Interview with Ruth Lehman
Date: ca. 1999
Interviewer: 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 Ruth Lehman, conducted by Paradigm Productions on an unknown date 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—00:00:23:00

Interviewer #1:

Would you just begin by introducing yourself?

Ruth Lehman:

I am Ruth Crady Lehman, and I live in Harrisonburg, Virignia. I was a—

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, cut, cut.

Interviewer #2:

Hold up on second.

Ruth Lehman:

Yes.

[cut]

00:00:24:00—00:00:37:00

Ruth Lehman:

—exactly what I'm doing.

Interviewer #1:

No, your middle name's fine.

Interviewer #2:

Sorry about that, Richard.

[production discussion]

Ruth Lehman:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Well, well, at least my, my—

Interviewer #1:

Do you use it?

Ruth Lehman:

Not always. I won't.

Camera Crew Member #2:

—wearing, I'm wearing pants. [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

[laughs] OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

OK?

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're rolling.

00:00:38:00—00:00:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Good. So start again, just introduce yourself.

Ruth Lehman:

My name is Ruth Lehman, and I'm from Harrisonburg, Virginia.

00:00:46:00—00:01:41:00

Interviewer #1:

Ruth, could you talk a little about, your religious background, and—actually, you know what I'd like to talk about is your religious background, and do you consider yourself a conscientious objector?

Ruth Lehman:

Yes, I do, consider myself a conscientious objector. My religious background is in the Mennonite church. My father was a minister and a bishop in that church, and, and I lived at the church. And so my life, as I was growing up, was in the church and of the church. And so, I could hear him preaching about turning the other cheek and all of this, as I grew up. As I became older, I would listen to the adults conversing with each other about how things were getting worse and worse in the world, and I just decided in my mind that, probably by the time I was in my teens, I would—my peace position would be tested. And it turned out I was right.

00:01:42:00—00:01:53:00

Interviewer #1:

What, how old were you when World War II began? When we, you began—

Ruth Lehman:

In 1941, I was twenty. Not quite twenty.

Interviwer #1:

What did you do at—

[picture cuts]

[cut]

00:01:54:00—00:02:05:00

Interviewer #1:

—to, sorry, we're, we're running behind, and this is interesting, but we're going to do a fairly, I, I'm not gonna torture you for long. [laughs]

[production discussion]

Ruth Lehman:

You tell me what you want to know, OK.

00:02:06:00—00:03:41:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, OK. Ruth, you've introduced yourself, why don't you start, why don't you just start again with the, what you were telling me about, how you saw yourself as a conscientious objector.

Ruth Lehman:

As I was growing up, my—I lived in this church community. My father was a minister and a bishop, and so I, all the time, heard about the peace position. The two tenets of the Mennonite church, at that time especially, was nonresistance and nonconformity, and this is what I was taught. And so, my father had six daughters, and he did not have to face, you know, this draft position, but he, he made us feel like this was ours to do, also.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Ruth Lehman:

So, when I went to high school—I was sent to Eastern Mennonite High School. I had taken one year at a public high school, but they decided I need to go to, to the Eastern Mennonite High School in Harrisonburg. And here we were taught, just reinforced, all that I had been taught as I was growing up. And, yes, I felt like I was a part of what the church was doing. And when I became older, and listened to my father and others talk about what was happening in the world, I, was rather decided that probably by the time I'm a teenager, my peace position would be challenged. Not by having to go to camp or being in the draft, but

perhaps friends of mine would face it.

00:03:42:00—00:04:41:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. And, and what, what was your experience during World War II?

Ruth Lehman:

During World War II, I was at, Mennonite Central Committee in 1941, and I heard, Franklin D. Roosevelt declare war right after Pearl Harbor. I listened to it at MCC with a lot of CPS men, and others. And, it frightened me, of course, and I decided that—I would stay at, at Mennonite Central Committee, because it made me feel like, that I was part of what was going to happen, so I took care of the CPS records for the Mennonnite inductees, I set up their files; and I, worked as typing up the cor—the many, the heavy correspondence that went on. So, I was an integral part of MCC in my mind, because of all the—and my work was with the CPS.

00:04:41:00—00:04:47:00

Interviewer #1:

Working with the—

Ruth Lehman:

Part of the work, yes.

Interviewer #1:

—CPS camps.

Ruth Lehman:

Mm-hmm.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're gonna have to change the tape.

Interviewer #1:

Oh. OK.

[cut]

[end of tape]

00:04:48:00—00:08:10:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, what I really want to get at—

Camera Crew Member 31:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

—here, [shifting papers] OK, so you worked there, and then you went with your husband. Why don't you just talk about going to Vineland, and, working there with your husband while he was in the, a CPS assignee, and you were with him.

Ruth Lehman:

OK. I left MCC, then, and went back to college. At the end of my college, in 1944, I graduated in June, and then, in December, we were married. We were not going to get married till the end of the war, but we changed our minds. And so, in January, on January 7th, 7th of 1945, I went with my husband, right after our honeymoon, to the training school at Vineland, New Jersey, which is where he was in, the director of a CPS unit, number ninety-two. He had, my father had said, well, what are your plans for Ruth? And he said he had found a job for me at the training school. I was to be the secretary of the purchasing agent. The purchasing agent was a woman who was precise, very practical, and I had to work hard. In lots of ways, I worked harder than Harold did, who was teaching. I really did, I worked longer hours. And, he was teaching mentally retarded children, who, whom he could take in mathematics up to the long division, and that was it. He taught them physical education, and a lot of other things. There was a staff of about twelve teachers there at the training school. I, had several of the, of the training school children, as they called them, even though my errand boy was sixty years old, forty years older than I was. And he was my errand boy, but he was one of the children. We, we learned to know a lot of these, children, as I'll call them, and they were sweet, and they were kind, and they were loving, and they were at this training school being trained, and, and lot of them just being kept there because their parent, their children, their families did not want them. And so, they never discriminate against the CO's. Now, I couldn't say the same for the staff who was there. We ate in the main dining room—because Harold was a teacher and I was a secretary—with the rest of the administrators. And, we were at a big round table, and there were women there who were not very happy about the CO's who had come onto the campus. And so they would let us know in just little innuendo, you know how women can do it the best. Little innuendo's and little, asides. So one woman said one day, my, my nephew is 4F, but I'm going to buy him a pin that says 4F, so he can wear it, so no one'll think he's one of these CO's. And so, we just kept

smiling, you know, through all of this. It was not a big discrimination, but we felt it daily, constantly. But we were act—I was actually happy to be there. I wouldn't give anything for the experience I had at the training school.

00:08:11:00—00:09:08:00

Interviewer #1:

Would you say, would you talk a little bit about how women—

[loud crash]

Interviewer #1:

—I don't know if they took the brunt, but they, how they, suffered the, discrimination against conscientious objectors, if you have some examples of that—

Interviewer #1:

[another loud crash]

Interviewer #1:

—personal, or stories you know.

Ruth Lehman:

Well, I would tell a little bit about this one woman I know who was in a mental hospital—and she had just been married, she was just eighteen. And she went to Norristown, Pennsylvania, mental hospital with her husband. And, she had no orientation, and she was put, the first night, on a women's floor. And, she had to subdue one of the patients, and she had to quell a riot, and she was just eighteen. Now this was not unusual at, at the state mental institutions—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Ruth Lehman:

—because this, this was, what happened. And these young women, CPS young women, who were not trained, went in and did that kind of work.

00:09:09:00—00:09:19:00

Interviewer #1:

When you say CPS young women, do you mean wives of—

Ruth Lehman:

Wives.

Interviewer #1:

—CPS assignees? OK. But they called—

Ruth Lehman:

Wives. They were no drafted.

Interviewer #1:

But they called themselves CPS women?

Ruth Lehman:

They called themselves CPS wives.

Interviewer #1:

Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

00:09:20:00—00:10:42:00

Ruth Lehman:

Now at the training school, we were, told that no children could be—of the CPS men, could be on the campus. And so, there was one woman that had a child, but she had to live off-campus. But this was, not discrimination, I guess, this was just one of their rules. Yes, I think women, who, who had friends who were CO's had to, had to, through—bear just as much of that kind of discrimination as others. I could tell you a little story about when I was in college. We were in the town of Harrisonburg, Virginia, and, we would go to the jail, to sing at the jail for a Sunday afternoon. And a group of us were in a car, and we were driving through the city of Harrisonburg. The driver was a young man who was draft age, and by right should have been in, in the war, or else in a CPS camp. He, instead he was a theological student. And one woman was crossing the street. And she reached right in the window, 'cause his, window was rolled down, and slapped him on the face, and, called him a yellow-belly. And, he turned the other cheek, and she did it again. I was sitting right behind him.

00:10:42:00—00:10:52:00

Interviewer #1:

She did it again?

Ruth Lehman:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

Huh.

Ruth Lehman:

So, there was a lot of, of hard feelings during those years against all of us.

00:10:53:00—00:10:59:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, stop. We need to stop. Yes, we've got, but we've got, oh we lost the power we got backed up. I think—

[cut]

00:10:59:00

[end interview]