

Interview with Esther Bankoff

Date: January 18, 1999

Interviewer: Rick Tejada-Flores and Judy Ehrlich

Camera Rolls:

Sound Rolls:

Interview gathered as part of “The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors”. Produced by Paradigm Productions. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Interview with Esther Bankoff, conducted by Paradigm Productions on January 18, 1999 for “The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors”. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of “The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors”.

00:00:11:00-00:00:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Start right in.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, go ahead.

Interviewer #1:

Go ahead, yeah, so start off—

Interviewer #2:

You mind telling us the story?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

So go ahead and tell us the story and we'll come back and do—or start by just introducing yourself, and then tell the story.

Esther Bankoff:

I'm Esther Bankoff, and during a World War Two, I was a, a, I, I was a, was a pacifist and I'm still a pacifist, and oh, cut it, I just—wait a second—

Interviewer #1:

No, that was—

Esther Bankoff:

—wait a second, wait a sec, wait a sec.

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

00:00:46:00-00:02:02:00

Interviewer #2:

We'll come back to it maybe if we wanna get—but just go ahead and—

Esther Bankoff:

I have to get, I have to get out, over the Bennett story, don't, don't—

Interviewer #2:

You wanna finish first—

Esther Bankoff:

—yeah, I wanna finish the Bennett story, let me get that out of the way.

Interviewer #2:

—finish with actual [unintelligible]

Esther Bankoff:

Anyway, the comment is, that he made was, that this was a great prison administrator who had put him in a special prison, a special pr, prison that had so many advantages that nobody else had because he, he was such a wonderful person he wanted to make it easy on him and, and, and he, he'll never forget how wonderful he was. So I wrote Amy a letter and said, this is, this wonderful person is the person who was hated by all the conscientious objectors [phone ringing] in his system [phone ringing] oh, just let it ring, unless you have...

Interviewer #2:

We should probably unplug it, but that's all right for you. [phone ringing]

Esther Bankoff:

Beau, because of his treatment of conscientious [phone ringing] objectors, it was under his aegis that my brother was put [phone ringing] into segregation and, and he was, when he went [phone ringing] on a hunger strike he was force fed [phone ringing] and that he was—

00:02:03:00-00:02:38:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

We can't use this

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, no, I know—

[production discussion]

[phone ringing]

Interviewer #2:

—I know, I thought, I didn't realize—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, you're the one person who isn't [phone ringing]

[man walks by in background]

Interviewer #1:

What should I do? Just unplug it?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just unplug it.

Interviewer #2:

Or pick it up and say hello and take a message.

[phone ringing]

Interviewer #1:

I'll unplug it. [noise in background] [phone ringing] It's unplugged.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

There you go, you lost the most important phone call of your life.

Esther Bankoff:

Oh yeah, right.

Interviewer #1:

They wanna sell you something.

Esther Bankoff:

An, another marketeer.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, marketeer.

Interviewer #1:

OK, go ahead.

00:02:39:00-00:02:47:00

Interviewer #2:

OK, let's roll.

Esther Bankoff:

Anyway, it, it upset because I had personal, a personal discussion with him, I went up to his—

Interviewer #2:

Wait, wait—

Esther Bankoff:

—office and...

00:02:48:00-00:06:09:00

Interviewer #2:

—wait, this is really out of order. Let's, let's go, let's start from the beginning. Let's start this over again. Let's roll.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Fine.

Interviewer #2:

Introduce yourself, let's get some background, tell us a little—

Esther Bankoff:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

—bit about you, you know, what you—

Esther Bankoff:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

—how, the way you started out was perfect. Where, you know, what happened to you during World War Two, and what happened to your brother and what was, what was, what does that

mean to you at this point in your life?

Esther Bankoff:

Mm-hmm. I'm Esther Bankoff, I was a young person growing up in New York City, where, very early on I became committed to the principle of pacifism, being against war, and fighting for human rights. And during my high school years, I went out on a high school strike that we had against war, we were in favor of the Oxford Oath against world-wide war, and my activities as an anti-war re, resister were, were encouraged by my brother who, older brother who felt similarly and became my mentor. So when my brother was, decided to become a conscientious objector, I threw all of my energies, young energies into supporting the, the pacifism that had become a very meaningful and committed thing for me. And I started working for the release of conscientious objectors from prison, and as a result of that, I went to Washington D.C., and helped to demonstrate and, and picket the White House for the release of COs, and participated in various demonstrations that were held at that time. It was a very difficult time. I'm Jewish and my father had—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Esther Bankoff:

—many, many relatives who had been killed in, in, in, in Nazi con, Nazi controlled countries, and, but still the commitment to conscience and resistance to war was very strong. When my brother went to prison as a result of his, his conscience as a conscientious objector, he was sentenced to three, three and a half years. I, I worked for him and all the others that were in prison to, to, to get their release as political prisoners who were not, who should, who should not be kept behind bars because they don't want to kill.

00:06:10:00-00:06:12:00

Interviewer #2:

What did your father do—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can I make a—

[cut]

00:06:13:00-00:08:44:00

Esther Bankoff:

I can't hear you—

Interviewer #2:

Oh—

Esther Bankoff:

—have to speak up.

Interviewer #2:

—sorry. Wait until we're rolling.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We are.

Interviewer #2:

So give us, I wanna hear a little bit about your family background. Were your parents pacifists themselves? Or what was the—

Esther Bankoff:

No, my parents were middle-class, business people in New York City they had a shop. They had come, they were immigrants, had come over in the big immigration in the early 1900s—

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

—and they were Jewish, are Jewish and they felt very upset about my brother's imprisonment because my, my father felt that nobody in the family had ever gone to prison before and, and this was a very shameful thing for him. My mother took a more emotional approach, she even went so far as to come to Washington D.C. to picket for the release of her son, and my mother is the only one I know of who had the temerity to approach Attorney General Tom Clark on the steps of Department of Justice to plead with him to release her son from prison. And when she said to him, my boy is a good boy, he has never hurt anybody and I think you should let him out of prison, he said to her, well, he said, I would do that, if your son will play ball with me, I will play ball with him. Meaning that Morris was to sign his own, a, a, a conditional release that he would leave prison and then report on parole. My brother was an absolutist and refused to do that because he would not acknowledge that there was any kind of, anything to be guilty about, anything that he was guilty of, that he should not be in prison

in the first place, and that he was, he would not, he would not sign anything, any condition that would continue his image as, as a, a criminal.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

So, I thought that was very brave of my mother and I really admired her for that. I lived in Washington D.C. for three years while I was working for the government and continued to work for the release of conscientious objectors.

00:08:45:00-00:08:57:00

Interviewer #2:

What did your brother think about you working for the government?

Esther Bankoff:

I was working at a mental hospital at the time and there was no problem there.

00:08:58:00-00:11:21:00

Interviewer #2:

Give me a de, define absolutism again. What's your definition of an absolutist in this context?

Esther Bankoff:

Well, an absolutist, my brother had a history of being very absolutist about his, his ideals and his conscience. An example is that he was first sent to Civilian Public Service camp, and at public, Civilian Public Service camps he found that they were, it was organized on the basis of being controlled by the military. And that is something that was unconstitutional and not written into Selective Service Act when they established the Civilian Public Service camps, so instead of walking out he at first tried to slow down and not cooperate, and then he was sent to another Civilian Public Service camp which was for troublemakers, those who would not, who were still dissenting and resisting the, the, the military aspect of where they were being incarcerated and working on pay list jobs. As a result of that, my brother walked out completely with other people who felt similarly and notified Selective public [sic] Service that they had walked out and why. And he, he was then arrested and, and sent to prison for three years, three and a half years. He had started a lawsuit, but no lawsuit ever reached the Supre, ever reached the Supreme Court that the Supreme Court agreed to he, to hear on whether or not CPS or Civ, Public, Civilian Public Service camps were, were constitutional.



Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

So, he finally got out in two and a half years after staging a, a hunger strike, being force fed, and then they summarily got rid of him by having somebody else sign a, a, a conditional release for him.

00:11:22:00-00:12:35:00

Interviewer #2:

Did, what happened to your brother after his experience in prison? Did he continue to be an activist?

Esther Bankoff:

No, not very much. He had been going to law school, he was in third year law school before he was arre, arrested. He was in Washington D.C. going to law school there, was a very brilliant law student and on the law review, but when he got out, after his connection with the justice system, he wanted never to have anything to do with law as it's practiced or justice as it's, as it apparently he found injustice in the practice of, of, of the way this country treats its, its justice system. That left him, really the rest of his life mostly the work that he did was in construction and I, I felt it was kind of a trauma that never, never was healed.

00:12:36:00-00:13:21:00

Interviewer #2:

Was that true of other people—

Esther Bankoff:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

—did you see that? What did [unintelligible].

Esther Bankoff:

There were a couple of people that I knew, couple of men I knew who, two, knew about, who committed suicide. There were others who found it very, very hard to be isolated in prison,

and had a lot of, of mental problems. But there were many, many who did wonderful things, continued in, in, being activists and left a, a, a marvelous heritage for others to follow.

00:13:22:00-00:13:28:00

Interviewer #2:

Who were some of them?

Esther Bankoff:

[sighs]

[laughs] God!

Interviewer #2:

It's not a quiz. I'm just thinking, who comes to mind?

Esther Bankoff:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

Esther Bankoff:

[laughs]

00:13:29:00-00

Interviewer #2:

Let me ask you something else Esther, what, what was, how did you feel as a woman in this situation? Where you weren't being called up yourself.

Interviewer #1:

You're supporting them, you know—

Interviewer #2:

Was—

Interviewer #1:

—you're trying to contribute but...

Interviewer #2:

—did you think of yourself as a conscientious objector? Or did you, you know, what was the, what was the role women could play that would be really useful—

Esther Bankoff:

Well the—

Interviewer #2:

—or frustrating?

Esther Bankoff:

—well the women organized the—

Camera Crew Member #1:

You're talking across—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, I think you're right, start again. I, I stepped on your line.

Camera Crew Member #1:

—don't want that [inaudible]. Being careful about—

Esther Bankoff:

The women, sisters and wives and, and the girlfriends, and so forth, women friends got together and organized a support group, friends and families of conscientious objectors, and they were very important in the commu, communicating among each other and getting together with the s, getting meetings together and, and recognizing, visiting and recognizing COs and their needs and that was very helpful.

00:14:36:00-00:15:25:00

Interviewer #2:

Were you part of that?

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah, the part that I probably did more in terms of was civil rights as well, we were all as pacifists, the early civil right activists as well, and so being involved in civil right actions or helping to organize and, and shelter and, and give help were, were very important things. Since I went to talk to—an example would be as a sister I went to talk to Bennett, who was the, the correctional—

Interviewer #2:

James Bennett?

Esther Bankoff:

—James Bennett, the correctional...

00:15:26:00-00:17:21:00

Interviewer #2:

Start again, I'm sorry, I just wanna, I just thought of his name myself. It was annoying me. Could you say, start that sentence over—

Esther Bankoff:

Boy, I really am having a hard time with that one. [pause] [sighs] One of the most painful things that Morris found in prison was when they did not, when they censored his letters, my brother's letters were censored, and when he wrote to me I never really knew whether I was getting the, the full information, but what came across in the letters was his warning me that if I'm contacted by any prison officials not to believe what they were telling me about, about him or any of the other prisoners. He wanted to be sure that mis, misleading information was not getting out and that I knew the truth. Armed with that kind of information from my brother, I went to see William [sic] Bennett to talk with him about releasing my brother, and others like him. And I, my, my conversation with Mr. Bennett was very painful for me because he made allusions to my brother that were very critical and even slightly threatening in, in, in some ways that since I was very vulnerable at the time it, it was a, a very excruciating experience.

00:17:22:00-00:17:43:00

Interviewer #2:

You, you have to explain who Bennett was, you didn't say that mis, you didn't say who Bennett was.

Esther Bankoff:

William [sic] Bennett is the, was the administrator of the federal corr, correctional system in the U.S. at the time that all of the conscientious objectors were in prison at that time.

00:17:44:00-00:18:58:00

Interviewer #2:

What did he think about conscientious objectors?

Esther Bankoff:

All that I could glean from what my brother said and what I heard was his, his main, his, what he really felt was these, that these so-called trouble makers, and the kind of protests that they put up in prison were not too dissimilar from the way prison authorities are treating prisoners today. There was, there was no compassion, no feeling of understanding of the positions that people had as, in, in, in the prison, they were just, they were, they were not interested in anything that would help prisoners have a, a, a, a, more rehabilitative life if they were not political prisoners, or, the whole system wa, was a very un-benevolent and, and, and very punishing type system. And I don't see that we have anything different going on today in the prison system.

00:18:59:00-00:21:08:00

Interviewer #2:

Did he have a particular opinion of COs versus other prisoners, did you think? Did you get anything like that from him?

Esther Bankoff:

Th, what I heard from the other COs who came out of prison and from my brother was that a lot of them tried to start some very excellent teaching, helpful kinds of activities within the prison. Some of them were teaching just English and literacy, they were, the important thing that my brother and others did at the particular prison he was in, and maybe some others, was that they went, they protested and boycotted Jim Crow in the dining rooms at that time, the, at that time African-American and white prisoners were in separate dining halls, and since, when the C, conscientious objectors came in, in, they set up boycott and refused to eat unless they could eat with the African-American prisoners. As a result of that, they were put into isolation, segregation units which were typical of what they are today, you can't, they couldn't get out to exercise except for an hour, they, they were cen, their letters were censored, their family visits were limited, they couldn't get exercise, and [sighs] I think that there was a sense there, I'm sure other prisoners understood why they couldn't be talking to them, or being with them. Because I heard one story of prisoners saying, why is it that we have to come to prison to get education? This was a result of the, the, the classes that were

being taught at the time.

Interviewer #2:

Was, was your brother at Asheville—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hold on—

[cut]

00:21:09:00-00:21:56:00

Interviewer #2:

—tell me more about women's roles—

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah, well—

Interviewer #2:

—in this, and kind of, were, were they like—

Esther Bankoff:

—the friends and families, what, I can't really say except for lobbying as, as, and, as, much intensive lobbying as could be done when I was in Washington, my, I felt that my role was to support the COs that passed through, and a lot of them came through and, and stayed for awhile. Just as Roger Axford and Dick Suzuki who, who were on the steps of the Department of Justice for about seven, eight months in their campaign to release conscientious objectors, and supporting them was, was very important.

00:21:57:00-00:22:05:00

Interviewer #2:

Did they stay there round the clock? They slept, they slept on the steps?

Esther Bankoff:

Yes, they never left, right. And so they, they needed a lot of help.

00:22:06:00-00:22:57:00

Interviewer #2:

Did, would you tell that story you told me about Harry Truman?

Esther Bankoff:

Yes, I got this information from Roger Axford that the time that they were sitting on the steps of the Department of Justice with their, with their campaign to [clears throat] release the conscientious objectors after the war was over, Harry Truman was President at the time and Roger told me that he passed by the steps of the Justice Department and thumbed his nose at them as he rolled by. For a, for someone who dropped the atom bombs in one of the greatest criminal acts of this world has ever known, [clears throat] that's not too funny.

00:22:58:00-00:23:25:00

Interviewer #2:

Did he, did they have signs, at the time? What do, do you remember what they said?

Esther Bankoff:

"Release conscientious objectors," that's about, you know, all of the signs were, were really an attempt to not imprison them anymore, they were still being imprisoned, and to release the ones that were there.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

And to stop all of the assaults on, on pacifists that were going on at the time.

00:23:36:00-00:25:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. What was that like, being a pacifist after the war?

Esther Bankoff:

In what sense?

Interviewer #2:

I mean, you said there were attacks, did they, did, did it lighten up after the war was over? Was it easier to be a pacifist? As, what's that Ammon Hennacy quote, it's, "being a pacifist between wars is like being a vegetarian between meals." Did you think that was true, was it easier?

Esther Bankoff:

Well, it depend, depended on, it was very difficult being a pacifist and against the war, particularly if you were, you were Jewish. As I said in my, my father had many relatives who were killed by the Nazis and did not survive and that, that made it very painful. What, what really I think was very important in that struggle, that conflict was the fact that I, I and other pacifists spoke up against th, those things that were either, that had encouraged Nazism and that weren't, that weren't helping the victims of Nazism, such as we, we knew about the, the ship that was turned around by Roosevelt during the war of, and, and turned back so that all, all of the people who were fleeing from Nazi, the Nazi regime were then, had to go back and probably were killed. There was a large outcry about that from, from the people that knew what was happening, and these were mainly the pacifists who were opposed, who were opposed to the war but at the same time fighting for the lives of those who were going through this Holocaust. So there were incidents like that, that made it possible to feel that we were fighting, but we were fighting in other ways.

00:25:44:00-00:27:44:00

Interviewer #2:

Well, did you, I—who knew what and when? Did you, were you aware at the time what was going on in Germany? And did that, were there Jews who changed their minds about pacifism in the face of what was going on in Germany? Or what—I mean, you said it was painful, but how, how did people try to, to put together those two pieces, the fact that they were against killing but were also against fascism?

Esther Bankoff:

It's a total feeling, the total feeling that was involved in killing, militarism and killing were always the basis for the ideal that you could, that I at least, [clears throat] and those I'm sure who felt similarly could never veer from. That no matter how, [sighs] how terrible things were, killing people was not going to be the solution.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. I see.

Esther Bankoff:

The, when I was young, the things that influenced me were things like seeing \_All Quiet On the Western Front\_, \_Johnny Got Your Gun\_, all the things that involved why we have to



hate war. Why war is such a terrible thing. There is no justice in war, there's no humanity in war. And this is regardless of what's happening on either side, and I think today, we are coming more close to that kind of solution for doing away with war. Hating war and just, and, and loving peace and the work of the, the new, of the new—hang it.

Interviewer #2:

No.

Esther Bankoff:

No?

Interviewer #1:

No.

Interviewer #2:

No, you can't get up [laughs]. No, no, no.

Interviewer #1:

No, no.

Esther Bankoff:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

No, no reference materials. You get—

Interviewer #1:

No, we want, we want, we're gonna stick with

Interviewer #2:

—no, that's alright.

00:27:45:00-00:28:57:00

Interviewer #1:

So, so Esther, we—

Esther Bankoff:

The Hague, the Hague appeal.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

—Esther, Esther, talk to Judy a little bit about, you know—

Esther Bankoff:

What?

Interviewer #1:

—people now, it's, the war is fifty years over—

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—and somehow people don't remember how horrible it was, it was all, you know, soldiers kissing girls when they were home on dates—

Esther Bankoff:

[sighs]

Interviewer #1:

—was it a good war?

Esther Bankoff:

[pause]

Interviewer #2:

Look at me.

Esther Bankoff:

A good war? I don't see that [sighs] as a good war or any war as a good war. I see the culture of peace being good. I, I see the, the struggle to advance a culture of peace that doesn't look at war in any positive way. If it, if it takes a generation of acculturation to the idea that we cannot have war because there is no good in killing people, I think then we'll be able to live in a humane society.

00:28:58:00-00:30:26:00

Interviewer #2:

What did you say when people said to you, you're Jewish, you know people are being killed by the Holocaust, you know, you knew what was going on in Germany, at the time [background noise]. What did you say to them in response to that? And, and you refused to, to fight, or your brother refuses to fight and you support him.

Esther Bankoff:

Well, when you're involved in a community that you f, of, of people that feel the way you do, that's what, where support is very important. So that anything that I could read, the information that was being written by pacifists and anti-war people were very important to me. And making, making myself, making, being aware and being educated and being informed and feeling that support of various types were important at the time and that's what sees you through this.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

It, it, and there are a lot of things that I've been an outsider in, in terms of thinking about human rights and poverty, and inhumanity, and so forth, I haven't been on the inside and what people think hasn't really changed my life, I'm pretty much the same as I've always been and were then.

Interviewer #1:

No, but, but what Judy was saying—

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:30:27:00-00:31:17:00

Esther Bankoff:

—and they want us to bring three pennies to school, tomorrow. The Red Cross wants us to do that because of World War One veterans, or to give to people who were hurt in World War One. And my father said, why did they need to be killed? Why did they need to be hurt? What was it all about anyway? He even said it in Yiddish.

Interviewer #1:

Can we say that on camera?

Camera Crew Member:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

OK. Do that again.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, just say that story for us one more time.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, that's great.

Interviewer #1:

And then say it in Yiddish at the end. When you came home from school—

Esther Bankoff:

No, I, I don't speak Yiddish. I understand it—

Interviewer #1:

Oh, that's OK—

Esther Bankoff:

—very well, but I can't—

00:31:18:00-00:33:17:00

Interviewer #1:

—say, say the story one more time. Go ahead.

Esther Bankoff:

I have a memory of being six years old, being in first or second grade and coming home from school and telling my father, Papa, I'm gonna need three cents because tomorrow I have to bring the money into school, the teacher said to give to the Red Cross to help the people who were hurt or families who were, of people who were killed in the war. And I'll never forget, apparently [laughs] haven't forgotten in the past seventy, seventy years, the look on his face and his voice as he's turned to my mother and he said, why? why was it necessary to have that war? to have those people killed, to have them hurt? That's something I think remained with me for a long, long time, but also the basis of that hasn't changed. That thought has never really changed, in my life, during my lifetime of wars and violence, and government violence. I've always felt that that's probably something that is very fundamental and important. It must've carried me through a lot of the conflicts on the issue of war.

00:33:18:00-00:33:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Yet you say your father wasn't a pacifist.

Esther Bankoff:

No, he wasn't.

Interviewer #2:

It sounds like a pacifist.

Interviewer #1:

At some level.

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah, right. Oh, sorry—

Interviewer #1:

It's all right.

Esther Bankoff:

—yeah, really, really.

Interviewer #2:

I mean what more, what—

Esther Bankoff:

Right.

Interviewer #2:

—he understood—

Esther Bankoff:

Exactly, exactly.

Interviewer #2:

—you just noticed that [laughs].

Interviewer #1:

Esther, when you were—

Esther Bankoff:

Why, that was so good.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Esther Bankoff:

Thank you Judy.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:33:44:00-00:35:10:00

Interviewer #1:

—talking, you were talking about things that influenced you, and you, you remembered seeing the film, *\_All Quiet On the Western Front\_*. We're gonna talk to Lew Ayres' widow about Lew Ayres and what he re—

Interviewer #2:

And we did talk to Lew Ayres, Rick.

Interviewer #1:

—so talk a little about that film, about *\_All Quiet On the Western Front\_* and what that meant to you.

Esther Bankoff:

Well I saw that film already, and saw re-runs of it many times—

Interviewer #1:

Start, start over again. I saw *\_All Quiet On the Western Front\_*, so we know what you're talking about.

Esther Bankoff:

Yes, as a young person I saw *\_All Quiet On the Western Front\_* and that, it was a wonderful film because it brought me right into the feeling of, why are people killing each other? The destruction of human beings for no real reason in terms of human welfare, and so that was a really, really important film. It's stayed with me for a long time and it was replayed so many times it became the basis for the pacifism that many people felt. Lew Ayres eventually did become a conscientious objector, but of a different kind. He, he accepted, he, he accepted medical...

Interviewer #2:

He was a medic, he was a, a noncombatant.

Esther Bankoff:

Noncombatant, yeah.

00:35:11:00-00:36:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Did, did you have a, how, how did your Judaism relate to your pacifism, if it did? Was it, were you brought up in a religious family? Or, or not.

Esther Bankoff:

My, no, unlike others who, I don't know, who maybe came from Jewish Zionist families and so forth, my, my father was a conservative, a conservative in his Jewish practice. We went to synagogue, but not very long. He pretty much was, he was quite learned as a, in Jewish history. You know, men, men who were, Jewish men in Europe were well, well educated. Women were not so it was my father who was sort of considered a scholar, a Jewish scholar in, in the family and in the extended family, but, but there was not that connection with a, any, any sort of anti-war feeling except that he told stories about people who left the country because of...

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

—because they were draft, being drafted.

00:36:44:00-00:37:52:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you th— is that a tradition? I mean that's, that was true of my grandfather—

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—too. And I wonder, did that influence at least, it seems like there's a lot of, of Jews who end up in prison because they refuse to cooperate, but they come out of a tradition where that's how they ended up in this country in the first place. Do you think, was there an awareness of that, of a kind of tradition of refusing conscription, and did people talk about that at the time? That you remember?

Esther Bankoff:

People talked about it because that's the way many men left their country and that, and it was



just to save their lives [laughs], it was a, the practical thing to do. It was easy to do in terms of separating yourself from the country and then you were out of the draft. And, and the, that was the way people did it then. The way my brothers' generation did it was to resist and become conscientious objectors and fight it all the way through.

00:37:53:00-00:38:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Did they do the right thing?

Esther Bankoff:

Yes. Yes they did, and I think that maybe we don't see it right now, today, but I think that we will in future generations, see not only that th—they did the right thing but they led to the right way. Whatever [laughs] you want to call "right."

Interviewer #2:

Say that, a call—

Esther Bankoff:

To the way of, that, that we're talking about this culture of peace that we need to develop, not only anti-war but hatred of war, a culture of peace that starts, starts in our civilization as a very basic tenet that makes a big difference.

00:38:44:00-00:39:55:00

Interviewer #2:

And do you see the conscientious objectors of World War Two as, as important piece of that, of developing that? Could you say—

Esther Bankoff:

Yes, I do.

Interviewer #2:

—that you see that?

Esther Bankoff:

Yes I do. We have evidence of it all the time and I have a great deal of faith in young people, and they're picking it up more than ever now.

Interviewer #2:

What are they picking up? Are, you need to say it without—

Esther Bankoff:

I think—

Interviewer #2:

—hearing the question.

Esther Bankoff:

—they're picking up resistance to militarism, insistence on democratization, and a struggle for civil disobedience where it involves viol— where it involves fighting against violence and against the violence of governments. I think that's picking up, I think that more people becoming involved, we have lots of help now from environmentalists who are basically part of this whole effort to, to resist the violence wherever it is, in, in the land, in the world, in the armies, in the military, in, and so forth.

00:39:56:00-00:40:36:00

Interviewer #2:

Is it easier to be a pacifist now then it was in World War Two?

Esther Bankoff:

Well, it depends on where you live, I suppose [laughs]. I don't think of it as easy or not easy, I just think of the way I have to go and have to feel and the amount of crying I'm doing [laughs]. So that when things work successfully— we didn't stop the Iraqi War, we haven't, aren't, we haven't still stopped the bombings, but we're still trying.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm. Have you got any other questions?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, I think we'll stop there—

[cut]

00:40:37:00-00:40:48:00

Esther Bankoff:

I—

Interviewer #1:

So, so at fifty years ago, why, why is all this important now? To you, personally?

Camera Crew Member:

I, let's, we're gonna stop this for a second.

[cut]

00:40:49:00-00:41:28:00

Esther Bankoff:

—Is joined us, we always worried about what he—

Interviewer #1:

About what he would want to do.

Esther Bankoff:

—would say, yeah. So you might say these are the people who really were as committed as any of us, but because of their nontraditional ways of either of looking or dressing or living or doing things while they were in their lifestyle that were a source of, you know, embarrassment, but that was part of the, you know, total community of, of...

00:41:29:00-00:41:47:00

Interviewer #2:

Actually you're getting at a point that I think is really interesting about all this and you been, we've talked about it a little bit. Just the idea of the level of individualism that this was all about, that how your brother and, and yourself and being an out—outsider—

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—and seeing yourself as—

[knock on door]

Interviewer #2:

—defining your own way—

[doorbell rings]

Interviewer #2:

—in the world.

Esther Bankoff:

Do you want to open that?

[cut]

00:41:48:00-00:43:31:00

Interviewer #1:

— you today. Why is it still important to you? Tell Judy.

Esther Bankoff:

Why is it still important?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

What you said before about that you were still—

Interviewer #1:

Because you're still connected with it, you know, that sort of stuff. But, but, why, why is it so important to you still?

Esther Bankoff:

What could be more important? Even during periods where I wasn't active at all, the world

was active around me and I saw things developing that I felt close to, that I felt encouraged by, going into the civil rights movement particularly. By the way, I did say my brother wasn't active, but he was still active in civil rights for quite a long time, he got arrested in, in a, a very important case in New Jersey. We all went down to the Palisades Park in New Jersey, and we picketed the pool that was being segregated, no African-Americans were allowed in the pool, and so we picketed there and the park had us arrested by the New Jersey police and we had a trial and we won, we won at the trial and that w— that was very important. And I heard later that as a result of this particular project of ours, the state of New Jersey passed one of the first civil rights laws in the country.

00:43:32:00-00:44:23:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm, was that a CORE action, Esther? Was that CORE?

Esther Bankoff:

Yes, that's the Committee of Racial Equality, and my brother was involved in that too and so was I. So, and, the, those are the thing, things that carried me through as a continuing thing, but when part of my life was involved with, with family and working and so forth and there was that period when I wasn't doing too much or, I still followed through on all the things that were so meaningful for me, a, a greater part of my life. And I have the joy of seeing this being carried on by others who have picked up where, not where we left off, but have picked, have built on what we have done and that's very satisfying, that makes me very happy.

00:44:24:00-00:45:06:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

Is, did I...

Interviewer #2:

Is that—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, yeah, that, that's [inaudible] yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—oh, OK, because there was something about what you—

Interviewer #1:

No, no, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—said before that was slightly different that I thought—

Interviewer #1:

Well, [inaudible].

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah, I continued, I did, you have to, you can never really stop. If you've gone through such, at least I felt I went through so many eventful, important things, touched so many people who were so valuable and worked for such causes that were so important that I could really never let them go.

00:45:07:00-00:46:40:00

Interviewer #2:

Hmm. Talk a little about, and then we'll wrap up, but about nonconformity. About what it meant to be against the tide of World War Two, and what it's meant to be against the tide being a pacifist in a militarized society.

Esther Bankoff:

[pause]

[sigh]

It was hard. But for women probably even harder because it meant that there were a lo— there were not many options for you to connect with a partner who felt similarly. Outside of the fact that there weren't too many options anyway [laughs]. The, it was really very difficult. I had a lot of friends, but, they, the ones that were not committed the way I was, you know, never brought me any comfort or joy in the friendship.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Esther Bankoff:

I was always a little strange and different from them. So it, there's an alienating factor that's always with you most of your life.

00:46:41:00-00:47:15:00

Interviewer #2:

Because of [car horn honks] just, I, you won't hear my question, so—

Esther Bankoff:

No.

Interviewer #2:

—because of your pacifism? Could you just make that a complete sentence, what you just said.

Esther Bankoff:

Because of my pacifism, mm-hmm—

Interviewer #2:

Could you—

Esther Bankoff:

—and my being so anti-military—

Camera Crew Member:

Most of this will cross.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, you need to do the whole thing as a sentence.

Esther Bankoff:

Yeah, what did I say?

Interviewer #2:

Say—

Interviewer #1:

You said it was hard and it was alienating, but then you didn't say why. So you have to make that one complete thought.

00:47:16:00-00:48:07:00

Esther Bankoff:

[sighs] Right. Well, being a pacifist is not easy. It's not easy in a society of non-pacifists, but any group, any people, any individual who takes a different turn from what is the conventional, is going to experience the same sort of feelings. On the other hand, on the other hand the optimistic view of this, when you do come across those precious individuals, they mean so much to you and are a, a are a great inspiration.

00:48:08:00-00:48:14:00

Interviewer #2:

That's great.

Interviewer #1:

OK, I'm happy with that.

Interviewer #2:

You said it. Very nicely—

Esther Bankoff:

You liked that?

Interviewer #2:

—oh, yeah.

Interviewer #1:

OK, now let's be silent.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:48:12:00



Keywords:

Morris Horowitz

Roger Axford

conscientious objectors

political prisoners

prison reform

pacifism