



*the
Lesbian,
Gay,
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Religious Archives Network

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for the history of LGBT religious movements.*

Oral History Interview: Ruth Barrett

Interviewee: Ruth Barrett

Interviewer: Doris Malkmus

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Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Doris M. This is Doris Malkmus interviewing Ruth Barrett on November 28, 2004, at her home in Evansville, Wisconsin. Ruth, I am so glad that you agreed to interview with us and to allow us to use this material on the LGBT Religious Archive Network website and oral history project. I'm wondering if you could begin by giving us some background about yourself. Where were you born and raised, and when were you born?

Ruth B. I was born in 1954 in Los Angeles. Actually, second generation Angelina. And lived pretty much most of my life in California until relocating to the Midwest in 2000. So my family was very involved in . . . were some of the first founding families in the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism, which is a fourth branch of Judaism—you know, Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, and then Reconstructionism. Now there's also Renewal, and there's other movements. But Reconstructionism plays actually a big part in my personal development spiritually, as well as having, setting a context for me to later understand the evolution of Goddess religion and spirituality. Because a Reconstructionist perspective, as it applies to Judaism, is a way of understanding the Jewish people as they move through time. And that we constantly have to look at the customs and the traditions and practices and philosophies and make them relevant to the time that we're living. So we're talking about Judaism as an evolving religious civilization. That was, the key word is "evolving." (laughs) So what it meant was

that many things that the early Reconstructionist movement brought forward were in a sense going at odds with—certainly Orthodoxy—and also Conservatism. The Reconstructionists were the first to basically demand full equality for women in all aspects of religious life, from the rabbinate, becoming a rabbi, to the Bat Mitzvah, the girls having that ceremony. Prior to that, only the boys at thirteen years old could have.

Doris M. And when you said “prior to that,” did your parents, were they active in this as you were growing up, or is this something that happened after you were grown?

Ruth B. Growing up in it. I grew up in the movement. My father was the lay cantor for the First Reconstructionist Synagogue in southern California. So I grew up with the movement from early on. Big, big proponents of social activism. And the rabbi, who is long time rabbi there, who has since passed away, he was speaking out against the Vietnam War before it was popular to do so, things like that. And so I grew up in that movement. And the God concept was interesting, also, which was definitely supportive to me as a growing spiritual girl, that the God concept of God being a man, an old man with a beard up in the sky, that kind of idea, most Jews don't go with that anyway. But basically, the bible, the Hebrew bible, is understood as a work written by men at a certain time in history over a period of, you know, quite a bit of time. I'm trying to remember how many years now. But basically documenting a people and how they lived, and what they thought then, and not to be taken as like the word of God. But rather how people understood life, and how things came to be and such. And looking at it from that perspective, it's a great book. (laughs) So the God concept, the way that I was told from the time I can remember was that God is the creative force in the universe that makes things happen. And there was not really a gender ascribed to this God concept. In fact, it was kind of really moving away from that idea. But that God as in God the Father, or a male idea of God, was understood as, you know biblically this was

where they went because that's what they thought in those days. And now, of course, we can go with definitely like a, to be different than the pagan, the pagan cultures that were living around the Jewish people. And of course they prefer a male god, primarily. Although there were male gods at that time of the world, time in history. But anyway, basically how this God concept evolved through time.

Doris M. That must have been a very rich background.

Ruth B. It was, in terms of—but I didn't know anything else, mind you. So I didn't have any—it was the way it was. So I'd think about God in basically, in any way that occurred to me. And how it occurred to me—(laughs)—very early on, was that if you have to choose a metaphor for the creator, it made sense to me, early on, that you would say “She.” Because it was not something that you had to have faith about; it was something that you could experience every day. Women giving birth to life, the female trees have the fruit. I mean, it was like we live on a female planet. I mean, what's there to wonder about? It was all there. (laughs)

Doris M. And you're having ideas in the late Sixties?

Ruth B. I'm having these ideas when I'm nine, ten years old. So I'm, you know, and I did go and announce to my parents that my God was Nature. 'Cause I still used the word “God” early on. But I'd say, “My God is Nature.” And I had a meeting with the rabbi about this. Because still, even though it was understood that God could be whatever you basically say, there were certain things they were a little worried about. “Hmm. This is a little. . . Hmm.” So I went and had a conversation with the rabbi who told me that religions that deified nature also sacrificed babies and did all these really terrible things. And the focus was more on the individual than on community and basically trying to say, “These are where it's different from

Judaism.” And I took that in and it never made sense to me how if you have a religion where all life is sacred, how could you then kill babies? I mean, that just didn’t make sense to me. So I just kind of went “Okay, well I’ll keep going with what I’m thinking, but I’ll just be more quiet about it.” (Laughs) So basically, I just continued going my merry way, but just, you know, kept—but my experience of going into the temple for services was that I didn’t feel especially spiritual when I went in the temple, but when I left, I did. When I’d look at the trees. So that’s how I kind of went “Hmm, compare, contrast. I like staying outside; I feel things I don’t feel inside that building.” So that’s how this kind of evolved out of my experience. But there was lots of really cool—oh, and early on, also, the prayer books—this is back in the Sixties and the early Seventies—the prayer book that we had to work with in temple was still all about God, He, master and ruler of the universe, the king of the universe stuff. And I would complain about this to my parents, you know, it’s the old languaging, that doesn’t have anything to do with Reconstructionist philosophy. And I’d kind of bitch and moan about that. Well since then, the prayer books have all been redone. But I being an impatient young teenager, I didn’t, you know, “Why can’t it be just done now? Just toss them out!” You know. I would go through the prayer books and like mark them out with White-Out, and change the language. My father, from those early days, still is, all this time has been on the prayer book commission of the Reconstructionist seminary. And they’ve redone pretty much everything at this point. All the prayer books for the different holidays and stuff. And it’s all very egalitarian languaging and wonderful writings in there. I mean, Judy Chicago’s in there, Marge Piercy, lots of other writers that you would think of as being feminist writers and such. So it all has happened over time. But going back to my early days where I didn’t have the patience for it, I began to seek out other places that might have reflected more of this, because I didn’t have the patience to wait. And I was, you know, I was a kid. I was disempowered to actually do it myself, other than the prayer books we had at home with my White-Out and pen. You know?

(laughs) So I began writing poetry that was specifically to the Goddess at about twelve, I think, where I would use “She” in the languaging. And basically I thought I had my own religion, my own personal religion. Because even like when I think about junior high school, where my girlfriend and I went to, like there was a witchcraft shop in Los Angeles called The Hermetic Workshop. And it was owned by two crone sisters. And we would go in there and there would be incenses and, you know, this was *early* on. This was really before New Age and all that. This is back in, oh goodness. ’66, ’67, I mean, somewhere in there. And there was no, I’d go in, we went in here, and I didn’t see the Goddess there. That wasn’t where I saw her. It was all, I now understand, it was a shop that was devoted to ceremonial magic, not to what I was. . . later became part of Goddess spirituality, or the Goddess movement. So I’d go in there and I’d buy, I had bought a little crystal pentagram and you know, love powder. What do you do when you’re a teenager? You buy that kind of thing. And I would practice making people fall asleep in class. Which was easy to do, actually. (laughs) And then I stopped. I thought that was, you know, I shouldn’t do that. I kind of self-censored myself on that and stopped that. So anyway, by the time I was in high school, I met, I think I was actually in eleventh grade, I think it was eleventh grade, where I met Mark Simos, Mark Simos, and that’s M-a-r-k, S-i-m-o-s, he was fourteen years old. I was sixteen. He was in, anyway, whatever year is before, earlier. But he actually told me about a book called The White Goddess, by Robert Graves. And there, all of a sudden, was the Goddess in poetry. Well, Mark Simos is Mimi Simos’ younger brother. Mimi Simos is also known as Starhawk. So you have this very interesting circle of interrelated things that were happening in Los Angeles. (laughs) Including Starhawk who then, eventually—I did not meet Starhawk as Starhawk and get to know her until she was already Starhawk, and the first edition of The Spiral Dance had come out. But Mark would tell me that she was doing interesting Goddess things up in San Francisco. So anyway, at the time, let’s see, in junior high there was only, let’s see. I began collecting traditional folk ballads

that focused on what you'd call the supernatural. I started collecting from about the time I was twelve. So it was into, because my family played folk music and did a lot of singing. But I was attracted to those ballads that had to do with other worlds, the other realm. Or the dead lover, or the things that were just not about love songs. They always had an edge to them. And so I found myself drawn to what I now understand as the pagan ballads. So I began to do more music and starting in high school, I had got my first dulcimer in 1971. I'd already been playing guitar for some time. And so I began to do more music then with the dulcimer. And it was, and got involved in the Renaissance Faire, which was in southern California. It was called the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, and it was the mother faire of all the Renaissance Faires that later became, went all over the country. And it was a place that I found, I worked there from 1971 to 1984. And in that period of time, it was a wonderful place for me to cultivate other realities, other realms. And I did a lot of singing at these. And I performed there regularly, at both the Southern Renaissance Faire and the Northern Renaissance Faire. And the thing that I enjoyed the most there, besides having a duo or a trio doing old songs, was I worked with a puppeteer who became, eventually, world famous. Bruce D. Schwartz, who ended up winning a MacArthur award for artist of like whatever the century, or whatever year. (laughs) I don't know how that works. And we did the old ballads, old supernatural ballads, to my singing the songs. And he would do the rod puppets. And they would move like they were alive, and it was beautiful.

So it was there, ("shoosh" getting all around), that I met Shekhinah Mountainwater, who was called (brief pause) I met Shekhinah Mountainwater in either, I think it could have been even '70, but it was certainly '71 that I met Shekhinah Mountainwater. Because she was performing there. Her name was at that time Natasha Faust. And she had her two young children there. And the three of them were called The Sybil—after the sybils that would sit and prophesize over, chew laurel leaves and inhale the fumes and prophesize. (laughs) And she

would sing ballads of myths. She'd make up these beautiful songs that were based on tarot cards and myths. And her children would dance they would act out. And the children were like three and five years old. I mean, it was pretty outrageous. And her children's names were Freya and Frey, who are Norse god and goddess. So anyway, I saw them perform a lot and was totally enamored, being drawn into the mythology that they sang about. And then it was probably '73 where I actually went and started talking with her. Because my trio at the time, called Briar Rose, we did a capella trio, we sang this song called "The Rolling of the Stones."

Doris M. Would you sing for us? Just a line or two?

Ruth B. Sure. (singing) "Will you go to the rolling of the stones, the tossing of the ball? Or will you go and see pretty Annie dancing among them all?" And it goes on about. . . it's very mysterious. It's about someone who gets killed, and then she brings them back from the dead. And this whole thing. So what I found was that every time I would sing this song, I would start trancing out. So I really wanted to understand, why is this happening to me when I sing this particular song? So someone said, "Maybe you should talk to her." And it was to talk to Shekhinah, who eventually became Shekhinah. So I went and talked to her about it. And that's how we connected. That's how we connected, around the music. And formed a friendship that continues to this day. So, let's see. I was again very involved in the Renaissance Faire, and kind of the faire mentality outside of the faire as well. People I knew were very creative. And eventually I went to college. And I began to. . . basically it was when I was at UC Santa Cruz that I realized I could form my own independent major there, that you could do that there. So I formed an independent major in folklore. And what I did was I got to study about the Goddess, and get credit for it. So I began to explore, to kind of bring these threads together for myself of many things. Studying the Jungian stuff that was really available at the time—there wasn't much else, besides The White Goddess

by Robert Graves. There was Esther Harding's, it was called Women's Mysteries. And then there was Eric Newman's The Great Mother. And those were two Jungians that wrote about the Goddess. And so I did my little writing part of it. But then I also did a performance where I incorporated music and dance and puppetry. I kind of brought a lot of different people in on this thing for my final presentation. And basically. . . and it also had culminated after studying with Shekhinah for over a year in Santa Cruz. So we met weekly. I was in her very first study group. Her first Goddess circle, if you will. And we met every week. We met on Moon Day, Monday, from, like, all morning for like four hours. And there was a group of about, I think there were probably seven or eight of us. And we would actually meet in this little round hut in the woods, the redwoods. And we would talk about things. We would chant this thing that we called, that Shekhinah called the "Ma chant." Which has become very much incorporated into rituals now, chanting the sound of ma, or mother. And I learned it from Shekhinah. And she, we sang, we talked about feminist issues. And this was a group of women, I don't think we even talked about sexual identity or anything. I don't think we did. I think probably many of those women eventually came out. But I can only say for Shekhinah and myself that we eventually both did. But we weren't at the time. You know, we identified as heterosexual.

Doris M. Can I ask if you knew about lesbians from Santa Cruz? Or from the Faire?

Ruth B. Oh, yes. Yes. But I didn't, at the time, I think, because of homophobia, I thought of lesbians as very much "other" than me. Drawn, but other. Okay. So both were present. But I was too frightened to actually entertain that thought, the thought of, around even my own identity, or considering that till later. It would have changed my life too drastically, and I was already pretty much on the fringe. So I think that would have just put me over the edge. I was already very alternative. (laughs) So anyway, it was all Goddess focused. Everything we talked about was Goddess

focused. So that was not, that was already a departure from witchcraft as it was revived in the 1950s by Charles Gardner and brought to this country, where it was based on a dualism of the Goddess and the God. In fact, this is actually important. We never talked, we never called it witchcraft. It was Goddess. It was not, again, this is early in the movement, in the Goddess spirituality movement, or in the women's spirituality movement, which is kind of a broader umbrella. Witchcraft, Goddess spirituality, were not, at that point, really mixed. They were very much separate. 'Cause covens at that time, I mean, the witchcraft laws were not repealed until like 1954. So that's really not that long ago, especially if we're talking here the mid-Seventies. We're talking about maybe twenty years earlier. So, you know, covens of witches, you didn't regularly know where to find them. It would be kind of difficult. And hardly ever published, you'd never see something publicized. So we, she didn't, Shekhinah did not call what she did "witchcraft." So again, just like when I went into that metaphysical store, you know, The Hermetic Workshop, when I was younger, I didn't get that that was what I was doing, either. Even though now I see, okay, we're talking about variations on a continuum here, perhaps. But I didn't understand that then.

Doris M. You didn't connect the Goddess to Witch, in the kind of fairy tale—

Ruth B. No. It was all very, very compartmentalized, very separated out at that time. So we talked about sisterhood in those early circles. We talked about how we would be together, and how we would treat one another. We worked with different myths. We at the end of our, and this was weekly for a day, it took many hours of that day, and it culminated with creating a pact of sisterhood, which I actually still have. And we signed it with our menstrual blood. And it was a very big deal, and it still is. You know, the things we would commit to one another and how to be together.

Doris M. This is in like '74?

Ruth B. This is in '75, '76. At the latest, '76. I think probably that was '75. I probably have it written down somewhere.

Doris M. And there's something like ten women in Shekhinah's group.

Ruth B. There were, I think there were less than that. I think there were about seven or eight of us. But those women, and I'm not in touch with anybody else from that original circle, except for Shekhinah. But it was really quite an amazing thing, because I don't think any of us had ever come together with a group of women in that way. This was not a consciousness raising group, which of course, the consciousness raising groups were happening in the Seventies. But this was not a consciousness raising group, per se, around elevating ourselves about patriarchy and learning about sexism and stuff, although we were talking about those things, but it was all through this filter of feminism, yes, but through the lens of the Goddess. And through more of a spiritual focus. So . . . And we weren't there to talk about equal pay for equal work. We weren't there to talk about the ERA, per se, the Equal Rights Amendment. I mean, I was, you know, nineteen, I must have been twenty years old. Just twenty years old. So, you know, and I was in school. So I thought, what I thought about, women who were older than I were probably doing more of that than I was at that time. So I left Santa Cruz in 1976, moved to Los Angeles, and I was with the person that became my daughter's father. And we actually got married in a big hippie ceremony in the Santa Cruz—like actually an old farm that belonged to Alfred Hitchcock. And we had a two-day hippie extravaganza. And Shekhinah and her children were part of the ceremony. And my cousin showed up who, it turns out, was a lesbian. A cousin that came from northern California or Oregon or something. And she came down with her girlfriend and it was, you know, like oh my gosh, look at that! (laughs) My

parents came. “Huh, interesting.” And then I basically met. . . I moved to Los Angeles from Santa Cruz and began hearing about this woman named Z Budapest. Had not heard about Z Budapest until I moved to L.A.

Doris M. Can I ask how you heard about her? Did you have friends who you could talk to about the Goddess? Where would that be?

Ruth B. What happened was, I had a friend who lived in L.A. Her name’s Stephanie. And I’m trying to remember what happened first. I think this happened first, that she said, “Oh, you know, there’s this witch trial that’s happening. And this woman named Z Budapest is getting tried for reading tarot cards to an undercover police officer.” And this was, I think, probably ’76. This date could be—certainly it’s public information, so I could get that—but we’re talking about in there somewhere. And she said, “You want to go with me?” And I said, “No, I don’t think so. I don’t think I want to go.”

Doris M. Had your work with Shekhinah included tarot or astrology or anything like that?

Ruth B. Tarot. Tarot. Some tarot, but not too much. And I regret that I didn’t go. I didn’t go to Z’s trials. Because that would have been a whole element of Herstory that I could have, I could have met her earlier and certainly been a part of that energy. But it wasn’t until I actually took the EST training.

Doris M. E-s-t-e?

Ruth B. It was Erhard’s Seminar Training. That’s what it was short for. And I did a college training, for college students, when I had been up in Santa Cruz in ’76. And so when I took a seminar in Los Angeles after I had gotten back. And you had to wear nametags at these things. And there was a woman who I saw, I

noticed that her name on her nametag said Annu. A-n-n-u. And I kind of, “Hmm. That’s a Goddess name. I wonder if she knows.” So I kind of, you know, when you try to find out if someone’s a dyke, you know, and you kind of drop like, “Have you ever been to the Michigan Women’s Music Festival?” (laughs) Or you say certain things that if they are, they’re going to respond in some way, instead of like, “No, what’s that?” So I said, “Wow, that’s a very interesting looking name. Do you know what it means?” And she says, “Oh, yes. Actually, I do.” And she started talking about knowing it was a Goddess name, so we started talking. And it turns out this is the same Annu who had opened the feminist Wicca store with Z. And there’s a whole story about that which is actually on the video that I have with her telling about the store, you can hear it from the horse’s mouth. But it was the first Goddess occult store that was a feminist Goddess occult store in the country, as far as I know. So that was how I connected with Annu. And it was through Annu, then, that I went to my first Sabbat. And it was a Halloween ritual with the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1. But first she had told me, “Z’s going to do this performance at the Women’s Building downtown Los Angeles, and it’s called *Rise of the Faiths*. It’s this play that she wrote, and it’s really funny.” And she gave me the information. So I’m getting excited, thinking this is really cool. So my husband at the time goes with me to the Women’s Building. I’d never been to the Women’s Building. We walk in. And every head turns, because I’m walking in there with a man. I had no idea. (loud thud) Oh, that was a violin in a case that just fell. So all of a sudden, I hear hissing. I hear hissing sounds. And I’m thinking is that for us? Of course, this is like the thick of separatist energy. We have just totally (burst of laughter) walked in on something that we had no idea. So it’s kind of like should we go? Should we stay? We sat in the back. And went to the play. And it was great, and it was just this totally heretical play that she wrote called “Rise of the Faiths” and it was really funny. And she did this talk afterwards. And again we sat in the back. And this one woman in the front was really angry, was saying something really like male-

bashing. I mean, it was even something like, you know, “Kill them!” I mean, it was really like pretty extreme. And Z said, “Oh, I hope not. I have two sons.” And it was like, okay. It was like seeing what someone’s made of; how are they going to respond to that? Well, I did go back again to the play without my former husband. So I learned from that experience that was not an option. And I brought Z this thing I had made for her. I had crocheted her this kind of hat that had feathers on it. Really bizarre. I don’t know what she thought of it. But anyway, that’s how I connected. And then I went to my first Sabbatt. And I went with my friend Claudia. My friend Claudia, who became part of, one of the women who then stayed with the coven that reformed after Z left. And again, this is so interesting to me. I remember calling her up and I said, “Claudia, go with me to this witches’ Sabbatt for Hallow’s. Because they’re real witches.” Now of course, again, this is like, here’s this stuff from Shekhinah. That, to me, isn’t the real witch thing, right? But this is somehow.

Doris M. And you didn’t connect it in any way with that organization that was women who were against—I can’t remember what the acronym—

Ruth B. Yeah, WITCH. The women of WITCH. No. It wasn’t WITCH. These were real witches! (in whispery, excited tone) “Will you go with me? I don’t want to go by myself!” (laughs) So Claudia and I went to this ritual that was held in a house somewhere in the, I don’t know, the Hollywood hills. And it was really crowded. And we were like (whispering) watching. And there was this part of the ritual where women took out these knives and they started sticking them into pomegranates and the pomegranates were bleeding like blood. And this one woman was, I’d never seen. . . there wasn’t violence in my family, okay? I know it’s unusual. I actually don’t have a history of abuse. (laughs) It does happen, on occasion. So I was one of those people that just did not have that kind of childhood. So I didn’t ever see anyone ever really angry, like really angry. And

here there was this woman, and she was really angry at this ritual. And she had her knife out. And she said, “And this is for my brother, who raped me.” And she stabs the pomegranate with her blade. And I about fell out. My jaw must have hit the floor. And I—that was a turning point in my life. Because I’d never, there were several things that happened in that moment. One, here was a woman who was being authentically in her anger. And doing it in a public way; being supported for being righteously angry about something that happened to her; and being like, “Yeah! Yeah!” Like getting encouragement for letting out those feelings. Not like, “Oh, you know, you should deal with them in private. Or go to therapy.” You know. (laughs) And it was being facilitated in a ceremony. And that was a turning point for me. Because it was like—and I remember thinking, in that moment, “This is what, this is really what happens to us. This is about what’s really happening in our lives. This isn’t that religion is about something else.” And so a dot was connected. Something was connected in a major way, and I was hooked. That was it. This is where I need to be. And it was all, you know, it was all about seeing the benefit is that this is dealing with our lives in patriarchy. This is not saying, “Okay, you have to behave a certain way and hide these things.” But rather, “Bring them here. Bring them here. This is what really goes on.” So I was really jazzed. That was it. And I immediately began getting involved with the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1. And I would attend rituals, and we would meet at the feminist Wicca store on Lincoln Boulevard in Venice, California. And we would then go to various locations to, whether it was outdoors, on the beach, or up in what is known as Temescal Canyon, which is in Pacific Palisades, or private homes. And we would do that. And we would just get in cars and follow people and go from there.

Doris M. Were there set rituals in those days? Or did you evolve them as you got together?
Did someone lead?

Ruth B. Z led them. Z led them. And the form was, you know, somewhat similar to . . . every time. . . But you know, the holidays change with the seasons, so there was different focuses. But very typically it was about, you know, we would light a lot of candles. Then we would. . . but Z, she likes to improvise quite a bit. So you know, even if we had had a change, it would have changed anyway. Because that's how she works. But she facilitated. And you know, it was really an exciting time. I mean, it was just, it was not formal. You know, the rituals have evolved in a much more formal way since then. Due to me, frankly. And it was really an amazing time. It was like there was a place to come together and be subversive, and raise our voices and be outrageous. And do what we. . . create a lot of energy and direct it and send it to the fall of patriarchy. That was like part of what we were there to do.

Doris M. Did this put any fissure between you and your parents? Or you and your husband? Or you and your working colleagues at all?

Ruth B. I didn't discuss it too much with anybody. Not because I felt afraid to, it never occurred to me to. It was like. . . it just never occurred to me. I was so used to at that point of having my own spiritual world, from the time I was a lot younger, that it never occurred to me. And later on, years later, when the rituals would be often at my own home and I'd send my husband out. You know, "Come back after eleven," you know, that kind of thing. And he would do that. But I. . . it just never came up. He'd never say, "So what did you do?" Nothing.

Doris M. Was it your sense that the other people there were lesbians? Or straight?

Ruth B. Both. That's when we had kind of evolved to, I mean, with the Susan B. Anthony group, many of the women were lesbians. Many of the women were lesbian. And many were not. Again, people have an interesting. . . there's a myth, I think. Or

not, I don't want to use that word. The story goes like thinking that it began as lesbian religion or something. And that's not true. There were always women of all sexual orientations who were drawn to this early on, and influenced it. I would say primarily lesbian because lesbians wanted to be in women-only space. It was not like a stretch. And then there were the bars, right? in those days. So you have women used to having places to go. And here was another place that they could go. And the consciousness raising groups, again, women were used to that. And this is women-only, and a lot of lesbians were involved in the consciousness raising groups. So sometimes I would probably describe it as a spiritual consciousness raising group. And I think that was probably pretty accurate. So we went on this way. I mean, I started my involvement. I began the newsletter *Themis*, T-h-e-m-i-s, which later became *Thesmaphoria*. We would have these mailing parties, and it would happen every so many months. So I would go and I'd help out with the mailing parties. That's what I would do. And we would, of course, hang out together and talk while all that was happening. And I remember, well, Z, let's see, I had my daughter in 1978. And so. . . Prior to that, though, I was initiated into the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1 in 19, it must have been '77. Or actually, you know what? I think it was early '78. It must have been Brigit '78. So that would be February 1, 1978. And I was initiated, I only remember one woman because I loved her music. Carol Christ, was her name.

Doris M. She was in the coven?

Ruth B. She was in the coven. She was initiated. I'm sorry, not Carol Christ. Chris Carol. Chris Carol, who was a musician. And she had come down from somewhere up north to be initiated. And then I gave, you know. . . That had to be '77. I'm sorry, it has to be '77. Because '78, I was pregnant. And I would have remembered that. So when my daughter was born, she had trouble breathing. She had water in her lung. I put a call out to Z, and the group focused on her and sent her healing

energy and stuff. She was born on Equinox that year, fall Equinox. So she was the harvest baby. And so that was great to be able to make a call and get the witches on it. And then, I think things just kind of went on until Z asked me, she was thinking about—

(End Side A. Begin Side B.)

Ruth B. So Z asked me, would I consider taking on the work. Being ordained. And it was like, it was a really strange moment of being totally in shock. Cause I was thinking the “Why me?” thing. I’m thinking, I’m not a lesbian, I have a baby. Isn’t there somebody else who’s been around a lot longer than me?

Doris M. Were you working at a job or something?

Ruth B. No, I wasn’t. I was, that was, cause that was, my daughter was just a couple, two years old. And we were poor, but I wasn’t working a regular job. So I was around. But I thought it was interesting. But it was because of the music that I was doing. She was looking for somebody who would attract people. She likes to say, about me, I’ll let you hear her own words on the video. Because she talks about the early years and why she picked me. So I eventually, I mean, I don’t remember giving her an answer right away. I thought about it for quite a while. I, of course, had no idea what that would really ultimately mean, but even at the time, it felt like a big deal. And I, so my promise was I would keep the Sabbatts going. I would make sure that there were rituals that were ongoing, and that I would teach. So I started teaching at the Wicca, at the feminist Wicca, what we called Feminaries, instead of seminaries. And we called them Feminaries. And I started teaching classes out of there.

Doris M. What did you teach?

Ruth B. Oh, real, the real kind of introductory, you know, what is Dianic religion? And concepts within the religion. Triple goddess, the interweaving of politics and spirituality, your basic spell work. You know, these kinds of things. So I started doing that. And then the group that remained behind, many women just like left. Never saw them again. And you know, it's interesting. You know, people gravitate toward different individuals. So people that were attracted to her for different reasons may not have been attracted to me. And for some, it may have been because I was not a lesbian at that time. So it's hard to know. But basically, eventually a new group, core group, came. And we would have Sabbaths. And things went on. And I basically had it more where women would get together and we would plan the rituals. Had more input from many people. I still held center. I was aware that was my job. But we would plan things and decide what we were going to do and where we would have them, and things like that. Much more of a, a little more democratic. And then there were these sessions, you know, "I don't want to do so much politics," some women would say, "I want to have more of the party." And others would say, "I want more politics and less party." And it was this kind of thing that would go on. And so women. . . but it turned out that the women who wanted to party more and have politics less eventually would probably leave. A lot of them left because I wasn't going to have it. So we had interesting people, interesting women.

Doris M. When Z left, how big was the coven?

Ruth B. You know, the coven, it's probably going to be really difficult to ever know the numbers because a coven, typically, is a group of thirteen. So that already was not accurate. She initiated at every Sabbath, Z initiated at every Sabbath, no matter who, you showed up, you wanted to be initiated, you'd be initiated. As she liked to say, at that time, she was sowing seeds. You never know where it will stick. So

she just did it. She said, “You don’t start a movement asking if you’re qualified. You just do it.” And she knows that today it’s different. But in those days, her way was like, spread it around, spread it around, spread it around, you never know where it’s going to take. So I would venture to say there were many, many, many, many, many women. I mean, I don’t know. She’d probably be better to say if we’re talking hundreds. But it’s possible. It’s definitely possible.

Doris M. How many people would come to a Sabbat?

Ruth B. Sabbat? I would say dozens. I think probably 30 to 40 was about average. I’d say that was about average. Anywhere from 25 to 40, I’d say.

Doris M. What other covens were in the L.A. area? Or southern California?

Ruth B. Eventually there were many covens that evolved, but not in those early days. This was the only thing going, that I’m aware of. So once the group I was with. . . (Picking up a journal from the table and looking at its contents) I’m just reading in my journal, we thought we’d call ourselves the Susan B. Anthony Coven #3. I don’t know where the number two is. (laughs) But we ended up not doing that. we ended up calling our group Moon Birch Grove. Because I had birch trees in my backyard. I lived at that time in what’s Mar Vista, near Marina del Rey. So the group met there and we struggled with the name and came up with all kinds of things. And we continued meeting. And it became very much of a working coven with regular members. And you know, we’d see the same people. And eventually began to initiate women into the coven. And it was a coven model. So later, actually we called it Moon Birch Grove, instead of Moon Birch Coven. A grove—the distinction between a coven and a grove is that a grove (coven), you don’t have more than thirteen. Including the person presiding, the leader leading it—a grove is usually something that’s bigger. Has the option for being larger. So

basically we knew that we'd be opening to have anyone come who wanted to come at different times. So we thought that the word "grove" would make more sense, because we would be larger at different times. And we were. So, and I mean, the flavor of those years, I mean, we were. . . it was wild. It was wild. And we got crazy. We got naked. There was, at the feast after the rituals, women would drink sometimes. Certain women would get inebriated. I did not like that. But you know, we had wine in the chalice. And it didn't. . . eventually we began to be aware that some women had a drinking problem in the group. And began to deal indirectly (short laugh) with that problem. One of the women in the group, her name was Felicity, and she and I, we. . . this is now 1984, '85. And I'm beginning the coming out process.

Doris M. What started that?

Ruth B. What started it was my friend Felicity, who was my friend at the time, told me she was in love with me. And also in love with my, in love with me. And basically, do I have to take him, too? You know.

Doris M. That sounds like southern California.

Ruth B. Oh, yes. So I don't think I really want to get into that—there was, oh, my god. I'm not proud of the things, those days. I just made some unbelievably stupid mistakes, so. . . Things that I do regret. So, but I did come out. And eventually that relationship also ended. But she and I began teaching together when I left my former husband. And she had a younger daughter, also. So we moved in together and basically started teaching classes in three different places around the City of Los Angeles. Over distances. And I began to be able to support myself teaching feminist witchcraft.

Doris M. How did that feel?

Ruth B. Great. Really great. I mean, I don't know how we did it. We weren't charging very much. But it was enough. And then I was also then, again, with Moon Birch Grove. So eventually what happened was there was a break with the coven because I was too busy. I was ritualed out. I was doing rituals three nights a week. Then all of a sudden my coven is going, "Well, we have a ritual." And I'm like (sounding tired and unenthusiastic), "Really?" (laughs) "I'm really tired!" And I think also there were problems in the group, interpersonal relationship problems. And it didn't end in a way that now I would have done. Again, none of us knew how to do conflict transformation or conflict resolution very well. And we all hurt each other a lot. And it was just not, you know, we were young and didn't know enough to do it better. So that happened. And it kind of blew up. And Felicity and I began. . . Again, continued teaching. And then I came up with the different name, Circle of Aradia. And that was about '88, 1988.

Doris M. The White Birch Grove ended.

Ruth B. Moon Birch Grove. They continue. They continue. That group is still ongoing in Los Angeles. And I don't know how the tradition evolved or didn't at that point. But they are still happening, so that's really great. And I do run into a few of them, I have over the years. And the relationships are fine. We're not like friends, on that kind of basis. But it's friendly and I don't think anybody is bearing any grudges at this point. In fact, they were invited to the 25th anniversary. I made sure that they were invited. And a few of them came, and it was great.

Doris M. But the Circle of Aradia was a new beginning.

Ruth B. Circle of Aradia was a new beginning. I came up with that name back, it must have been about '88. And it was, it still was, I started, again. What happened with the teaching was that more women would continue taking classes. They had learned stuff. And then I would ask them, "Do you want to help facilitate rituals?" So cause again, that was my commitment that I had made, to keep these things going. So the rituals just, you know, the rituals have continued in Los Angeles, unbroken, since 1971. That's really pretty astounding, you know, in one form or another, but primarily from the Susan B. Anthony Coven to Moon Birch to Circle of Aradia. So that continued. Yeah.

Doris M. Are you seeing Z every so often? Other people? Does Starhawk come? Do people go up to see her?

Ruth B. Yes. Yes. We would have Z come down and do a weekend here and there. We'd bring Shekhinah down. Starhawk also, would bring down to do classes or rituals and things like that. So there was continued contact. And then when my relationship with Felicity ended, that must have been '89, I think that was '89. And you know, I continued teaching. Things kept growing. And over the next few years after that, I basically realized that I was, I felt that if Circle of Aradia was my business, in a sense—running this thing sort of as a business because there's no other way to talk about it—I started to think about incorporation. I wanted to give it away. I wanted to make sure that other women really had ownership, in a sense, of it. So I started thinking about that. so we incorporated as a nonprofit. But then I had meanwhile heard about Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess. And I met Jade a few times when I would travel and do workshops at the National Women's Music Festival. And began to talk with her. Because they, Re-formed Congregation of the Goddess was in Madison, but they were thinking about becoming more of an umbrella for other groups. So basically I thought "Hmm, okay, well they're not a specifically Dianic organization. But since we would be

pretty independent, I think this is a good match. And then it wouldn't require me to go and start yet another federally recognized anything." They had already done the work. And I figured it would be an easy way to do it and should work. So that's what we did. It was in 1992, '93, we incorporated as the first consecrated circle of RCG. And did that.

Doris M. How did you meet Kay Gardner during these years?

Ruth B. Oh, goodness. Kay and I met, how did I first meet Kay? I must have, well, I might have met Kay originally at Michigan, at the Michigan Women's Music Festival. My performing partner at the time, that I actually was, I was music partnered with her from 1982, basically, until I left in 2000. So, Cyntia Smith. And we, I haven't even talked about that part, the Goddess music, because that's a whole other thing going on, track that's kind of going on concurrently with this. We were some of the first few pagan artists to actually record Goddess music. There were only like, I think, two or three other people. Kay was, I think, the very first, with *Moon Circles*. And then we were like second. . . Third, I think, to record Goddess music. So, oh, so yeah, we were at the Michigan Women's Music Festival, at the tenth one, that was when we went. And I think that's where we connected. And then Kay would come to California. Her mother lived, lives still, in southern California. So she would kind of visit her mom, she and Robin Free, who was her partner for many years, for 18 years, would stay with us. And actually, this is before I came out. She would come and stay with my husband and I. And we would hang out then and do stuff. And of course we connected on the music. So that was really exciting. And then the relationship just developed over time.

Doris M. Do you think if you hadn't had the connection with her mother that she would have, that there would have been much traveling between coasts on the coast or in Madison? Were those exchanges like once or twice a year at the festivals?

Ruth B. Yes, the festivals definitely were a place where women would come together and steal an hour or two. And then, you know, “See you next year.” So the festivals, the Michigan Women’s Music Festival, the National Women’s Music Festival, for me, those two in particular were definitely a huge, huge support to all of this. And a place for women to network.

Doris M. And except for that, most of the work in your circle or your coven was done locally.

Ruth B. Yes.

Doris M. Except for maybe Starhawk coming down or Z coming through—

Ruth B. Exactly.

Doris M. There wasn’t a lot of people coming from Connecticut to visit, or Washington state.

Ruth B. No. No. No. But the rituals grew. I mean, the rituals grew. I, again, continued teaching, developed a curriculum that women could basically take classes ongoing for a couple of years. And the rituals got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. And we outgrew every, we rented churches, we rented. . . goodness—we rented all kinds of places to try to—and we eventually outgrew them all. And we ended up once I moved to Topanga Canyon in ’89? ’88? Somewhere in there. ’87, ’88. We ended up renting the Topanga Community House up there. And the Circle of Aradia still rents that place. And depending on the ritual, how many women show up, it either, you know, it’s just right or it’s too small. (laughs)

Doris M. So we're talking 100 people?

Ruth B. We're talking between 100 and 200 women.

Doris M. That must be a lot of power.

Ruth B. Yes. And what's really fantastic is because women had the same training, they all knew what to do. And it wasn't like herding cats, which really, the early days was about that. Women didn't know what they were doing. I didn't, either. I mean, I include myself in that. We didn't know how to, Z knew how to facilitate something she wanted to have happen. My orientation was different. I wanted women to learn things so that we could work together. I didn't understand this fully quite. . . I didn't articulate it this way until much, much later. Until really the last few years where, you know, when I became middle-aged and I was thinking about, you know, the legacy, what do I leave behind? And is this all going to be just a personal experience we had? Or is there something we can pass on? You know, I really started focusing on longevity. And if women are all trained in different ways and don't know how to, don't have anything in common, how do you? Where does it go when people die, I mean, basically? It dies with you. So I just wanted, I became very focused on a way to. . . How can we build something together and have the powerful honoring the individual. And yet when we come together, have certain things in common so we can actually partner one another spiritually. Because we know what each other's doing. So we can more effectively work together magic.

Doris M. So Circle of Aradia did this. And you taught.

Ruth B. Yes, I developed a curriculum, which is still being taught today. So women all come through that same door. And it doesn't mean that they don't have their own

practice. But when they come together, and things are done a certain way, they know what and why and how they're doing it. And that's what I continued to do in teaching after I left.

Doris M. And do covens, smaller groups, continue to break off of the Circle to do their work together?

Ruth B. Yes. Yes. And I'd like to see more and more of that, actually. But there are groups of women who work together outside of the seasonal rituals. Which, you know, eight times a year are the Sabbats. So that leaves a lot of time for women to have their own covens. And it's really essential. If you depend on larger gatherings, you can't really get your personal work done. And so it's really great if women actually take it on to, you know, they might come out of a class and those women like each other and they continue working together.

Doris M. Is there anything else about the Circle of Aradia or the early years that we haven't talked about, before we move on to your move to central Wisconsin and the guardian piece?

Ruth B. I think that's probably pretty good. I think if you get to see the video it will be really helpful for the early years.

Doris M. Great. Okay, Ruth. (tape shuts off, resumes)

Ruth B. Yes, what I wanted to say is that, in Los Angeles, we were so busy just simply doing the work, that except for my excursions to the festivals, excursions to do workshops out of state on occasion, we became very, we weren't thinking about what was happening outside of California. How was the tradition developing elsewhere? Was it developing elsewhere? And how? We were frankly, I mean, for

myself personally, I would go and come to the Midwest on occasion or go other places. And I wouldn't really identify with what they were doing was Dianic. It would just be okay, this is kind of a, Goddess-centered and stuff. But some of those women would probably have considered themselves Dianic. But we were so focused on what we were doing that it never, we just weren't engaging, really, with other parts of the country at that time. And I still think that's true, pretty much.

Doris M. Thank you. (tape shuts off, resumes) Anything about the Temple of Diana that we haven't talked about?

Ruth B. Yes. Temple of Diana was founded here in Wisconsin in 2000. And what happened, after I moved here from Los Angeles, after being there for 20 years, it was like okay, I get to start over, in a sense. And first I incorporated under RCG again. And started that. But what became clear to me is the tradition, the Dianic tradition—meaning the legacy of Z Budapest and what I had evolved in southern California, didn't really have its own 501C3 religious organization. So I realized that that really was the way to go. Because I was very focused on preserving the legacy and preserving the lineage, the teachings, in a certain way. And RCGI is a Goddess spirituality organization. And again, even though there are women who identify as Dianic, it's not a Dianic organization, per se. So I wanted that. I wanted, I felt like that's something I can leave behind. And then maybe we can also be an umbrella for other Dianic organizations that have come through that same door.

Doris M. Being the southern California Z Budapest lineage.

Ruth B. Yes. Exactly. And eventually we knew we were going to be teaching, we started teaching. And we have a program called The Spiral Door Women's Mystery

School of Magic and Ritual Arts. And we were going to be graduating priestesses from this. At least some of them, and we wanted to be able to provide those women with some federal protection. So that's how Temple of Diana was born.

Doris M. Right here in—

Ruth B. Here in Wisconsin. In Evansville. (laughs)

Doris M. Evansville.

Ruth B. Yeah. But now, Circle of Aradia is actually under the auspices, only recently, removed from RCGI and came under the Temple of Diana. Because now they could have the umbrella of, basically of the tradition that they're a part of. As opposed to the more open Goddess spirituality.

Doris M. Has that kind of resulted in a sort of a split or a splinter between the two Dianic groups in the Madison area? Or do people move between them?

Ruth B. There are women that definitely move between, which is really great. Again, I don't think of RCGI, I mean, I'm just going by their own materials. They don't call themselves a Dianic organization. So I don't think of it as a split between two Dianic organizations. We serve really different groups of women. Some are crossovers. RCGI is a wonderful organization for women coming into this and finding the Goddess, and in a much more broad way, broad terms. It's not a tradition. So here, the reason is, it's like apples and oranges. They're all fruit, but one's, you know, we are teaching a specific tradition. And so there's not, you know, there's not really a, at least, where we're coming from, there's no competition. Because some women are not drawn to the Dianic tradition, and they want more of a Goddess, open Goddess kind of energy, or an open focus without

having it be along a certain line, a certain types of practices and such. They want to make up their own. And ours is not about really making it up.

Doris M. Okay. That makes it clear.

(75 minutes)

(End Interview.)