HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Jeri Laber

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2016

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with name of Jeri Laber conducted by Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux on October 26, and 28, 2016. This interview is part of the phase two of the Harriman Institute Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC | Session: 1

Interviewee: Jeri Laber | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux | Date: October 26, 2016

Q: This is Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux. I'm here on October 26, 2016 in New York with Jeri Laber, for the Harriman Institute Oral History Project. Jeri, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today.

Laber: My pleasure.

Q: Very interested in hearing your stories. As I just mentioned, we usually start with a little background about the person. So I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about when you were born and kind of what you remember about your childhood [laughter].

Laber: Well, I was born on May 19, 1931. My first five years were spent in a house on the Brooklyn/Queens border. Then we moved to Jamaica Estates an up and coming but semi-rural area at the time, where I spent my entire childhood and where my parents continued to live for many years after I had left home.

Q: So you're a true New Yorker.

Laber: Yes.

Q: Born and raised.

Laber: Yes I am. I'm trying to think of what would be relevant to this project. My childhood was, I think, a fairly happy one. I went to public schools, public grammar school, Jamaica high school. My parents were quite well-to-do. We lived in a big house up on a hill, which was one of the nicest houses in a very nice suburban community. The only trauma in my childhood was an older sister who was psychologically disturbed and added a note of tension to the family dynamic. The other trauma, of course, was that I was a child during World War II, a Jewish child. I was protected by my parents from full knowledge of what was going on in Europe at that time. I think they were also protected to some extent. I mean, I don't think anyone really knew the extent of the Holocaust until after the war was over.

But I knew enough to be very anxious and upset about it. Certainly after I became a little older and read Anne Frank's diary—I very much identified with her. She was my age. I sort of looked like her, the same kind of child, dark hair, dark eyes. I had a strong identification with her and what happened. It was a very frightening and I think formative thing, because it made me feel at a very young age that I was privileged in a way that I didn't deserve to be privileged, and that I should be doing something to make up for that, some kind of good work. I never knew exactly what, but—

Anyway, I was a good student and a good athlete though not a terribly serious student until I got into college. I went to NYU [New York University]. Am I going too fast through my childhood?

Q: I just wondering how reading Anne Frank's diary at that time, shortly after World War II and having this identification, how that made you think of your own Jewish identity. Had it been a big part of your identity before that time? Or it changed how you thought of—?

Laber: Well, we lived in a community in which we were one of the—perhaps the first—Jewish families to move there. My father designed the house himself. He bought the land and had the house built. I experienced a lot of resentment and anti-Semitism in my early childhood. Kids on my block were told they couldn't play with me. My parents were not observant Jews. We did not do anything very Jewish. My brother was bar mitzvahed but it was like a three-day wonder, nothing taken very seriously. Just an excuse for a party, just something you did.

I should go back. My father came from Russia when he was about ten or eleven. There, his family had been religious. He was obviously considered very bright and they had hoped he would be a rabbi. But when he came to this country he became more American than an American. He really bought the American dream completely. He gave up on religion. He gave up on Russia, which he never wanted to talk about. Became a successful businessman and supported the status quo, voted Republican, hated labor unions, hated FDR [President Franklin Delano Roosevelt]. He was very much an American businessman.

So my only identification, really, with being Jewish was the fact that on Christmas everybody had houses lit up beautifully and we were dark [laughter]. My parents did not go the next step; [laughter] we could not celebrate Christmas. Left out and wanted to belong and that was painful at times. In grammar school, eventually there was another Jewish girl in the class and she and I

became friends. But the other girls were jealous and they formed a club. We couldn't join and they wouldn't tell us why, but we weren't qualified. It turned out it was called the Anti-Jew Club. So that was my experience of being Jewish, which is not a very positive one. At the same time there was the Holocaust going on in Europe, where Jews were being exterminated. There, but for the grace of God go I.

By the time I got to high school it was a little different. The high school was very segregated—the black kids stayed together, the Christian kids stayed together and the Jewish kids stayed together. There was a group of Jewish girls that I became friendly with. To that extend I identified with being Jewish, but it was not a religious thing, it was a cultural thing, at best.

Q: So you mentioned that your father came from Russia as a child and I think your mother also has roots in Former Soviet—

Laber: My mother's parents were from Lithuania.

Q: Lithuania. Was there any kind of Russian or Eastern European culture or influence on your childhood? Did anybody talk about the old countries or—? No?

Laber: No, never [laughter]. No one ever talked about the old country. Many years later when I was an adult and a writer I tried to get my father to talk about it a little bit. I got him to write a little ten-page essay about his origins, which I pored over when I was writing my own memoir, trying to extract the information that wasn't there, as well as what was there. To the extent that

there was a family culture, it was an East European-Jewish culture, not Russian culture. The two are intermingled, of course, so there were certain foods that we ate, which are Russian foods as well as Jewish.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: We're on again. Okay. So you were just saying it was more of a—you had some of the foods and some of the influence that way, but—

Laber: Yes. When my grandparents were alive there were some Russian words that trickled into their conversation. We did celebrate Jewish holidays then, as long as they were alive, but once they were gone, that was sort of it.

Q: Your father never spoke Russian to you, or at home?

Laber: No, he didn't. He really hated the communists; he hated Russia. Whatever his experience there was, it was probably not a very good one. To my knowledge his family was not the victims of a pogrom, but they certainly knew about them. It was part of the reason, I'm sure, for leaving.

His mother was the only girl in her family. She had seven younger brothers. The entire family was brought here. There was a family organization that met periodically and it grew. Amongst those brothers there was quite a variety of adaptation. One of them was in business with my father. Some of them had done very well and prospered. But there was one brother in particular

who never learned to speak English. [He] and his wife, both of them looked like Russian peasants. They never really adapted to American life at all. They were always kind of fascinating to me. A little scary, when I was a kid, because she wore black and [laughter] looked a little bit like a witch [laughter]. She sort of tried to fondle me in a way that made me think, Oh my gosh, she is scary, this is a scary old lady.

Because they all left when they left, we didn't have relatives in Europe during the Holocaust. So it didn't touch us. Or at least not close relatives. It didn't touch us in a personal way.

Q: That was lucky. You said that you weren't a particularly good student in high school, but you went to NYU for college, right? So you—

Laber: I was a good student. I did well. I was in the top ten of my class. I just didn't study [laughter]. I did it without—

Q: It was easy, yes.

Laber: I was in a very anti-intellectual environment, where being too smart was a strike against you, rather than something to be proud of. I sort of played it down because I wanted to be popular with my friends. I had other interests, which were not particularly academic. There is very little that I can think of from my high school education that stuck with me in my life. I had one English teacher who taught me the rules of grammar and that's about all I can remember that I learned [laughter].

Q: Useful.

Laber: Useful. I still think about that when I'm editing and writing.

Q: But did you always know that you would go to college? Was that something that was expected?

Laber: Yes, it was expected, but it wasn't something that my parents took very seriously because I was a girl. There was a strong anti-feminist attitude in the family. My father was a strong personality. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. When my brother was ready to go to high school, they became very interested in his education. They sent him to a prep school because they wanted him to get into a good college. He was five years younger than I was and all of a sudden they were really interested in his becoming well educated and having a good career. As far as the girls were concerned, my sister went to Queens College, which was practically within walking distance of our [laughter] home. As far as they were concerned, I should go there too, because it was fine for her. It was actually a very good school. It is still, and it was then, I think, considered one of the best city colleges.

But I just didn't want to go to the same school as my sister. I didn't want to be so close to home. I ended up going to NYU instead, which is where I got a good education finally [laughs], and became a serious student.

Q: What was Greenwich Village like in the early ’50s?

Laber: Oh, it was actually great. I started at NYU thinking I would transfer out. I graduated mid-semester, so there were very few colleges, at that time that would accept students until September. And I graduated in February. But NYU did and I figured, Well, I’ll go there and eventually I’ll transfer to some college with a campus, you know, some Ivy League school. But I really liked it there. The whole village was like the campus. Washington Square Park was the place where students hung out. It was great because it was not just a student environment; the city was part of it.

I lived at home when I went there. I commuted. But on a weekend I would just put on my village clothes, which were sandals and peasant skirts—I believe, that’s what we wore in those days—and just go to the park, because I knew I would meet people I knew there. Some of the people I met were not necessarily NYU students, but artists and writers who lived in the village at that time. There would be a party somewhere and I’d end up going. So without actually living there, I would go there to live. The Village, at the time was still cheap, and people who were not gainfully employed but trying to make their way in New York could afford to live in apartments there. It was a wider constituency than just the college students. There were also people a little bit older. It was an exciting time to be there.

Q: How did you find NYU academically? Was it interesting? Challenging?

Laber: I was very lucky. It was and still is a very big school. I'm sure it would be possible to get lost there academically, as it is in any large university. I'm sure there are plenty of people who went through NYU at that time without getting a good education, or coasted through taking easy courses. But I was just lucky. I studied English and Philosophy with some really great professors that really turned me on to being an intellectual. I got involved with a group of people who were intellectuals, both students and young Fellows who were in the philosophy department. It was very challenging and exciting. The world of ideas opened up for me in a way that was long overdue.

Q: Speaking of the world opening up, you mentioned in the book about a trip you took to Europe. I think it was the summer of 1950 maybe?

Laber: Right. That was also an eye opening experience for me. I went to Europe—

Q: This was before international travel was very common. That was kind of a—

Laber: Yes. I went with another woman, a fellow student. We went with the National Student Association. We went by boat, a student ship. It was not that expensive and it was for three months, which is a pretty long trip. We really got to see a lot. It was supposed to be an art tour. At that point it wasn't that common for people to go as tourists to Europe like that. I was the first in my family to go. Although within a few years, once air travel began, my parents traveled all over the world and were constantly traveling. But at that point it was a big deal.

I think my parents thought it was a chaperoned trip. I had never gone away to college, and I think they saw it as a way of compensating for it. I don't know why they agreed to let me go, [laughter] because it ended up that I was the chaperone [laughter]. We got on the boat and there was a group of ten or eleven people. I think there was one boy and the rest were all girls. The first thing we did was electing a leader and that was me, [laughter] so I was in charge. I was supposedly the chaperone.

But it was not badly organized. In every country—well, in some of the countries, anyway—there were people who took us into their homes. There would be a student from the country who was my counterpart. Anyway, about halfway through the trip we left the tour altogether, my friend and I, and just traveled by ourselves [laughter] because we were just tired of being in a troop of ten people. It was a great trip. It really was eye-opening because the people we met there, the students, were also much more serious, much more intellectual, much more interesting. It was 1951.

So it wasn't that long after the war. Many of the places we went to still had bomb damage and so forth. People talked to us about the war. Americans were very popular at that point in Europe because of the Marshall Plan and whatever, so people were friendly. And we looked like Americans. Nobody wore blue jeans except us. American culture had not yet infiltrated. People would stop us on the street and want to talk to us because they knew we were different, and knew we were American. We got invited to people's homes and taken to various places. It was a good experience.

Q: Wow. It sounds wonderful. Was it during this trip maybe that you started to be exposed to Russian literature? Or was that—?

Laber: Not during—no, that came later.

Q: But maybe more of a deep interest in philosophy or something after—?

Laber: Well, two things. One of the philosophy courses I took at NYU was a course in existentialism. We read [Fyodor Mikhailovich] Dostoyevsky and [Count Lev Nikolayevich] Tolstoy as existential writers. I also took a great books course, where we read a number of the Russian writers, and I got really involved with them. NYU did not offer any specialty in Russian literature. I took a year's specialty in Irish literature, which was fascinating, and which was also wonderfully taught, not just the literature, but the history and the whole culture, Irish culture. I loved getting involved in literature in that way, where you were reading it against the background of what was happening in the society at the time. The professor who taught it was very charismatic. He was an Irishman himself and very involved in Ireland.

But there was nothing like that for Russian literature, which is what really interested me. I heard about the Russian Institute—which it was called at the time—through a friend, Burt Rubin, a fellow student who was applying. When he told me about it, I thought, my God, this is what I want.

I didn't know what I was going to do after I graduated. I wanted to stay in graduate school. Sidney Hook, who was an esteemed philosophy professor at NYU and a very powerful mentor in my academic life, offered me a Fellowship in the philosophy department, to stay on and do graduate work and be a teacher's assistant and whatever else fellows did there. I was very flattered, extremely flattered, because I didn't feel I knew that much about philosophy, actually. It was my minor; it wasn't my major. There were whole branches of philosophy I'd never really gotten into. I didn't really think that's what I wanted to do, and I didn't like the fact that it sort of narrowed my interests at a time when I was really eager to expand my knowledge.

The Russian Institute sounded just perfect because I could study Russian literature, which I was very eager to do, but at the same time I could study Russian history and economics and also politics. It was a very confusing time in my life because I found myself attracted to communism had not really understanding what was wrong with it. I had some very left wing friends who, if not members of the party, were certainly very close to it and spouted that ideology. That, when compared to my father, who had the totally opposite view, had me very confused. I thought, Well, I'll learn what it's all about if I went there. That was an education I needed. So I applied and that's—

Q: And you got in, obviously.

Laber: [Laughter] And I got it in. It was tough to get in, I believe. Classes were small. Since you couldn't study Russian as an undergraduate anywhere in the country at that point, knowing the

language was not a requirement, as of course it would be, I think, now. But it involved intensive Russian language study once you got there. It was a great choice. I loved studying there.

Q: How did your family feel about you turning to this field of study?

Laber: Well, first of all I was supposed to get married by the time I was out of college. So I had failed [laughter] in my college education. I think they thought I should go out into the world and get a job. I was educated, I was supposed to meet people, and find a husband, and settle down, the way my mother had.

Q: The conventional life, yes.

Laber: Right, right. So just the idea of going to graduate school was a surprise to them. My father was appalled when I said I wanted to study Russian, of all things. He was sure that it must be a communist cell that was organizing up at Columbia [University], because why would anyone at that point be teaching Russian and Soviet studies. We had nothing to do with the Soviet Union. That was his attitude completely. Why do we want to know about these people? They have closed their borders. We are totally separate.

I had to actually make the money myself to pay for the first semester. He said he would not pay for it. But I think he also made some inquiries and was reassured by people that, if anything, it was not a hotbed of communism [laughter] but an anti-communist cell. Anyway, I think my parents made their peace with it.

Q: Tell me about how communism was taught and looked upon at the Russian Institute at that time, and how that shaped your own—

Laber: Well, there was no one there who was a communist sympathizer at that point. Some of them had been. Some of the professors had had their own flirtations with communism. But there's nothing like a former communist to make a good anti-communist [laughter]. If anything, I think I was probably brainwashed in the opposite way by the education that I got there. Although I subscribe to it and still do, it certainly was not an apolitical place. This was during the [Joseph R.] McCarthy era, so there was concern I think amongst both the professors and the students. The McCarthy people had the same attitude as my father. Why would anyone want to study Russian unless they were communist sympathizers? So there was a strong imperative at the institute, I think, to prove your anti-communist credentials, that you were—

I'll give you an example that I'm not particularly proud of. The professor with whom I took the great books course with at NYU was a left-leaning guy and he fell victim to the McCarthy witch hunt. He lost his job. His committed suicide and he never taught. He was very popular with students there, and when he was struggling to keep his job, they circulated a petition in support of him. I was asked to sign it and I decided not to because I thought, "Here I am at the Russian Institute. If I start signing petitions for a suspected communist professor it could destroy my future career," whatever it was going to be. At the time I thought it would be in academia, that I would become a teacher. Anyway, I'm not very proud of it. I'm not at all proud of it [laughs]—but it does indicate the kind of pressure we all felt.

And it wasn't just me. I know that many years later, when I was an alum, there was some kind of institute gathering where Steve [Stephen F.] Cohen talked about those days and the pressures that were on people at the Institute. It unleashed a whole mea culpa in the audience. It was really interesting, talking about the pressures and how everyone felt constrained when they were studying and could not be really open about politics because we were in a vulnerable position.

At the end of my second year, I had a momentous trip to the Soviet Union, which was—

Q: Which is really extraordinary, because of the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union was completely closed off at that time, right?

Laber: Exactly. Yes. [Joseph V.] Stalin died in 1953. A European student group had secured permission to go. A lawyer named Marshall McDuffy who was the first American to get a visa to go. Some students at the institute said, "Why don't we try?" It seemed really off the wall, but I heard about it and I said, "Well, can I join you?" They said, "Yes." My boyfriend at the time, whom I'd met at the institute, and who later became my husband, thought it was ridiculous. He wasn't going to go through the application procedure and all the shots we had to get in preparation for going. But I thought, you know what? What was there to lose?

I think there were about eight of us that applied. We went through that the application procedures. We all had inoculations that we would need, in case we got our visas. Nothing happened, nothing happened, and then at the end of July—I was working at the *Current Digest* at

the time, the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*—four visas came through; two women and two men from our group. I was one of the two women. We had visas that were good for four weeks in the month of August, so we had to get moving very, very fast. It was unprecedented. It was very exciting.

At that time there was something in your passport that said you could not travel to the Soviet Union, so we had to get special dispensation from the State Department in order to go there. Our professors had to vouch for us. There was an international students meeting, a pro-communist meeting that would be going on at some point while we were there. We were told we could not attend it. They didn't want us to be used for propaganda purposes.

When we applied we did not tell the Soviets we were students at the Russian Institute, because the Russian Institute had been criticized in the Soviet press as being an anti-communist establishment. So we just gave the other department in which we were staying. I was in the Department of Slavic Languages. I think the others were studying in history or government.

Q: Fewer red flags in those departments, yes.

Laber: That's what we thought. But when we arrived there was an article in *Pravda*, a little article saying four students from the Russian Institute [laughs] have just arrived in Moscow. So obviously they knew everything [laughter], or a lot. Why they chose us I'll never know. Especially me, because I had a Russian last name, which I thought would be another flag. I was

the only one in the group that didn't have a strictly American name. We were Humphry, Randall, Curran, and Litdsky, which got translated in my visa as Lidskaya [laughter]. So they obviously—

Q: They claimed that, yes.

Laber: I would have thought that that would have lead them pick somebody else from the group. So had they made that choice, I don't know.

Q: Once these visas came through, there was no question that you wouldn't go? I assume it was such an extraordinary thing—

Laber: Oh my God. I was supposed to be getting married in September, and we had to change the date of the wedding because of it. It was an opportunity that you could not afford to miss. It was really exciting. I never dreamed that I would ever, ever see the Soviet Union. Nor did anybody else. Professors gave me assignments: find out about this, and take pictures of that. Because there was a feeling that we were just going to go there and then the Iron Curtain would close again. We didn't realize that it was beginning of an opening. It could have been a fluke, that we were being used as an example or something.

Q: It's kind of like your first mission trip even though—

Laber: It was, actually.

Q: First fact-finding.

Laber: It was fact-finding. A lot of very prominent scholars and intellectuals got in touch with us ahead of time, expressing interest in certain things and certainly in seeing us when we got back.

Q: That's a lot of responsibility going into the trip.

Laber: Well, it was. In addition *Time Magazine* gave us film and CBS gave us cameras and movie film, because they all wanted us to show what we saw when we got back. I became an instant photographer. My father had a very fancy camera, which he let me take. I would stay up late at night on the plane and in the hotel rooms reading the Leica [Camera] handbook, trying to figure out [laughter] how to use the thing properly. So yes, there was a lot riding on the trip.

Q: And what was the trip like itself? I'm sure it was very tightly controlled, that you weren't, perhaps, able to gather a lot of information.

Laber: If it were a human rights mission I would have called it a failure [laughter]. We were not as tightly supervised as we might have been, though they told us where we could and could not go. We traveled. We went to Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi, Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand. I think that was it. And we had guides. But they didn't have to worry about us very much. We stood out, so that we were never going to sneak around and go places where we weren't supposed to go. Wherever we went, if we weren't with a guide we'd attract crowds of people and

eventually the police, who didn't know who we were—I think we were arrested twenty some odd times in the course of the trip. You know, taken to a police station and asked to show our credentials. We had a paper from the U.S. Embassy in Russian explaining who we were. We had the contact documents and they would make some phone calls and send us on our way.

But people were suspicious and the police were suspicious. No one would think of inviting us into their homes or even keeping appointments. Sometimes we would try to make dates with young people our age who were clearly interested in knowing more about the United States. We'd say, "Let's meet in the park tomorrow and we can talk some more," and they would not show up. Somebody had got to them and told them it was dangerous or they thought better of it, whatever. So from that point of view, we didn't get to see the real Soviet Union. But we saw plenty.

Considering that we were students in our twenties, it was a high-level tour. They asked us what we wanted to do when we first arrived and we told them places we wanted to travel to. Some were off limits and some were okay. I had just finished writing my thesis on socialist realism, and I asked to see the head of the writers union and I got an audience with him, which was pretty amazing. I mean, I didn't expect that. So we had certain high-level meetings. It was fascinating, but it was superficial, in the sense that people would self-censor. The police didn't have to intervene. It wasn't like my visiting dissidents later on in Eastern Europe where they were eager to see me, and the only thing that could stop us was if the police got on our tail there. Back then, in 1954, people themselves were nervous about meeting with us.

Q: But what were you able to observe? I mean, this place you had studied and never thought you'd go to and then you're there. Were there things that surprised you when you were in these places, about the people and the way they lived?

Laber: Well, the way they lived was something we didn't really get to see very much of.

Q: Or how they presented, I guess, yes.

Laber: I think the thing that was most telling, when I think back on it, is how isolated they were from the outside world. I mean, what all those years of living behind the Iron Curtain had done. They didn't know who we were. They knew we were very foreign, that we looked very different in every way. We tried to hold off, as long as possible, before telling them that we were American, because that would frighten people away. People would stop. They'd say "*Otkuda nui*?" Where are you from? And we would say, "Guess," [laughter] and the guesses were wild. They'd start with Eastern Europe, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and then China. They never dreamed that we were from the United States.

My pocketbook was of interest. The pens, and makeup, the flashlight. Everything was so different. It was just a totally different society. Their products were different and they sensed that everything was much more advanced, which it was economically, in the United States. They wanted to know about American cars, and American movies, and other things they vaguely knew about. How much would it cost to buy a car, how much does it cost to go to college. They

thought that we lynched Negroes on a daily basis. “Have you ever seen a lynching?” And things of that kind. It was really a very different culture at that point.

Q: Wow. Going back to your time at the Russian Institute, you mentioned how you were there during 1953, and so you were there for the death of Stalin. How did that reverberate around the community?

Laber: That was a very big, [laughs] big event, needless to say.

Q: I would assume, [laughs] yes.

Laber: We were very self-important in those days. I remember I got a call [laughter]—I guess it was late at night. I can’t remember exactly—but from a fellow student telling us Stalin had died. “They’ve announced it. We’re calling a meeting.” The next day, I guess it was, we gathered together this sort of sub-group of students—we considered ourselves more sophisticated, more intellectual than others at the institute. We all gathered at this guy’s apartment to discuss what Stalin’s death meant for our studies and what would happen. I’d love to, now, have a transcript of that meeting. I can’t imagine what we had to say except that everything was up for grabs and that basically we had to sit back and wait and see who was going to replace him, what was going to happen, and so forth. But we were very thrown by it and it was—

Q: People feel hopeful or—?

Laber: It was a fellow student, Paul Willen, who called the meeting; it was in his parents' apartment. On their wall they had a Diego Rivera painting that was huge. It covered the whole wall, and portrayed all the communist officials, Stalin and [laughter], [Leon] Trotsky, and [Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov] Lenin, and also communist leaders from other countries. It was amusing that we were sitting having our discussing underneath that painting.

Q: The perfect setting.

Laber: Yes.

Q: That's funny. So you said this group who met, you were perhaps the more serious students at the Russian Institute at the time. Who were your classmates and peers? What were their goals at the time? Why were they there as well?

Laber: Well, let me think who was in the group now—George [L.] Sherry was one of them. He was legendary—even while he was at the Institute—as an interpreter at the United Nations. *The New Yorker* did a profile of him, because he had this unique ability to translate. He knew several languages, and he did all of [Andrey Yanuarevich] Vyshinsky's speeches at the U.N. Vyshinsky's speeches were always peppered with aphorisms and Russian sayings, and George had the ability to quickly find an American saying that meant the same thing and put it into the interpretation. He was really good.

So he was one of our colleagues. Burt Rubin, my friend from NYU, was another. Paul Willen was another; he was a very good writer on Soviet affairs, but left the field and became an architect. Frank Randall [phonetic], who I went to the Soviet Union with, was part of our group. We kept it up after we left the Institute for a few years at least.

Q: Or just the wider class after—

Laber: Yes, after we graduated we continued to meet, a group of Russian Institute students who all lived on the Upper West Side. My husband, Austin Laber, was one of them. He was a lawyer and then as a lawyer went to the institute and had dreams of joining the State Department as their Russian specialist. But the administration changed during his studies and they said, "What do we want a Russian specialist for? We have nothing to do with those people," [laughs] so that was the end of that. We continued to meet for a while. I don't know how long that lasted, but maybe for a year or two.

Q: That story about your husband and the State Department is kind of surprising because I mean, it feels like during the '50s was kind of the golden age of interaction between government and academia. Was there a lot of connection between Russian Institute and the government then?

Laber: I don't know. That story was his story. But when I think about it now, it seems odd to me. He said that before he went to the institute, he went to the state department, and talked to somebody who said that it would be a great thing to do and, "You should study Russian; we need people like you." Then when he graduated under a republican president they said to him, "What

do we need you for?" When I think about it now, it doesn't really make a lot of sense because certainly they wanted people in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] who knew Russian. It could be that he wanted to be in a policy-making branch of government. Who knows.

Q: Did other peers go onto work in the—?

Laber: Yes, a lot of people—the CIA was one destination point. They recruited at the institute. Of the four people that went with me to the Soviet Union, one of them, I believe, went into the CIA. One became a professor. The other woman got married to a theater guy and I think went into the theater [laughter]. And there was me. So not everybody stayed in the field. My husband went on to practice law. He never did anything with Russia after that. Paul became an architect.

Q: Were there many women at the Russian Institute at the time?

Laber: There were fewer women than men, but there was a pretty good handful of us. Colette Shulman was there. I forget now what her maiden name was, but she married Marshall Shulman eventually. She was a class behind me. Kay Feuer was there. Most of the women were special n one way or another. Kay was a married woman who lived in New England somewhere and commuted to do her studies. She had children, I think, and went back on weekends. It was hard for her. I got a scholarship after my first semester, which is what I was desperately hoping for because I wasn't going to be able to pay for my studies after that, unless my father reconsidered. But I was proud and I didn't want to ask him. I got the scholarship that I wanted.

But when Professor [Ernest J.] Simmons told me that I was getting it, he said famously to me, "I don't know why we waste our money on you women. You end up getting married and have children and that's the end of it." So that was not very nice [laughter]. That was—

Q: That was the attitude?

Laber: It was the attitude. It was strong enough that I remember it to this day, but it was not unexpected, either, that someone would say something like that.

Q: Tell me about the other faculty members that you took classes with, and your interactions with the faculty there at the time. Marshall Shulman was there. No, not yet?

Laber: No, he was at Harvard [University] before he came to the Institute. He was never there when I was there. Well, let's see. Simmons was my advisor [laughter]. [Geroid T.] Robinson.

Q: Okay. He was the director then?

Laber: Philip [E.] Mosely was the director.

Q: Philip Mosely, okay.

Laber: Trying to think of his name now. He was a very nice guy. He was my—Hazard, John [N.] Hazard, who I think did the politics, government specialty within the institute. He was actually

very helpful in getting my husband his first legal job when he graduated. He got him into a very prestigious Wall Street firm that had never hired a Jewish lawyer before. That was a nice gesture. He was a good guy. I didn't really have a close, even intellectual relationship with any of my professors there. Some people may have. Unlike at NYU, where I really fraternized with some of the professors and they took a special interest in me. My advisor was Simmons and I had very little—can I say this on the record?

Q: If you're comfortable with it, yes.

Laber: None of us had very high regard for him. He suffered from something; I won't call it "plagiarism" because I think it was unconscious plagiarism. He would assign readings to us and then lecture right out of the readings. He had them in his head—it was from the book. We'd look at each other and say, "We just read that last night." He would lecture as if they were his own words. I think it must have been an unconscious kind of absorption. Because one day he was lecturing and Burt—my friend who went with me to the institute—said to me, "That's right out of my paper that I submitted last week." [Laughter] So it was kind of weird. I think he was subsequently called on it. He published a couple of books in English on Russian writers, and he had apparently lifted a lot of his work from Russian writings on the same subject. I think there was a little bit of a scandal about that. I don't remember the details. But anyway, I did not feel close to him. And that comment about women would indicate why.

Q: For sure [laughs].

Laber: I liked some of the language professors, and got to know them. But the other professors were not in my department. I would take a couple of courses with each of them, and they were large lecture classes. I didn't get to know them well. But there was a kind of group spirit. For example, Mosely, when I first started, had a party at his house to introduce the incoming class to the class before us. It was a very small group. I think there were fifty of us all together, between the two classes. Don't cite me on that; I may be wrong, but it was something like that.

When I started working for Human Rights Watch, Marshall Shulman was then in the State Department and I went to meet him. One of my jobs was to get to know people in the State Department who were dealing with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It was very early on. Although we'd never met, he knew who I was when I called him. I didn't have a big reputation at that point, but it was like a little club, the Russian Institute. He opened all kinds of doors for me. Not only did I meet with him, he introduced me to everybody in the State Department who might be of any relevance to human rights work. He took me to lunch up at the officers' dining room. I felt like I belonged to a club. There'd already been maybe three or four classes before me. Only Columbia and Harvard that offered that kind of program at the time.

Q: At the Davis Center, right.

Laber: So there was a feeling of connection to the institute. But I can't say that I was close to any of the people who taught there.

Q: Sounds more like to your classmates and friends, yes.

Laber: Exactly. And some of us were older, like my husband was six years older than I. He'd already been to law school and been in the service. A lot of the people there had advanced degrees in other fields before they came, or they'd been working in the government, probably the CIA, and sent back to learn about Russia. So it was not a young crowd on the whole. There were some people like me who had come right from college, but a lot of our classmates were older, and a lot of them were married. It was a more serious group.

Q: Did this network, these people, stay with you and come in and out of your lives, either personally or professionally, even later on?

Laber: Well, the example I just gave you with Marshall Shulman was a very good example of that. Colette Shulman and I now sit on a Human Rights Watch committee. We were never really friends at the institute, but there was a sort of a bonding when she showed up at Human Rights Watch, you know.

When my children were young I worked for an organization called the Institute for the Study of the USSR. It was a part time job. I edited publications. They encouraged me to write, on my own, articles about Russia. I could do it on their time as long as I said that I worked for them, so they got some credit. It was a very nice little job in a way. But at one point it turned out that the organization was being funded covertly by the government. It's one of many of these Cold War organizations that were—

Q: By the CIA?

Laber: Well, I don't know. I don't think the money came directly from the CIA, but wherever it came from. It was a branch of Radio Liberty. There were also some publications that were covertly funded for some reason they did it covertly until they were exposed and then they started doing it overtly, which they should have done from the beginning. There was no reason to hide the fact that these organizations were being encouraged with government money. There were a lot of émigrés that working there, and that was fun for me because I had a chance to use my Russian.

The office parties were great. Everybody cooked Russian food and there was a lot of Russian culture in the place. There were former princes and counts, or people who claimed they were former princes and counts [laughter], working in the mailroom and that kind of thing. It was like a little bit of Russia and I liked that a lot. At one point they brought in a management consultant, and I remember he gave me some kind of quiz to show how they evaluated me. They actually paid you according to a scale, which was like the government does. You have a G this and G that.

Q: Very civil service, yes.

Laber: Yes, they had that same mentality. He said, "Why don't I give you the test and see how well you grade yourself?" It turned out that, although I graded myself rather low on that score, my highest grade was my "connections," which really surprised me at the time, that they had

considered me valuable because I knew so many valuable people. Where would that come from but the Russian Institute?

Q: It sounds like a really wonderful job. Were you very disappointed when it ended, after it was shut down?

Laber: Let me put it this way. The first day I arrived at work—it was kind of a public relations job—we had all these publications that were being prepared on the third world countries. The idea was to counterbalance the Soviet propaganda in third world countries. We were promoting these publications. I dictated about twenty-five or thirty letters, and at the end of the day went to see the guy I worked for, my boss. He said to me, "Twenty-five or thirty letters? Well, you'll get used to the pace of the place after a while." I was like this eager beaver—

Q: Working too fast? Yes.

Laber: —to have done all of that, [laughter] and no one was pleased.

Q: That's very government [laughs].

Laber: Right. A guy who I will keep unnamed would have a three-martini lunch every day and then go into conference in his office, which meant that he was taking a long nap. [Laughter] But for me, who had two small children at the time and had to pay somebody to take care of them when I went to work, it was very nice to have a job that was three days a week. If there was a

conference at school I didn't have to show up at work. My hours were very flexible; it was a very easy job. It didn't pay that well, but it paid enough to pay the babysitter and maybe a little bit more. Then as it developed into this writing thing, it became sort of great because I could use the institute publications, and it's a very good library.

So yes, it was good for me at that time in my life. I didn't leave the job. It ended when the organization ended; at the point when they were exposed to be government-funded, there was a total reorganization and they just closed the Institute office in New York altogether. But I was ready to move onto something else. I didn't take as much advantage of the writing as I could have or should have. I did some. And the rest of the work there was totally boring. It got me out of the house at a time when it was useful.

Q: And provided a flexible schedule at a time when I assume no one was talking about work-life balance [laughs].

Laber: Right, exactly. So I was lucky to have it. I was there for ten years, I think. Actually I worked at home when I had one child. Then I started working in the office when I had two children, because I could no longer work at home. And then I had another child. I worked during the childhood of my three kids.

In 1970 [laughs] I stopped working at the Institute. Then there was a period when I was freelancing. I was writing book reviews in the Soviet field. I wrote for *The New Republic, Commentary,* and some other publications. Around 1974, a friend and I got the idea of writing a

cookbook, which we did. We got it published. And then there was a big economic recession. I think it was in ’74.

My husband’s business suffered. My father’s business suffered, and my husband was working for my father. A good part of his income was coming from representing my father’s business. But suddenly that was all gone. We lived very well because we always had the feeling that I had this rich father, that I always had someplace to turn if we needed money, and that someday I was going to inherit a lot of money. It was sort of built into my psyche that money was never going to be an issue. And suddenly it was. I decided I should go to work myself because we needed money.

Because I had written a cookbook, I began getting some freelance jobs editing cookbooks for various publishers. I tried to get a job in publishing, but publishing was also suffering at that time and publishers were using a lot of freelancers.

Q: [Laughs] Like today.

Laber: They said, “I don’t have a job for you, but I can give you freelance work because our staff has been cut and we need people to do it.” So I started editing a lot of cookbooks. I got a big job—it seemed like a big job—editing the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook*, as a co-editor. That was not just editing, it was a total revision of the old book. Knopf had gotten the rights to it and they’d hired a cooking teacher named Marion Cunningham, who subsequently became—I think on the basis of that book—well known in the field. And because she wasn’t a writer, they hired

me to help with the writing. The job was supposed to last a year; it lasted a lot longer. At the same time I got involved with Amnesty International. That's when my human rights work began.

Q: Let's talk about the article that you read in 1973 in *The New Republic* that really sparked your interest in human rights.

Laber: I read an article that was published in *The New Republic* in 1973 by Rose Styron, whom I knew slightly. It was called *Torture.* I picked it up thinking, what is Rose writing about? What does she mean by "torture"? Is it a bad marriage? I had no idea what the subject matter was going to be, but the title and the writer interested me so I started reading it. It was very shocking to me, as it would have been to anyone at that time, although today I think we've been desensitized to these issues. What I read was absolutely horrendous. She had written about the use of torture in many different countries around the world, and the horrible methods that they used, and what happened to the victims. I just didn't know that was happening in the world. I knew about the Soviet Union; I knew something about the gulag; but I didn't know that this was going on in so many different parts of the world and in such primitive ways.

The materials that she used were based on Amnesty International research. I'd never heard of Amnesty International before. So I just started talking to people I knew about it because it had made such an impression on me. A good friend of mine, who knew Rose and was actually the one through whom I knew her slightly, said, "She's involved with an organization called Amnesty International. If you're so concerned, why don't you get in touch with her and see if you can do something about it?" At the time we had a country house in Connecticut, which was

in the same community as the Styrons. I called Rose and she invited me over to talk about it, and that was really the beginning of my introduction to the human rights world.

Rose was a member of what was the first Amnesty group in the United States. It was in New York, up at Columbia and consisted mainly of Columbia professors, although there were a few other people like Rose. She invited me to come to a meeting and I did. I think altogether they had adopted four or five Prisoners of Conscience, two of whom were from the Soviet Union. Because I had a background in the Soviet Union, they immediately assigned them to me [laughs]. So that was my entry into the human rights world.

Q: What did that mean, at the time, for Amnesty, when they assigned you a case? What kind of work did you do to advocate for these individuals?

Laber: Well, the work was usually to organize a letter writing campaigns on behalf of the prisoner. You never worked for someone in your own country. You always worked for people in other countries. There were times when a successful telephone-to-the-prison campaign could shut down the whole phone system, because if enough people called they couldn't handle the calls. It was to call attention to the plight of prisoners with the hope that if the jailers knew that they were internationally recognized prisoners, and people were following their cases, they would not treat them as badly. There was little hope of getting them freed, I think, but rather of improving conditions and so forth.

I had two prisoners. One was Vladimir [Konstantinovich] Bukovsky, who was in a psychiatric prison at the time. The other was a Ukrainian, Valentyn Moroz, who was being tortured in a prison in Ukraine. The *New York Times* had just started the op-ed page, maybe a year or so before. I got the bright idea of writing something about Moroz as described by somebody who had come out of that prison who talked about what was happening to him in very graphic terms. I used that as a taking off point to talk about what was happening in other prisons as well.

I called Harrison [E.] Salisbury, who was then the managing editor of the *Times*. I had met him in Moscow; he was the *Times* correspondent when I went there on that trip back in 1954. We had met; he had followed us around because we were [laughter] newsworthy.

Q: You were the news. Yes.

Laber: I got to know him there, and then had seen him since. They had a house in Connecticut, not far from where our house was, so I'd gotten to know him somewhat. I sent him the piece. He liked it and sent it to the op-ed page, and they decided to run it. They never had done anything on human rights before, as hard as that might be to believe now, and they'd never used Amnesty International as a legitimate source without having to go to other sources to verify the facts. So it was a big breakthrough, number one for Amnesty, which was really thrilled to have itself cited that way. Number two, for the Ukrainian community in which I became a sort of minor hero. There's a very large community in Canada and in the United States. They were very, very thrilled about the article. And both of these guys did get released eventually.

Q: What did you think of the work that Amnesty was doing and the tools that they were using?

Laber: Well, this letter-writing thing—I think it was very useful, but I found it a little boring. It didn't sustain me. The idea of writing an article was my own idea, and it worked. And I continued. I wrote a whole bunch of op-ed pieces about different parts of the world, not just Russia. I did one on the Philippines, on Iran, on Indonesia—it was the same format. I would describe a method of torture, something that was really shocking, and then I would talk about what was happening in the country itself, the political situation, and why these people were in prison and who was imprisoning them, and ask people to join the cause and so forth.

Q: You found that a successful formula for these—

Laber: It was. And they kept taking my pieces, which was really great. I must have had—over the years I've published more than one hundred articles on human rights, of which close to fifty word op-ed pieces. This is over the course of my entire career. But long before I had a career in human rights, I had already published about ten op-ed pieces on torture different parts of the world. The op-ed pages of the *Times*, and of other papers, too, were very receptive to the subject at that juncture. Now they would never take a piece like that because everybody knows about it. It's covered by the media, and newsworthy. All you have to do is look at television, read the *New York Times* and you know about human rights in these countries, but no one was reporting on that at the time. As hard as that is to believe.

The correspondents who were working in those countries weren't looking into human rights abuses. It wasn't considered fair game to criticize another country for their internal affairs, that was the U.S. government's position. We don't get mixed up in another country's internal affairs. I think the press reflected the same sort of thinking at the time, so my op-eds were breaking news. Because of my Amnesty connection, I had access to such materials.

But the real start of my career began when our Amnesty group organized a protest outside the Soviet Consulate in 1975.

[END OF SESSION]

ATC | Session: 2

Interviewee: Jeri Laber | Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux | Date: October 28, 2016

Q: This is Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux. Today is Friday, October 28, 2016. I am here with Jeri Laber for her second session of the Harriman Institute Oral History Project. We are going to start right where we left off. Jeri, you were just telling me before I pressed record about how you started working for Amnesty before "human rights" was even a term that people used.

Laber: Well, that's true. I published a number of articles at that point. Within the space of a year and a half I published eight or ten articles on human rights issues based on Amnesty materials in places like the Philippines, Iran, Indonesia, the Soviet Union and a few other places. But if anyone had asked me what they were about, I would say they were about torture, about imprisonment. The word "human rights" was just not part of my vocabulary then—or part of any ordinary person's vocabulary.

It wasn't until Jimmy [James E.] Carter became president in 1976 that human rights suddenly became almost a household term. Within the space of a couple of years I could go from having to explain to friends what my human rights work was all about, to being able to say to a taxi driver who asked what I did that "I work in human rights," and he would say, "Oh good." [Laughter] Not what is that, or what is that all about? Things really changed very, very quickly and then—I think it was in 1977—Amnesty International won the Nobel Peace Prize, which of course, made human rights work even more familiar to the general public.

Q: Yes.

Laber: In 1975 our Amnesty group organized a protest outside the Soviet consulate in New York. It was on the occasion of Vladimir Bukovsky's birthday. He was one of the two Soviet prisoners we were working for, and he was in a psychiatric hospital for having protested against psychiatric abuse of dissidents in the Soviet Union, one of the many great ironies in that country. A young man, he had spent most of his life in prison, all of his adult life practically, for speaking out. We demonstrated outside the consulate. We had gathered a number of prominent people, theater people—Dustin [L.] Hoffman was one of them, Celeste Holm was another—hoping that their participation would attract press attention, which is what we wanted.

It was at that demonstration that I met Bob Bernstein. We were walking together and he introduced himself. I had known of him because he had been talked about by my Amnesty colleagues as one of the very few businessmen—he was the president and CEO of Random House at the time and a prominent publisher—one of very few people of his stature and connections who seemed genuinely aware of and interested in human rights work. Bob and I subsequently re-met at a dinner party at a mutual friend's home. He, meanwhile, had been reading my articles. He immediately began suggesting to me other articles I should be writing. He had started spinning ideas over cocktails as to what I could [laughter] be doing.

When he found out that I was also editing a cookbook for Knopf, which is a division of Random House, he said, "Well, the next time you're in the building why don't you give me a call?" And I

did. I had in the back of my mind a feeling that he and I could work together in some way that would be more creative—I don't know if that's the right word—but more interesting, more rewarding, I think, than the Amnesty work I was doing. Which, although I think it is wonderful and remains wonderful, it was kind of tedious, writing letters to officials and to prisoners when you never expected to get any response and never did get any active response. It was frustrating. I had a feeling that there were other things we could be doing, and Bob certainly had the same feeling.

Initially he arranged for me to be a consultant, I guess you would call it, to the Association of American Publishers, working to get their newly-established International Freedom to Publish Committee off the ground. Shortly after that Bob got frustrated with the committee that I was working for because it was looked down upon and worked against by most of the publishing industry, which was much more interested in doing business with the Soviet Union than it was in protesting about the fact that there were more writers at that point imprisoned in the Soviet Union than in all the other countries of the world combined. The Soviet Union, as an ideologically-based country recognized what a lot of other countries, equally tyrannical, did not realize, which that the written word had power. Writers and intellectuals in both the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries were the first to be punished.

Bob then started another human rights organization called the Fund for Free Expression, which was a misnomer because it had no money. The word "fund" [laughter] would imply that we were looking for places to contribute to, when actually we were trying to get money ourselves to do the work. But it was an interesting group he put together of writers, publishers, people of some

note. Kurt Vonnegut [Jr.] was one of them, Anthony Lewis, several people from the *New York Times.* And yes, I was also hired to be a staff person for that very small, newly-formed group. I was working part time in both jobs. Together between the Association of American Publishers and the Fund for Free Expression I was being paid to put in three days a week of work, although I was working a lot more than that because I wanted to. The Helsinki Accords were signed in 1975.

The first Helsinki Review Conference was in 1977. That created a lot of attention in our very small circle because it was the only international venue where east and west would meet and talk, and could be used as a venue to voice our concerns with the Eastern Bloc countries at a high level, if we could get to the people who were actually at the conference. The conference was in Belgrade and the first U.S. ambassador was Arthur [J.] Goldberg. He organized a meeting in Washington before he left for NGOs to attend and voice their concerns. I went representing both of the two organizations that I was working for at the time.

I was the only one there who did not come with a vested interest. Most of the other people were from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czechoslovakia, people protesting what had happened to their homelands, and clearly wanting to see justice done. Whereas I was an American representing groups of Americans who were concerned with what was happening to prisoners of conscience, regardless of what their ethnicity or their views, for that matter, were. Goldberg singled me out and asked me if I would write a paper for him about our concerns, which I did. There was nothing really new in that paper. A lot of it was actually based on information that the CSCE [Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe] Committee in Washington had prepared as

briefing papers for the delegation. They did very good work on what was going on in the Eastern Block countries, and I used them, and Amnesty, and a few other sources.

What Goldberg was trying to do was to develop a constituency for what he wanted to do in Belgrade. What he did in Belgrade—which was considered very, very courageous at the time—was to actually name, I think it was five of the prisoners of conscience that were being held by the Soviet Bloc countries. He spoke out.

The conference I think lasted about six months and it got very, very little attention in the western press and nobody was really following it that avidly. When he came back Goldberg was very frustrated because there was no constituency for what he was doing. He spoke to McGeorge ["Mac"] Bundy, who was then the head of the Ford Foundation. Together they decided that what the country really needed was a U.S.-Helsinki committee as a counterpart to what was going on in the Eastern Block countries where people had formed Helsinki committees. There were five of them in the Soviet Union. There was Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. There was the early pre-solidarity group in Poland. He felt that if Helsinki committees were formed in the western world, it would call attention to what was happening in the Eastern Bloc.

Bundy got in touch with Bob—I think it was partly because of the paper that I had written and my very tangential connections with Goldberg, and suggested that we come to the Ford Foundation to discuss it. There was a meeting that Bob and I and a few others attended, where Bob said he would be happy to set up a Helsinki Committee, but he could not raise the funds for it. He was having trouble just keeping the Fund for Free Expression going. Bundy suggested that

we apply for a grant, which we did and received without very much effort [laughter]. We got $400,000, which seemed like a huge amount of money at the time, to be spent over a period of two years, that being what they assumed it would take to prepare for the second Helsinki Review Conference, which opened in Madrid in 1980.

The Madrid Conference went on for three years. By the time the conference was over, we had gotten extensions of our grants. We were a functioning organization that wasn't going to end with the conference.

Q: Right. I know at the beginning after you received the funding from Ford, that $400,000, there was a search for a director, and that was kind of long and ongoing. I think it took some prompting for you to actually apply for that position. Right?

Laber: Right. We started the Helsinki Committee. We were not absolutely sure of what our focus was going to be, whether it was going to be both on U.S. violations and also on violations in the Eastern Bloc countries. By monitoring our own country freely, without being put in prison, we would demonstrate the fact that people in the Soviet Union should have the same privilege and not be arrested the minute they started forming Helsinki committees.

On the other hand, it was kind of redundant for a little group like ours to be monitoring what was going on in the United States when we had the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and a million other organizations that had been doing it for years and on a large scale. It was complicated trying to

find our focus. First of all, we needed a director. We hired someone who had an American civil liberties background, who really was not the right person, we realized soon afterwards, because our interest really was on the Soviet Union and what was going on there. He really was much more focused on problems in the United States and that wasn't working very well, especially with the Soviet émigré dissidents that we worked with who felt it was about to compare what was going on in the United States, with what was happening in the Soviet Union.

So that direction left after a relatively short time, a few months, really. Then we started a search for a new director and we were having a lot of trouble finding someone. I was part of the Search Committee. There was a small group of us that Bob had put together as a kind of executive committee. All men except for me. All white men, I should say, except for me. And we had trouble finding someone.

Q: Did you think, "Hey, I could do this, it could be me," or how did—?

Laber: Well, I was in a transitional state myself at that point. I was in the midst of getting a divorce. I had not worked fulltime since I got married. I still had one child at home. My other two daughters were in college. I was suddenly faced, number one, with the fact that I had to make money because I was a single parent and could no longer count on a husband or the family that had stood behind me—my father's business had gone bankrupt, there was no fallback position. I had never thought of myself as a breadwinner. The work that I was being paid for, part time work, was something that seemed perfect for the mother of three children who also wanted time to spend with her family.

The idea of actually applying for the job was a new thought. It came from one of my colleagues. One of the people in our group said to me, "Why don't you apply for it? You'd be great at it." I thought about it and decided I should, and wrote a long letter to Bob explaining why I thought I would be a good person to do it. He shared my letter with other members of the committee, who seemed, if anything, more enthusiastic at my doing it than he was [laughter]. There was a reluctance among certain people in that group about having a woman in that job. One in particular had said in my presence. "I don't think this is a job for a woman."

Nevertheless they agreed that they would like me to do it. And I became the director in—I would say it was probably in the late spring of '79. We were already behind the ball because we were being funded for only two years, and a half a year had already gone by, and we hadn't really done very much except hire and fire our first [laughs] director and hire me. I don't know how much detail you want me to go into. I think I'll just skim over the Madrid Conference.

Q: Yes, that's fine.

Laber: It lasted for three years. By the time it was over we were established as an organization. We weren't going away and we were getting more money, not just from the Ford Foundation but from other sources as well. Helsinki Watch was there to stay.

Q: Tell me, what did become the focus of Helsinki Watch? How you found the commission and then worked to realize it.

Laber: In 1980 [Ronald W.] Reagan was elected president. The whole political climate changed. We no longer had a sympathetic to human rights administration as we had under Carter and Patt [Patricia M.] Derian who was running the human rights department at the State Department. We then began to focus not just on the Soviet Bloc but on Central America, which had become the site of a proxy war with the Soviet Union, where the US government was defending tyrannical governments against Communist insurgencies.

The Reagan doctrine—it was actually formulated by Jeane [D.] Kirkpatrick—distinguished between totalitarian and authoritarian governments. Totalitarian governments, what we had in the Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union, were not susceptible to change. Authoritarian governments, such as those in Central America, did not control every aspect of society. They were dependent on aid from the United States and willing to accept it, and therefore we could work with these governments and affect change. That was the philosophy of the Reagan administration; it was not ours. In 1981 we formed Americas Watch, as a counterpart to Helsinki Watch. Aryeh Neier became the director of that and the overall director of both organizations. Over the next years we formed a Middle East Watch, an Africa Watch, an Asia Watch. By 1988, we were ready to bring all these groups under one umbrella and call it Human Rights Watch.

Meanwhile, I was still working with Helsinki Watch. I went on several missions to the Soviet Union. I went there in 1979 for the Moscow Book Fair, which was our cover to get people in because there was no way that people working for human rights or for Helsinki Watch were going to be admitted to the Soviet Union.

Q: Yes. After that you were banned from travel. Right? To the—

Laber: Yes. So in ’79 we organized under the Fund for Free Expression’s name, not Helsinki Watch, although we all worked on it—a book exhibit called America Through American Eyes, which would be at the Moscow Book Fair and show through books that were published in the United States about American problems, the kind of freedom we had in our country to publish, which was not true in the Soviet Union. It was also the kind of exhibit they couldn’t censor, we felt, or ban because it was not anti-Soviet.

Q: It was anti-U.S. almost, right, yes.

Laber: It was a subtle anti-Soviet protest, showing by example the freedom that we had that they didn’t have. The exhibit was extremely popular. We put a huge amount of work into it. The *New York Times* donated a newsprint catalogue of all the books, with descriptions of what they were in both Russian and English, so that the Russian public in general could see what these books were really about, because they couldn’t buy them. They could just come to the bookstand and see them. But they could go away with a catalogue and get a real sense of what U.S. publishing was capable of.

Bob Bernstein did not get his visa to go. They turned him down, which was the first sign that they knew about Helsinki Watch, and his connection with it, and were concerned about it. But I went and worked very, very hard doing a lot of different things at once. Keeping track of all the

censored books—because books were censored throughout the book fair, books exhibited by other publishers. I think we only lost one ourselves. The press was very interested in covering censorship. I became the point person for keeping track of what was going on, because it was subtle. The book exhibits would be closed for the day and people would come back the next day and certain books were just missing from [laughter] their stands. Nobody came and said, "We're taking this," they just took them.

I also organized a dinner for dissident writers in Moscow, which was a complicated thing to do. We held it in a restaurant in Moscow. At the last minute the Soviet authorities seemed to catch on to what we were doing and who was coming, and had stuff on the radio about it, which frightened some writers away. Some of the more established writers refused to come because of that. But, I think, some twenty-odd writers did show up, including Andrei [Dmitrievich] Sakharov and a writer straight from prison, Anatoly [Tikhonovich] Marchenko. He was really one of the people that got the Soviets very angry, angry that he was part of it.

The night of the dinner, there was a very heavy police presence around the restaurant, but they did not stop people from coming in. The dinner actually took place, and it was considered a very courageous thing for the writers who came. But it also was a protective thing for them. So it was a good thing that we did.

All in all, that first trip was quite successful. I also met with the Sakharovs—Yelena [G.] Bonner, Mrs. Sakharov, who was part of the Helsinki Committee that had formed, what was left of the Moscow Helsinki Committee, the people who were not already imprisoned. I saved that meeting

till the very end of the trip because she advised me, "Once you come to a meeting of our group you're going to be under strict surveillance. Why don't you wait until the very end, or they may end your trip prematurely." So I did. I actually went to the meeting with my suitcase on the day I was supposed to leave for home, and went right from the meeting to the airport.

The meeting itself was quite sad, actually. It was mainly women. The wife of Yuri [F.] Orlov, who was the head of the Moscow Helsinki Committee, because he was in prison. People whose relatives had been imprisoned. Feisty women and courageous women. It was an important thing because I was able to tell them that there was now a U.S. Helsinki Committee, that we knew what was going on through smuggled information and samizdat. We were aware of their problems. We were going to work for them as best we could. I established a kind of physical connection that a real person had come from the States to tell them this. That was from a Helsinki Watch point of view, probably the most important thing that I accomplished during that trip.

It was so important that the next time I applied for a visa I could not get a visa [laughs] to go to the Soviet Union, nor could I for many years, not until [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev was I able to go back. After Moscow I went to Prague and Warsaw.

Q: You did over sixty missions, I think.

Laber: Pardon?

Q: I think in the book you say you went on over sixty missions, which is just incredible, [laughter] and a lot.

Laber: It's a lot. Yes.

Q: And very demanding. In general, what was the purpose of these trips, of going to each place? What types of risks were you taking, and how did you feel about that?

Laber: Well, I was the first person to go, obviously. The staff was so small at that time, there was no one else. I was the first person at Human Rights Watch to start going on missions. They were called fact-finding missions. To some extent they were, although we really got very good information from the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries because the samizdat channels were functioning well and there were U.S. reporters who smuggled information out. There were people in the embassies who smuggled—we never talked about this stuff. We got information through émigrés in this country who got it through their sources. There was a network. As my contacts in Eastern Europe grew, I was part of the network and I could tell people that I was coming and the word would be sent ahead. They had their ways of communicating. After a while I could actually set up contacts before I arrived, say, in Prague. People would know I was coming and I would have at least one person to visit at the start. But at the beginning I was just going cold. I didn't know anybody when we did our very first mission in '79. I was accompanied by a woman named Helen Sen who was on our staff at the time and had helped set up these contacts, just from reading samizdat stuff, getting the names of people who we thought were activists or dissidents.

On that first mission I just established contacts, both in Prague and in Warsaw. In Warsaw we actually got them to set up a Helsinki Committee. We had a meeting with Adam Michnik and Jacek [J.] Kuroń, and some other the activists and explained to them that it would be helpful if we had a counterpart committee there. They already had other groups working, but they said no problem. A guy named Zbigniew Romaszewski took on the job of forming the first Polish Helsinki Committee.

I did gather information, no question about it. I got personal stories from people when I met with them. But I was also bringing information, because these people were so cut off from outside contacts that I could bring information from a Hungarian activist to a Czech activist or a Polish—their own contacts with each other were very tenuous. I could bring messages back and forth between them, and just tell them what was going on in the outside world that they didn't know about. What was going on in the United States. I would bring books. Nothing controversial, just literature. These were intellectuals on the whole who were also cut off from reading, and newspapers, and knowing what was going on. So part of it was just moral support and intellectual information and discussion.

Over the years we also began to plan joint activities that would test the limits of official tolerance. That became a very important part of our work in the post [Leonid Ilyich] Brezhnev era. Certainly after Gorbachev first came into power. First of all, we had access, once again, able to go back to the Soviet Union. People were being released from prison in the Soviet Union. Countries like Czechoslovakia and—well, Romania, were hanging in there, being particularly

intransigent. So they became focal points for organizing events with dissident groups in public, to see whether we could get away with it or not. Very often these meetings were broken up, but at least they took place. We were testing; we were showing what the real situation was.

Czechoslovakia was one of the most repressive of the Eastern Bloc countries, and where I spent a lot of my time. I don't know how many of my sixty missions were to Czechoslovakia, probably about nine or ten, maybe. Something like that.

Q: Despite the level of repression in Czechoslovakia, you seem to have fallen in love with Prague the minute you got there, in a way.

Laber: Well, yes, something clicked with me in that country. First of all, it was such a beautiful city, and untouched by war as so many of the countries had been during World War II. It was preserved in its pristine state. Because of the Communists' lack of western commercialism, the city was untouched. I mean, I could walk alone through the streets at night—I'd be the only person in the Old Town, which is hard to believe now when you see the crowds of tourists there. But there was no reason to be there because there were no cafés, there were no bars, there was no activity, no life, no commercial life. I could pretend to myself that I was in the fourteenth century, because nothing had changed. It was both wonderful and very depressing because the reason it was that way was because of the repression. And the fact that I could walk so far, all by myself, was because I was in a police state and I could be pretty sure that nobody was going to mug me or [laughter] rob me.

The people I got to know in Prague were very special. They were intellectuals, they were extremely courageous; people who had signed Charter 77 and had seen their lives destroyed, their children unable to go to college. They were working in menial jobs, as janitors or window washers, in order to survive. There was a kind of esprit amongst them which was quite compelling. It's not that different from what was going on in Poland, or Hungary, or other countries that I went to, or the Soviet Union, for that matter. I think the people in the Soviet Union had the worst situation because they were arrested and sent to heavy labor and had awful repression. In Prague, it was more sophisticated. Dissidents just were denied the right to live normal lives forever. Their children suffered, and their relatives suffered, and it was like a second-class citizenship. It was a kind of apartheid, almost, for the group of people who had signed the charter. And there were also arrests.

I wasn't going to the Soviet Union at that time, and if I had I wouldn't have been seeing many people because they were in prison or in Siberia. But in Eastern Europe I was able to meet, and talk, and see what it was really like, and try to publicize things which on the surface didn't sound that terrible. You don't have a telephone, you don't get any mail, your kids don't get into school. It's not like being tortured or at hard labor in Siberia. However, when you see it first-hand you realize how wasted these lives were, for a cause.

Q: You developed really deep networks and relationships in the whole region over time, but also especially, I think, in Czechoslovakia. One of your contacts there was [Václav] Havel, is that right?

Laber: Václav Havel. Actually Havel was the only person who was well known. He was a writer of international prominence. He had spent a lot of time in prison, so much so that I didn't actually get to meet him until much later on in my travels there, because he was in prison when I first went there. I met his wife. I met his brother. I met his friends. I was arrested [laughter] in 1983.

Usually I traveled alone. But on that particular trip I had gone with someone from the International Helsinki Federation that we had formed in Western Europe. I went with a Swedish man named Gerald Nagler. I think the fact that I was traveling with a man, who wore a suit, and we had a car—all that made us look much more prominent. It was probably a mistake on my part because on my previous trips I'd gone by myself. Once I went with one of my daughters, actually, and we looked very nondescript like western tourists—which is what I was supposed to be. It seemed weird that tourists would even want to go to these countries, because it had none of the tourist attractions that usually attract people, and there wasn't very much tourism in these countries. But that was how I went, and that's how I traveled, and I kept a very low profile. I think the fact that I was a woman also made me look less threatening.

But on this trip I had a more visible presence, both the foreign car and the foreign man. We were stopped almost immediately on the first day, after our first visit to some dissident friends of mine. We were stopped, taken in by the police, told to leave the country by midnight that night, which of course we had to do. We were followed by a police car almost to the border. I thought that was going to be the end of my travels to Czechoslovakia, but the next time I applied for a visa I got it, which was something I never understood and never will understand. When I got to

customs, in Prague airport, something went off. I was no longer an ordinary tourist and I would be subjected to a very detailed search of all my belongings and my person and so forth before they let me in, which was their way of telling me that they knew who I was.

On the other hand, they let me in. My Czech colleagues seemed to think they were more interested in seeing who I would visit, and what I was up to, than in keeping me out. So that also put an extra burden on my travels there because I knew I was being watched all the time, and that the people who met with me were possibly being compromised. They knew it. They had to take that risk, and they did.

Q: I think in ’83, when you and Gerald were kicked out of Czechoslovakia, you called on a former classmate, actually from Harriman. You called Jack [F.] Matlock [Jr.].

Laber: Absolutely, yes. At that point Jack Matlock was the ambassador to Czechoslovakia. He subsequently became the ambassador to the Soviet Union. Whenever I traveled in Eastern Europe, I would always ask one of my contacts in the State Department to inform the embassy that I was coming. But I would have no contact with the embassy, because they were under surveillance all the time. As I went to the embassy, that would immediately make me look like an important person. But I thought it was important that they know that I was there. When we were arrested and went back to the hotel, under police supervision, to get our belongings, I called the embassy, spoke to Jack. “Oh, Jeri,” he said [laughter], “I heard you were in Prague, but I didn’t expect to hear from you.” I told him what had happened and he said, “Come to the embassy. I’ll send a car over.” When we went to the embassy we were escorted both by a Czech

police car and an American embassy car. The embassy car went first, then we drove our, following the embassy car, with the police bringing up the rear.

Q: What a procession, yes [laughs].

Laber: But there wasn't very much that Jack could do. He had no power to protest. If I remember correctly, I gave him some of my notes, because I was afraid that they would be taken at the border. I asked him to get rid of the compromising stuff for us. I remember a shredder being involved in some way [laughter]. And then we left.

Q: These missions that you take, they sound courageous and dangerous and quite frustrating sometimes. But obviously you kept doing them; you felt that they were very worthwhile. Were you starting to see some—or feel the purpose of the work, and that it was fruitful work to do, to do all these trips?

Laber: I never had any question about the value of those missions. It was very hands-on. It was just the opposite of writing letters, [laughter] which, at Amnesty, is how I started. First of all, for example, the mission I took in '81, which was to Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary—

Q: And Yugoslavia.

Laber: And Yugoslavia. Thank you [laughter]. I ended up in Madrid, where the Review Conference was still going on [laughter]. The ambassador was Warren Zimmermann, who was

extremely sympathetic to human rights causes. He was somebody we worked very closely with. He was a great ambassador. He arranged a dinner for me with ambassadors, not just from the committed western countries, but from the neutral and non-aligned western countries, which had more sway with the Soviet powers—perhaps because they were considered neutral—than others. I spoke, at that dinner, to about twelve of the ambassadors about what I had seen in Eastern Europe. It was very effective.

Q: The people didn't know.

Laber: Well, they must have known. But I guess I was bringing it home to them. Having someone actually describe the people and what their problems were, what was happening there, it brought it home in a very different way. I think it really, really did help in getting them behind Warren Zimmermann, in his human rights protests—naming a lot more than just a couple of names. They protested about repression in general in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries.

The Madrid Peace Conference was much more contentious that the previous one in Belgrade. The Soviet Bloc countries walked out several times during speeches. But they came back. They didn't leave. There were so many other things at stake, not just human rights. It was not a human rights' conference; human rights was just one part of the agenda. From the Soviet Bloc point of view it shouldn't have been on the agenda at all. They were there to discuss trade and other kinds of economic cooperation, and security issues, and other things that were meaningful to them.

And that is why they stayed. We were like a thorn in their side, raising the human rights issues. The U.S. delegation was, spearheaded that.

So yes, that was how I ended my first major mission to Eastern Europe in ’81, during which I was gone for about three and a half weeks. Not only was it effective, going to Madrid at the end of it and telling what I saw and learned, but I also laid the groundwork in each of those countries for future visits and for whatever contacts we could make. In Hungary—which what was one of the somewhat less repressive countries—I was able to arrange, subsequently, to get four Hungarian intellectuals out; to get them to come to the United States and work in academic institutions for a period of time. I did that through the State Department, through Elliott Abrams—who was our enemy when it came to Central America, but who was sympathetic to what was happening in Hungary—and through the embassy, and other connections in Budapest. Somehow we were able to get visas for these people. Small things like that were concrete and helpful.

I always came back with a bunch of promises that I’d made, such as trying to get books to certain people who were doing research and couldn’t get the research materials they needed. I could ask tourists, who were neutral, and not under suspicion in any way, to bring in materials for other people and things of that nature. They were small things, but very meaningful things to the people involved, and it gave me a sense of satisfaction.

Q: In the meantime, between all of these trips and all the travel that you were doing, it seems like there was a lot going on in New York as well, at the offices here. Maybe even though you were

hesitant to apply as the director, you became a very capable administrator and dealt with your staff and trained other people to do the work that you were doing and how to deal with that.

Laber: Absolutely. We grew—our division today is called the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch. I think it's always been the largest division of Human Rights Watch. It certainly was in those days. We got a lot of specially designated funding. It was, in certain ways, easier to raise money because we could get it not only from the left but from the right. Even though we didn't like to think of ourselves as an anti-Soviet organization, but as a human rights organization, the fact that we were working in that part of the world attracted people from both right and left. Whereas it was rather more difficult, say in Central America, where the causes were considered left-wing causes. Plenty of organizations in the United States did not approve of what Human Rights Watch was doing there through our Americas Watch at that time.

The place where I did run into the left-right controversy was Turkey, which was also a signatory to the Helsinki Accords and a gross violator of human rights. Turkey was another place to which I became very dedicated, both to the people I knew there and the country itself. One of the cases I took up there was of a young woman, she was a medical student, who had been imprisoned and very grossly tortured by the Turkish authorities. Her sister was living in the United States and came to my office, and told me her story. Every time I went to Turkey I would see if I could do something on her behalf, to find out what was going on with her.

It was a whole different situation in Turkey. Turkey was a large recipient of U.S. aid. The U.S. Embassy was on good terms with the Turkish authorities and, unfortunately, not at all critical of

what they were doing to dissident left wing people in the country. However, the embassy could be embarrassed into doing something. I kept raising the case of Gulsat [Aygen] to the embassy people who should have known about her. They promised me they would make inquiries, which they did. Ultimately she was released and we met in Istanbul.

She had been on a hunger strike and was close to death at the point that the U.S. Embassy started showing some interest in her case. At which point the prison authorities forcibly took her off the hunger strike and, I think, force-fed her, which in retrospect she was very grateful for, because she didn't want to die and she didn't die. She always credits me, which I think is a little extreme, but she always says that I saved her life, which, indirectly, I guess I did. It's a nice thing to hear from someone, a feeling that you've really accomplished something like that. To save someone's life is—it's not a small thing. The great thing is that she's now made an academic career in the United States. We're Facebook friends [laughter]. She's always getting awards. She teaches linguistics and she has a real life here, which makes me very happy to see.

Q: That's wonderful. You talked about this woman in particular being grossly tortured. Soon, your staff, and other people are doing mission trips and are interviewing victims of torture. How did you handle, and how did you teach others to handle, interviewing people? How did you tell your staff how to deal with that themselves even?

Laber: Well, my staff consisted almost exclusively of young women in their twenties. There were a couple of men, too, but initially they were all women. Of course, once I couldn't go to the Soviet Union we sent in surrogates. Cathy [Catherine A.] Fitzpatrick was for a long time our

main point person on the Soviet Union. She spoke fluent Russian and she did some incredible things, including something I would have advised her not to do if I had been asked, but I wasn't asked. She visited a prisoner in a psychiatric hospital by pretending to be his cousin from Lithuania, or someplace like that. Her Russian was good enough, and her appearance was convincing enough, that they actually thought she was Russian and she got in and into that hospital.

We had some very good [laughs] people. After Cathy left, Rachel Denber opened our first Moscow office. That was in 1990, I believe. Rachel had studied at the Harriman Institute. She's still there at Human Rights Watch. I think she's one of the longest lasting members of the Human Rights Watch staff, and doing incredible work.

In 1990, just at the time that the Soviet Union was imploding. I went to Moscow and opened an office there with the help of Lyudmila [M.] Alexeyeva, who for many years had been a representative of the Moscow Helsinki Group in the United States, and had worked as a paid consultant to Helsinki Watch, and was a wonderful woman who's now still active in Russia, running a very different Helsinki group there. With her help we found an office, and found a young Russian man named Sasha Petrov to staff it. Then we sent Rachel as our American representative there.

That office is still in existence. I hope it will continue. They've been closing down all kinds of civil society organizations, and NGOs, and human rights groups, accusing them of being foreign agents. One of the few that still remains is the Human Rights Watch Moscow office, which, God

knows, is supported by foreign money. I don't know how long it will continue, but they've left us relatively alone, so far.

Q: I was wondering if you could tell me about your reaction—your personal reaction and Human Rights Watch's reaction—to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Laber: To the collapse of the Soviet, oh wow.

Q: Did you think, okay, we're done? [Laughs]

Laber: Well, 1989 was an extraordinary year for my branch of the organization. As Human Rights Watch grew, and all these other regional committees were established, we were kind of like outliers. Everybody else had small successes and sometimes larger successes. They would take up an issue, they would write to the authorities. The authorities might not agree to change but they would write back angry letters. There was an interchange between the governments they were criticizing and us, which is gratifying. If you publish a report on violations of human rights in Argentina, and then the Argentine government writes back a letter to the *New York Times* saying, "Americas Watch is crazy, this isn't happening," and so forth, you know you're getting a reaction that they're listening.

But with the Soviet Bloc it was all dead silence. Never a response, never a feeling that we were having any effect whatsoever on the authorities. Although we knew we were having some affect on the dissidents. But once Gorbachev came into power, and they started releasing prisoners,

then we could see that the first prisoners who were released were the people on our lists—that they'd been listening all along. Then we got invited to Moscow in 1988 as part of the International Helsinki Federation. That was a dramatic first, that the Soviet government agreed to meet with a non-governmental organization itself was exceptional, and a non-governmental organization that was devoted to human rights made it even more so. The meetings themselves were kind of farcical, in the sense that nothing was accomplished. We made our points; they made their points. They were using us, I think, for propaganda purposes because they were very eager to have a Helsinki Review Conference in Moscow. But even that in itself was a big step.

Gorbachev came into power in '85. The ripple effect in Eastern Europe was enormous, especially when he said that the Soviet Union was no longer going to interfere in the internal affairs of East European countries. He actually stated that, and that threw the Communist governments in Eastern Europe into various degrees of panic. Some, as in Hungary, tried to loosen up a little bit. Some as in Czechoslovakia said we'll go our own way and we're not going to change and they hunkered down.

There were all kinds of openings for us to send delegations. Once we went to Moscow, we could go to other countries and meet with officials, which had not been a possibility before. Then all the revolutions began, with a domino effect throughout 1989. It was just extraordinary, the people that we had been working with were suddenly the presidents of their countries—everything changed. Everything seemed to be working in favor of very different systems of government. The Communist authorities were no longer there and eventually the Soviet Union was no more, [laughs] which was really hard to believe.

Q: Thinking back to your time at Harriman, and thinking that you would never even get the chance to visit before that 1954 trip, and then to be there at the end and see it happen—

Laber: Well, it was some trajectory [laughter] when you think about it, yes. Studying a country that we thought we would never see, then ending up seeing the country disappear, along with shelves and shelves of books in my library that suddenly [laughter] became pointless almost. Who cared anymore about the Five-Year Plan [laughter]—? Communism was no more.

We had some great moments in the organization. When Havel made his first trip to the United States, he made a point of coming to Human Rights Watch and thanking us. And actually saying—it was a quotation that appeared in the *New York Times* saying that without you our revolution might not have happened. "The revolution would not be," were his actual words. Again, I think it was a bit of hyperbole; a lot of other things went into that revolution. But still, it was a very gratifying thing to hear.

For a brief period of time people were saying, "Well, what's the point of continuing?" Even within the organization, "What are you going to do now?" [Laughter] But somehow we knew the calm wasn't going to continue. Certainly, in the new Russia, almost from the beginning, there was Chechnya, there were all kinds of internal battles. We knew that things were not going to be easy. But I never thought that things could get as bad as they've gotten in Eastern Europe. That has been a great disappointment. For a while things looked very promising. There were issues like the treatment of the Roma and various institutional abuses within these countries that we

figured would be corrected in time. Instead it's gotten worse and right now, it's very discouraging, in the entire region.

But there was a brief period, at least, when we were riding high. It's seldom that this happens in the human rights world in general, that such a dramatic series of changes happened all at once. And ironic because this was what Reagan and Kirkpatrick said would never happen, the totalitarian governments were impervious to change, short of a violent revolution. These were peaceful revolutions—the whole system just collapsed. It didn't collapse just because of us. It collapsed for economic reasons. It collapsed for political reasons. It collapsed because of Gorbachev, I think he made a number of significant miscalculations probably from his own point of view. He didn't realize the forces he was unleashing with the changes that he made, but it happened.

Q: I was also wondering, as you were talking about your work, and these mission trips, and being able to write microscopically small almost, and your techniques that you developed to circumvent the surveillance. How did the Internet and technology and other technologies, too, make your work different or easier over time? Was it easier to—?

[INTERRUPTION]

Laber: Well, I developed a methodology. It was really trial and error [laughter], but it became the methodology, at least for traveling in severely repressive countries. There was definitely a difference, when you went to Turkey, for example, which was a very authoritarian country where

terrible things were happening. Half the population was in prison when I first went there, and there had been martial law and so forth. But when you went to the airport and went through customs, they were only looking for contraband. They weren't looking at the books I was reading. I could have brought in anything, the *New York Times*, a [laughs] Human Rights Watch report on Turkey. There just wasn't the same kind of control. But in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, which is where my main focus was, one had to be very careful about what you brought in and what you brought out.

People were always asking me to take out samizdat literature, and reports that they prepared. I never did that because I knew that I would be searched and that would be the end of it for me, and possibly for them, and that they had other ways of getting it out. But the one thing I did have to get out was my own notes, because I couldn't keep everything in my head. So I developed a system of writing in this very, very tiny script, that I couldn't even read myself when I got home. I would put my notes in a Xerox machine and enlarge the font so I could easily read what I had written. My notes took up as little space as possible. I'd have maybe ten or fifteen small sheets that I could then roll up and stick in my pocket like it was a leftover tissue or something. Then I had an address book, which I had to code to protect people. I found ways of disguising people's names and their phone numbers, adding and subtracting digits that I knew would be superfluous when I needed to use them.

Well also—I mean, it seemed so obvious to me then that, I guess, I didn't even realize I was establishing a methodology—I never used a telephone in a hotel to call anybody. If I had to make phone call, I would call from the street, from a public telephone. When I went to visit people I

would either go on foot, or if I took a cab I would be dropped off several blocks from my actual destination, and tried to see whether I was being followed or not. On one of my visits to Prague, one of the dissidents asked me to have a beer with him in a bar, which was something I didn't usually do. Most of our meetings were in parks or in people's apartments. It was all business, but occasionally somebody would just want to be friendly. I had one friend who said, "Let me show you Prague," which was wonderful. We spent time together. This guy said, "Let's have a beer and just talk about stuff," and we did. He was quite a prominent dissident. After I left him, I'd walked maybe a block and I was stopped by a policeman on the street, "Your passport, please." It's amazing how they never seem to walk up to you; they just suddenly materialize. Every time I was stopped by police in Eastern Europe, they were suddenly there in front of me and I didn't even see them coming. I don't know where he came from. Suddenly he was there.

He checked my papers. He didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Czech so I don't know what he was doing. He wrote some things down and then I continued on my way. It was the day I was leaving. I thought to myself, this is not good. I went back to the hotel as quickly as I could, and got my bags packed, and got into a taxi. I had about five hours before I had to be at the airport, and I told the taxi driver to just drive me around and show me Prague [laughs]. So we drove around—I was looking to see if anybody was following—not that I could tell because they were very good at following you in unmarked cars, and using more than one at a time. But finally I ended up at the airport and everything was okay. But I think I probably did the right thing. Because the policeman marked down the hotel I was staying at. I thought, They're going to come to the hotel. If they did, I was gone. So I think I avoided a search or an expulsion that time around.

All of these things are things that I told my staff. I'm sure they added their own stuff to it. But it was the kind of methodology that we used in the kind of country that had that kind of surveillance—in other places it wasn't quite as important. Your question was larger than that.

Q: Yes and so then when—

Laber: Oh, technology.

Q: The technologies, yes.

Laber: Well, today it's a totally different world. There was almost no phone connection then between Eastern Europe and the US. I wanted to place a phone call from Warsaw at one point because my father was very sick and I wanted to call home. It took twenty-four hours for them to put the call through. I had to be waiting around for them to say [laughter], "Okay, now we've got it." So there was really no easy connection with home. Now, human rights researchers in Chechnya, for example, can send their reports directly to the office through the Internet.

Q: Right, they don't have to keep it on them.

Laber: Yes, first of all they have phones. One of the last things I did there before I retired was editing a report by someone who was in Chechnya. I could go back and forth with him by telephone, when there were things I didn't understand or I wanted clarification. I was editing it

while he was still there [laughter] and it was sort of amazing. It's changed the nature of the work. It's also made it possible to be in more dangerous situations because there is a lot of Internet protection. You're in contact all the time. I'm not sure it's great, but in war zones now, you can be in contact with people who can tell you when it's time to get out and so forth. So it's a very different situation.

I had a routine. I always had to change planes in Frankfurt when coming back from any place that I traveled to. During the first part of the flight I would get my notes in order; read them over, take notes on my notes. During the second part of the flight I would write an article [laughter]. Actually it was a good policy because once I got back I would have all kinds of administrative stuff to deal with and the office routines and so forth. I wanted to write, and did write about all these trips. There are over a hundred articles that I've had published on human rights issues. Of those hundred articles, I'd say, probably seventy percent or so were based on trips that I'd taken. Well, let's say sixty, seeing that I took sixty missions [laughter] and I always wrote about what I had seen or thought about these places. I found writing in a plane very easy. It was a solitary, quiet time. But all of it was done in longhand; I had no laptop.

I brought the first laptop into the Soviet Union that went to a dissident. Personal computers were strictly under control. I mean, in these countries, typewriter faces were registered, so that police could tell by the typeface whose typewriter had done what. Xerox machines were under lock and key. You couldn't get at them. It was very primitive, also. They were way behind the west technologically. Whatever technology there was toward the end was in government offices. Back in the late '80s, we worked very closely with George Soros and the Soros Foundation. If I came

back and said I met a new dissident group in a country, George would say, "Give them twenty computers and see what they do with them."

In 1987 I got a Toshiba laptop that was paid for by the Soros Foundation, to bring to a dissident group in Moscow. I remember when I brought it home my daughter and some of her friends were there, all very interested in technology and they marveled at it. I think it cost $4,000. "Let's see. Let's see it." They opened it and they marveled at it. It had been programmed for Russian. This thing had no hard drive. That was the state of technology at the time. The hard drive was on a separate disk that you put into the laptop.

Q: It must have been pretty heavy, too, I would imagine.

Laber: Well, [laughter] it was not like my Mac Air, no. Yes, it was a little suitcase. I archived the disc separately, it had been programmed for Russian, which was great. I didn't know how to use it, either. Someone had written down the steps for me—it was also done in Russian, which made it a little more complicated—to tell somebody first to put this in here, then you press that, then you push the—you know, just to get the thing up and running. I actually brought it to the head of a sort of newish Helsinki group that was forming. His name is Lev Timofeev. But by the second day he had given it to the samizdat publisher, Sergei [I.] Grigoryants. And when I went to visit Grigoryants, it was his son was in the other room [laughter] fiddling with it. His son and one of his peers were getting the thing up and running. Anyway, they did get it to work. It lasted for about a year before the authorities found it and took it away. But that was the state of technology and that was in 1987. Things progressed very quickly from there.

Q: Absolutely. Something else I was wondering about.

Laber: I should say that we did have tape recorders in those days. People in the Americas Watch used them, but I could not use them because they would have been taken away from me.

Q: You mention that 1973 article in *The New Republic* that really sparked so much. I wonder, now, if human rights work is easier in some way, but harder in others because the public is so desensitized to terrible stories, maybe in a way that they weren't forty years ago, and just what your thoughts are on that. How do you keep people interested and active and engaged in it?

Laber: The field has changed so tremendously. It was initially a bootstrap operation. We had this money. We ran with it. We figured out what to do with it. We made a lot of mistakes at the beginning, but we gradually developed a program. We were one of very few human rights organizations. Now there's a proliferation of them, both nationally and worldwide. There's a real movement.

Take the articles I wrote for the *New York Times* back in the 1970s and the early 1980s—and I continued. I had done a lot of such writing before there was a human rights movement, and I continued, we all continued, writing op-eds for the major newspapers based on various issues that we were dealing with. We got a lot of publication. I would actually contact people on the op-ed page before I went on a trip and say, "I'm going to Poland and I'll write something for you when I come back. Is there anything in particular you think would be of interest to the paper?" It

was that kind of [laughs] collaboration, which was very unusual. After a while they had to put limits. A single person could not have more than one article published in the *New York Times* every six months, because we were flooding them with material.

There are still human rights pieces in the papers, but they're very, very different. The idea of sharing information that other people didn't know has long since come and gone. The sad part of it is that people are also inured to it. We have a wealth of information from all kinds of sources, television, media, social media, books, articles—but where people no longer seem to care very much. It has to be something very heart wrenching, like a Syrian boy on the beach, that suddenly gets public interest and humanizes a situation. It doesn't happen that often, and probably doesn't get to the right people. That has changed completely.

Human rights work has become institutionalized. We work much more with institutions to effect change, like the United Nations, and the World Bank, and corporations. There's a whole branch of Human Rights Watch that deals with business, and tries to get people to use leverage that will count. Not to pull their heart strings, but to put their money where their minds and mouths should be. It's a very different operation. The fact-finding is much less emotional and much more factual because we need facts to convince people who are going to argue against what's happening. So the reports, which from the beginning were the basis of Human Rights Watch work, have become much more sophisticated and much more detailed. It's very important to be correct because not everybody's just going to accept it. People will argue against us.

And the organization is huge now. It's—

Q: In the Empire State Building.

Laber: It occupies several floors of the Empire State [laughs] building. And has a huge budget. I always forget what it is because it's so large [laughter]. They have their own media department, making their own videos and everything, and a very effective website. There are a million other offshoots. People who once worked for Human Rights Watch are now working for other organizations that are also doing very good work. It's a field, and Human Rights Watch is an institution. The reason they give my book to people when they start work at the Human Rights Watch is to try to humanize it. I think a lot of young people who come into the field think—I've had them actually say this to me—they think that Human Rights Watch is like the United Nations, like it's always been there and it's this big organization. It's sort of humanizing for them to see how it was started not all that long ago, and by a handful of people who had an idea.

Q: Such an empowering and inspiring story.

Laber: It is. It's hard for me to imagine working there today. I'm very proud of what we accomplished. I'm proud of the organization. But it seems very large [laughter]. I love to look back on the time when I read every report that we published, whether it was in my division or somebody else's division, and we all knew what everybody else was doing, when we were small enough to really keep on top of everything. Whereas now it would be impossible for anyone to even read every report that's issued, or keep track of every mission that's going on and so forth. It's much more impersonal in that way. I think it's good, but I don't think there's the kind of

excitement that we had. I would pinch myself and think, "My God, I'm getting paid to do something which I would be doing anyway." I couldn't believe that we were actually an ongoing enterprise. Now the staff actually organizes protests about their salaries [laughter]. I think they're unionized, actually.

Q: Different times.

Laber: Different times.

Q: You stepped down in '95, right? But then stayed on as kind of an advisor.

Laber: I gave up the directorship of the division in '95. I stayed on for about six years on a half-time basis as a consultant. I was working on my book at the same time.

Q: Any last thoughts or reflections about Harriman today? I don't know if you—it's not too far away—if you're still involved or go to any of their events.

Laber: I try to keep up with what's going on there. There's been a lot of changes at Harriman, obviously, and recently also. I knew the previous director, Catharine [T. Nepomnyashchy]—

Q: Cathy, yes.

Laber: Cathy, yes, with the unpronounceable last name.

Q: [Laughter] Yes, exactly.

Laber: She tried to get me more involved. Peter [H.] Juviler was giving a course at Harriman that he invited me to speak at several times, but I don't think he gives it anymore. So I did go up there and talk about my work, and the things we were talking about today, to students at Harriman, and also in the other branches of Columbia as well. But that was my connection with Harriman. I'm on their mailing list. I try to keep up, at least by reading what's going on.

Q: Now at Harriman, too, over the years things have changed. They have, in their curriculum, much more of a focus on human rights, and there's many more students who go that route.

Laber: Well, that's another very positive change because as I think I may have said at the beginning of this interview—when I verged off into human rights I really felt like I was leaving the Russian field, that the people at Harriman wouldn't approve. That wasn't what I was being trained for. I was supposed to go into academia, or government work. I thought that human rights would seem sort of frivolous from an academic point of view. You can see now how that has changed, where human rights is interwoven into the curriculum, not just at Harriman but in many different departments at Columbia. I think the Ford Foundation was responsible for that in the beginning, and it's now taken off. We have people from Harriman sitting on our advisory committees, plus those applying for jobs [laughter], and those who are working there. Two of us have gotten Distinguished Alumni Awards from Harriman.

Q: You in 2013, I think, and then Rachel just this past year, yes. Deservedly so.

Laber: So anyway, it's a nice feeling to know that they considered their work [laughs] well done. I had a very good education at Harriman, and good training for the work that I ended up doing.

Something I don't think I mentioned—it's a little out of context but—I did my master's thesis at the Russian Institute, which it was then called, on dissent within the theory of Socialist Realism. Even back then, I was looking for dissident writing, trying to find within the official jargon the people who were perhaps not agreeing or trying to deviate from official ideology.

Q: In retrospect that thread is there then, through your master's thesis, and even reading Anne Frank's *Diary*. It all kind of connects.

Laber: Right. In the early articles I wrote, before I started writing about human rights, I was writing about dissident literature as it started to emerge during [Nikita S.] Khrushchev's time. For a while there, there were these writers that were [Ilya G.] Ehrenburg and other who—there were little hints of dissent in their writings.

I became a kind of [Aleksandr I.] Solzhenitsyn expert. I wrote a number of articles about Solzhenitsyn when he was still in the Soviet Union. They were controversial because I was one of the first people, or the first person, at least in writing, to recognize that he was not Andrei [D.] Sakharov; that what he stood for was not our concept of free expression, but that he was what he turned out to be when he came here, somebody with a very different orientation. I got that from

reading his novels, and trying to reviewing them, and realizing that this man was different from—

Q: The way others perceived him to be? Yes.

Laber: He was not the western-oriented liberal that everybody expected him to be when he came out.

Q: Interesting. Jeri, thank you so much. Is there anything else you'd like to add about—?

Laber: I think I've talked enough [laughs].

Q: No, it's wonderful. Thank you, again, for all your time and these great stories.

[END OF INTERVIEW]