

The interviewee has requested clarifications to be added to statements made at the time of the interview. All clarifications are footnoted and appear with a RL before the text indicating it is a statement made by Renata Laqueur after the interview.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**2**

**Interview with Renata Laqueur**

**February 7, 1998**

**Beginning Tape One, Side A**

Answer: -- **indiscreet** only the answer.

Question: Well, so I've got -- I-I made a bunch of notes, listening through to the -- the first interview.

A: You have to talk a little louder, because I have a problem with my ears.

Q: I see. Okay.

A: Okay.

Q: I-I made some notes, listening through to your first interview, about just some concepts I wanted to go over and some things, but the first thing I need for the tape, which is so simple, is your name.

A: **Renata Laqueur**.

Q: Did you ever have a middle name or anything?

A: Hm? No, never. Oh -- no middle name, I had three. Typical. I was born in **Germany** and I was called **Renate Liselotte Margarethe**, I forget the third one, **Laqueur**. When -- when I became a citizen in 1957, I was married to **Deso A. Weiss**, who was at that point a citizen and I became a citizen because I married an American and I thought I better be an American, I regret it until today. I should have kept my Dutch passport.

Q: Why?

A: S -- was up and down with **America**. Right now I'm -- there are days when I'm very happy and very proud of **America** and there are days when I just wish

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**3**

I were Dutch. That has nothing to do with that. Anyway, 1957 I had a hearing for the citizenship and the guy said to me, "This is your chance to change your name. Why don't you become **Linda** or **Marilyn**?" **Linda** was because, it was of **Linda Darnell**<sup>1</sup> or -- and many of the movie stars at that time, **Marilyn** was because of **Marilyn Monroe**. And I said, "I want one change. I want to change the "e" to an "a" from **Renate**, because I don't like the German ending and I want to chuck out my middle names." And that's how I became **Renata Laqueur**.

Q: Now you were born in **Germany**?

A: I was born in **Brieg, Germany**, which is today **Poland**, because the border -- after the Russians moved west, it is now near **Breslau**, which is **Wroclaw** today. And my grandparents were from there, it was the third or the fourth generation and I was very -- my mother all told me proudly, "You were born in your great-grandmother's bed." And I was three years old when my father moved to **Holland**. That's a story in itself. And so I was born in November 19<sup>2</sup> and I was before Christmas in **Holland** and we made<sup>3</sup> in **Holland** till -- I would say till **Bergen-Belsen**, so that is 1943. So my whole basic education, including **gymnasium** and -- no, and a year of study in **Amsterdam**, was all in **Holland**. So my mother -- my mother tongue is -- my parents spoke German and I answered in **Holland**, in Dutch. So again, like in **America**, where the kids are in there in English<sup>4</sup> and the f -- and their parents speak either Italian or Russian or whatever.

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<sup>1</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "Linda was because, it was **the name** of Linda Darnell..."

<sup>2</sup> **R.L.:** November 1919.

<sup>3</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "lived."

<sup>4</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "So again, like in America, where the kids are there **and speak** English..."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**4**

Q: So what -- you're an American citizen, born in **Germany**, now **Poland**, grew up in **Holland**. What is your n -- your identity now?

A: My identity? Only American. Because I've lived -- I would say -- I'm 78, so if I'm here since 1953, I've spent the greater part of my life in **America** and I've lived in **Canada**. And I couldn't immigrate to **America** because I was born in **Germany** and I was on the German quota, so I went on my Dutch passport, as an immigrant to **Canada**. And within nine months, the time it takes to get a baby, I had a visa to come in as an immigrant, because I hired a lawyer in **Montreal**. And the moment I hit **Montreal**, I got an immigration lawyer, who got me nine months later, on an immigration visa to **America**, because I had met my second husband and I was chasing him.

Q: So you were by yourself in **Montreal**?

A: I was by myself. I immigrated alone and I wo-worked for a year in **Montreal**.

Q: What did you do?

A: This goes -- gives you some idea of the Dutch education. In a Dutch school, you grow up with four languages. So I had Dutch, French as a second language, German as the third, English as the fourth and a base of Latin and Greek. So when I got to **Montreal** -- I had gone to a secretarial school in **Holland**, because when I wanted to study, which was 1938, when I got my **bachot**<sup>5</sup>, my what is it, the **eindexamen**<sup>6</sup> for the **gymnasium**. My father said, "You don't study till you have a skill." He was right. He said, "I'll send you to secretarial school for a year, you come out with French, German, English, Dutch, shorthand, bookkeeping, whatever. An international secretarial school."

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<sup>5</sup> **Bachot**: baccalaureate

<sup>6</sup> **Eindexamen**: final exam (Dutch)

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**5**

I tell you, I made my life with that secretarial school. In **Canada**, later on I used this education when I studied, because I could do notes. I was in comparative literature in four languages, without any problem. So I'm very grateful, because I didn't study in **Holland**, but I made up for it by studying later on, 40 years later.

Q: I want to go back to your saying that y-your identity is as an American, because as you pointed out, you have a Dutch kitchen, you have this poster --

A: Yeah, I have d-d-d --

Q: from **Holland** with [indecipherable]

A: Don't forget, the older I get, you will see everywhere there's **Holland**. It's the flowers whether they're f -- they're all false, but they're from **Holland**.

Q: The tulips.

A: It is somehow the -- the remnants of some food things, of pictures, of culture. I've n -- I've not been back now for eight years. I'm going back this year for the first time again. But the Dutch and the American have a lot in common, I mean at least in the East. This feeling of being free, of talking against the authorities. That's very Dutch. And that's something I love. And I love the freedom of **America**, because I'm freer in **America** than I was in **Holland**. It's less provincial. Except right now with that whole crap with the president.

Q: L-Let's get back to the identity thing for a little bit.

A: Hm?

Q: The or -- the identity thing. Your parents -- as I recall, you said in the first interview, were Jewish, but cultural or secular Jews.

A: Not only cultural, but my father -- my father was a physician, had studied and my mother was a rich girl and she was his cousin. They both were not

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**6**

raised Jewish, they had never been in a synagogue. The grandparents already, their parents were trying to assimilate. It was the time of **Dreyfus** in **France**. It was the time when a boy couldn't get into medical school if he was Jewish and so on and so on. So they got baptized I think, when they were very young, they were cousins. I think they were either 18 or 19. And so, no Jewish religion at all. And then comes **Hitler**. And then, he's in **Holland** and he's professor of medicine, pharmacology, st -- and **MD, PhD** and the immigrants are coming and he helps them and these were Jews who were Jews. Whether they were religious or not, they were marked as Jews and had to be helped. I have never, ever forgiven my father, it's also in my book, that in 1941, when the Germans came with this kind of ... ordering people to fill in forms where they had to put in whether they had one or two or three or four Jewish grandparents, he was so fucking German, that he filled in four. He could have gotten by with filling in none or one and he would have gotten by and I've never forgiven him for that. Because this was again the -- what do you call this? Buckling under, because of the army, the militaries, my father was an officer in the German army in the first World War. This is all, incidentally, in the g -- book of my dissertation in German. The editor has written a t -- an, what do you call it? Introduction, in which he<sup>7</sup> explained what my background is and my struggle with being German by ... let's say, by genes. But not in feeling. And my father -- let me give you the story, because this is -- all had -- all to do with later on the concentration camp. My father is born in a -- in 1880. He marries in 1905, his cousin. They marry in **Germany**, they are both baptized. He is finished with medica -- medical school in **Heidelberg**. She has no profession. They marry in 1905, in 1912 he is called by the University of **Groningen** in **Holland**, to

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<sup>7</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "she."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

7

come as an assistant professor, because he had made his name in pharmacology. He is, incidentally, the guy who later on, in **Amsterdam**, in his laboratory, did develop testosterone. So he became a very famous pharmacologist and physician and whatever. So 1912 he goes to **Groningen**. My three older brothers and sisters are born already. 1912 I'm not born yet. No, 19 f -- two were born in **Germany**, the third one was also not born -- was 14<sup>8</sup>. 1912, he's in **Groningen**, he's very happy, they have moved their two children and his wife and he is in **Holland**. The war breaks out, 1914, he volunteers -- that you should **tay**<sup>9</sup> to a Dutch child -- he volunteers to go into the army as a medical officer. So he goes into the **ROTC**, whatever it is in **Germany** and what do they do? They stick him, because he's a pharmacologist, he's the -- in the -- occupying German army of **Belgium**. He works with the gas, with the -- what we call today, the **Saddam Hussein** kick ass<sup>10</sup>, because as a pharmacologist, they develop...nitrogen, mustard, you name it. Later on I come across that again in **Sloan-Kettering** in '53, because the first chemo is a mustard thing. Anyway -- and the result of this is, although he never, ever worked on arms, that the Belgians say you get capital punishment if you ever come to **Belgium** after the war. This means that we lived in **Holland** already, because in nine -- let me -- I'm jumping. 1914 is in **Belgium** for -- I don't know whether it was '16 or '17, I -- that I don't know. '18 the war is over, 1919 the Dutch want him back. And this time they want him in **Amsterdam** and they give him a professorship, a full chair pharmacology, **MD**, whatever and a laboratory. So he goes. He packs up -- by then his four children, **Renata** has been born. **Lilo** comes later, she's born in **Holland**. And -

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<sup>8</sup> **R.L.:** 1914

<sup>9</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "say."

<sup>10</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "**Saddam Hussein** use of gas"

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**8**

- why am I telling you this? And then in **Holland**, he -- is still 1932<sup>11</sup>, he is a German citizen. In 1933 he becomes a Dutch citizen, with his children becoming Dutch because he wanted<sup>12</sup>, he makes his money, he's there, the children are Dutch. It had nothing to do with **Hitler**, it was just before. And we become Dutch. But I was always second generation. So this may be also, just as I'm talking to you, why somewhere I'm more American, because this is -- was my free choice.

Q: You -- on the ph -- when we spoke on the phone a while back, you said that you weren't Jewish enough for the Holocaust Museum.

A: I'm not Jewish enough for the Holocaust Museum in that sense, that I cannot even ask whether they, let's say, give me any sponsorship of any of the really Orthodox, or purely Jewish organizations, the **U.G.A.**<sup>13</sup> or whatever.

Q: Do you feel Jewish?

A: I've never been in a synagogue.

Q: Do you feel Jewish?

A: No. If I feel anything -- and that it -- religion, and this is interesting because it comes out when I'm very sick or when there is major disaster, I pray and I was raised also in a Dutch reformed school environment, so I am basically Calvinist, but I've had Catholic boyfriends, Jewish boyfriends, so that's -- but I feel very, very, very un-Jewish.

Q: Do you have any spiritual practice?

A: Any spiritual what?

Q: Practice. Was there an -- you said you prayed.

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<sup>11</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "is still **in** 1932."

<sup>12</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "...with his children becoming Dutch because he wanted **this**."

<sup>13</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "U.J.A."



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**9**

A: Yeah, I pray, but with a shopping list. Or thankful God<sup>14</sup> that I came through or that I'm still here. Never just pray. I pray with a shopping list.

Q: Do you --

A: God make me do this or let me have this or let it continue or discontinue, you know. I manipulate God. My --

Q: Have you ever read the Bible? Old Testament?

A: Oh yeah, I have read the Bible and the Bible, but I read the Bible more as literature. And as a cultural background, just as you -- you -- you read whatever, you know, in Liberal Arts.

Q: Y-You said that when you -- when you pray, it's -- it's to manipulate? Those were your words?

A: I never thought of this, but I just said it. I don't know, you see that's a good question, why do I pray? Do I -- I pray of a mixture of guilt from I have to thank Him or I have to be angry or I have to do something. I definitely pray when I'm in trouble. But I also pray when I'm very happy. In between I forget.

Q: Do you --

A: I have to go to the bathroom.

Q: Okay.

A: That is mine... Did you find it?

Q: Yes. Thank you.

A: The coffee? ... What we are talking about is to my mind, cultural history.

Q: So I -- I want to get back to this Jewish thing for just a little bit, because so much of what happened to you, or everything that happened to you was predicated on your being Jewish.

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<sup>14</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "Or thankful **to** God."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

10

A: You mean the concentration camp? The concentration camp, yes. On the other hand, I'm not sure at all, I might have ended up in the same concen -- or in another concentration camp if I would have been plain Dutch and working in the -- what is it -- resistance. I don't know anybody who did not not work in the resistance. It's very interesting, the people of my **gymnasium** class, of my let's say, high school class, out of 22, 10 died -- but a percentage and this was a non-Jewish school, which means they didn't come back. D-Don't forget we had the Japanese occupation and the German occupation. At least three of, or four of my classmates were in Japanese prisoner of war, men or women. The other ones were either picked up because they were in the resistance -- and one other one was Jewish. So you see, the percentage in **Holland** is unbelievable, because it's not comparable to **France** or **Denmark** or **Belgium**. Because **Belgium** had a...military command, **Denmark** was somehow not very serious either. We had one of the very worst Nazis, Himmler-like Seyss-Inquart<sup>15</sup>, who came from **Austria** and in many ways the Austrians were worse. So that was **Holland**. **Holland** had -- the percentage of people dying is enormous. And when you say the Jewishness has something to do with it, I'm not at all convinced of that. Because **Bergen-Belsen**, yes, but either **Dachau** or one of the female camp, **Ravensbrück** -- I read up on all these concentration camp because of my diary preoccupation in the dissertation. So the Jewishness -- and on the other hand, I also feel this has been a problem after the war was over -- that it didn't bring me closer to the whole Jewish problem. Because it would be naturally that I would say okay, they persecuted me, I didn't feel really part of it, but now I want to be part of it. I moved away from it. The more -- I thought about it before you came here and I thought if I add up who are my friends

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<sup>15</sup> Dr. Seyss-Inquart was appointed to oversee occupied Holland.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

11

today and sociologically or that is -- yeah, sociologic -- where are they from? If you take 10 people, there are at least seven who are not Jewish. And this is in **New York**. A kind of, an almost -- to me it's not conscious, it's subconscious, but I avoid it carefully -- on a -- I don't know on what level, I can't -- can't even explain it. It has to do with friends, with relationships with men, friendships with women and it -- the really deepest involvements were with non-Jews. Both husbands, the first husband was baptized, is today **Paul**, lives in **Germany**<sup>16</sup>. He married a woman who was 35 years younger. That is his third marriage and the second one was Dutch nobility. He had four children with her, the third one is 35 years younger, **dee**<sup>17</sup> wasn't even born yet<sup>18</sup>. He's 84 and we are corresponding, we see each other each time when I'm in **Germany** and we still love each other. We're friends. But he also has veered away from anything which is Jewish -- was fully Jewish born, parents were not even baptized. But you either go with or you do totally without. I have never realized it until now, when I get such interviews that I think. I said, "How does it tally up?" And I figured it out last night. Never thought about it.

Q: What ef-effect on your thinking --

A: The business of the ten -- ta -- take this -- this building where I live. There are Jewish people, non-Jewish, just on -- one or two blacks, this is today, everything is mixed, especially now on the east side. And when people ask me what are you -- you know, the holidays come. I said, "I'm nothing, but Merry Christmas." Th-th-that's it. So there is something -- I know one thing, that if I wouldn't have any racially Jewishness, I would have been fanatically pro-Jewish.

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<sup>16</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "...Paul, **who** lives in Germany."

<sup>17</sup> **R.L.:** she

<sup>18</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "she wasn't even born yet **during Hitler**."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**12**

Q: Why?

A: Because I would like to help them, because they were forever persecuted, they're forever the underdog and at the same time there are many things I don't like.

Q: Do you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah? Neither? Both?

A: Hm?

Q: Do you celebrate Christmas or Hanukkah?

A: I celebrate Christmas, I've it -- I still have a tree. Now the problem is, in my own family in **America**, I have a sister in **America**, here, who -- some of the kids got married to Jews, then they got divorced and so on and so on. Some of them became lesbians, some of them became homo and th-the -- the all break up of families<sup>19</sup>. But Christmas and **Hannu--** in that family.

Q: What about Passover?

A: And God forbid if you wouldn't have a Christmas tree.

Q: Do you relate to Passover? Freedom from oppression, all of that?

A: Don't e-ed-ed -- you know that I only learned about this here? I never heard about it. And so this -- this is -- don't forget I went to school till I was, let's see, 18. Then I come back, then **Hitler** comes and somewhere I grew up with the whole German-Dutch culture of Protestantism. Christmas, Easter, always two days at Christmas, two days at Easter. You know, first day, second day. **Jesus** goes back to -- to the -- to heaven, it's two days, right after Easter, six weeks after. I mean all those holidays, I still have them in my head. So it's what you were raised into. And at the same time, a father who joined the German army and who dealt in gas? Can you imagine what that does to a...so-

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<sup>19</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "...and **all this turns into** the break up of families."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**13**

called Dutch child? And today I just tell myself -- not necessarily a war criminal.

Q: You said in that first interview --

A: Pardon?

Q: In that first interview, you s -- when you were talking about your father joining the German army --

A: What did I say?

Q: You said, "I hated to be my father's daughter."

A: Ah, yeah. That comes out again, my -- that's why my editor in **Germany** put that down and she said, she made peace with her father before he died, because I told them<sup>20</sup> all of that.

Q: You still h -- sounds like you still hate being your father's daughter.

A: Yeah, because isn't the father figure some -- somebody you want to be very proud of? How come I married a man who was 18 years older? So I'm -- I'm very conflicted.

Q: How has the --

A: Since that time I've never had a guy who is not 20 years younger than that.

Q: You have a boyfriend now?

A: Yeah, 25 years younger.

Q: Good for you. This guy?

A: Look -- look at the picture there, with the color picture, here, o -- here, where I point.

Q: This one here?

A: In the orange vest.

Q: Okay.

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<sup>20</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "him."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**14**

A: That's **California**.

Q: Jewish?

A: No, Danish. But -- put it off for a second.

Q: Okay.

A: Do with life, they have to do with father<sup>21</sup>, with being a daughter who is trying to be obedient and being molded because he was a very, very interesting and important man. Short of the Nobel Prize, he had everything. Was a good-looking guy too. So --

Q: How did that influence your desire to keep learning and -- and becoming someone?

A: I got even with him, in the sense of he had always said -- when I was 18 and when I wanted to go to the university in **Amsterdam**, he said, "What do you want to go to the university for? You good looking, you're beautiful, you'll marry anywhere." One of those. And I said, "Yeah, but I want an education." And he said, "Not now." So finally, in **America**, I was 40 exactly when I went for my **BA**. And I finished, I was 51 with a **PhD**, working and so on and so on. But only to prove I could do it. But politically and sociologically and genealogically, I understand and this is where I have full understanding when I'm in **Germany**, that people are not necessarily war criminals, if they go along with what is happening. And if they don't want to see what may be the dark side, because don't we all do this today? What gives us the right to say, "How could they?" I think if I -- the only thing where I think that of as unforgivable, is that they really didn't think at all, that they were just applauding and obeying and this is why I love **America** and this is why I love

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<sup>21</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "All of this has to do with my father..."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

15

**Holland**, because we disobey. We make up our own minds. You have it today again.

Q: Okay. How did that influence --

A: The **Clinton** scandal. I don't care, you can put it on. I was absolutely devastated about two, three weeks ago when this **bisery**<sup>22</sup> started, because I said -- I voted for **Clinton** and I told myself, the guy is doing everything right, I know there's something wrong sexually, but who the hell cares what he does, whether he lets his pants up or down, that's **Hillary's** problems. But then you get into the impact to the children<sup>23</sup>. I mean, when a child says, "What's a president?" And you have to explain oval -- oral sex, it becomes very complicated. And that's where I start being ashamed of being American because this is something, it wouldn't happen in **Europe**. They would have said, "Fuck it. It's his problem." Mrs. **Mitterrand**, even the scandal in **Britain**, when they had the minister who had to leave -- that's years ago, because he had an affair, so what? But not a president. So.

Q: Y-You mention often, your kind of independence, your **chutzpah**, manipulative, t-to use your words. How do you think that influenced your ability to get through all those situations that you found yourself in?

A: Oh that -- that has nothing to do with m-my father. I think children are the -

Q: No, I don't mean from the father, I mean that you have, you talk about the independent spirit of the Dutch and the Americans and that's what you relate to. In your first interview, you talk a lot about, you know, your -- your **chutzpah**, you're -- you know, if I don't get this out of you, I'm going to dunk

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<sup>22</sup> **R.L.:** misery

<sup>23</sup> **R.L.:** "But then you get the impact **on** the children."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

16

you underwater and you scream back, “Well, how can I talk if I'm underwater?”

A: Yeah, th-th-that's right -- right -- right -- right.

Q: How much do you think that has to do --

A: It's also realism. I mean, common sense. You s-- maybe that's also partially Dutch, they are very down to earth, very much down to earth and below the belt. So the functional thing, and you have to somehow -- there is the puncturing of pomposity. Let's say we all are terribly emotional and happy or not happy or we blow ourselves up and be, w-we want to be this and we want to be that. There is something in the Dutch and in the education, where they have a beautiful word for it, is **aansteller**. Which means you pretend to be something. And the Dutch come with a pin and the balloon is **kaput**. They puncture all this and that is survival also. So if -- and if the Germans scream and rant and rave and obey **gehoorzaam**, you have to be -- like my father did, you have to obey the rules, the military, you know, the whole business, the **humpa**<sup>24</sup>. We laughed as kids. We said, “What's the matter with those guys? Why can't they walk normal, why can't they behave normal?” And that's survival. That helped me. Besides, it also helps if you're good looking. I was good looking.

Q: Still are.

A: But I don't know, is that so way -- is that something special? To be -- it has also something to d-- it has nothing to do with humility, but maybe it has something to do, gee whiz, I'm not that important. What's important is I do not want to be pushed around and stepped upon and be destroyed. That is crucial.

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<sup>24</sup> **Humpa**: nonsense



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

17

It came back in the cancer, in my treatment. It came back in the whole business of you do this or that. I said, "I won't do anything unless I understand it."

Q: You've had a number of illnesses.

A: And this today, is medicine. The attitude of the patient, which helps or not helps, but you have to argue. Do you agree with me, by the way? Put it off for a second ... Do you understand why I had five hours with **Joan**?

Q: You're a good talker.

A: She -- at that time -- five hours and 15 minutes video. What you saw is only part of it. **Joan** was incredible, she asked things which -- to give you one example, when she said, "Why did you write a diary? When did you write?" I suddenly came up with this answer, "Because I traveled." Just as suddenly, I realized last night, when I told myself, "What am I going to tell **Karen**? How do I stand in this and this and this?" And then I came up with those, out of 10 friends, seven or eight are non-Jewish. So there is all these things come out from<sup>25</sup>.

Q: How has that first interview affected you, now that you look back on it?

A: It doesn't affect me at all. By now nothing can happen to me any more. All I want to do is stay on top and stay alive and not end up as a homeless person. So I'm trying to have too much -- th-th-the money I have goes -- that's why I asked you whether you have children -- the money goes to my nephew and nieces and they will say, "I wished she would have spent a little more on herself." But the hell with it. I do my -- my best.

Q: But has -- has that first interview, where you were asked to remember certain things, helped you remember in any way?

A: How what?

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<sup>25</sup> **R.L.:** "So there is **where** all these things come out from."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

18

Q: Has it helped you remember other things? Having been asked those questions before?

A: The question of whether I -- what helps to remember or --

Q: Yeah, if -- if having that first interview with **Joan** has prompted you to remember more things since then?

A: Yes. And the reason why I protested against having another interview, I think that interview with **Joan**, I have the tape and the interesting thing is only two -- three parties of my friends have seen it, none of my family. I will not show it to my sister, I will not show it to her children because she would fight me. She would say, "That's your problem with Daddy," or this or whatever or this isn't quite so -- I -- which is okay, I would fight it, but she said, "Why do you say that?" And I don't feel that at my age, when I was with **Joan** I was 76, I don't have to defend anything I do. Certainly not with my family. But I see it my way and their way is different. And I don't want any arguments. So the people who have seen it are close friends and I have no **VCR**, so I can't even see it. I refuse to have all that gadgetry. I have no time to read and I've only a television and not even a computer. No e-mail, no nothing. No fax. It's fine.

Q: In -- in that first, in -- you wrote a letter to **Joan** afterwards that you t -- where you mentioned the -- and I'm not going to get the words right, repressed memories that came out from doing that interview, repressed --

A: The what?

Q: Repressed and buried memories.

A: I have all that stuff here. If you want me to I can look it up, there's --

Q: No, that's okay.

A: No, but -- depressed memories --

Q: These are repressed.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**19**

A: Re? Oh, repressed. Constantly.

Q: Repressed and buried memories.

A: You see repression works -- that's another thing. If I meet people, let's say when I meet **Paul** in **Germany** or when I'm at my sister in **Boston**, she remembers things in a different way from I do and when I talk and then she says, "Don't you remember this?" I said, "I have not the vaguest idea what you're talking about." I have honestly repressed it. There are so many things where I know that I don't remember a single name. How often do I run into people who ask me, "Did you know **Anne Frank**?" That's the first thing they ask. Did you know this or this or that? I said, "There were thousands of people. I've seen thousands of corpses. Maybe 500 living people, versus 10,000 corpses. I can't tell you what anybody looked like. It's all gone." And it comes back in -- any time when I'm in **Germany**, when I'm walking in **Bergen-Belsen** or where I am -- I said the first time I was back, when we walked over the -- they say the grounds of **Bergen-Belsen**, I said, "I'm walking on my grave, I should have been dead. I should have been one of those here." There's no guilt feeling, many people have guilt, I no -- I'm just glad. That's where I say, "Thank God."

**End of Tape One, Side A**

**Beginning of Tape One, Side B**

A: How do repressed things come out? When you least expect them. There's something which triggers it, either a question, or a smell or a meeting, or whatever and suddenly it all comes back. And I have really, strangely enough, no problem with that, because if I don't want to think about it, I'm like **Scarlett**, I say, "I'll never be hungry again," and I won't think about it. I just

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

20

know I will never be hungry or dirty again. I'd rather die. And that I have lived by. These are my two tenets, **Scarlett**.

Q: What are your favorite foods?

A: Hm?

Q: What are you favorite foods?

A: Light. Everything without fat. Salads, berries, the hell with it? Cookies, but only one or two and then I can eat a jar of cookies and then not eat them for a year. Favorite foods, light, fresh, clean. And never, ever fat.

Q: Why?

A: I already screamed as a child. When I got older, whipped cream as a -- with a German mother and a German grandmother and a **Kuchen mit der Schlagsahne**<sup>26</sup> and the coffee with the **Schlagsahne** and the gravy which was -- had little eyes on it, you know, the thing. And I was screaming. I had an aversion against fat. What do I end up with? Colon cancer, **hypercholesterolemia**. Genetic. I can only tell you it had nothing to do with anything, but I still have the aversion. And I remember in **Holland**, I hated the butter and the cheese.

Q: Are there --

A: But I wanted the peanuts and the fresh vegetables. I didn't know there was such a thing as light milk, didn't exist. We didn't have any idea what good food was. We always had heavy stuff. Think of your mother's kitchen. Think of Easter, of Christmas, of Hanukkah, whatever you want to do, all that stuff. **IB, mein Kind**, eat.

Q: Do you cook?

A: Hm?

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<sup>26</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "Kuchen mit Schlagsahne."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**21**

Q: Do you cook?

A: I love it. If I -- if I can cook quick. I don't want to spend time in the kitchen. But I'd -- I like to cook if I can stay -- stay away from the recipe. I get the idea and then I start. Then I have no idea and then occasionally I write it down. And then I do something else. It's the same where as this one.

Q: In --

A: I draw, I write, I cook, I do everything, because the whole family is artistic. This is my mother's painting, this is my brother's painting, it's all over. Psychiatrists, psychologists, this is my sister's painting. Everybody paints. And I draw only when I'm on vacation. Only architecture. So -- and this I did out of anger. I came for the first time from **Italy**, in 1959, in **Venice** and we needed a coffee table and I wanted to do what I had seen in **Venice**, these beautiful, beautiful **colors**. And my husband said, "You know what? Do your thing." I said, "I'll make a coffee table." He said, "How do you do that?" I said, "We go buy glass, we go buy things." And I smashed the glass. I got rid of my aggression and we put it in together and I made sure that it wouldn't be concentric. And then I got a little Chinese who helped me to put it together and he said, "That's it." And I've done this ever since. So, if you ask me what I like to do, I like to improvise. Studies the same way. I went to **NYU Columbia**, to get a degree, so I would be able to talk Spanish, because he'd been in **Cuba** and we had Spanish friends and I ended up, because of my course work, in Irish literature. I ended up with comparative literature and that's it.

Q: And then you went on to do more studies.

A: What?

Q: Then you went on to do more studies, after?

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

22

A: Well, I had to do -- da -- da -- now comes -- now comes, how did I get to the dissertation? And this is, of course, part of this whole thing, because you see, how come, if your life was so different in **America**. I was married to a psychiatrist, we didn't have much money because he had divorced and I didn't have the money yet, which would come free from **Holland**, only much later. And we were doing things in a very frugal way, but we had a lot of fun in **New York**. **New York** in the 50's was great. You could go to the theater for four dollars and to the movie for 50 cents. We went in the afternoon to the movies, in the evening to the theater, so that was fine. But... in 1965, the diary I'd kept in -- in the camp, was published in **Holland**, as a paperback. And a friend of mine took care of that and she went to a good Dutch publisher and that was it and when I studied at **NYU** -- I don't know whether it's on the first tape, I don't think so. When I studied at **NYU**, it was between '60 and '71. Already, before the **BA**, I realized I don't want to have anything really to do with Spanish, I want English literature. Because it was a foreign literature for me. It opened up vistas. And my American lit professor said, when I wrote papers, he said, "**Renata**, you write well, have you ever written anything?" I said, "Sure. I wrote stories in **Holland** and I wrote for women's magazine and I always liked to report things. And I have a diary." He said, "What kind?" I said, "A Dutch diary in **Bergen-Bel** --<sup>27</sup>." He said, "**Ey? Anne Frank?**" I said, "No **Anne Frank**." I said, "I wrote in a camp and it is in Dutch and it's published." He said, "Can I read it?" I said, "If you can read Dutch, you can read it." He said, "Will you translate it?" I said, "Why would I?" It was 1963 or something. And he said, "Do me a favor, translate it. I'll get you somebody to help you with it, from **NYU**, a graduate student. You dictate and he puts it in a typewriter." We

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<sup>27</sup> **R.L.: Bergen-Belsen**

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

23

didn't have a computer at that time. So I dictated and he did it and I still have that, I have the manuscript. It's still bad English because my English wasn't as good, was 25 years -- 30 years ago. Anyway, he tried at that time to get it to publishers. He tried everyone, from the biggies to the small ones, from Random House to everywhere and they all said, "It's not sexy enough, not violent enough, understated. It's **Hemingway**-like understated." So nothing happened, forgot about it. Then comes the dissertation, where my husband says on a beach in **Turkey**, when I say I want to write the dissertation, 1969, about the aviator in literature or the doctor in literature. He said, "Are you crazy? You're never going to get finished. Why don't you take your diary and find other diaries. You know they were written. Get a fellowship, do it." I did. Got it in a year and a half. So this is how the diary and then the -- the diary -- the di -- dissertation was done, he dies. To my mind, he -- his death came earlier and I felt very guilty about it, because I had been totally absorbed for two years in getting this stuff out of the way. And that's when you said to me, my husband didn't take to it too much when I went back to school. **Deso** fully understood my total dedication, was completely wrapped up with it himself, read everything I wrote, criticized very constructively, but was dead tired of the whole stuff, because I was -- I had also been in **Germany** in between and of course did whole stuff to digest that. I defended my dissertation in May 1971. He was dead 19th of November, '71. That meant -- he had congestive heart failure, he had smoked himself to death. And he kind of gave up. And that's it.

Q: What was your second husband's name?

A: Till '71 November, he died at **New York** Hospital.

Q: What was his name?

A: **Deso**, he was **D-D-Deso-Desiderio Weiss**. Anyway --

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

24

Q: Beautiful name.

A: Middle name?

Q: No, b-beautiful name, does it re--

A: Yeah, okay, he was **Desiderio** and I was **Renata**, so the one was the wished for, the other one was the reborn one, so when he met me, he said, "My God, I always wanted to meet a **Renata**." I said, "I never wanted to meet a

**Desiderio**." But whatever. This story I have to tell and I think this should be on tape. How did I meet him after the war? It's not on the f -- on the tape in --

Q: I wanted to ask you about these things, so good, let's go ahead with it.

A: Yeah, but now I'm going to tell you. And I leave out all the -- the titillating things, I just leave in the fact, it's good enough.

Q: Titillation is fact.

A: I -- I married -- I married<sup>28</sup>, since 1941, to **Paul**, who was my buddy, five years older, we had a wonderful relationship. He was the first man for me and we come back from the concentration camp, as he says today, I know I saved his life, so he is totally grateful and happy and whatever, we are good friends. Our marriage was on the rocks, because I don't know, I said this already on the tape, but I'm saying it again, I don't know any marriage which survived the concentration camp if they both were there. Because they grew apart. Same thing with prisoners of war in **Japan** and even **Vietnam**, I know all these things happen. **Paul** and I grew apart, he married, I remarried, how did I remarry? In 1950, I'm his wife and I write stories and I help him with his practice, he was a speech therapist and I'm a housewife. And I'm pretty happy. We had had a child, the child died. He had a girlfriend, I had boyfriends. We

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<sup>28</sup> **R.L.:** "I was married."



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

25

lived a very much after the war life<sup>29</sup>, growing apart and still together. In 1950, in July, he tells me, "We have an international congress of speech pathology, why don't you work for that?" And I became the sec -- the treasurer for that, big deal. In August 1950, the treasurer of that international convention comes from **New York** and my husband **Paul** tells me, "He is the guy you should have married. Because I met him when I studied in **Vienna** before the war." He had studied with him, speech pathology and whatever. And he said, "He is older than you, but this is exactly what you should have m -- cause you should have ne-never married me, we know that." I said, "Okay, I'm not going to marry him, I'm -- I'm not going divorcing you. I'm okay." A week later I asked him for a divorce. I said, "You're absolutely right, this is the guy I'm going to marry. He doesn't know it yet. I know I'm going to marry him." Ah, let's see. I went with the guy to **Paris**, with the -- with my second husband and it was a wildly beautiful affair, 18 years older. And he said, "I'm married, I have no children, a very unhappy marriage." I said, "I know." I knew that already from **Paul**, from **Vienna**, from 1936. He had said, "He has a very unhappy marriage." And so on. He said, "I love you, but we will never, ever get together because I live in **New York**, I have no money. I have to restudy, do my medicine over again. I have -- I'm only beginning and my wife will never let me go." I said, "Leave it to me. I'm immigrating." That's how I got to **Canada**, that's how I got to **America**. I divorced **Paul**, 1950. I said -- he had a girlfriend. I went to his girlfriend and I said, "I'm leaving. I'm going to **Canada**. Please marry **Paul**, he can't be alone." She said, "I won't marry a Jew." I said, "You can live with him and you<sup>30</sup> can be your boyfriend and you

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<sup>29</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "We lived a very much **an** after the war life..."

<sup>30</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "he."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

26

won't marry him?" She said, "My family wouldn't let me." I said, "He's not a Jew, he's baptized." Any -- could we go over this, she married him, they have four children. This is the **Paul** who then married the German girl. I went to **America**. My second husband we -- for a year we corresponded because I couldn't get, til about '52, out of **Holland**. It took me that long, the immigration, to get out, to wind up everything and in between he had come once, on borrowed money. He had borrowed money from my brother because he didn't have money. And we met in **Amsterdam** and in **Switzerland** and in **Paris** again and he went home in 1951 and he said, "We'll never see each other." I said, "Leave it to me." I immigrated. I was a year in **Montreal**, I came to **New York** and it took us four years to get married.

Q: When you were in **Montreal**, did you see each other?

A: He came. I couldn't come back and he came every four, five weeks and I lived at the "Y". So.

Q: Why did it take four years?

A: His wife wouldn't give him a divorce. We'd made the usual mistakes, I had written him beautiful, explicit letters. The typical story, he -- she had found them before the jacket went to the cleaners and she said, "I'll run her out of the country, if she ever comes in. This is moral turpitude." It was also the **McCarran** time. I had trouble already coming in because I had signed something in **Europe**, which had something to do with the **Picasso** peace movement. So this would be today, let's say, the peaceniks, that would have been something like in the 60's here. There were problems, politically. They --

Q: Talk about that a little bit more. So you were a political activist before you --

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

27

A: I was a political activist in **Holland**. I was always a liberal, I always wanted to be -- I-I made up for the lost time in the concentration camp.

Q: So, what'd you do?

A: Be liberal, vote for the right people, help people, think about it, do things. I always did, I still --

Q: So -- so were you working at the time as well?

A: I was working, I was --

Q: Doing what?

A: I worked in an office, I wrote stories for women's magazines. I don't know, I was a young, active person.

Q: You were in **Amsterdam**, or --

A: In **Amsterdam**. **Montreal** -- in **Montreal** I went to school.

Q: But are y-you --

A: I went to **McGill**.

Q: Okay, wait a second, you're brushing over this and this is really interesting to me, okay? So you were writing stories for women's magazines?

A: For women's magazine and what I usually wrote about was either love story or -- oh I forgot, I was a fashion reporter. I won a **Vogue** prize, first prize **Vogue**, 1949. That is something I'm more proud of than the **PhD**. 1949, there is a competition. Combine a wardrobe for -- for a woman from 18 to 80. You can only have 10 pieces. And send us that and this was **Vogue International**. And I told myself, that's something I've been doing my whole life. So you combine the bottom, with the top, with the middle, with the upper, with the evening, with the middle, with the s -- beach, whatever. I had 10 pieces and I put them on a postcard, I drew them. One goes with one-A, 10 goes with this<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> **R.L.**: Renata wants this to read "One goes with one-A, 10 goes with **two-B**, etc."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

28

I got number one prize from the **Vogue** and this was the paper in **Holland**, let's say the **New York Times** of **Holland**. And I got the first prize and I said, "What's the prize?" She said, "We want you to report the fashion shows when they come to **Amsterdam**." That was **Dior** at the time, the new look, '47, '48, nine<sup>32</sup>. And we will send you to **Paris** and you can have a dress and you can have perfume and you can have this and become a fashion reporter. So I did this for a year. And I had a press card, so when I went to **Montreal**, I still had a press card. So this is how I got into fashion and the fashion has remained with me, in a way that I'm still very interested, but I've never done anything. But it was again the competitive spirit.

Q: How so? You wanted to win, or?

A: What I really -- what I always forget to tell -- in 1938, when I had my **gymnasium**, classical, nothing. I want to either study or become a fashion designer. And I said, I told them this in the -- in -- I think in -- in **Washington**. In **refar**<sup>33</sup> to my father, "I want to go to **Paris**, I want to become a designer." He said, "My daughter is not a whore." Just like that. **Meine Tochter ist keine Hure**. "You do not go to **Paris**. You can study after you've been to secretarial school." I also had another year of schooling. I learned to be a teacher. So I had -- I had all kinds of what I call skilled schools. And the fashion was always somewhere in my mind and in **Bergen-Belsen**, in the diary I have fashion drawings. And when they published the diary in **Germany** now and the book about the diary, there was an exposition in **Bergen-Belsen** where they took the drawings of the camp inmates and they asked me permission, "Can we

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<sup>32</sup> R.L.: '49

<sup>33</sup> R.L.: reference

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

29

put those fashion drawings?"<sup>34</sup> I said, "Do what you want to, I don't care." So they magnified them and they enlarged them and they're in **Bergen-Belsen**.

Q: What were you w --

A: The fashion doodles.

Q: Okay, but what were you wearing in **Bergen-Belsen** at the time you were doing these?

A: What was I wearing? An overall, an old sweater and lipstick. This is survival and I think I said this in -- maybe I said it in **Washington**, but I may - - may not have said it. When the Germans arrested me on the 18th of February, 1943, they took me to jail and you<sup>35</sup> said, "You have -- you can pack something and you can take something," so I said to **Paul** -- **Paul** wasn't arrested. I said, "I'll take the best sweater I have, I take perfume and I take my lipstick." He said, "Are you crazy?" I said, "Leave it to me." I always had lipstick. I traded in the perfume for food in **Bergen-Belsen**, I traded always something. But the lipstick and it has been ever since, it is protest against my father. When, in 1937, the year before I graduated **gymnasium** high school, I was at the wedding of my oldest brother, who married a Catholic girl from **Brabant**. Was a beautiful, Catholic wedding. And I had a dress which was eh, something I didn't like, but you know, teenage stuff. And I had my first lipstick on. My father walked across the hall in that hotel where the reception was. He came with his napkin. He spit on the napkin and he wiped off my lipstick, in public. "My daughter doesn't wear lipstick." So the lipstick fixation came from something. I know where things come from. And that's not repressed. So there's the lipstick. **Basta**.

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<sup>34</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "Can we put **in** those fashion drawings?"

<sup>35</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "...they took me to jail and said."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**30**

Q: When you drew these, when you made these drawings of fashion, what kind of fashions were you drawing?

A: Hm?

Q: What kinds of fashions were you drawing?

A: What I was drawing was always sporty stuff, it was always what I would say **Calvin Klein**-like. It was understated, always combinable. Nothing -- nothing romantic. Very wearable. So something -- I have suits which are -- I have cashmere sweaters which are from Liberty 1971. They're indestructible. Because I don't believe in anything which is high fashion. It has to fit the person, it has to fit the circumstances and it must be wearable at all times. Then it's fashion.

Q: It seems --

A: I hate diamonds. Love pearls

Q: You have a beautiful ring on.

A: Okay.

Q: It is, it's beautiful.

A: Yeah, okay, that's my so-called wedding ring.

Q: What do you mean so-called?

A: It's not a wedding ring, it's nothing.

Q: From which -- which marriage?

A: Second marriage.

Q: Why do you still wear it?

A: Hm?

Q: Why do you still wear it?

A: I didn't -- I didn't -- I bought it in **Holland**, in 1970, just after I had come back -- the other one had broken, I had a gold band, which I can't wear any

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

31

more anyway, it's a plain gold band. In **Holland**, in 1970, I had just come back from **Munich**. I'd worked on the dissertation. I saw in a store in **Holland**, this ring and I told myself, we have never had the money, we have never done any fancy stuff. Let me buy the ring and show it to **Deso** when I come home, whether he like it. It wasn't expensive. He loved it. He said, "It's your wedding ring." I said, "But you didn't buy it." He said, "You bought it, because I wasn't there." That's the wedding ring.

Q: Do you think --

A: It's not a wedding ring.

Q: Do you think of yourself as a very sentimental person?

A: Not... no, it's strange that you say sentimental. I think I'm more faithful than sentimental. I believe in continuation, in continuity. And it's funny that you asked that question, I have never thought about it. What I'm saying is what I'm really thinking. Continuity in a life which has been a constant fight against chaos. And remains a life against cha<sup>36</sup> -- fight against chaos. We talked about God and praying, what I mainly pray for or am thankful for is continuity. If you come out of a concentration camp, if you come out of metastatic colon cancer, third degree, at an institute like **Sloan-Kettering** and you have a year of chemo and you can only take five months of this crap because the side effects are too bad. And if you then come back and struggle and are almost better than before, that's continuity. And sentimental, yes I am. Because when **John Glenn** decided or **Clinton** decided that **John Glenn**, whatever -- whatever plays up, will be in space this year, I got sentimental. I felt, hey, this is great, I was there. And I saw that and I was really grown up when he was doing that. It was 1960 -- whatever it was, '69 was the moon, so this must have

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<sup>36</sup> **R.L.:** chaos

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

32

been '62 or three. So I was just studying and now **Glenn**, who was my same age, one year younger, is going into space, then I tell myself, he's doing the impossible. That's continuity.

Q: The way you describe contin --

A: That's sentimental. That is pure sentimental because it has nothing to do with anything. It's just a sentiment that I admired the guy. I didn't particularly like him as a politician, but I liked him as an astronaut.

Q: The way you describe continuity sounds more like what someone else would call survival.

A: Yeah but, is survival really -- you see, the trouble with survival is I'm not only talking about physical, because when I mentioned the physical, it's not too -- of course the cancer and I mentioned concentration camp, it's the physical, but I'm also talking about mental survival, spiritual survival. The mere fact of those, that's why I'm so bitter about the publication. The fact that there were people who had the spiritual resistance, defiance, to write under these circumstances, that to me is continuity, that to me is c-- survival, but that should be published. And so what, so if **Anne**<sup>37</sup> diary -- writes diary while she is hiding, the danger is there, but it's not the danger of a concentration camp.

Q: Why did you decide to kind of come out, in effect, with the diary an-and traveling and speaking--

A: Why did I decide to come out? I had the diary, I'm an orderly person, I decided I p -- put this all together, I never thought of publication, never. Just as **Paul** had a notebook about -- he was doing speech therapy in **Bergen-Belsen**. He had this notebook with him and the most unhappy thing which happened to him was not that he came out weighing 80 pounds instead of 200,

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<sup>37</sup> **R.L.:** Anne Frank diary



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

33

but that that notebook was gone. He is still talking about it, I just saw his interview in **Germany**. He's still unhappy about the notebook. So if I would have lost my notebook, I would have been quite unhappy. I had given my time, my sleeping time, my energy to this thing. Why did I take it out? It was with me. If I had tried to keep it from bed to bed and straw mattress or wood -- wooden bunk or barrack to barrack, why wouldn't that put it in my wherever. It was this thick.

Q: But y-you held onto it for some time before you decided to make it public.

A: I held on to it -- no, I gave it immediately, the same summer, as I was stuffing myself with food, getting fat, really fat. I was fat til I was 40. That's another story. I come back in July, I need to eat, I need to sleep, I need to screw, I need to do everything normal. And **Paul** says, "Why don't you write -- type up that diary, because nobody can read your thing." I said, "Why not? Nothing better to do." So I sat in the garden of my parents home, at the beach house in **Holland** and I typed. And I typed the manuscript and then I decided, "Why do I type it, I give it to the war documentation, what is the **U.S.**

**Holocaust Museum** in **Holland**, and that's where it sat. And then something happened. Yes. I told you, it happened in **America** and somebody in **Germany** -- no, you will find this in the story of the diary, which I give you. My nephew, the son of my Dutch brother, is a **NATO** officer in **Germany**. And he comes across a page of my diary in German on a stone on the heath of **Lüneburg**, where the **Pershing** weapons on the left, on the west is the English and American, on the right is the Russian. They stand like this, 1950 -- something. He's in the army on the beginning of 1960. And a German historian had f -- se -- written -- seen my diary in the document -- documentary museum in **Holland** or historical institute, he had translated it and somehow seen to it that

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**34**

it got onto a stone in the heath. And my nephew **Matthias**, comes to **America**, he was a student, exchange student. And he says, "Hey, did you know that you're published in **Germany** on a stone?" I said, "How would I know?" **Paul** went there, made a picture, sent me the picture, I immediately throw it out, it was a rotten little picture. Don't even have it, forgot about it. Then comes my studies and the professor here who says, "Why don't you do something about the diary? You have it published, now translate it." So this is how it comes. And then it begins and you get the whole story in there.

Q: Well, let's get it on the tape.

A: I don't have to put that in -- in -- in -- in -- again on tape. How I get the first time to **Germany**, why I'm so worried about interviews because they ask me political things, I don't want to get into.

Q: I want to know about how -- how you felt that first time going to **Germany**.

A: Heh heh, how I felt. I had been in **Germany** in 1970 on my fellowship, my one year, two year fellowship and in 1970, which was 15 years, it's 25 years after the war -- no, 15. How much is 45 of 70? 25 years after the war, it felt to me as if the war was still on. I went to **Munich**. It was May, 1970. This is a crucial moment in **America**. This -- I was in **Munich** -- at<sup>38</sup> **Kent State**, fourth of May, 1970. I never forget it. I was an American, they hated. Because the kids in **Germany** were protesting against **Kent State**. We had **Nixon**, I was a liberal. I had voted whoever it was at the time who was against it -- **Kennedy**, then **Nixon**, then -- **Kennedy**, th-that was -- who was -- came after **Kennedy**, the guy from **Texas**?

Q: **Johnson**.

A: **Johnson**.

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<sup>38</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "during."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

35

**Q: Lyndon Johnson.**

A: But this was already **Nixon**, **Nixon** was bombing **Cambodia** and therefore the **Kent State** started. The war had involved both **Deso** and me because **Deso** was a psychiatrist and kept people out of the war, with certifications. I was at **NYU**, you know, we were all anti, anti, anti. In the beginning we were for it. For the first, I would say, the first three years or two years, '33, '34<sup>39</sup>, whenever we were in, being Europeans, we were for it. Because we saw again the salami. If you give them one piece, you give them everything. The whole Communist **haunt**, the whole business. And then as the war went on, we turned around. But by 1970, we were already in 1968, after **Tonkin**, we turned again. I have family, relatives, nephews who were in the Marines. The non-Jewish part of my family. They were Marines in **Vietnam**, captains, enlisted men, whatever. And those guys turned while they were there. **My Lai**. I mean I'm just giving you examples. You see, when we talk about chaos and continuity. So I'm in **Munich**, 1970, May, for the first time on my fellowship. First **Paris**, then **Amsterdam**, and then **Munich**, to find diaries. And I made one promise to myself, you do not shake hands with anybody who is your own age, you don't talk to anybody who is your own age, because you know that they all lied to you. So, in other words, at the institute where I did my research, if I got a real old guy and a guy who said, "**Gnädige Frau**," kiss your hand, you know, the whole garbage, of the Bavarian **civility**, which is close to the Austrians. I was ice cold. I said, "I need this and this and this from your library, I need this and this and this." I wouldn't fraternize with the younger people already then. When I met people who showed me -- give you one example. The younger people were already, in 1970, 25 years after the war, when I talked to the

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<sup>39</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant '63, '64.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**36**

people who were 20, 25, 30, they had nothing to do with it. And I met younger people in **Munich**. Among others, a young woman who showed me around in **Dachau**. She said, "Do you want to see **Dachau**, now that you want the diaries?" I said, "Of course." I had been a smoker, I smoked, learned to smoke only during the war. In **Dachau**, I hadn't smoked for 16 years. I hadn't smoked from '54 to 1970. In **Dachau**, I said, "I want a cigarette." I smoked again from '70, til '92, til the cancer. They told me at **Sloan-Kettering**, "Do you smoke?" "I smoke very little." He said, "If you smoke, we don't operate." Anyway, so **Germany** was something I did because it wa--

**End of Tape One, Side B**

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

37

**Beginning Tape Two, Side A**

A: -- that's with espresso.

Q: Excellent.

A: Mixed.

Q: Okay, so this is **Renata Laqueur**, tape two. Did you just say that **Germany** was business for you?

A: Business what?

Q: **Germany** was business for you?

A: Yeah, **Germany** was business, Germans meant bringing back a box full of cards. Diaries, which I couldn't get at **Harvard** or **Columbia** or **Washington** or wherever I had gone. Because I knew there was stuff. And I really found six diaries from **Germany** and brought them back. Or five diary, I forget now. And the incredible surprise was the diaries, which were from 1933 to 1945, by Germans in **Dachau**, in **Oranienburg**, near **Berlin** and this is what the dissertation is about. Non-Jews, again.

Q: Interesting.

A: And I didn't make any friends in **Germany**, except I became very friendly with the person who was the lady who showed me around in **Dachau**, who is today a very important person there, because she became someone who is in charge for all the documentation in the area. I've never seen her again, but to give you one example, I become easily friends with people if it is business and interesting. But I will not be intimidated or sentimental just because somebody is nice to me, if I don't trust them. That carried over into 1985. 1985, the diary had been published in 1983 in **Germany**. I had seen the proofs, I had seen the translation and so on and then I had met my diarist, who is hanging up there,

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

38

there's a<sup>40</sup> picture on the left, the young guy. And he had translated it and I had met him in **Amsterdam** and he convinced me to come to **Germany** in May, 1985. As you say in French, in English<sup>41</sup>, **contre-coeur**, against my heart. And I said, "Peter, I'll come, but I hate it." He said, "I'll make it worth your while, you'll meet the people who are like me, who are born in the late 30's or in the early 40's or after the war and you will see that they want to know, they want to help, they want to do." I said, "I don't believe it." I was very Jewish in this respect. Jews never believe anybody would do that. And he said, "I'll prove it." He proved it. He proved it from the moment till he disproved it and I never saw him again. The following -- I've never told anybody this. 1945, in May, I came to **Germany**, he introduced me to the papers, he introduced me to the **Frankfurter Zeitung**. That's where I met the editor who now published my latest article. Everything went wrong. I had always told him, I will meet your family only if you can guarantee me that they were okay. Because I'm not going to be in anybody's house, where you were either involved. You told me that your father had worked in **Bergen-Belsen** as an electrician and that's how you knew. He couldn't help that he worked there, fine, good. I'll meet your family. While I was in May, with him, we spent a day with his family around **Bergen-Belsen**. Were received very nicely, his mother, his father, sister, younger people, right?<sup>42</sup> Very, very nice. When I came back, in '86 for the movie which they had made about him and me walking in **Bergen-Belsen** in 1985, I met him again in **Hannover** and we talked and we again talked about -- he was doing more research about this whole thing and we talked about

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<sup>40</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "his."

<sup>41</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "...or in English."

<sup>42</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say, "**We** were received nicely, **by** his mother, his father, his sister, younger people, right?"

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

39

meeting the wrong or the right people. He said, "I lied to you. My father was in the -- " What is the brown -- the brown shirts? "The **SA**." I said, "Okay. I still love you, but I will never meet you again and I will never meet your family again." That's how you can trust people. I've never seen him again. He has disappeared. Because I told him, "This doesn't make any sense, why didn't you tell me right away? I would -- with you I have no problem. You were born in '44. You published my diary, you've translated it. I would sit by candlelight for your children.<sup>43</sup> With -- with a pen," not with a thing<sup>44</sup>. But I said, "I don't want to be lied to, I don't trust you any more." Bastard. That's it. That's the relationship with **Germany**. It remains that way. If I have friends who tried to whitewash the past, I said, "Look, I don't mind it. I have a father who was a quote unquote 'war criminal.'" In the first World War, that's how they saw him in **Belgium**, but at least I knew about it. I can deal with it. But if I'm told something wrong, I can't deal with it. Then I don't open up. That's chaos. And I am too stupid to lie. Because if I lie, I have to remember when I lie. I can't do that. I may repress it, I may forget it. Reminds me of **Clinton**.

Q: Well in -- in your -- the diary excerpt that I have here, you have this epigraph from **Goethe**, from **Faust**, interestingly enough. And I'm not going to do the German because my German is really horrible, so I'll do the English translation. And you have here --

A: Do you mean the **epinow**<sup>45</sup>, wh-wh-what is on top of the diary?

Q: "What I possess, I see as if from afar; what has vanished--

**[indecipherable]**"<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> **R.L.:** Renata wants this to read "You published my diary, you've translated it, **and you** would sit by candlelight **translating this** for your children."

<sup>44</sup> **R.L.:** typewriter

<sup>45</sup> **R.L.:** epigraph

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

40

A: Yeah, but that was **Goethe**, that wasn't me who said it.

Q: I said, this is **Goethe** from **Faust**.

A: That's a beautiful, beautiful saying. Because if you're in trouble, any trouble -- marriage, illness, deprivation of freedom, you start living in the past, because you cannot accept reality.

Q: So is this true of you?

A: No, but it's not only true of me, this was true of -- hey, I have a dissertation. Dissertation means you find something which is a general happening, this happened to the 13 diarists whom I describe. They had all the same hang up, the past. Because you can't survive if you have nothing. What you can remember is better. Think about it. If you have a diarist who entitles his diary, **Goethe** in **Dachau**, what does that mean? I'm only thinking about it now, I haven't thought about it for 30 years. That he is deep into literature, deep into all the things he remembers about the good, old time when he was a student, free, a teacher. And so he imagines how it would be if **Goethe** were in **Dachau** and if he meets **Schiller** or if he meets **Hildemene**<sup>47</sup> or if he meets **Shakespeare**. As the Germans say, **unser Shakespeare**, our **Shakespeare**. And that is the intellectual, who is above the real thing. Just turn it off a minute, I want to show you something... ready quarter after four.

Q: Oh, not to worry.

A: This is your -- your free weekend too, this is your husbands time.

Q: Heh, heh, heh.

A: By the way, do you get p-paid for this? I hope so. Does -- the united -- does the Holocaust Museum --

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<sup>46</sup> **R.L.:** The saying reads, "What I possess, I see as if from afar; what has vanished **is coming close(r).**"

<sup>47</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant Rilke.



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**41**

Q: Tape's on.

A: I'm wondering why I didn't ever tell **Joan** about this, because I've been -- the tape was in 1996. 1994, two years after the cancer, I decided I always wanted to go to **Jerusalem**. Not because I'm Jewish, but because of the cultural history. The churches, the background, the Bible, the whole thing. I had to see **Jerusalem**. So in 1994, I took a tour with an American company and I went with my dissertation advisor, who was German, but 10 years younger, whose father died in a concentration camp<sup>48</sup>, whose brother was killed in **Russia** and we are best friends, 10 years younger. And we went together on a trip which got us to **Syria** first. So we were in **Damascus**, we were in the whole Syrian north, so the art and the thing and then crossed over from **Amman**, we were in **Jordan**, very strange trip at that time. Crossed over the **Allenby Bridge** to get to **Jerusalem**. And we came not in by air, but by bus. So we were in **Jericho**, it was the hour of our time<sup>49</sup>, we were in **Jerusalem** and in **Tel Aviv** when the bombs exploded in the buses. And for me **Jerusalem** was the absolute epitome of history come alive. Like **Rome**, or **Florence**, or **Amsterdam**, or **Edinburgh**, or you name it. So this is **Jerusalem**. How did we get to that?

Q: You were asking --

A: Because I asked you have you been in **Israel**. And I'm dying to go back, because I wasn't well, I had a terrible problem and -- and so on. Thought that the -- the cancer had returned, it didn't. Anyway.

Q: Did you feel Jewish there?

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<sup>48</sup> **R.L.:** Renata's advisor's father died right after the war, not in a concentration camp.

<sup>49</sup> **R.L.:** Renata wants this to read "So we were in Jericho, it was a strange hour in our time: we were in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv..."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

42

A: No. Absolutely not, but I felt immensely Christian. I mean, everything I knew from the children's Bible was real. **Gethsemane**, and the crosses, and the road at **Via Dolorosa**, and the landscape from the paintings. I mean, if you know your painting history, if you take one liberal arts course with painting and the books, as an undergraduate, you've seen all those painting. Besides, I grew up with art. No, I never felt Jewish. Sorry.

Q: The -- the -- your dissertation, you said you --

A: No, I mean for instance, when people went to the wailing wall and you saw all these people there with the --

Q: Pious.

A: With the -- with the funny hats on and the -- and hair growing with -- on the -- out of the ears. And the guide said, "Does anybody want to go to synagogue?" And there were two or three people who wanted to go, who went. And **Doris** -- and **Doris** said, "Would you want to go anywhere?" I said, "No, I just want you to take pictures." Well, that's it.

Q: Your dissertation, you said these were diaries of Germans? Non-Jews?

A: Do you know, the dissertation were whatever I found. I read diaries of three or four Dutch, I have to look it up again. You have to just -- 13 in all. Five Germans, not a single Jew in German.

Q: Why?

A: There were professionals, or doctors or painters or journalists and one woman who may have been half Jewish, I think. And the Dutch were two Jews in **Bergen-Belsen**, one guy who was Jewish and who died in **Auschwitz** and I have his unpublished diary, so that's three and two resistance fighters. The **Goethe** in **Dachau** is -- is a Dutchman, non-Jewish. That's it. And the diaries were in Dutch, in French and in German. And I pulled them together.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**43**

Q: In your, I think it's in the first interview, you talk about that you've always felt you were a translator.

A: That what?

Q: You were a translator.

A: I was a tran -- oh, that's what I did in **Holland**.

Q: Yeah, but I don't mean literally. That you have always been in some way translating, not just from language to language, but in fact from experience to experience.

A: That I don't know whether I meant it metaphorically, I don't remember. I don't know how to say what a translator is, somebody who brings something across -- I don't know. I don't know what that means. To me, translation is taking something from one language into another language and with it comes also the knowledge of how people behave in that country. Because if you look at the German language, the German language is very much like the Germans, very complicated, very precise and always putting something together which nobody else puts together. The English language is to me the language. It has more synonyms, for -- just look at a dictionary and a German dictionary, because it's combined of romance languages, Latin, Greek, Celtic, Germanic and everything. It is the richest language in the world. Because they have everything. This goes for American English, same way, because it comes from English. And then they threw in all the other languages here.

Q: But do you see yourself as a translator from one -- one set of time to another time period, from one culture to another, from one kind of emotion to another?

A: I don't know, I'm very unemotional when I work. I'm not sentimental.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**44**

Q: So -- so you -- you don't -- you don't see the metaphoric application of the word --

A: I don't see it an anthropological, sociological way, but it's -- you have a good point, it's something which occasionally I may be even doing it without thinking. You're absolutely right, because if I think of some of the troubles I had with the dissertation, because of the gruesomeness of the German language, which then describes certain situations in a concentration camp, I mean the word, it's **zertrümmern** I mean, I'm thinking of all the things where I tried to find -- you smash something. The **zertrümmern** is you really split, you can hear almost the stones coming apart. The German language is gruesome. It's like the fairy tales. Because they combine two things which are not combinable and it becomes a concept. Never occurred to me. And when you work with the concentration camp literature, you get into situations. I'm thinking about how d -- I have a chapter in the dissertation about the German language, the **SS** language, where they talk about the **Dritte Reich**, the **Third Reich** expressions. And if somebody yells at you in the concentration camp -- I'll say it in German first and then in English. "**Ich laß euch stehen bis euch die Scheiße aus dem -- aus dem Nase -- aus dem Mund koff**<sup>50</sup>." I let you stand here til the shit runs out of your mouth. So in other words, abnormal, chaotic, whatever. This was the language of the **Third Reich**. And the Germans who -- which also is in **Goldhagen**, the famous **Goldhagen** book, which I despise. I had a big argument in **Germany** about that book. The **Goldhagen** book is incredible. It's a lousy, biased version of the whole thing, because he "forgets" about the Gypsies, he forgets about the non-Jews who were killed. And that, to my mind, six million is -- is not enough, there is

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<sup>50</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "kommt."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

45

more. And that is what's coming out. And that has something to do -- now going back from the language again, into the whole history, it will take hundred years till we have the whole story.

Q: How --

A: But when you mention translation, it gets me into things I never think about.

Q: What language are you most comfortable in?

A: English. I can't write in Dutch, I can't even write a letter any more. Because I've been away now, wait a minute '52, say '92 is 40 years, so let's say 45 years. I am 78, so my first 35 years are in **Europe**, and in **Europe** I already spoke more than Dutch. I spoke fluent French, fluent English.

Q: And German?

A: Couldn't help it, like a Swiss girl. You learn it in school and I'm gifted. So I mean, I've learn -- I've learned Spanish here, just for the hell of it. I'm not bragging, it's just one of the things you get like you get vitamins, you get languages.

Q: Oh, my family's the same way, I mean.

A: What?

Q: I'm the idiot, you know. My mother speaks I don't know how many languages, her brother even more.

A: That's right, but you get this because you go to a decent public school. It's not a private school. I never went to private school.

Q: In your -- the diary, the translation that I have here, you use a lot of musical imagery.

A: What, you -- do you have the diary?

Q: I have here, yeah, I have diary of **Bergen-Belsen**, N-March 1944, sure.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

46

A: No, no, no, no, wait a minute --

Q: Okay --

A: What do you have?

Q: Dear, you really have a copy. Music, yeah, the music is something I grew up with, like the fashion, but the music has gone away, it has become theater now. Since -- and that may be why I love **America**, I got all my background, beautiful and I'm grateful for that to God and my parents. The background I have is one solid, liberal arts -- I could have had science, but I refused to get interested. That's a different story. In **America**, in **New York**, I became a theater addict. In the 50's, no more, because it's crap right now, in comparison to what we had in the 50's. I saw every great American play, from **Miller** to **Tennessee William**, not one time, but five, six times. Cheap. In the balcony. I went through the whole Broadway, up, but also down. Now we are back, we are coming back.

Q: Why theater and not music?

A: Because I had all the music and I don't, I got all the music as a youngster. I couldn't do both because it was a matter of timing, a matter of money and why not music, because I don't have the patience to sit and just listen. I got spoiled. Now, since 1945, I don't think I've been to a single concert, I had all my concerts in the concertgebouw<sup>51</sup> in **Amsterdam** with **Mengelberg**, with **Furtwangler**, with **Toscanini**, whoever came over, we -- we heard and saw. But since I came to **New York**, it was theater and literature. And **New York** is both and it's also music. But some other people, some my friends say, "How come you never went to **Carnegie Hall**?" I only went to **Carnegie Hall** for

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<sup>51</sup> **Concertgebouw**: concert hall

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

47

certain things, at Christmas or so, or if **Schneider** was giving a kid concert, things like that. With my nephews and nieces, of course they have to get it.

Q: You talk a lot about smells in the diary.

A: Smells.

Q: Do you still connect strongly with smell?

A: Very much no, lost all of it with the chemotherapy. Don't smell anything. That's why I eat garlic, because I never smell it anyway. Smell, sound -- I suddenly remember the smell of, what is that turnip? The smell of stinking something, of the disinfecting in the shower. That smell was unforgettable. It is like in **Proust**, when he has the **madeleine** and he gets the whole thing back. That's the things which you don't repress, which come back as they come. If a certain smell comes, you associate with the smell. If a certain sound, if a certain picture. Associative memo-memory. Don't you have that? Every person has that. What do you remember of your youth? A sound, a smell, a feeling, a touch. All the six senses.

Q: So you remember --

A: Strange. As we talk about it, I suddenly realize, I can not remember pain. That's repressed. I'm thinking of pain -- strangely enough, that was in normal times, the pain of dentistry. That is the pain I remember and that is the pain I refuse. I do not go to any dentist who will not give me anything against nerve pain. Be it a bridge, be it a nerve -- root canal, be it a drilling. I said, "I won't come unless you deafen me, dumb me." He said, "Good."

Q: Okay, I don't know if this is a pain, but you in the diary say, "The nightmares of the typhus siege have not left me." How about now?

A: The pain of -- I'm thinking of pain in the concentration camp, but I had very little pain. Very little pain except -- discomfort is not pain. Pain and discomfort

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

48

is incredibly different. Real pain is un -- I've never been tortured. Unbearable pain, I only remember in connection with the colon cancer. And that was unbearable because it was unexpected. And once again I -- d-don't -- I'm not -- I don't know why that has anything to do with anything. I wake up on the night that **O.J.** is driving his white whatever --

Q: Bronco.

A: Bronco -- with such horrible pain as I've never had in my life. Friday the June 12th, going onto Saturday morning. I go to the bathroom, I vomit. I vomit and shit at the same time and I know what it is. How do I know? From literature, from **Hemingway**, from *Snow of Kilimanjaro*<sup>52</sup>. At four a.m. I call my doctor at home, the chief of gastroenterology at **Sloan-Kettering**. And I said, "**Sidney**, I have gangrene. I have an obstruction." He said, "Are you nuts?" I said, "No. I stink, nothing stays up or down and I -- I have such pain, I'm in absolute -- wild with pain." He said, "Go to the hospital." I said, "I can't move, I have such pain." He said, "I can't help you, my wife is dying." His wife died that night --

Q: Oh my God.

A: At **Sloan-Kettering**. But that has nothing to do with anything. How I got from the bedroom to the phone, calling my super. I said, "**Ruben**, I am dying of pain, I have to get to **Sloan-Kettering**, will you take me?" He said, "I'm coming." Looking for my papers here, to get my papers, my keys, I ran into the desk, the desk broke apart, because everything is old here and rickety and **Ruben** comes up. I said, "**Ruben**, help me get dressed, get me to the car and get me to **Sloan-Kettering**." It took us an hour to get me dressed, to get me there and then they took over and it took them 24 hours till they decided they

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<sup>52</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant *Snows of Kilimanjaro*.



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

49

operate. My surgeon came back from the country. He said, “**Renata** is ill, I come back.” They operated, it was gangrene. They took again, some stuff out, nothing to do with the cancer. It had something to do with something I had in my belly for years and it had festered, infected itself, strangulated itself and that's it. But it was the worst pain I've ever had in my life and after that I was six weeks with drainage, had home care here, in this apartment. It was the most debilitating operation I ever had. And then I went to the Near East and to **Jerusalem**. And to **Petra** and in **Petra** climbed on a horse and thought I had split something. And that's why it wasn't so happy in **Jerusalem**. Then comes the third operation. I am in the Far East, traveling, and I get a terrible cold in **Bangkok**, and I start coughing and I feel that I have another time, something going wrong in the right side. I come back to **Sloan-Kettering** in January and see my surgeon. “It's nothing. It's a muscle which got in the way, you got to do exercise. I will operate on you, but this time I can't do anything any more, unless you're really very thin. Lose some weight, I will try to stitch you up from the inside. Otherwise I have to put a **maze** in behind it, which is a foreign body and then you may reject it, you get more operations, more operations. Do what I tell you, come back in three weeks, we'll operate. Lose three, four pounds.” We operate, I still have the stuff. He could do what he could do. He said, “Stay thin, you have no cancer. Come back every year for your colonoscopy.” But pain, if it's unbearable, I remember it. But it had nothing to do with the concentration camp.

Q: Disease has shaped much of your life.

A: Hm?

Q: Disease has shaped a lot of your life.

A: It's what?

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**50**

Q: Has shaped a lot of your life, it seems.

A: It's shaped a lot of my life. It's still shaping. And I don't know, sometimes, I mean, I sound very upbeat when I meet **Joan** or you, because I only talk about the positive thing. The negative things are getting older, feeling that you can't really do anything any more which is worth it. You want to leave something for the young people and the only time I really feel very "with it" is when I talk to youngsters, be it at the **U.N.** or at the private schools, or in **Germany** and I tell them, "Let's avoid this. Let's not discriminate," and... I think it is the whole discrimin-ory-tory process of because he or she has a different skin or a different nose or a different background and this goes right into the 90's. And I have been in **America** since the **McCarthy** time, through a couple of presidents, always voted against, never for. What<sup>53</sup> means for freedom, for liberalism, for whatever will give people what I consider a better life. And that's it. And if you live in **New York**, and if you keep your eyes open, you see almost as if everything in a microcosm, is because everything which happens here, happens all over the world. All I have to do is go west or south in **Manhattan**, or even east, and walk along the river and I'm back in **Holland**, because it's the same landscape. Especially if I go down to the battery. **Brooklyn** is **Holland** in many ways. **New Jersey** is in many way **Holland**. And **Ellis Island**. All that stuff is **Holland**. Even with the church spires. If you go mid-town, if you go downtown, you have **America**. If you go uptown, out of **New York**, you're somewhere in **Europe**. Because it's -- can be either **Germany** or **Holland** or **England**. You go to **Boston**, you're almost in **Portugal**. No, and this is living in **America**. Everything repeats itself here. I love it. I love being a European who has become an American. Because my

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<sup>53</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "that."

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

51

Europeanism has reinforced what I love in **America**. Whether I'm in **Portugal** and see the same stones, which I see when I am north of **Boston**, because that connects, or whether I'm in **Ireland** on the west coast and I know that someday this was all together. And I understand the Irish and I understand the Scotch and I understand the Dutch and I understand the Portuguese because I learned Spanish. And I have not been in **South America**, I've carefully avoided it because I like to go to countries where I feel comfortable. I have avoided **Chile** because of the dictatorship, **Brazil** because of it's stuff. **Argentina** because of **Franco**<sup>54</sup>. I wasn't in **Spain** more or less, till **Franco** was **kaput**. In **Greece** till the dictatorship was **kaput**. And that's very hard these days, to avoid countries. I'm still dying to go to **Iran Persepolis**. But I'll wait. If I see it fine, if I don't see it, fine.

Q: How's your health now?

A: Hm?

Q: How is your health now?

A: It's okay. It's okay if I don't overdo it. I swim six times a week. I walk five times a day up and down. I walk every day at least half an hour. Shop every day, carry every day and my family wants me in a nursing home. I said n -- my doctors at **Sloan-Kettering** said, "Are you crazy? Stay as long as you can and feet first."

Q: Do you still work?

A: I still work at **Sloan-Kettering** at least once a week. I am part of a program where they talk about nutrition and cancer and I help them with their grants. I work with psychiatrist, who gives me manuscripts about post-traumatic stress and so on. I do stuff. Not enough. Don't get paid. They have no money.

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<sup>54</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant Péron.

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

52

Q: Hospital seems to be recurring in your life, you -- you --

A: Pardon?

Q: Hospitals seem to recur in your life, a-at one point I think, in the first interview, you talk about that it had nothing to do with patients or medicine, it was about food.

A: That's right, it had to do -- it wasn't true, because the first 10 years -- I worked 23 years. The first 10 years I trained, in a sense of I had never, ever done any budgets, I'd never done any financial thing. I went to school in the hospital, on my own time, didn't get paid for that. And I learned how to write grants and then only the last 10 years had to do with food because I was in nutrition and cancer. The rest of the time I just learned about cancer. And boy did I learn.

Q: Why did you or how did you transition from comparative literature --

A: Oh, that's just very easy, the **New York Times**.

**End of Tape Two, Side A**

**Beginning of Tape Two, Side B**

A: -- put you into cancer.

Q: Is it your **PhD**?

A: **PhD**, 1971, I look for jobs, I write hundreds of letters, get hundreds of nothing back. In February, it must have been February the fourth, on the Sunday Times, there is an ad of Memorial Sl -- I had worked there as a secretary. When I came off the boat here and off the train in **Canada**, I didn't want to work in business. I worked at **Sloan-Kettering**, because it was on my avenue, I lived here and I was a medical secretary. I could learn that, I had heard medicine at home, I had all the background. I was six years a medical secretary at **Sloan-Kettering**, I need this in order to tell you how I got back. I

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

53

left there only because my mother had died and I got some money and I decided I don't want a mink coat, I don't want a house in the country, I want to study. So I studied **New York University, Columbia**, 1960. I had worked at **Sloan-Kettering** from 1953 to '59. In between I worked as a part time secretary in medicine because I didn't want to give that up, so I had medical experience. From '71 to '73, I looked for jobs in comparative literature, couldn't get a thing. February fourth, 1973, there is an ad in the **New York Time: Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center**, looking for a coordinator-writer for their grants office, who has medical background, languages. I write a letter to my former boss, who lives on East 68th Street, bring it to his home and say, "**Marty**, I need that job. I'm going to **Antigua** this week, because I need a tan for my application, see I have to look better. Get me that job." I wrote a letter also to **Sloan-Kettering** and sent him a copy. I come back from **Antigua**, I have the job. He left a message -- I didn't have an answering phone, he left a message for me, call me, you have an interview. Or they called me, whatever was the note, I had an interview. I got the job. At that time, 10,000 dollars a year, which was 200 a week, I worked from eight in the morning til 10 at night, no overtime, no nothing and learned the job, grant writing. And I ended up with having something like 150 labs as my clients. And reading their stuff, editing their stuff, putting it together in the format and shipping it out to the National Cancer Institute or to the National Institute of Heart and Lung and I learned more than I ever learned. So this is how I got from literature into medicine.

Q: Medicine frames your life in so many ways, I mean your father --

A: Yeah, that's right. I'm married, I'm -- father was a ph -- a physician, a husband who was a physician, a brother who was a physician, and so on. And

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**54**

medicine is -- I always wanted to write about the doctor in literature. Doctor and literature are very close. Doctor and science and mathematics are very close. It's the literature and the doctor which is very close to each other. That's the answer. And I end up with a dissertation was just literature. And two years later I'm in medicine. Never occurred to me till I talked to you. So again I travel from one specialty to the other, from one country to another, from one discipline to another. The fashion is the -- the drawing. The drawing comes back as I travel, because I only draw every time -- a Christmas card is a building, is architecture. That goes back to my youth, to my education, to the liberal arts. So the whole thing is full cycle. If the dissertation is finally published. I'm waiting. Look at that article in the **Frankfurter Zeitung**. What else is that but going back in time from experience to transition, from chaos to order and continuity? And I'm, by Jove, not an intellectual, I'm an intuitive talker, doer.

Q: Today, while we're talking, are you participant or spectator?

A: I'm very much a participant, I'm not a spectator. I'd -- strange thing is -- that's very interesting. If you talk, you don't document. If I write, I better watch what I'm doing and there I become the spectator. Because I cannot write unless I edit. If I talk, unless you guys stop the machine, there are lots of things I might want edited out if it goes somewhere. But if I talk, I talk honest. It's an incredible question, are you a participant or a spectator. I don't think I sense it a lot, I sense it a little bit, but very much on the surface. I just ser-se -- sense it only four letter words, because I very often think in four letter words.

Q: You think in English?

A: I think -- I think in English, I dream in English, I react physiologically in English. I know this because I went into shock. I went -- they gave me the

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

55

wrong medicine in 1956 when I was an employee at **Sloan-Kettering**, as a secretary. They gave me penicillin and I went into shock. And they called my husband who was work out in **Creedmore** as a psychiatrist, they said, “**Renata** is in shock, come. We gave her penicillin and she's --” And he said, “What's she talking?” He says, “English.” So in other words, English has become my communication. At the same time, I also know -- and this has nothing to do with me, but I know from **Holland** and from the resistance that if they gave people -- they didn't have to torture them, they just wanted to find out where they were from, all they had to do was take a pin, and how they said “ow”, or “ai” or “ouch” or “oy”, they know where they came from. And I know from having been married to a psychiatrist and having dealt with all kinds of issues also at **Sloan-Kettering**, that if you are in pain and how you react, it will bring back your mother tongue. And what I say, when they do something, I'm -- I'm usually don't say anything, I'm not a howler, I'm very tough -- is -- it may go back to German or to Dutch, but I doubt it. Because even in shock I talked English. But I know, for instance, that the aunt of my husband -- he was Jewish, **Deso** -- and she came from **Poland** and her children were very un-Jewish because they had married American Fortune 500 people. And got made it up in the media<sup>55</sup> and wherever, and she refused to say that she was Jewish, although her name was **Margulies**. They said it was French and they said he had been to the **Sorbonne** when he had never been near it. Doesn't make any difference, but they were not Jewish. What does bad luck have? She gets a stroke and she talks only Polish and Yiddish. So this is where I'm very careful and I tell myself, don't ever deny anything, because if you're on your deathbed or if you have a stroke, you'll talk anyway, whatever it is. So I don't deny

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<sup>55</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say “**They** got it made **also** in the media...”

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**56**

anything, I would never deny anything, it's stupid. If you lie you have to remember what you said.

Q: But you said in that first interview that you're -- can't --

A: I'm not Jewish enough for the Holocaust Museum.

Q: No, no, wait a second, you said that your -- I think it was your second husband said that you were, what, a monster, you weren't a moral person.

A: That's right, no, my m -- m -- my **Deso**, not **Paul, Paul** is my generation. My husband was the 19th century moralist, the very moral person. He said, "You are an amoral person."

Q: Are you?

A: Yes.

Q: What does that mean?

A: What does that mean? It means that I have my own rules. I don't feel, I felt -- I've -- I had to go into psychiatrist<sup>56</sup> to be re-educated because I was lifting -- shoplifting left and right. Because the **barrack** was so nice and I would take this or I would take that. I still -- it's very hard to go somewhere that I don't pick up a lipstick. But, I have my own rules. As long as I don't hurt anybody. For instance, all these sexual things, I don't want to talk about this, shut this off... -- you to the **U.S.** Holocaust Museum, my inner soul. Give me -- give me an answer.

Q: Because your soul and your experiences differ from anyone else's soul or experiences and that's how we learn. That's where truth comes from.

A: You're not a psychiatrist.

Q: No.

A: And I'm not --

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<sup>56</sup> **R.L.:** psychiatry



**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

57

Q: I've been to a number, though.

A: What?

Q: I've been to a few.

A: No, but what I mean and I have carefully avoided psychiatry, not because I've anything to hide, but because I don't believe in it. You have to do it yourself. And my husband agreed. He was a psychiatrist, but he was a psychiatrist of the eclectic ilk. He said, "If I have a patient who is with me longer than six months or a year, I kick him out. Because if I haven't covered everything this person has to give me, there's something wrong with my approach or his denial."

Q: Okay, you say you still shoplift.

A: What?

Q: You said you still shoplift lipsticks.

A: So what? So I've made peace with it. But -- I'm very happy with it. If I can live with myself and if I can function and overcome barricades which obstruct my life, be they in career or in health or in whatever and I still don't hurt people, why do I need psychiatry? Why do I have to bare my soul? It's nobody's business what is the third level, the fourth level? I really feel -- I'm a Scorpio and Scorpio are diggers. We dig deep down and then we hide. Do you know how I learned that? From my psychiatrist husband, who believed in somewhere, not in astrology, but he says, "You know, just look at your picture, we are both Scorpions, we fight like hell because we are both the same sign. I'm a generation older than you and I have more moral beliefs than you do, you are totally demoralized by war. Your relationship with your father, you were fighting the nine -- the 19th century all your life. You're all 20th century." Now I'm 21st century. He said, "The last thing you need is psychiatry. You

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

58

need an education, a re-education. You have to learn that you can't do this, you can't do that, you can't do that without running into trouble. But otherwise --"

Q: In the -- the article you sent me, the translation of -- for the **Frankfurt** paper, you say that you're -- you won't take a shower, you're --

A: I don't want -- I hate showers. People who were in **Auschwitz** would understand this much better because shower was gas. In **Bergen-Belsen** there was no gas, but a shower in **Bergen-Belsen** meant taking a shower while the **SS** is watching and with all these other skeletons and whatever. I don't like showers, I've never liked showers. I want a bathtub, where I'm alone and nobody watching me. But showers for other people who were in concentration camp is gas. And that -- that's why I don't make a big thing about it.

Q: Y-You referred in the other interview to victims in **Bloomingdale's** clothes.

A: Yeah, that was that horrible movie, made about, I think it was m-meant -- it was based on a **Gerald Green** movie, where they showed the people in **Theresienstadt** and where they -- I said they were in **Bloomingdale's** clothes, they looked much too good. And that is one of the reasons, I'm not bitter about it, but I ended up with the literary agent of **Norman Mailer**, **Gerald Green** and a couple of other famous writers, where I gave him my diary and the dissertation and I think I paid him 800 dollars to just read the crap. And he came back with a criticism which I have somewhere. I've hidden it, but it is like going into psychoanalysis. What he said hurt so deeply that I got burned. He said, "It's very original, it's very real, but it is totally unpublishable because there is no sex, there is no real violence, there is no -- it's not sellable, salable." If I would be dead it would sell like hotcakes! I know that. If **Anne Frank** wouldn't have died, the diary would never have been published. You have to die in order to prove something. I'm not bitter, because I'm delighted to be

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**59**

here. But how often have I said in **Germany**, if I would have been died<sup>57</sup>, I wouldn't need you to publish it. But the Germans had a bad conscience, so they published it. Isn't that kind of funny?

Q: Who would you like your audience to be for your work?

A: Pardon?

Q: Who would you like your audience to be?

A: The youngest possible, because they have no idea what we're talking about because all they get is the stuff from other countries where you have things like that happen, **Bosnia**, maybe even **Iraq**. What do we know what this God damn guy is doing? We know now about **Taliban** and the people in **Afghanistan**. And especially how women are being mistreated and so on and so on. It's going on. And I still talk like an old professor. Remember one of the guys whom I quote in my dissertation, who calls the 20th century the century of the grotesque? We are going with the grotesque into the 21st century. Everything is upside down, topsy turvy. From the smart bombs to the **coletvil**<sup>58</sup> damage, to the concentration camps, to the treatment of people, to the racism. I mean everything. There is nothing which is normal. The good old times. There is no continuity. And if we lose respect, we lose continuity. Boy am I preaching on the soapbox right now. I would stand in Central Park and this is how I stood in **Germany** and this is how I stood at the **UN**. I said, "Kids, do something about it, let's have some decency, continuity and I mean morality, which is acceptable." You can still steal a lipstick or have an affair and still be very moral. You know what I mean. Okay? **Basta**.

Q: Okay. When you went back --

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<sup>57</sup> **R.L.:** Renata meant to say "dead."

<sup>58</sup> **R.L.:** collective

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

60

A: It is 10 after five.

Q: Yeah.

A: You started at 20 of three. How long do you want to have this go on?

Q: Are you tired?

A: That was the trouble with **Joan**. **Joan** says, "I have more questions."

Q: Hey, I'm Jewish, of course I have more questions.

A: That has nothing -- oh, wo-wo-wo-wo-wo-wait a minute. Jews -- if you talk to Jews, real Jews, they ask you a question, but when you answer, their answer is a question. And that's why it never stops.

Q: So why shouldn't it be?

A: Hm?

Q: So why shouldn't it? To answer you with a question.

A: No, no, I am very serious. There comes a point where, to my mind, unless you have a real question, this all has been answered already, was by **Joan**. No, she didn't ask me, do you feel a participant or do you feel a spectator. This is as crucial as why did you write. Because I come to a certain level of insight, which actually makes me now even more keen on never giving more interviews. There is no point to it. I don't have to discover things, I know by now. How important is it whether I'm a spectator or not? It's a nice twist. It's a psychological twisting the knife.

Q: I don't understand.

A: I don't know what this is, but you guys, reporters, interviewers, historians, professors, psychologists, all of you God damn **compassional**<sup>59</sup>, including myself, I have a feeling when you interview people, you sometimes open a wound. And you're not cruel, but you twist the knife. You go a little deeper.

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<sup>59</sup> **R.L.:** compassionate

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

61

And if you get an exhibitionist like me, who loves to talk, you're lucky, because you dig deeper and deeper and you find levels. But there are always levels nobody will ever talk about. So what? So you go from level one with the elevator down in the basement and then you go below the earth's surface and then you go all the way up and you come on the other side of the earth and you come up again. And what have you done? Dug into something. And what are we going to do about it? That is the thing. I'm not hurting more than anybody else, I think I hurt less, because I have in -- desensitized myself. I refuse to feel pain. That's part of survival. Some people said to me, "You never mourned for your husband, whom you dearly loved." He was the great love of my life. I said, "Who has time?" If I do that -- I've barely given myself time to recuperate, in order to get on top again. So that is the style, but that's not something which other people do, or should do. This is very, very unusual and may eventually, finally kill me. This week -- okay, let it be, I'll leave it on, although I haven't told anybody, ever. This week I went to the tailor and I had to have a pair of sh -- pants shortened. I step out of my pants, I step back into them and it's in a little stall where you have a curtain around you because it's in the shop and I have nothing to hold on and I knew I was going to fall. And I only told myself, "Not on your head." So I fell backwards and I'm used to being very limber. And the guy was not there. I said, "I'm falling." He said, "Oh, my God." I told myself, "Geez, what does God have to do with?" I fell. I hurt myself quite badly on my right side and I told myself, "Don't break your hip." I have osteoporosis, of course. Don't break this, but I suddenly realized, once again I had gone beyond what I should be doing. I should have known that with this side effects I have, I should hold onto something. But I didn't. One of these days --

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

62

Q: What do you metaphorically hold onto?

A: What do I metaphorically do?

Q: What do you metaphorically hold onto?

A: Metaphorically I hold on to -- I just think of giving you the first thing I thought, staying on top. Which is in control. I -- **Joan** knows about it, I told her about it. At **Sloan-Kettering** or wherever, they have trouble putting me to sleep, I will not do it. They say, "Shut up already, we'll give you something." Because if I'm anesthetized, I don't feel anything, I'm not in control. This has come back to 19 -- f<sup>60</sup> -- I would say to the concentration -- I didn't have this before the war. I was like everybody else, if I had to have something. After the concentration camp, I will not be in the dark till it's dark. "Death shall have no dominion." Death had it's dominion in **Bergen-Belsen**. And **Paul** always says to me when he meets me, he said, "You are amazing. You still alive." I said, "Yes, but so are you."

Q: Because of you.

A: Yes. He says, "But I'm much more depressed than you." I said, "That's why I divorced you." I tell you -- no, I -- you should see my sister, my sister is two years younger and she's at least in looks and in behavior, at least 95 years old. And we don't get along because she feels that I'm too theatrical, too outgoing, too this, too that, too **rigot**<sup>61</sup> whatever. Tough.

Q: Do you have fun?

A: Huh?

Q: I have fun, most of the time. But if I don't have fun, I also find how to get myself out of the pit. I have new -- new therapies. First of all I have book

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<sup>60</sup> R.L.: 1944

<sup>61</sup> R.L.: rigid

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**63**

which is ideal, which is "The Erroneous Zones," not the erogenous zones. And that book answers many questions from why do you do this or why do you that. If I'm really depressed I read it. I don't remember it, but I know it. I found a way, this fall, when I was terribly depressed, I was angry, bitter, lonely, I didn't want to be 78, didn't want to live. And I told myself, "You got to do something because otherwise you end up paying 100 dollars an hour to talk about the crap." So that done it. So what did I do? I decided I wear, every day, besides clean underwear, which I do anyway, every day something different. Even if you're alone. Don't wear the same T-shirt, though you wash it. Wear some jewelry. You always wear lipstick. So do it. I've not been really depressed any more. I found the way. That happened in -- around my birthday in November. Now it's February, I'm doing okay. But I forced myself. Do it, make a plan, finish every day something, even if it is crud, but do it. And don't watch so much television, now again. **O.J.** I didn't watch, but this **Clinton** thing. Okay. Questions?

Q: You had mentioned, and correct me if I'm -- if I'm not remembering well, your nickname was **Gaga**?

A: **G-Gacka**.

Q: **Gacka**.

A: **G-a-c-k-a**, which is talker, yakker. I must already have done this when I was a kid, couldn't shut up. My husband used to say, "You talk the air away." But then now, I'm alone and I don't talk to anybody, sometimes for days. And if you have an interview, you're supposed to say, you're supposed to talk. No, I've learned to shut up. I can shut up.

Q: How would your parents feel about you doing these interviews, about you talking about all of this, do you think?

**Renata Laqueur**  
**February 7, 1998**

**64**

A: How would they feel if they -- why do you think I don't show my family the tapes? Because there are things I already did as a child, I talked about the impossible things. I wanted them to be more open, more direct, less hypocritical. My sister is two years younger, she is much more 19th century than I am. She married a guy whose third wife she was, who named their first daughter after his first wife.

Q: Whew.

A: I don't have to say anything else. You can imagine how the relationship is between mother and daughter today. It's totally fucked up. The daughter became a lesbian. Now, at the ripe old age of 45. And married and divorced and ah. Now I want you to shut off the thing. Because I'm talking about something --<sup>62</sup>

**End of Tape Two, Side B**  
**Conclusion of Interview**

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<sup>62</sup> An amendment has been made to the Interviewee Release Form in regard to the final statements of the interview, beginning with "It's totally..." and ending with "Because I'm talking about something." At the request of, and in agreement with the interviewee, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum prohibits the use of these statements, in whole or in part, both by third parties and by the Museum itself, in any publication, display, or production, in any and all media now known or yet to be developed in the future.