

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library Berkeley, California

University of California

Barbara Epstein
Free Speech Movement Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 1999

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Barbara Epstein "Free Speech Movement Oral History Project: Barbara Epstein" conducted by Lisa Rubens in 1999, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2014.

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[Interview 1: May 9, 1999][Begin Tape 1, Side A]

Rubens: It is May, 1999 and Barbara has kindly come to my house on a sunny Saturday, and we're going to talk about political and social events in 1964 as well as a little before and a little after. While you were not a participant in FSM at Berkeley, you were a politically active student. So, in 1964 where were you specifically?

Epstein: That fall, right? I was a junior at Radcliffe. I graduated in '66.

Rubens: And just for the record--because we were talking about sex discrimination before we formally started this interview--would you explain if Radcliffe was, at that time, a separate school from Harvard?

Epstein: No. The name Radcliffe still existed, but it was not a separate school--not in the way that Barnard is. For example, there were no such things as Radcliffe classes. So it was simply women's dorms and administration, which mostly made our lives difficult. It was a fund-raising device. But we took Harvard classes, we were Harvard students, we graduated from Harvard. There was an administrative entity called Radcliffe and there was a Radcliffe library. There were vestiges from the past when Radcliffe was once actually a separate school.

Rubens: And so it wouldn't be that women would apply to Harvard?

Epstein: We applied to Radcliffe, and we were accepted by Radcliffe. If you were a woman, you applied to Radcliffe. The way women were at Harvard was by being at Radcliffe.

Rubens: Were there other differences?

Epstein: There were these odd little vestiges of the past. For instance, there was a Harvard library--the money for which had specified that no woman was ever to cross the threshold.

Rubens: Really! And you knew that? You were told that?

Epstein: Yes. And the way we knew it was when I was in my freshman year, there were three stories of classrooms above the library. And when in my freshman year, the classes that met in those classrooms had just been integrated. But that meant that women had to go in through the back door. I walked in through the front door, of course.

- Rubens: Why “of course”? Say something about that.
- Epstein: Well, I certainly wasn’t going to walk in through the back door. I mean, that was out of the question.
- Rubens: Did anyone else walk in the front door with you?
- Epstein: Not that I was aware of. Nobody ever stopped me.
- Rubens: Was there any sniggering or whispering at your thwarting the rule of tradition?
- Epstein: Not that I ever noticed.
- Rubens: And in fact, did you notice after a while some other women started walking in the front door?
- Epstein: Well, I was the only woman in my section.
- Rubens: What were you studying then?
- Epstein: I can’t remember. I think it was a math section or something like that.
- Rubens: Oh, that’s a great story.
- All right, so it’s 1964. We’re now talking about the fall. You’re a junior. We’re trying to get a sense of how news about FSM traveled east, and I guess ultimately to make a comparison between what politically was going on in the East Coast and West coast. And then, finally, I want to find out how you came out to California.
- Epstein: Okay. Well, the way we heard about FSM was very simple: there was an off-campus house in which three friends of mine lived who were very involved in the movement. I can tell you what the movement meant at Harvard and Radcliffe, but at any rate, their house was a center. They had a WATS [Wide Area Telephone Service] line.
- Rubens: Why did a house have a WATS line?
- Epstein: As a matter of fact, I’m wrong about that. They didn’t have a WATS line. The story about the WATS line was that the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] office in Atlanta had a WATS line, and in the middle of the night, when people in SNCC heard about the sit-in at Berkeley, they began calling people around the country who were their

contacts. So they called my friends, Max and Simon. Max and Simon got hold of the rest of us. They must have called me first thing in the morning. I was on a steering committee of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and by eight o'clock in the morning, the steering committee of SDS was in front of the office of Dean Monroe, who was the dean of students of Harvard, telling him about the FSM and demanding that we be allowed to conduct political activities on campus.

Up until that time, it had been against the rules to, for instance, pass out leaflets on the Harvard campus because the Harvard campus was sacred, so to speak.

- Rubens: Also private. That was a big distinction between Berkeley as a publicly-mandated and supported institution.
- Epstein: That's right, private; but also the mystique of Harvard was that it was the ivory tower, and how could you possibly do something to besmirch that by handing out a leaflet?
- Rubens: Had people tried to do so before, to your knowledge?
- Epstein: No, we simply knew that it was against the rules.
- Rubens: And of course, you had already violated the rule that no woman enter that library. But there were rules and there were rules, I understand. There was a hierarchy of rules.
- Epstein: That's right. And I don't remember that we had tried to violate that one. The conflicts weren't really quite at that stage yet in the fall of 1964.

At any rate, we demanded that we be allowed to conduct political activities on campus, including handing out leaflets, and Dean Monroe agreed very readily. We thought at the time that the reason he agreed so readily was because he wanted to avoid something like the FSM; we thought it was the strength of the FSM backing us up. Now, I think this was true. What we weren't aware of was that Dean Monroe was sympathetic to our side.

- Rubens: And just to be clear since we had the earlier discussion about Harvard and Radcliffe, he's the dean of students at Harvard.
- Epstein: He was the dean of students at Harvard. All I know is that he later left that job to go take a job at one of the historically black campuses in the South,

and it turned out that he was a strong supporter of the Civil Rights movement. We later thought, Ah, that's why he gave in so readily, because he had truly agreed with us. And the FSM was sort of the occasion for him to be able to do that.

Rubens: Had you ever had encounters with the dean before?

Epstein: No. SDS had. We had dealt with him before. He certainly was not known as a problem. But on the other hand, we didn't particularly think of him as a supporter either.

Rubens: And do you have any memory, particularly about having met as a steering committee before you all were there at eight o'clock in the morning? Did it happen very quickly in terms of it was just obvious what to do?

Epstein: Oh, you mean did we meet to talk about what to do at that time. No! What I remember is getting there still only half awake, and just joining everybody right there.

Rubens: That it was just clear what to do?

Epstein: Yes, it was clear. That's right.

Rubens: And that the demand was both for your own movement, but in sympathy with FSM as well?

Epstein: In sympathy. And it wasn't just for SDS obviously, it was for the movement as a whole.

Rubens: So let's just take two prongs then. It's just a great story. There's no question that, therefore, the news of FSM had a seminal role.

Epstein: Right. And one thing you might want to add to this story is that there's another connection here, which is the Communist Party connection. My friends Max and Simon were Communists, as I was.

Rubens: Were you in the Party, or were you in the YCL [Young Communists League]?

Epstein: No, I was in the Party.

Rubens: Was that distinction important to you at that point?

Epstein: Oh, yes.

- Rubens: I'm saying this also just because of the history I've done on people in the Communist Party. Dave Jenkins, for instance, was so keen to say that in the 1930's he went straight to the Party, not into the YCL. Were kids at all going--?
- Epstein: There was no such thing as the YCL. It was gone by then. You joined the Party. That was the only thing there was to join. And I had joined the Party when I was a first-year student. Max and Simon, the two students who were in contact with SNCC, were also Party members.
- Rubens: So why are you saying this was another thread, then?
- Epstein: Just because it was interesting that the line of communication was actually through the Party. I mean, in the sense that they were the ones who got the news, they were the ones who were in direct--well, Max really--who was in direct contact with SNCC. So if Max hadn't been there, I don't know that SNCC would have called us up.
- Rubens: Ah, because SDS did not have a particularly strong relationship to SNCC, or--?
- Epstein: Well, see, all of this was really sort of on a kind of personal basis. Max had been in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. He had just gotten back. Max was a major activist on the Harvard campus. Simon actually was an MIT student. And the two of them were living off campus. I don't know exactly how the SNCC office decided who they were going to call, but it was the fact that they had a personal connection to Max, was part of the story.
- Rubens: Sure. Was Max also in SDS?
- Epstein: Yes. Max and I were both on the SDS steering committee.
- Rubens: As well as in the Party?
- Epstein: As well as in the Party, which gave some people in the Party a little bit of pause. Actually not at Harvard, where nobody got upset about it, but in the central office. The fact that we were fifty percent of the SDS steering committee made some people nervous.
- Rubens: On the Harvard--?

- Epstein: No, in the SDS national office. At Harvard they knew us, everybody knew everybody, and as far as I know, people didn't get nervous about it.
- Rubens: I'm belaboring these distinctions because at Berkeley during FSM, the specter that's always raised is Bettina Aptheker, the known Communist. Still late into the game--into '65, '66--there were some in California--the state superintendent of schools, Max Rafferty, for example, who really believed that FSM was a Communist conspiracy, and that the students were dupes.
- Epstein: Right.
- Rubens: But I think it's pretty clear--and Bettina will be telling her own story too--that she was rather incidental as a "Party member." That if anything, the Party was a little bit more conservative out here than in the East Coast at that time, on this issue, anyway. And that it absolutely made no difference whether she was in the Party or not.
- Epstein: Yes. On the Harvard campus, unless I was living in some kind of dream world, I think that some people felt some discomfort about at least the fact that I was in the Party. I'm not sure they felt as much discomfort about Max, actually.
- Rubens: Were there other women in SDS who were also in the Party?
- Epstein: No. Max actually always went out of his way to sort of imply that he was an SDS member first and a Party member second. Somehow, he pulled that off. So I was the one who people were more suspicious of, and I think the reason for that was that I was quieter than Max. There was something about the fact that Max was very gregarious that sort of protected him from a lot of stuff.
- Rubens: And in your own mind, had you resolved what you were first or not?
- Epstein: Well, I think I thought I was a Party member first. You know, that may have been part of the issue. But the reason I was a Party member first--really, the Party was very much involved in building SDS at Harvard.
- Rubens: I actually didn't know that.
- Epstein: Yes, absolutely.
- Rubens: And you're saying at Harvard more than at the national level?

Epstein: Oh, absolutely. It was sheer luck. This had nothing to do with Party policy or anything of the sort. What it had to do with was the fact that Max and I and some other Harvard-Radcliffe students had gone to a high school in New York called Elisabeth Irwin. It was a Left high school, and it was a Left high school in the old-fashioned sense of the word, which meant that a lot of the teachers were either Communists or ex-Communists, and there was a very sort of favorable attitude towards socialism and towards the Communist Party. And on the whole, many of the best students at Elisabeth Irwin were also radicals, and that was partly because we were encouraged to be radicals.

Rubens: And of course, the times were felicitous.

Epstein: Right. When we were in high school, it was late fifties, early sixties. But there was a series of years when the most radical activists in each high school class went off to Harvard and Radcliffe. There was a sort of direct pipeline. In my year it was me and two Harvard students, one of whom by the way recruited me into the Communist Party, and the other of whom also joined the Communist Party. And the next year, it was Max.

Rubens: And Angela Davis? Where was she in relation to you?

Epstein: She was two years ahead of me in high school, and she did not go to Radcliffe. As far as I know, she was not involved in the movement at that point.

Rubens: Or in the Party?

Epstein: Certainly not in the Party. But I don't remember her as particularly being an activist. And for me, I think the reason why I was a Party member first and an SDS member second was really very personal, which was that not only the Party but the culture that surrounded it in New York had been my family, basically. It was what had saved me from what would have been an otherwise completely disastrous childhood. There was something about that Jewish radical arena in New York that for me was my first identification. For me, there was something about the way SDS distanced itself from the old Left that-- I mean, it wasn't even so much that I was politically uncomfortable with it, it was just cultural. And it was also that SDS was--by my standards, coming from New York--very WASP-y.

Now, when you look back at it, actually the fact of the matter is that an extraordinary proportion of SDS was made up of Jews. At Harvard and Radcliffe certainly, and I think at colleges like that. But nevertheless, if

you're coming out of the New York Left of the late fifties and early sixties, SDS at Harvard and Radcliffe was a bit of a shock.

Rubens: And flesh that out just a little bit more. What do you mean by culture--the dress, conduct--?

Epstein: Well, I'll tell you--it was partly that--dress, not exactly. By that time, I'd gotten used to wearing skirts. [laughter]

Rubens: Was there a dress code? Were you required to wear skirts?

Epstein: I think everybody did. The reason I say that is because I went to an elementary school in which we were required to wear blue jeans.

But what was it about Harvard and Radcliffe? Well--.

Rubens: Certainly the ivory tower, that you were institutionally constrained?

Epstein: Oh, yes, it was the ivory tower, but it was also--you know, all of these tall blond students from very privileged homes, very sure of themselves in the way that people from those kinds of backgrounds often are. It was interesting that by that time, there was a substantial proportion of Harvard and I think especially Radcliffe students who came from the public schools in New York, and they were largely Jewish. We tended to congregate together, and we were by and large an overwhelming proportion of the movement.

Rubens: Was there any feeling that as Jews there, you had to mute yourself some because you might be giving Jews a bad name? That's what our parents were always concerned about.

Epstein: I am trying to remember. Of course, that was a period when especially people on the Left were not identifying themselves as Jews.

Rubens: And less so Communists as well?

Epstein: Oh, yes.

Rubens: I mean, certainly Max and you were quite clear about being in the Party, but this is not a "popular front" era.

Epstein: Right, and that didn't have to do with being Jewish. What that had to do with was--so many of these things come back to things that are entirely

personal. Max was the child of two Communists. Max came from an absolutely secure home and an absolutely secure politics.

Rubens: Was he Jewish?

Epstein: Oh, yes. In my high school, we were virtually all Jewish. Those who were not Jews were children of color. At one point, somebody made the joke that we should have a fellowship for white Protestants, because otherwise none of us would ever meet any.

Rubens: What other distinctions did you feel at Harvard?

Epstein: Well, it was WASP-y, but it was also that I remember my first year in SDS, people got very upset if you used the word “socialism” or “imperialism”. These were words that I had freely used in high school. I remember once saying something out loud and using the word “imperialism” and somebody coming over to me and saying, “Shh, don’t say that.” And as a matter of fact, I remember a story about--it was my freshman year. It was right after the Cuban missile crisis. There had been a meeting of the men in SDS, actually, because one of the problems in SDS was that women were not allowed into the Harvard houses after ten o’clock at night. And of course, men weren’t allowed into the Radcliffe houses after nine o’clock, but you can imagine where the informal SDS meetings took place: they took place in Quincy House, which was the house where SDS members lived, on the whole.

I remember noting how the language had changed the next morning after the Cuban missile crisis was over. The night before, when the Cuban missile crisis was resolved, the SDS men stayed up all night at Quincy House and talked about it. Rick Wolf--who is now a Marxist, post-Marxist--god knows what typology--professor of economics at U-Mass Amherst--Rick Wolf got up and said, “This is an example of U.S. imperialism.” And the thing that was interesting was when people told me about it the next day, it wasn’t that they were shocked at the idea. The idea was familiar to them. What they were shocked by was that Rick had used the word publicly.

That was sort of what it was like. There was a whole vocabulary that we had used freely when I was in high school that you were now sort of afraid to say out loud.

Rubens: You had to package your ideas in a different way.

Epstein: That's right. Another example is from that year when I was a junior, when Max and I were on the steering committee of SDS. That meant that there were the two of us in the party, and then there were two non-Party members. One morning, I woke up and I went down to breakfast and read the Harvard Crimson--the Harvard newspaper--and there was a story on the front page that SDS was holding a march that day. I thought, Well, that's interesting, nobody asked me about this. I'm supposed to be on the steering committee. What's going on here?

So I called up Max, and Max said, "Oh, yeah, we were sitting up last night and talking about it, and we said we thought it would be a good idea to call a demonstration." I said, "But Max, what about the fact that I'm on the steering committee? Surely I should have been involved in this decision." Max said, "Oh, Barbara, you're so into structures. What you don't understand is that the New Left is about spontaneity, and this is spontaneous."

So I can't remember what else I said to Max, but I went to Simon. Now, at this point Simon and Max were not living together. Max was a second-year student and he was living in one of the Harvard houses, and Simon, who was a first-year MIT student, had an apartment someplace. So I went to Simon, who was the chair of our Party club. I said, "This is male chauvinism. I'm being excluded from the decision-making process in SDS, and Max is going along with it." Simon agreed with me that this was an instance of male chauvinism, and so the two of us marched over to Max's house on the Harvard campus. I wasn't allowed to go in, so Simon went in, dragged him out of bed basically, and brought him down and said, "Now, Max, this is male chauvinism, and as a Communist, you're not supposed to act this way."

Max was very chagrined about it. It actually then got discussed in a club meeting. Max apologized, and everybody agreed that this was an instance of male chauvinism.

You did not get discussions like this inside of SDS.

Rubens: I daresay the word male chauvinism was never used!

Epstein: It didn't exist. It didn't exist.

Rubens: Whereas imperialism existed, but you had to reword it.

Epstein: Right.

Rubens: And it would be unlikely that a woman would have even identified sex discrimination. And so interesting that Max would code it all in the notion of spontaneity of the movement because in fact, that's why the movement became so powerful and was so male-dominated, because it largely was spontaneous, and a women's movement, let alone consciousness, did not exist. There was no palpable organization or historical memory of a women's rights movement that curbed that male power.

Epstein: Right, right. See, and that's probably the way in which Max was really more part of the spirit of SDS than I was. Max was a very charming puppy-dog. He charmed everybody, and he was spontaneous in the way that SDS was spontaneous. He also happened to be a Red Diaper Baby.

Rubens: What made you join SDS as an organization?

Epstein: Oh, everybody was joining SDS. See, on the one hand, I was a member of the Party. I had joined the Party my first year in college. But I was also a part of--what can I call it?--sort of a milieu, a friendship group, of Harvard and Radcliffe students who were on the Left. And even though I was a Party member, these were all my friends. We made decisions together. In particular, I had two friends at Radcliffe, Sarah and Jean. I actually invited both of them to join the Party, and both of them were very close to doing it and then decided not to.

At any rate, Sarah and Jean and I, to some degree, sort of operated as a unit. We were in Tocsin, which was the Harvard-Radcliffe peace organization, our freshman year, and then at the end of that year, an SDS chapter appeared off campus. I remember going to some of those meetings. They used to hold meetings at Cronin's, which was a coffee shop off campus. At that point, it didn't seem like a big deal.

The next year, as I remember, we and other people who were part of this milieu were part of the Harvard-Radcliffe Socialist Club. And then somehow--I think it was when Max and others came back from Mississippi--that somehow at that point, what lots of people were saying was, "It's now the time to go beyond single-issue organizations and form a multi-issue organization, and SDS is going to be the vehicle for that." People in the Party were very sympathetic to this because this was seen as sort of the step towards a more radical movement.

So all of us joined SDS, and SDS became our vehicle.

- Rubens: Yes. The summer of '64 is such a crystallizing time. Where were you that summer? Was there--I know I wanted to go to the South, but my parents wouldn't let me. I was a good and conservative girl.
- Epstein: Right. Well, I applied to go to Mississippi, and I was accepted, actually--.
- Rubens: Applied through--?
- Epstein: There was an application process. You applied to whatever it was—COFO [Council of Federated Organizations]. I was accepted, but then the Party asked me if I would come to New York and be one of a small number of young people who were being trained, who would go through a training process in the national office, essentially designed to turn us into Party leaders. So that's what I was doing the summer of 1964.
- Rubens: To return to the story of FSM: And you hear this news about what happened at Berkeley, and while all these dynamics are taking place, it almost spontaneously is used as the occasion to push the boundaries at Harvard--?
- Epstein: Yes, that's right.
- Rubens: And lo and behold, not only do you have a savvy administrator who doesn't want it to become what it became at Berkeley, but is also sympathetic.
- Epstein: Right. And I guess the important thing about what I was saying about Max was, was Max an SDS member? Was he a Communist? Was he a SNCC member? He was all three simultaneously.
- Rubens: And just to narrow our focus just a little bit about what happened at Berkeley, do you remember knowing anything about Berkeley before?
- Epstein: Sure, because I was also on the National Youth Council of the Communist Party--if that was the name of the body. National Youth Commission, that was it. Bettina and I were both members of the National Youth Commission. We met once a month.
- [begin tape 1, side B]
- Epstein: Was Bettina a member of the National Youth Commission? I don't think she was. But I think she was invited to come speak to us right after the FSM.

- Rubens: Exactly. Had you known her before then?
- Epstein: Yes, Bettina and I knew each other in high school. We were both in--I was a member, and eventually the chair, of High School SANE [Students for a Sane Nuclear Policy]. Bettina was a member of her chapter, and that was how I knew Bettina. Plus I think I took courses at the School for Marxist Studies from her father, Herbert Aptheker. When I started graduate school at Berkeley, Bettina's father, Herbert, drove Bettina to the airport. She and I flew out to Berkeley together. And the reason I remember this so clearly is that my father drove me to the airport, and there was Herbert with Bettina. Now, my father, as a former Communist and a bitter anti-Communist, by the way, knew nothing about Bettina, but he certainly knew Herbert, and he was absolutely appalled. I realized it had been a big mistake to allow him to bring me to the airport because this was the moment when he--when it sank in that I was a member of the Communist Party.
- Rubens: Did he not know, or did he allow himself not to--?
- Epstein: Actually--well, that's another story. What had happened was that I had not told him. I joined the Party when I was a freshman; at this point I was going off to graduate school. The summer before I went to Berkeley, I had been a delegate to the first convention of the Communist party that had been held in---I don't know--since the beginning of the McCarthy period. I had a delegate's card in my wallet. I had made the mistake of leaving my wallet lying on the kitchen table in my father's house. My oldest stepbrother, evidently quite innocently, looked to see whose wallet it was, and saw this card, and told my father about the card.
- When my father came to pick me up to drive me to the airport, he was absolutely shaking, and he said, "Is it true that you're a member of the Communist Party?"
- Rubens: Oh, so it's literally layered? So you're having this discussion and then he sees Herbert Aptheker?
- Epstein: Yes, yes, yes. He told me that the Communist party was evil and immoral, and I was immoral to be in it. I can't remember what I said. Oh, and he told me that I was no longer his daughter. But he drove me to the airport, and there I said, "I'm flying out to California with my friend Bettina." [laughs] And my father was not sort of up enough on student politics to know who Bettina Aptheker was but when he saw her father there, he certainly knew who her father was.

- Rubens: Your father's name was Epstein, but you were known as, and remained, Barbara Easton as a student and during the beginning of your published career.
- Epstein: That's right, that's right. My name was Epstein when I was born. My parents were divorced immediately after I was born, or at least my father demanded a divorce the day I was brought home from the hospital. In fact, he was living with somebody else and having an affair with a third woman. This continued through my childhood. He was basically running three relationships simultaneously.
- Rubens: And how many of those were families? Two of them were families.
- Epstein: Well, if you count me and my mother as a family.
- Rubens: Yes, I do.
- Epstein: Okay. Yes, that's right. So he was living with one woman, having children with a second woman. He had possibly four children with a woman who was married, and to this day, they don't know who their father is. I have four siblings who might be my half brothers and sisters and might be my stepbrothers and sisters, and nobody knows.
- Rubens: Really? There's never been a revelation? Including this one who looked at your wallet?
- Epstein: Well--he's the oldest one. He's definitely not biologically related to me.
- At any rate, when I was three, after my parents were divorced, my father, in what I take to have been a fit of self-directed anti-Semitism, decided that I had to have a non-Jewish name. He went through the New York telephone book looking for names like Epstein but goyish, and came up with Easton. He talked my mother into changing her name and mine to Easton. Now, he said he was going to change his name too, and he went down to the courthouse. When he came back, he said, "By the way, I decided not to change my own name."
- Rubens: Now, this ostensibly is to protect you?
- Epstein: Ostensibly.
- Rubens: But were there political reasons as well?

- Epstein: Yes. Now, it's 1947. My mother believed that this was because of the Holocaust.
- Rubens: And the beginning of the severe repression against Communists.
- Epstein: Well, that could also be part of it. I took this to be anti-Semitism, cowardice, and I also later thought, and I still think, that my father did not want me to find out about his other family, and wanted to keep a distance.
- Rubens: But in fact, what I'd never really realized is, did you see your father regularly throughout your childhood?
- Epstein: Yes.
- Rubens: Okay. So he was part of the decision about what schools you'd go to, and culture you'd partake of.
- Epstein: That's right. Though I never knew where he lived. And I did not know that he was married or that he had children.
- Rubens: Did your mother know?
- Epstein: Yes. This was kept a secret from me. When I was fourteen, he sat me down and said, "By the way, I'm married and there are six children." I was told that the youngest child was his and therefore my half sister, and the rest of them were my stepbrothers and stepsisters. It turned out, of course, that that was not necessarily the case. I thought that keeping me in the dark about this was really not primarily to protect me, it was to protect them.
- Rubens: How did you decide to come to Berkeley for grad school?
- Epstein: The national leadership of the Party called me in and urged me to go to the University of Mississippi. I said, "No thank you." They said, "How about the University of Chicago?" I said, "Nope, I don't want to go to Chicago either." I said, "I want to go to Berkeley," and they said, "Coals to Newcastle. We don't need any more Communists in Berkeley." I said, "Well, you know, that's where I want to go." Before that discussion, they had informed me they wanted me to drop out of school and become a public spokesperson for the Communist party. I said, "No, I don't think I want to do that."
- Rubens: Boy, you had strength. Were you pressured?

- Epstein: They just asked me to do it. They didn't put pressure on me. I mean, what could they do? But also, they were actually decent people.
- Rubens: Oh, of course, right. But maybe just say one more thing about why you wanted to stay in school--go to Berkeley.
- Epstein: Well, I couldn't think of anything else to do.
- Rubens: Well, school and Berkeley--that was what was "happening" in the sixties. That's where the social movement was.
- Epstein: Yes, exactly.
- Rubens: So you said, "I'm going to Berkeley."
- Epstein: I said, "I'm going to Berkeley." They said, "You know, if you go to Berkeley, our prediction is that within six months, you're going to be out of the Communist Party and within five years, you will no longer be a Marxist." And guess what? [laughs] I mean, they were off by about six months. I left the Communist Party a year later rather than six months later. I said, "Why?" And they said, "Well, the Party is very different on the West Coast than it is on the East Coast. It's very sort of noisy and rambunctious, and you will be drowned out."
- Rubens: "Drowned out"--say something more about what that means.
- Epstein: Yes. Well, what that meant was--and they were absolutely right--that on the East Coast, your voice could be heard without being a very aggressive person. And it was partly because organization meant more on the East Coast than it did on the West Coast. On the West coast, you remember what it was like: when there was a crisis, there would be an ad hoc committee and there would be big meetings, and if you didn't have a loud voice, it was so spontaneous that there was very little way of making your voice heard. Whereas on the East Coast, it was smaller, and the organizational structures made more difference.
- Rubens: It was more disciplined there?
- Epstein: Yes. So if you were a member of an ongoing organization, then your voice could be heard in that organization. You didn't have to be loud. I mean, it's sort of like the difference between me and Bettina. Bettina was the kind of person who could make her voice heard at a huge meeting. I couldn't do that. So for me to feel as if I was really part of the movement

required that I be part of a structure--meaning a small group, something like that. It was true: on the West coast, organizations didn't mean much, things were going much faster than that, and loudness and aggressiveness was more important.

Rubens: And within one year, you formally--?

Epstein: Yes, left the Party, but not for the reasons that "they" said.

Rubens: I didn't think you had quite abandoned Marxism per se.

Epstein: No, no. Nor did I abandon the Party for that reason because, you know, actually, I did feel that I could be heard in the Party. No, the reason I left the Party was that it was becoming clear to me that the Party was on the fringe of what was happening. And not only was the Party on the fringe of what was happening, but the Party was very judgmental. This was actually, I guess, less true of the Berkeley club than it was of the Party nationally, but certainly the attitude of the Party nationally towards the New Left was that the New Left was a petit bourgeois nuisance. It was clear to me that being in the Party prevented me from--you know, not so much being part of the rest of the movement, but I couldn't even think straight because I actually shared some of the criticisms of the Party, but I knew that as long as I was in the Party, it was very difficult to be part of any broader current.

I guess my own sense of it was that in the early days at Harvard and Radcliffe, at least I think the Party was playing a positive, constructive role--helping to build SDS, and in bringing some sort of advice to SDS from a perspective that seemed to me to be helpful. By 1966, 1967, I couldn't see what the Party was doing that was particularly helpful.

Rubens: It was such a big change in your life too in terms of identity. Can you just say one more thing about why you wanted to go to Berkeley? Why were you so clear--?

Epstein: Well, a) because the Party was large there; and b) because the movement was large; and c), because it was 3,000 miles away from my family.
[laughs]

Rubens: Did you know Margo Adler, by the way?

Epstein: Yes.

- Rubens: And at what point did you know her?
- Epstein: I knew her at Berkeley. She was two years behind me at City and Country. In the thirties, City and Country had been the socialist school, and Little Red and Elisabeth Irwin were the communist schools. City and Country was the three-year-old group through the thirteen-year-old group. And I don't know when Little Red started; I didn't go to Little Red. But Little Red was also an elementary school. Elisabeth Irwin was the high school of Little Red. Every year a fair number of graduates of City and Country went on to Elisabeth Irwin because Elisabeth Irwin was more like City and Country than anything else around. This was part of the little left culture, and by the fifties, of course, the difference between Socialism and Communism was not that great. So I loved City and Country, and I wanted to go to a high school that was as much like City and Country as possible, so I went to Elisabeth Irwin. I knew Margo a little bit when we were kids, at least at City and Country. Then I re-met her in Berkeley.
- Rubens: In her book [*Heretic's Heart: A Journey Through Spirit and Revolution*, Beacon Press, 1997], she completely skips high school. There is just no discussion of high school.
- Epstein: That's right.
- Rubens: There is discussion of how formative City and Country is.
- Epstein: Well, I had the same feelings about it. I loved City and Country. She describes in her book how I tried to recruit her into the Communist party.
- Rubens: Is that you??! Is that right?
- Epstein: Yes, that's me.
- Rubens: Margo writes about that she almost could've--she would've joined the party.
- Epstein: That's right, she became a witch instead.
- Rubens: Well, later on. [laughter, talking over each other] I mean, I think it's also very moving how she discusses her experiences in the Civil Rights movement. She's just not comfortable there in the South.
- When you left the Party, would you say it wasn't so much defiance of the Party, as assertion of what you wanted to do and where you were going to go?

- Epstein: I left the Party very sadly. It wasn't defiance. You shouldn't get the impression that I was a strong, self-directed--you know, it was more that I had some sort of core sense of what I needed for survival, and I could not have been a public spokesman for the Party. I mean, I needed a family. That was why I came to Berkeley: I needed a community.
- Rubens: Did you come specifically to study history, or--?
- Epstein: No, I actually came to the sociology department, and then I switched into history. I started in '66. The next year, people on the Left started arriving in the sociology department, but the year I was there, I was taking courses from Neal Smelser and Philip Selznick, and it was all very mainstream and very boring. Meanwhile, I was taking a seminar from Larry Levine in the history department, and I liked the seminar from Larry much better, and I liked Larry much better. Again, it was sort of where my sense of cultural home was. If I had had different faculty members, I might easily have stayed in sociology.
- Rubens: Is there anything particularly that should be said about Mario Savio? Did you hear Mario and Suzanne when they came East? You had heard Bettina.
- Epstein: I don't remember hearing either of them speak. I don't remember meeting Mario until I came out to the Bay Area.
- Rubens: Did you know Todd Gitlin?
- Epstein: '62-'63 was the year that I was a freshman and Todd was a senior. That was when Tocsin was the sort of movement of the moment. Todd graduated at the end of that year and went off to Michigan and became involved in SDS.
- Epstein: It was the next year at Harvard when this little group of basically an SDS-affiliated discussion group began meeting off campus. It still wasn't a big deal.
- Rubens: So again, Todd Gitlin is not someone that you encounter or is part of your milieu until--?
- Epstein: Not until he showed up in Berkeley again. I certainly remember him from my freshman year.
- Rubens: A presence.

- Epstein: Oh, absolutely. Very smart, very arrogant.
- Rubens: Was he a WASP?
- Epstein: No, see, that's what I'm saying: that the movement was very Jewish, in fact. I would guess that if you looked at Harvard-Radcliffe SDS, it probably would have been maybe two-thirds Jewish, something like that. But it was in a WASP sea, in terms of Harvard and Radcliffe.
- Rubens: Was there any sense of a west coast presence at Harvard-Radcliffe? Or Californians there?
- Epstein: Not that I remember. Everybody I knew was from New York or wished they were from New York if they weren't from New York.
- Rubens: [laughs] Right. In the Kitchell film, *Berkeley in the Sixties*, shows a few people who saw the students protesting HUAC being flushed down the San Francisco [City Hall] steps and they wanted to come to Berkeley. Other students, of course, had already been enlightened, if you will, by the beatniks, who pulled them west. I mean, they were obviously older too, and that was when their consciousness was formed.
- Epstein: Yes, yes, yes, yes, right.
- Rubens: But there was something about '64 that was absolutely shattering.
- Epstein: The dividing point, yes. I will tell you a story if you want to hear a story about the difference between the East Coast and the West Coast. The summer that I worked--the summer of '64--when I was in this little training program in the national [Communist Party] office, one of the things that I was assigned to do was to write a paper on--oh, I don't know--it was something like trends among youth, something like that. I can't remember exactly. At any rate, I was basically a good little girl who was doing what I was told to do and expressing the ideas that I was told to express.
- One of the things that I put down in this paper, as I was told to do, was that Communists should not have sex before they got married. The reason for this was that the women could get pregnant, and this was male chauvinism. I also said that you shouldn't take drugs--no, drugs weren't even a possibility at that point. No, it was you shouldn't get drunk, because then you could say things at social parties that would reveal Party secrets. Now, all of this really was fed to me; I was what--nineteen years old, and I was really saying what I was told to say. Fortunately, my name

was not on this report. [laughs] The report went out to youth clubs around the country, including the Berkeley club, where it was a major laughingstock.

Rubens: And how did you learn this?

Epstein: When I came out to Berkeley. They were still chuckling about it.

Rubens: By the way, are you concluding that there was more sexuality and freedom--?

Epstein: There was certainly a much freer attitude towards it.

Rubens: In Berkeley.

Epstein: Yes. I'm not sure--. I mean, how do I know who was sleeping with whom? It may have been as many people sleeping with each other on the East Coast as the West coast; however, I suspect there was a difference.

Rubens: And of course, it's all changing very dramatically in '64, too. That's the turning point--.

Epstein: And the reason I suspect there was a difference is because the Party in Berkeley was part of the student milieu. In New York, it was not a student milieu. In New York, it was still primarily a working-class milieu. By and large, by the mid-sixties, the intellectuals had fallen away from the Party. I mean, the Party in the early sixties in New York was a shadow of its former self. Young people were joining the Party in the early sixties like me; there was a little wave of young people joining the Party. And there were people on the campuses who at least were in the Party temporarily. I mean, I think it was more temporary than a permanent thing. But you wouldn't say that the Party was situated in a student movement. The Party was situated in a fading working-class movement.

Rubens: In New York.

Epstein: In New York. Whereas in Berkeley, the Party was situated within the emergent student movement.

Rubens: Well, and also, the precursor, the Bohemian movement. I mean, I think that also had a tremendous impact on--.

Epstein: That's right, that's right. Well, of course that was true in New York too; but in New York, basically the more Bohemian edge didn't join the Party,

and they remained two different arenas. So I remember, for instance, Mike Zaggarell, who was the head of the youth division of the Party and a friend of mine, he got married at, I don't know, the age of twenty-one. I remember his saying to me in a very shocked way, he said, "You know, out in Berkeley, you never know whose car is going to be parked in front of whose house what night." [laughter] So there was this vision of, Those people on the West coast--they're constantly sleeping with each other.

[begin tape 2, side A]

Epstein: The other story I wanted to tell you was, summer of 1965--was it '64 or '65? No, I think it was '64 actually. Before--I told you that there were five of us who were invited from around the country to be part of this--to be trained as cadre in the national office. Before we went to New York, there was a little school that was held for us. I can't remember where it was, but they took us out in the country someplace. We went through classes and so forth.

So there we were, out in the country, five of us with various teachers from the Party coming in and giving us lectures. Somehow in the middle of this--somewhere in the middle of that week, it was discovered that some major leader of the Party--and I can't remember who it was--was an FBI agent. I believe that he had been a homosexual. If I remember this correctly--and it's possible that I don't--the way the Party found out that he was an FBI agent was that--or the way he had become an FBI agent was that the FBI had found out that he was a homosexual and blackmailed him. And somehow this had become clear to the Party; I don't remember how.

Well, I remember this sending a wave of fear through everybody. And I truly don't remember why I remember it--.

Rubens: The homosexuality?

Epstein: No, the fact that he was an FBI agent and sort of the fear of, Are people going to think we're FBI agents?

Rubens: Ah, ah, ah.

Epstein: I remember that I had a habit of sometimes taking notes in Hebrew.

Rubens: Because you knew people couldn't read it?

Epstein: I just liked it. I mean, why did I do it? I don't know. When I was a child, I used to pass notes to my friends in Hebrew.

Rubens: I didn't realize that; so you had a real Hebrew education too--a Jewish education?

Epstein: Yes. Well, I had spent a couple of summers on a kibbutz in Israel.

So at any rate, I remember somebody seeing that I was taking notes in Hebrew, and all of a sudden, there was this specter that somebody would think I was an FBI agent. And people said, "No, no, don't worry, we're not suspicious of you." But what I remember was the terror surrounding the issue of whether somebody might suspect that you were an FBI agent, and the connection of homosexuality, the danger that if you were--I mean, it was like homosexuality was like getting drunk at parties. There were all of these dangerous things you could do that could make you--.

Rubens: Reveal yourself and--.

Epstein: Right, or make you--get you in trouble. I don't know whether the attitude towards homosexuality would have been different on the West Coast or not. But I know that there was a kind of cultural conservatism in the Party on the East Coast that was reinforced by the fear of the FBI.

Rubens: One of the things that's always troubled me about the Kitchell film is that there's just no discussion of birth control, and I think birth control--the availability of the pill--made such a dramatic difference in the social and sexual life of students.

Epstein: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Rubens: There are stories here of girls who went to Mexico to have abortions, and I suppose on the East Coast there must have been stories of people who had bad abortions--.

Epstein: Either that or a girl who was in my house--woman, whatever--when I was at Radcliffe got pregnant and dropped out of school to have the baby. So that was--. By the way, nobody ever put heavy pressure on me to have sex with them. My impression was that, generally--though this was not completely true--there were the women who were taken seriously and there were the women who were seen as sex objects. They were different categories.

- Rubens: Let's specify now a little bit when you're talking about. Are we going back to '62-'63 at Harvard?
- Epstein: But also out here.
- Rubens: I just want to clarify, at the time the term "women" was not used. We called ourselves girls.
- Epstein: "Girls"--we did too.
- Rubens: And I've been always clear--I just wondered if you thought about this: I didn't want to be a woman. That meant you had to wear stockings, you had to cross your legs, you had to wear skirts, and speak softly.
- Epstein: Well, I certainly remember that was very clear in the Party. As a matter of fact, I remember it was in the summer of '66 that there was the first eruption of feminism in the Party. There was another week-long Party school, and this time there were very large numbers of young people at it; I can't remember how many, but it was a big thing. Somewhere during that week, a group of women got together and started talking about, I think what we still called male chauvinism, and there was a big meeting about it. I, at first, did not understand and was not very sympathetic, and it was actually one of the men who talked me into being sympathetic.
- Rubens: Why were you less sympathetic?
- Epstein: Well, because they were saying that they were being treated like girlfriends, and I was never anybody's girlfriend. So my actual frank response was, "I wish I had your problem."
- Rubens: This was said without dismissing the fact that you yourself had experienced chauvinism?
- Epstein: Oh, yes, of course. What they were saying was, "We're just treated like sex objects." And I also felt caught betwixt and between because on the one hand, there was the image of Bettina, who could get up at a mass meeting and have no trouble. There was a way in which I sometimes felt that people expected me to be like that, which I wasn't. And on the other hand, I also wasn't one of the girlfriends.

[End of Interview]