judaism, it's a Matriarchal Society
Nancy Davidson's Interview Transcript
Collected and Edited[1] by Eliza Lambert

In Association with the Maine Jewish Museum
and Documenting Maine Jewry

"I think my mother and father were one of the first somewhat prominent intermarriages in Maine."

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[1] Note to the reader: Narratives and transcripts have been recorded and compiled to show the slang and quirks of speech inherent in every narrator.

NANCY DAVIDSON: I was born in 1938. I came home to the Eastern Promenade, where my parents had a home. My mother was not Jewish, and my father was Jewish, with a Russian background and my mother with a Danish background. She had agreed that the children would be brought up Jewish. But we celebrated all the holidays in our household. I think my mother and father were one of the first somewhat prominent intermarriages in Maine. My grandmother wasn't too happy about that - my Jewish grandmother. But she learned to love my mother very much. My grandmother and grandfather on my Danish side… My grandfather traveled all over the world for the Lutheran church. My grandmother was a stay-at-home grandmother from Denmark. I believe she was born in Denmark. She was a extremely good seamstress. They had six children and she made all their clothes. Anyways, they were all very accepting of my father. But it was harder for my grandmother who - I don't know if she was married or divorced at the time, but she was very vehement about the children being brought up Jewish and I think my father honored that by saying to my mother, "Do you mind if the children are brought up Jewish?" There was no real formal education for Jewish women at that time, but I did go to Temple all the time with my father and we did celebrate the holidays. We did not celebrate Hanukkah. Hanukkah, at that time, was a minor holiday and never became quite so prevalent in society until it became a competition, in a way, to Christmas. So the Jewish children could have something. Many of the gentile children wanted to have Hanukkah and many of the Jewish children wanted to have Christmas. So anyway, it was a blended melting pot in my household. The Temple, Temple Beth El, which is the conservative Temple of Maine, of Portland, was built, I would say, maybe the early '50s, late '40s or later '50s. My father was very instrumental in having that happen and I always went to services with him. That was... And then I also had... I should not neglect to mention that although the house that I was brought up in was very huge. It also had two apartments in it. One apartment that was rented was by this lovely couple that were orthodox Jews and I spent a lot of time in their apartment. They were very loving, like a second grandparents. Their daughter and son-in-law lived there too, and he was a Hebrew Scholar. They introduced me even more than the Temple about Judaism. I used to go down and light the Friday night candles with them, etc. etc. Anyway. I went to a private school starting when I was five years old, at Waynflete, which is a familiar name to most people in Maine. I was the only so-called Jewish person at the school. I had a real mixed-bag of education… I always fought the so-called Jewish battles and democratic battles at Waynflete. I was probably... I used to walk around with Muskie signs.

ELIZA LAMBERT: What did you walk around with?

ND: Muskie, Ed Muskie ran for state senator. He was the first senator to break the Republican hold in Maine. My father was very friendly to him, and so I was exposed to him at a young age, and the democratic values of life. And at that time, many Jewish people were democrats. When you say, "How has it changed?" I'd say that it's changed dramatically that a lot of Jewish people now are Republicans. And some are still Democrats. Anyway, back to Waynflete and my education on Judaism. Come to find out, in Judaism, it's a matriarchal society. You are... The blood-line of the mother tells you who you are. After fighting all these Jewish battles, I realized if I had been... I couldn't go

to Israel as a Jew because my mother wasn't Jewish. Hitler would still have killed me, because my father was Jewish. Jumping ahead quite a few years, when I wanted to get married in the conservative Temple that my father helped build, I had to convert first because my mother was not Jewish. Throughout my childhood I always really thought I was Jewish, and realized that it was emotional Judaism. It was not according to the Torah. I don't know if it comes up in the Old Testament, probably does. Anyway. After I graduated from Waynflete and went to Boston University, majored in sociology, met the man I was going to marry, I found out that I had to convert. My husband to be was from the Reform Judaism in Providence, Rhode Island. He was... He thought what I was going through was extremely barbaric. I was very into it. I thought... I went to a mikvah, which is a bath. Said prayers. Went through that whole, let's say, tradition. Also studied history and was accepted as a converted Jewish woman. Now, when I was growing up, I want to make sure to mention this… I was making a list the other day of businesses on Congress Street. Most of the businesses on Congress Street were owned by Jewish people. That has changed tremendously. So when you asked about changes of culture and the Jewish scene in Maine, I had this list out for you right here so we can go back.

EL: Oh! You're so prepared! Thank you!

ND: Well, I prepared for something else, then realized it'd work -

EL: Just as well for this! Absolutely!

ND: So if I reviewed Congress Street or Downtown Portland as I was going up, the clothing stores were Schlosberg's, Bernie's Fashions, a surplus store that was owned by a Jewish man, of course, Levinsky's and Markson Brothers, which is a very old Jewish family. There's a lot written about the Markson Brothers that's recorded in the Jewish Museum. The furniture stores were Lancaster, Reliable, and Youngs. The only one in business today is Young's which is out at the mall. It's not longer in Downtown Portland. And then the jewelry stores: My father's business was Day's, and one of his competitors was Roger's, and they were both on Congress Street. There was a time when Carter Brothers was owned by a Jewish family from Boston/New York. So there were three jewelers that I know of. There was a cleaning business - B&B Cleaners - owned by Gary Berenson's family. The hardware stores were Sulkowich's Hardware and Maine Hardware. The Finberg family owned Maine Hardware and the Sulkowich Hardware store is owned by an old old Jewish family, and my grandmother's maiden name was Sulkowich. Her brother, Marc Sulkowich, was the person who motivated my father and uncle to go into business and taught them the ropes, so to speak. My father was an entrepreneur. Really enjoyed the real estate aspect of the family business, and my uncle, David Davidson - my father was Sidney Davidson - was a jeweler. And he really would have been happy with just one jewelery store. My father developed it into 20 jewelry stores. Also there were tires, tire business. There was Century Tire company owned by the Silverman family, and Yudy's by the Elowich family. It was interesting, because another man came into the Jewish museum recently, and I'm awfully sorry I don't remember his name, but he opened up a business and he said he was in competition with Century and Yudy's. He felt like he really wasn't accepted in the community because he

was an outsider, because he wasn't a member of the Conservative Temple. But he never felt accepted, and felt that, possibly, that had something to do with the two people who were very involved in the Temple kind of putting up a wall between... Who knows. Anyway. Then there was an antique business owned by Sam Cinaman**,** which was on Fore Street. The Cinaman building, it's a big building. My mother shopped there quite frequently. Many of the doctors - my pediatrician, and my childrens' pediatrician - they were all Jewish. Dentists, lawyers, judges, who were very much Jewish. There's an exhibit that's going on now at the Jewish Museum, that in 1932, before Hitler came into power, which was '33, 40% of the lawyers and judges in Germany were Jewish. All of them were told they could no longer practice anymore. There was an exhibition to that effect in the Jewish Museum as we speak. That show motivated me to review what the situation was, as I was a child here in Portland, that most of the businesses in Downtown Portland, a great majority compared to the percentage of the Jewish population compared to the non-Jewish population, were Jewish proprieters, Jewish lawyers, Jewish doctors. I don't see that as much now. A lot of people did move away. A lot of my close friends growing up - maybe there're two of them here - that're Jewish, that I'm still very bonded with. But many of them moved away. Of course, over, in the past 20 - maybe it was 20 years ago - there was a Reform Temple that opened. As a matter of fact, the young woman who called us, she was bat mitzvahed in the Jewish Home for the Aged, which was up on North Street, which has become Cedars.

EL: Oh...

ND: So that's an interesting piece. It was quite interesting to have your granddaughter bat mitzvahed at a home for the aged. But the heart of the day was there. It was probably one of the most unpretentious bat mitzvahed I'd ever been to. It was very simple. You know, Etz Chaim, which has got the, where I have been responsible for curating many shows within the last two to three years... At the time that it opened, which is 1921, there were three synagogues in that area. And my grandmother, Goldie Sulkowich, belonged to the Newbury Street synagogue. It was interesting, in my time at the Jewish Museum, I found out that many of the people that were members of the Newbury Street wouldn't have considered going to Etz Chaim because they would not allow you to speak Yiddish there. I know my grandmother, as much as she wanted to be Americanized - My grandmother graduated from Portland High School. My father graduated from Portland High School and my granddaughter is going to be graduating from Portland High School in June. They sent me to Waynflete. Anyway - She would never put up with the fact that she couldn't speak Yiddish. I think it was one of the examples of up-and-coming families moving up in the social strata where they didn't want Yiddish spoken. Anyway, in the forties, that whole neighborhood really changed because many people moved to the far Woodfords area and to the Baxter Boulevard area. That's when Temple Beth El was created, and later on, the Newbury Street Orthodox Shul, which was in the area of the Jewish museum built a new building called the Noyes Street Synagogue, and that was right near the Conservative Temple. Then, much later - I don't know, my dates are bad - much later the Reformed movement developed. It started at the Jewish Home for the Aged, and then in the school out in South Portland, and then they expanded the school so now it's a very contemporary, wonderful-looking building out in South Portland near Route 1. There are

about ten to twelve thousand Jewish people in Portland, in Maine, and about seven or eight [thousand] are in the Jewish area. That includes Falmouth, Foreside, Cape Elizabeth, South Portland, Freeport and this whole area. A lot of them identify with being Jewish and a lot don't. I always thought growing up that I was the only person with a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father. I probably wasn't far from being wrong, because if it happened it wasn't talked about. My parents were very open about it -

EL: Open how?

ND: Open in that there were no secrets. There were no secrets that my mother was Danish Lutheran, who agreed to bring the children up Jewish and my father was a Russian Jewish man, and he married someone who wasn't Jewish, he married a gentile. That wasn't a secret. There are many people who still talk to me about it. "Oh my aunt married out of the faith, or my da da da da da." Anyway, it was not like that. But, to my surprise, about ten to twelve years ago, when my last aunt on my mother's side passed away, it was shared that my mother and her - who were sisters - great grandmother was Jewish in Denmark. So, needless to say, I'm a double Jew, because I did not have to convert! So I call myself a double Jew. But anyway...

EL: What do you think happened there?

ND: They just kept it a secret. I don't know if my mother knew. It seems to me, if my mother had known that, she would have told me. But I don't know how long they knew it or whatever. I don't know the history because all the people who would know that history are gone. In my immediate family there're no secrets, but that certainly was a large secret. I was even told of a story that my grandfather who traveled with the Lutheran Church all over the world, as I said previously, used to come home to his wife who was very petite, very very small, very petite, she was the seamstress. He would put his arm around her and say, "Hello, my little Jewess!" So he knew! For a long time! And he never never got upset that my mother married a Jewish man. But the whole story was never told. I still don't know the whole story. All I know is that my great great grandmother was Jewish.

EL: Was there something going on? Some repression in Denmark at the time?

ND: That would be interesting to research. I had not researched that. Because you know and I know the Danes were the most supportive to the Jews during the Second World War. But right now there's a lot of anti-Semitism in Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany.

EL: What do you think that's about?

ND: Well, I think a lot of it has to do with economics. When the country's not doing well, they always have to blame somebody. Plus there're a lot of people who don't truly understand the dynamics and the history of the Israeli-Palestinian War. I think if they truly did the research and understood it, they wouldn't be as judgmental of the Israelis and how they've handled the situations that've come up currently, in the last year or two. Because most of our country only sees things on the surface, and are not necessarily

connected with history, or knowledge about why, that's why I would say a lot of anti-Semitism has cropped up. That and economically. Whenever there're economic problems, and the Jewish people are doing pretty well, that's when the anti-Semitism seems to crop up. I was aghast because I never knew in 1932, a year before Hitler took power, that they had told every lawyer and every judge in Germany that they could no longer practice. I had never heard that before. Actually, this exhibit had never been created or put together until the 1990s. '32 to the '90s was a long time, and it was put together by the legal system in Germany cooperating with the legal system in the United States. On the other hand, I've heard there's a lot of anti-Semitism in Germany right now, and we've had some positive experiences with the German consulate with the United States coming to speak at the Jewish Museum. They were sponsored by the Jewish Museum, not the synagogue. Anyway. I don't know what else to say. I'm very proud that I brought my children up Jewish. I'd have to tell you that my son is the most committed to Judaism. He is married to someone who is not Jewish, but his children were brought up Jewish. My two daughters love to celebrate Hanukkah, but I don't think their commitment to Judaism is very strong. I think it has a lot to do with their training. It was always such a struggle to get them to go. They learned the Hebrew, but not necessarily the interpretation of the Hebrew. They knew they had to have a bat mitzvah and a bar mitzvah, but they didn't take it beyond that. We have somebody who's the head of the Hebrew school at Etz Chaim. I'm there on Sundays, when I stay in the Museum. And these children come in, and they're so excited to be there. The teacher, Laura Boenisch - I think that's the way you pronounce her last name - She's so good with them. I mean, she's so warm and affectionate, she gets down on the floor with them, she plays games with them, they were in a sukkah playing games, you know, and they love coming! They're learning a lot, and they seem very positive about being Jewish and most of them are mixed marriages. I have a lot of the wives that aren't Jewish asking me questions, you know, that kind of thing. Of course, I'm probably a good example to talk to because of my background of a mixed marriage. In answer to your first question, how has it changed... I think inter-marriage is much more accepted. Certainly gay marriage is very much accepted in the Jewish religion. There's a lot of decisions, different decisions you can make, either Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. There's even a Reconstructionist movement, which doesn't seem to be in Portland or in Maine, as far as I know. But it may be. There're a lot of ways you can go into Judaism. I would say one of my daughters, she respects all religions, and has pulled quite a few of them into her life. We affectionately call her my Bu-Jew, because she's very much into Buddhist meditation. But, you know, she had a party this year, a Hanukkah party. There are different things she's picked up, and it seems to me that it's all okay. As far as I am personally, I'm very connected to a larger energy, God or higher power. But most of my connection has come outside of any organized religion. It's come through just living day to day and being in contact with a power that's greater than me. It hasn't been so much from traditions, or from Hebrew, or from Christianity, which was sort of forced down my throat a little bit from my Lutheran relatives when I was growing up. I think it's all about kindness, you know, being kind. I must say, I learned that through people that I was close to. Not through a rabbi or through a minister. Or through an institution, or with religion in it. And I think that that option is okay now too, which in the past would not have been. I'm not just talking about New Age connections. I'm

talking about something that for me personally stronger than that whole movement as well.

EL: Could you explain to me the differences between Reconstructionist Jews versus Orthodox?

ND: Well, Orthodox Judaism is the strictest, next to the strictest. You still have to talk about the chabad, which is stricter than Orthodox. But Orthodox, generally speaking, the women sit on one side, and the men on the other side. The women are not allowed to go up and say prayers on the bimah, which is the alter or the stage, whatever you wanna refer to... Ideally, people walk to the Synagogue on Saturdays, they don't drive. Ideally, they keep a kosher home, which means they don't mix dairy and meat. They have two sets of dishes and they only serve kosher meat. They eat fish, but they certainly don't eat beef or chicken that doesn't go through the process of making it kosher, which is a cleansing process. Reconstructionist, I don't know a lot about. But I... But if I had to make it up, I would say that Etz Chaim is unaffiliated, but it has a Reform service, an Orthodox service and a Conservative service run by the same Rabbi at different times. But I would think a Reconstructionist would be borrowing from each, but being more ultra-reform, which is that you don't necessarily have to wear a yamaka, you don't have to wear a tallis (tallit) when you're praying. Women and men sit together and most of the service is in English. I think the Reconstructionist might have even more of the English service but I'm just guessing. I really can't tell you that I know about Reconstructionist. I know that before Etz Chaim became an unaffiliated synagogue, there was a movement within it called Jews Without Boundaries. Rabbi Sky, who had been the Rabbi at Temple Beth El, the Conservative movement for over thirty years, he retired and he joined with a group of people to create Etz Chaim. It was called Jews Without Boundaries. But when he left to move down to the Carolinas to be close to family, that sort of disappeared and it became an unaffiliated temple, which is very flexible. Everybody's welcome. It's all about welcoming the stranger there anyway. But to really define for you and answer your question about Reconstructionist, I'm guessing. I really do not have enough knowledge to tell you that.

EL: What other kinds of Judaism are there, that you've experienced or seen?

ND: Well... I met a lady from Mount Desert Island in the Temple just the other day, and she said they don't have any synagogue or temple, up on Mount Desert Island. So what they do is they meet in peoples homes to celebrate the holidays. Of course there's always the, I never get the term right, the very mystical Judaism. I forget what it's called right now. There's a special name and a lot of movie stars are connected to that form of Judaism, which includes less interpretation of the Torah and more about angels and their relationship to humans. More New Age, or out of the textbook, out of the Old Testament, which in many of the Jewish movements have never considered that part of Judaism. What is the term, I can't think of the term. There's one famous movie star, a couple that're... Not Scientology (laughs). But my seventy-six-year-old brain isn't getting the word right now. But the chabad is the very very religious, orthodox, Jewish movement. Most of the men have the payes, which are the curls that come down here. You can't

touch... A Jewish man can't touch another woman, or you couldn't shake his hand or anything cuz separation. Usually they have large families, because I don't know what their version of birth control is but I know we have a Rabbi - Leansky - who's the head of the chabad movement in Portland - has eleven children, maybe more. If I remember correctly, Friday night, which was the night of the Sabbath, which you light the candles and honor God, that's also the night when you can have sexual relations with your wife. I think he's been busy on Friday nights (laughs).

EL: He must be, that's a lot of children.

ND: He was very... My father was a stroke patient for about 16 years. He used to come and visit him all the time. Of course, my father would give him donations to the movement. Which was kind of an issue in our house, because my mother didn't appreciate that. One cute little story is that the Reformed Rabbi - Rabbi Berkowitz, who was the Rabbi that bat mitzvahed my granddaughter in the Jewish Home for the Aged - was there one day when Rabbi Leansky came and expected a donation. He got very upset and he said, "Sindey Davidson has given enough money to this community! Leave him alone!" So that was kind of an interesting conversation between a Reformed Rabbi and a very very Orthodox Rabbi.

EL: Much earlier on, when you were talking about being raised with a really strong Lutheran background, with your mother, but also a very strong Jewish background with your father... How did the two intersect in your household?

ND: Well, my mother's personality was... She was more rigid. She was more rigid and fairly black and white in her thinking. But always quite loving. She never never talked about Christianity to us. It was only when she was - one thing she always said to me was, "When I die Nancy, make sure I'm not buried in the Jewish cemetery. So I honored that. But when she passing away, during that, it was very clear to me personally that she was connected with Jesus and that Jesus was going to take care of her. She had a real, wonderful light around her, cuz I was there when she was passing away. But she never... She always celebrated Christmas and Easter, but she never talked about the truly religious significance of either one. It was more Santa Claus and gifts at Christmas, and just wonderful Danish food at Easter time. Her relatives, her Lutheran relatives would always have us over for Christmas, but we would have to go there late because in the beginning they would do their services, and then we would come late. I was very aware of that (laughs). And was also aware of some of my Lutheran relatives trying to convert my children behind me back.

EL: Really? Woah! That's stepping all over your parenting.

ND: Yeah. So I made it clear to them that I respected their right to believe whatever way they wanted to believe and I expected them to respect me and how I was bringing my children up.

EL: What did they do, if you don't mind me asking?

ND: Well, they talked about converting them when I wasn't around. Course, they told me all about it. Actually, I had one cousin, one aunt, who wouldn't allow her daughter to come to my brother's bar mitzvah, because she was afraid she would meet Jewish boys.

EL: Oh dear.

ND: Yeah.

EL: Wow.

ND: Yeah.

EL: Well, I guess you're a prime example of this; but it seems that intermarriage was a really big deal. Could you talk to me more about that?

ND: Well, I think intermarriage when my parents got married is a totally different thing than intermarriage now. It's more accepted now. My mother was always referred to as the schikza, which is a term meaning gentile. She hated that term, and she shared that with me. She, being married to the male of course, took on all of his friends and their wives, and they were all Jewish. So she was the only one that wasn't. She used to share some things that happened during those periods of time that felt, that made her feel somewhat unwelcomed. What was the question again?

EL: How... Why was intermarriage such a big deal?

ND: Back then or now?

EL: Back then, I guess.

ND: Well, because they - Christians - believed that if you didn't believe in Christ, you'd go to hell. So if their children...

(Nancy gets a phone call) (call ends)

EL: So popular.

ND: What was the last word I said?

EL: You were saying, "I think the issue back then, with intermarriage was..."

ND: Well, Christians thought if you married a Jew you'd go to hell. And Jews, Jewish people, felt, I would say, you were out of the clan. You weren't going to do the traditions. You were going to accept Christ as the son of God. The Jews didn't accept Christ as the son of God. Jews thought Christ was like a Rabbi, a teacher, a scholar, a healer, but not the official son of God. Which in Jewish literature, they say, and a lot of Christians feel

that there's going to be a second coming, the Jews would say it was the first coming I think. I'm not into that big time but I know that's part of the doctrine in Judaism.

EL: What were your beliefs growing up? Did you think, "I know I'm Jewish?"

ND: Oh yeah, I always knew I was Jewish. I always felt I was Jewish. When the Rabbi that I went to, who was in Maine briefly and very young, said, "In your conversion..." I said, "What conversion?" I said, "I'm not converting, I'm not a Christian." You know. "I've always felt I was Jewish." He really... He was so young, he didn't know how to deal with that. But it made me angry, because, you know, in the Jewish religion they don't go around trying to convert people. That's a Christian and Catholic tradition, to try to convert people. But in Judaism, you've got to work really hard with a Rabbi to become Jewish because there's a lot attached to it and they have to be sure because they want to be. I always felt I was. If you believe in your intuition and premonitions and all that, I was right.

EL: You were, you absolutely were.

ND: What was 'fighting the Jewish fight' ? What did that mean?

ND: Well, there were a couple of incidents at Waynflete that bothered me. One, the son of a doctor. I remember him pushing me on a swing, singing, "You're father owns a Jew-y store and youuuu are a Jewww. You're father owns a - " back and forth, back and forth. I want you to know, about thirty years later in a movie theater. We had seen a movie about how the nuns had helped the Jews during the Second World. He saw me and he came over and he apologized.

EL: No way.

ND: Yeah. Because he didn't, you know...

EL: What was that like?

ND: It was heartfelt, you know? Really was. Anyway, and then I had my best friend invited me to her... Her father was the manager of the Blackpoint Inn, which is out in Scarborough. She invited me for the weekend, and then she came back and said, "I'm sorry, you can't come. My mother said you're Jewish and you're not allowed there. Those were issues that hurt, but I had to talk to my parents about. And some of their answers were adequate and some weren't. Because when I talked to my mother about the first incident, she said, "Talk to your father." My father was not present enough to really explain what was going on. The other one, my father was furious. My father was furious. My mother kept her mouth shut.

EL: Did they do something about it, or was it more...

ND: No, they didn't take action. No no. You didn't. You didn't take action. But I'll tell you another incident. About twenty years ago, I applied for a job at Migis Lodge, which was very similar to Blackpoint Inn, but it was located on Sebago Lake. When I was interviewed, the first thing I said to them was that, "Several years ago, I would not have been allowed to come here. What are your views on anti-Semitism and allowing Jewish people to stay here, visit here, etc. etc." The owner put a big smile on his face and said, "We purchased this from a family, whose name I will not mention, it said in the leases, 'Gentiles Only.' But my father had been" - this is the Porta family, P-O-R-T-A - "My father had been the manager of the Kenmore Hotel in Boston. And he was known as the Bar Mitzvah King, because he had all kinds of Bar Mitzvahs at the Kenmore Hotel.

EL: This is your dad or that of the man who's speaking to you?

ND: This is Mr. Porta's father. So when he came here, to Migis Lodge, he opened it up. I worked for them, I was manager of their gift shop, and then I developed a gallery for them. It was very obvious that many Jewish families stayed there and many old money, Anglo-Saxon white families stayed there, and some nouveau riche of both. But it was also very evident to me that the Jewish people who came there sat on one side of the dining room and the non-Jewish were on the other side. That was as much as twenty years ago.

EL: What made you feel so strongly that you felt like you could open with that? Pardon the expression, but it's a very ballsy move.

ND: Well, everything's about your own reality. I didn't think it was ballsy. I thought, "Listen, if this is a place where Jewish people aren't welcome, I don't want to work here."

EL: Good for you.

ND: It probably would have been ballsy way back, forty, fifty years ago. But I didn't think it was twenty years ago, it was just part of who I am. Interestingly enough, I've worked in galleries most of my life, and I've had my own gallery, but I worked in Florida for eight... But before I worked in Florida, I worked in Kennebunk... Excuse me, first I worked in Florida and 90%, 85, 90% of my clientele who bought off from me were Jewish. Then I went to work, in the summer times, to Kennebunkport, and I was, 90% of my clients were not Jewish. It was interesting the whole difference. And somehow it always came up in conversation when I was dealing with somebody, in both places, that I was Jewish. And I think that probably comes from the background of having a Jewish, non-Jewish mix. I had a very interesting conversations with your father about that. He shared with me that his father was Jewish, but he didn't practice Judaism. His mother, I guess, background was Christian, but she didn't practice much of anything either. But they went to all the relatives houses, and he said when he went to the non-Jewish relatives, they were very stiff-upper-lip, not very affectionate. Then he would go to the Jewish relatives, and they were very huggy and warm and affectionate. He shared with me that he experienced some of those feelings coming to the Maine Jewish Museum again. He was very happy to exhibit there. I always tell, I tell the story sometimes that,

other than doing exhibitions at the Maine Jewish Museum, with artists that have a Jewish connection or a Maine connection, mid-career and beyond, one of my little underground feelings is that a lot of artists don't have a commitment to their heritage, whether it's Jewish or Christian. I hoped that they had a positive experience at the Jewish Museum, and maybe it would kindle something in them from their Jewish heritage. One of the things that Ani and I've been really happy about is that you came to volunteer, to do interviews, you know. Part of that never would have happened if your father hadn't had an exhibit here.

EL: Oh, it wouldn't. But he had such a great experience, and I came down there and you guys were just like, "Oh, if you can contribute, contribute." I think so many organizations need volunteer work and are community-based like the Jewish Museum. But they don't know how to let people do what they want to do to help, and makes space for the community to contribute to itself. I think the Museum does that very well.

ND: You have to thank Ani for that.

EL: You do have the best shows in town, though. Everyone says that. Like the one you have up right now, I love the menorahs, the menorah collection.

ND: Did you like the menorah collection?

EL: Well, obviously it's timely. But I really appreciate that you were showing that celebration is an art, and celebration is stylized, and celebration is personal, and how does that look?

ND: It was wonderful that some of the artists were Jewish that made the menorahs and some of them weren't. It was a lot of cute things that happened with people who didn't, that weren't Jewish, didn't know of menorahs. But we sold over 10 of them -

EL: I saw.

ND: It was like half and half. It was really nice. June Fitzpatrick and I are talking about doing another exhibition next year that may be in her gallery.

EL: That would be a nice expansion, she has a great gallery over there. That'd be a wonderful partnership.

ND: We'll see how that flowers.

EL: But we're talking about you and your experiences. What I also noticed was that you were also alive at a very important time for Judaism. You were born, especially, around the late 30s you said? How aware were you of what was going on in Europe and how did that influence you?

ND: Well, I remember when I was about... I remember when I was about four or five years old, we had one area in the house where there were all doors and no windows. We used to hide in there when they had the air raids. My mother used to talk about the German submarines that used to be going by here during the war. In Casco Bay. I don't know how close it was. But just that kind of fear in that, I can see how people would not want to be Jewish for that. But it never entered my mind. It just kind of cemented that they were the underdog, and that I had to be helpful as much as I could. When I first got married, in 1960, Rabbi Sky was the rabbi at Temple Beth El and he said, "Nancy, I understand you collect art." I said, "That's right." He said, "I would like to have a fundraiser here at Temple Beth El where we have an exhibition of art, and sell it to raise money for the Temple. I'd like you to ask one person old than you and one person even older than that person, three of you'd be co-chair people." I said, "It sounded very interesting." I was pregnant, newly married and I still, you know, was excited about this possibility. I asked a cousin of mine who was married to a doctor and was always home with the children, knitting and making beautiful meals and everything. Very unlike me. I asked her if she would be interested in helping me with this. And then I asked Mildred Nelson, who is the mother of Leonard and Kenny and Ruth and Andy Nelson (coughs), excuse me, connected to Nelson Smalls, which was a business connection of my father's. Because we not only sold jewelry, we sold appliances. We created this exhibition. We divided it into three parts. We divided into three parts, we had paintings on loan, paintings on sale from Maine and prints from all over, including New York. So each one of us took the chairmanships of these parts and for seven years this art exhibit was like an art activist movement in Maine because we sold contemporary art, we showed it and we sold it and it opened up door in the outer community for Jewish people. For instance, Peggy Osher, who was the cousin of mine, who was the first person asked to be on the board of the Portland Museum of Art along with Rosaline Bernstein who did a lot of work for the show. Joann Waxman, the Joann Waxman library at MECA, she started out the Jewish Museum, Judy and Steve Halpert, who owned the movies and who had some of the movies in the museum now, became very involved and it opened up a lot of doors. I really feel what goes around comes around, so when I went to volunteer at the Jewish Museum for a period of time and then asked if I could have, if I could get a grant would they mind paying to me to do what I was doing. They said, "Yes." So I referred to a cousin of mine, Bernardo Osher, who's more known as Bernie, and was the person who took me around while he was collecting and planted the seeds for me collecting when I was fifteen years old, if he would honor a grant if we brought it to him. He did. I was a volunteer for the Temple Beth El art show, went into the art business, my first employee being Barridoff Isle Galleries, then having my own art consulting business, then moving to Santa Fe and working in the art field there for a year. Working for the Porta family up on Sebago Lake and then having my own gallery. Then going to Florida, I mean, all of this was part of the circle that ended up being in the Jewish Museum as their curator. I don't know how that relates to what we're talking about (laughs).

EL: I think I asked you about if you were aware of what was going on in Europe and then we started talking about art as activism.

ND: Okay (laughs). Well, that's true, that's exactly what you asked me for. I think I was pretty numb about it. Because we had no family that was killed in the Holocaust. I didn't even know anybody. The first person I ever knew that had any experience with the Holocaust was Cantor Messerschmidt who is a survivor and his wife was a survivor. That was my introduction. He was part of, he was along with that Rabbi that converted me, married me in Boston at the Somerset Hotel. His experience really touched me and my children never would have finished being bar mitzvahed or bat mitzvahed if it hadn't been for him. My youngest daughter, who we affectionately call the Bu-Jew, said to me that, "I knew, when he told me his story, that I could not quit my Hebrew lessons. I just knew it." I always told the children one of the major reasons that I wanted them to have a bar mitzvah and a bat mitzvah is because many children were not allowed to have that during the whole period of the Second World War, or if they did it was underground, or they were converted to Catholicism or some other religion to survive.

EL: Right. Do you think that might have happened in your family, in Denmark?

ND: Yes, I think it's possible. That was my mother's side of the family. My grandfather's side of the family was something else. They had a large family, but his father was the tailor for the King of Denmark. And he married the cousin of the King of Denmark. That must have been a real scandal.

EL: I can only imagine. Tabloid.

ND: Some people have called me the Jewish American Princess, I say, "That's wrong, if anything I'm a Jewish Danish American Princess." (laughs) The Danish is more authentic.

EL: That's so great.

ND: So anyway...

EL: How do you think you went from being sort of numb to it as a child - to the Holocaust and all of that - to saying to your children, with honesty, that you're doing this because those who came before you could not?

ND: I think I picked up an awful lot going to services and listening to sermons and doing a lot of reading and taking some philosophy courses. Going through that whole conversion process, where I had to do a lot of studying of history. Hebrew was something I just couldn't take to, it just... My cousin Patty, who had a bat mitzvah in the last ten years, my friend and I took Hebrew lessons and we quit after three times. I just thought it was too difficult, I couldn't do it. But I did, you know, absorb a lot of the history. I think the history of the Jews is beautiful on one hand and sad on the other. I always felt that, I told you, but previously I always felt I was Jewish, and I really wanted my children to be Jewish. It wasn't easy - it sounds like I'm a victim, but I don't believe I am - but taking them and sending them to Hebrew school when they wanted to do maybe more sports at the time or... But I was committed that they were going to do it, just as committed as my

parents were that I was going to go to college. "You're going to college, that's all there is to it." You know? Cuz they couldn't go. And I wanted them to go to Hebrew school and be bat mitzvahed and bar mitzvahed because I hadn't had that opportunity. Of course I could have made it later on, but I didn't.

EL: So you were never bat mitzvahed?

ND: No. They didn't bat mitzvah girls. But they did have confirmations, but I didn't do that either. I don't know why.

EL: So you were alive while the gender gap was still present in Judaism, in a way that it's not today -

ND: Right, but the Conservative Temple that I belonged to was not Orthodox, so that -

EL: You've defined Orthodox for me, could you maybe define Conservative Judaism?

ND: Okay. Conservative Judaism is - the Jewish people can sit together, male and female. The woman is allowed to have a bat mitzvah and go up on the bimma and say the Hebrew prayers. That's really big, right there, what I've said is very big compared to the Orthodox. Maybe more of it's in English, but not as much as the Reformed. And the Reformed movement started before the Conservative. It went from Orthodox to Reformed with the German Jews identified as being Reformed and didn't want to be Orthodox. And then the Conservative movement developed. And if you ask me what years those were, I couldn't tell you. But it's interesting they went form one extreme to the other, and then to the middle. Which is all life is like that. People grow up thinking black is black and white is white and then they find out there's an awful lot of grey.

EL: I think about that a lot, how much ambiguity you have to get comfortable with as you grow up. What is the right decision?

ND: When you go back to Fiddler On The Roof, when Tevye says, "On one hand... and on the other hand..." That movie... Did you see that play or that movie?

EL: I did.

ND: It relates to everybody. Not just people with a Jewish identity.

EL: Can you talk to me about how you got into being the curator at the Jewish Museum. I know you sort of gave me a rough outline, but where did you start doing art?

ND: I was... What was I doing... I was working in Kennebunk in the summertime for Maine Art Gallery. I had just newly come back to Maine after being in Florida for ten years in the winter. I curated an exhibition for - I can't think of the name of the gallery right now. It used to be the Westbrook gallery... The UNE gallery! It was a huge success. It was like my seventh critter show. It was like seventy-nine artists in it and about a

hundred and seventy nine pieces. It was really a big deal. I was crazy to do it. And it took a lot of time, but I wasn't doing a lot of other things. I could focus on that time. That was very successful, so I decided I would find other places to curate shows. I did for a couple galleries. And then I went into the Jewish Museum, and was talking to them and found out they would really like to have me curate some shows in there. I really, I did. I also asked Bruce Brown to curate a show, Deedee Schwartz prints. Tom Crolty, to do the Dahlov Ipcar show. My first show there was Rush Brown's show of the changing... Excuse me, that was my second show. My first show was people who purchased paintings from the Temple Beth El art show. I made that into a show. And then I had Rush Brown who had painted the changing neighborhood of where the Jewish Museum is located. Then we had the Dahlov Ipcar, then the Deedee Schwartz show that Bruce curated. Then it occurred to me to ask Gary, who is now the rabbi, he was a cantor and he studied to be a rabbi. He was one of the pushers and shovers to get this whole apparatus together, because it is two organizations. You have the Jewish Museum and you have the Etz Chaim synagogue. I asked him, I said, "If I could get a grant, would you pay me to do this." He said, "Sure." Ani and I decided it would be nice to have exhibits by people, by contemporary artists who had some Jewish background or some Jewish connection, and also some Maine connection. They had to be mid-career and beyond. It was not... It was not a space where cousin Suzy's work was going to be. They had to have -

EL: Experience.

ND: Experience, background, education, etc. etc. That's how it all happened. For two years, I have done one show after another. And as you said earlier, and as I've been told by the overall community, that it is a wonderful place to show art. We've... we've received people in there from the art community and people who like to purchase art come in, collectors. They come in maybe to see the art, definitely to see the art, and then they are introduced to whole building. To the history of the building. To the synagogue, to the exhibitions on history that are upstairs.

EL: It's a gateway drug.

ND: That's right! That's right (laughs). That's right. I think it's very beneficial to the success of the Jewish museum who really rents space from Etz Chaim synagogue. So you have two different boards running the ship. So sometimes it gets a little complicated -

EL: I can imagine, yeah.

ND: But as of now, we're still cooking (laughs). And there's some wonderful shows planned for this year.

EL: Could you talk to me a little bit more about what's particular about the Maine Jewish community? As you were saying, it sounds like it was really a destination spot for Jewish immigrants as well as building a Jewish family and faith here.

ND: As far back as... My grandfather's twelve years old when he left Minsk, Russia. He ran from the Cossacks, he did not want to be in the army because they were putting Jews in the front line, like we did with blacks in this country.

EL: My dad's grandmother ran away from that in Romania, she took her sons away from that. Because she was like, "I'm not going to put my sons on the front lines. So they came here.

ND: That's interesting. Anyway, he got here, I guess he arrived in New York. But he knew there was a family in Portland, the Bernstien family that lived near him in Minsk. So he came here to Portland. I don't know how old he was when he married my grandmother. My grandmother had graduated from Portland High School. She really married somebody that was an immigrant. She was not an immigrant, not my grandmother. That's... That must have been around the 1980s, I mean, the 1880s. That must have been around that time. We're doing an exhibition in September of next year. It's called Welcoming the Stranger. What we've found out from the person who is creating this show, I'm supposedly the curator but she's got her own vision of this and I'm letting go of a lot. We've found out that on House Island, there was a Kosher kitchen. In doing research, Jo Israelson has found out that seven National Council of Jewish Women used to make Kosher meals and bring them out there. So it's going to be part of an exhibition showing this history of the settlement. I never knew anything about that, and a lot of other people didn't know anything - but they went into the archives of the National Council of Jewish Women and found this to be true. She's doing an exhibition about those immigrants as well as all other immigrants.

EL: Wow. Who knew?

ND: I certainly didn't know (chuckles). I don't think my family knew about that. But they used to call it Northern Ellis Island. How about that. House Island. Now, someone has just purchased this island, and so there's a lot of meetings going on, "Can we preserve, can it be preserved, the building and, you know, put on the Register, etc. etc." That's as well. There was not - My grandmother, Goldie Sulkowich Davidson was very much an American. She might not have left Newbury Street for Etz Chaim because they didn't speak Yiddish, but I don't remember her speaking Yiddish very much. She was very Americanized. She used to do the Jewish holidays. She lived on Franklin Street, which was part of that whole neighborhood that could have been called a mini East Side of New York. Very mini. But they had a Kosher butcher, and there was a Chinese laundryman around the corner from our house. She had a rooming house. Your question again was...

EL: I can't remember...

ND: You're going to have to take a lot of this out.

EL: No no no, this is all great. It was, why was Maine such a hot spot for Jewish immigrants?

ND: I don't know. I mean, it was for Irish and Italian as well, not just Jewish. I don't think, other than networking that they knew somebody for them that drew them here, or they... Bangor. Bangor was the first area that was really settled with Jews in Maine. And Portland afterwards. I think that you'd have to talk to somebody who was more familiar with Bangor to get a clear answer on that.

EL: What were you saying about - Which area was the mini East Side?

ND: I would say Munjoy Hill, the Eastern Promenade area, down to the foot of Munjoy Hill where Etz Chaim Synagogue, India Street, Newbury Street, Cumberland Avenue. Even my children have purchased a house on Saint Lawrence Street, and that was owned by a Jewish family, and the building across the streets, which is a big brick building on Saint Lawrence, that was owned by a Jewish family. If you go up and down that street, you'll find that a lot of the homes were owned by Jewish families. On the Promenade, where my father and mother lived. The Berman family lived on, the Sackinoff family lived up there. This was the Jewish neighborhood. Then it started to go down, and people started to move out. My mother said she'd never move out. I mean, she could see the ocean from every room, she wasn't going to go anywhere. But a lot of the people moved to Baxter Boulevard, Forest Park Baxter Boulevard area. All the homes on Baxter Boulevard, as well as the Deering Area. Then, it was more prestigious to go to Deering High School than Portland High School. Which people still think.

EL: I've still found that to be true. What have all these places become (refers to list mentioned earlier).

ND: Well as far as food is concerned, Blumenthal Kosher Butcher is no longer, Rice Bakery is no longer. George's Delicatessen has become Full Belly Deli. They learned everything from George. Cumberland Coal Storage was down on Cumberland Ave, was down on Commercial Street, and I think it's a building that's just been made into apartments, things like that. Scholsberg Furs is no longer, Bernie's Fashions is the building across the street from the Maine Historical Society. They had a gallery in it for awhile. That was Bernie's Fashions. The surplus store was down by there, Monument Square and one of those stores that have become, like, David's or one of those restaurants. Levinsky's is now in Windham, used to be on Congress Street. Markson Brothers is no more. Lancaster and Reliable Furniture is no more. We had a visitor, there was a son from someone who owned Lancaster who lived in Florida. Reliable Furniture was the Branz family, and he was married to a cousin of mine, and they moved to San Antonio, Texas. Youngs is still alive and well at the mall, and Jonathan Young seems to be running it. Days Jewelry went for many many years, which was my father's business and my uncle's, their first location was where the Maine Jewish Museum is now. If you go into the Maine Jewish Museum and you go down in the basement, it has all these cubby holes which have the names of my father's stores throughout the state. You see Rumford, Caribou, Houlton, Presque Isle, Old Town, Lewiston, Rockland, Biddeford, Saco... You see all of these because that's how they would push the inventory up the coast. And it's still there, so the Director always brings me down to show me that. Rogers

Jewelry sold out about ten years ago. That was the Pollack family. There still is Rogers Jewelry out at the mall.

EL: Yeah, I thought so.

ND: B&B Cleaners, I think, burnt down. It was on the corner of Washington and Congress Street. Sulkowich Hardware, finally they retired and that was down on Fore Street. Maine Hardware is still going on, they sold it. That was the Finberg family. Also that great big building on Forest Avenue, that is now the Glickman Library. That was the warehouse from Maine hardware, that big building with the seven floors in it. The reason I know they have seven floors is I'm curating a show at the top.

EL: At the top? I love that space, my mom and I go there a lot to do our homework together.

ND: There's a lady that's Jewish that moved from New York to Portland, and she has done illustrations and a book called Pumpkin Patch. It's a Buddhist Tale, T-A-L-E. I've talked with them, I want to do a show of it up there because it really wasn't appropriate for the Jewish Museum. Even though she's Jewish. And then, Century Tired Company just went out, he retired, and the building's still there.

EL: I pass by it all the time, I'm always wondering what's going on.

ND: Well, he told me someone was going to buy it. I have a feeling it fell through or something. And Yudy's was out in Westbrook, and they retired. That's the Elowich family. Sam Cinamon's son and daughter-in-law, Molly and... What was Sam's son's name? Anyway, they sold that building a long time ago and retired. So a lot of them are retired, and maybe the children didn't wanna go into the business, like myself and my cousin Patty. That's why they're no longer, they're no longer here. There's still quite a few doctors, but a lot of the doctors I knew and my family knew, and lawyers, are all gone now.

EL: Right. What do you think happened?

ND: They died (laughs).

EL: That's kind of a tell tale sign, isn't it (laughs).

ND: Despite that, there's still a lot of Jewish doctors and lawyers in Portland. There are. But not as many retail stores. Let me see, at the mall, and of course at the mall, T.J. Maxx, that's Max Felbrrg who used to own Zayres so and he owned the other one too, what's the other one that's similar to T.J. Maxx?

EL: Marden's?

ND: No it's home...

EL: Oh, Home Goods?

ND: Home Goods and then Marshall's. That all three are owned by the same people. But it's interesting, because the whole property of the mall was owned by a Jewish businessman from Boston and a non-Jewish business man. I think they've sold that all off now. But they owned all that property. But I think the children, a lot of the children of Jewish business owners wanted to do other things, like be a lawyer or a doctor or an artist, you know. A professor, at a college. And didn't want to go into... It was so much traditional, my growing up, that you went into Daddy's business, if you were a boy.

EL: How many siblings did you have?

ND: I had one brother.

EL: Did he go into the business?

ND: No, he didn't. He went into the service, and had emotional problems from that. So he didn't go into the business.

EL: Sorry to hear that.

ND: He's fine now.

EL: Good.

ND: Yeah.

EL: That's nice. How would you define whether or not you have a Jewish community, as it is today?

ND: Do I, personally, have a Jewish community?

EL: Yeah, and if so, what does that look like for you?

ND: Well, my Jewish community revolves around the Jewish Museum, and the synagogue. But I understand that the Jewish Community Center has bought a piece of property and are going to build a Jewish Community Center, which I think will be... The Jewish Community Center, when I was growing up, was a tall building on Cumberland Avenue. Right near, not Oak Street, but anyway... It was a four story building. It had basketball court, it had a theater in it, that was where the Jewish Community hung out. I used to play basketball down there. I used to go to all the theater productions, and that was another connection for me. I think that's going to happen. They had a small area that really focused mostly on Jewish Community Center Day Camp, which was on Sebago Lake. But they're really wanting to have a building -

EL: More space.

ND: More use. More use. I think that will be a great addition. I understand, the Orthodox Newbury Street, they don't have a Rabbi right now, he went to Israel. They've canceled Friday night services, which gives me the impression they may be in some financial trouble, and also loosing members. The Reformed movement has a few more students than we have studying for bat mitzvahs. That is where you really measure the success of the future of, hopefully, of the Jewish community is in the children. But then again, as people get more and more assimilated, that doesn't always happen. The Temple Beth El has been losing some of their members. Even Bet Ha'am has, some of them have come to Etz Chaim. For me, my Jewish connection is outside of institutions (laughs). Except for my commitment as curator in the Jewish museum (coughs).

EL: Do you recognize... Do you affiliate yourself with any denomination?

ND: I would have to say Reformed.

EL: What is Reformed?

ND: Less tradition. More English in the service.