NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

RAFAELA ANSHEL

Interviewer: Ric Tennenbaum

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Transcribed by AJ Sanders

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Ric Tennenbaum: Hello, my name is Ric Tennenbaum and I will be having a conversation with Rafaela Anshel for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is July 13th, 2017, and this is being recorded in Manhattan, New York. Hi, Rafaela.

Rafaela Anshel: Hi.

Tennenbaum: Um, could you please introduce yourself and talk to me about where you were born and where you grew up, and what that was like.

Anshel: Okay, um, my name is Rafaela Anshel. Um, I was born in the Bronx in 1952, uh, in the [inaudible]—in the projects, city-subsidized housing, um, on White PlainsRoad, near Alton Avenue, not far from Bronx Park. Um... [clears throat] I lived there 'til, um, I was 8. I have a brother who has lived—who was 13 when we moved to, uh, Flushing, right over the bridge, right over the Whitestone Bridge, to cooperative buildings which I'm not clear if they were subsidized or not. My mother said something about that towards the end of her life, but... Um, which were predominantly—at that time, the projects and the apartments were predominantly Jewish, as I am, and, um… So that's where I grew up, um… Growing up in the Bronx and part of my time in Queens, um, my grandmother lived with us, because she was diagnosed with, um, she was—she moved in with us when I was 4, she was 64, a year younger than I am now [laughter]. And, um, they thought she had a heart condition, but she had [inaudible]—she read up on it and got a second opinion, that was a new thing in those days, and she found out all she had was asthma. But she stayed with us in my primary years, from 4 to 12, and, um, that was significant. She had a lot—very big [inaudible]—influence on me. The hard part was that we had two bedrooms, and so it was my mother, my father, my brother and me and my grandmother, so my grandmother had her own room, so I switched off from sharing a room with my brother in a bedroom and my parents slept on a sofa sleeper—a pulled-out sofa in the living room, and they put doors on the living room. Um, I forget what it was in the Bronx, I can't even remember what they did. But it's more—I remember Queens better, how it was arranged. And, um, then, um, and at times my parents took the bedroom, and my brother always got the living room, and I would get the common space, which is significant because I didn't have any privacy. My mother put like a—a screen, a divider over the entrance to the apartment so if somebody came to the apartment and I was sleeping, they—nobody would see me. Because—but people would walk in and out of the room, so privacy was a big issue for me, not having privacy, and I was pretty, um—what's the word? You know, I—conservative. I wanted to be covered up and everything. You know? And having no privacy was a big influence in my life. But I really benefited from being with my grandmother. I kind of looked to her in many ways, um, and how she lived her life, which was a very simple life, was not an easy life, but, um, she lived a very simple moment—in the moment life.

Tennenbaum: Hm.

Anshel: You know.

Tennenbaum: Are there any specific lessons you learned from your grandma?

Anshel: Um—[clears throat] Well, you know, I idolized her in some ways, so I didn't know all the undercurrents of it, and, you know, all her history now. But I learned, um, she did everything simple, simply. She cooked simply, she didn't use oil, she just used water. [laughter] And, um, she was very clean and she was a quiet person, and she was the one who always said to me, "Get a civil service job." Because her—her brother was, um, worked for the post office and she… I learned a lot about—you asked me what I, what she taught me, um… Well, one thing she would say in her own way was to live each day, which is not easy for me, but she used to say "Live each day," and she always used to say "It could always be worse". That was her way of—that was her Jewish way of saying it, rather than, you know, other people have it worse than we might. You know, life could be worse than it is, or life—you know. So that was her way of saying it. And—and, um, she had a simplicity to her life, and it wasn't—she didn't have a big life, so in some ways, I—that gives me comfort about my own life, even though some of it, um, my involvement in, in volunteer work is—represents more of my other grandmother, who was a very out, active woman, and an innovative kind of a person. Just the opposite of my other grandmother, who was quieter. So… And I would spend a lot of time with my grandmother, in her room. You know. She was my friend, and she taught me- she told me over and over again the history which she knew of her family, and—and I learned about, um, some of her life, you know, she was a- she was in an orphanage, I can go on and on about that. I—I love all of her stories of my family, you know. Very interested in genealogy, even though I haven't pursued it very much.

Tennenbaum: Is the idea of living each day something that you still use to get by in—what does that mean for you?

Anshel: I struggle with it. I've lived alone most of my life, except for a period where I—I was in a relationship for nine and a half years, and we lived together for five of them. About five. And, um… So I lived alone most of my life, and when I lived alone I only lived in studio apartments. So, um… I've always lived alone and was very protective of where I lived, but I'm not so good at not being lonely, and—and not so good at entertaining myself, and I think some of that comes up from the lack of privacy that I had growing up. And, um, the kinds of problems that we had in our family. Um—there was a lot of arguing, there was no—no such thing as discussion. It was always—my brother and my father primarily were very intellectual, and would argue about, uh, civil rights movement in the sixties, and the Holocaust. And they would both argue with each other about it, and I was sort of—and I and my mother were not allowed to be a part of that. We were kind of pushed away from being… That's—has something to do with my gender issues, is that my—I wanted to participate with—in what the two males were performing, which was arguing and screaming, and then my father would get very violent, and—and he had to be right. And—and if I tried to say anything, he would very sharply tell me to shut up. So… I lost track of what we were talking about, but, um, that was some of my childhood, and that's some of what affected my gender issues. The lack of privacy, um, being aligned with the females in my family. Not wanting to be like my father, who was angry and, um… I blamed everything on him at the time, most of my life, I don't always completely now. But I understand now that he had his own

problems and PTSD and… There is a certain, um, hereditary anger, I think, particularly on my father's side of the family. His mother was that way, too, expressed through anger and yelling and—and impatience, and I didn't want to be that way. I worked very hard at not being that way. You know. So that's one of the themes.

Tennenbaum: Can you tell me more about how, um…

Anshel: [clears throat]

Tennenbaum: …the lack of privacy and aligning yourselves with the women in your family, um… You said that that affected your gender identity. Um, how did that progress through, like, teenage years into early adulthood? What were some of the thoughts during that…

Anshel: Well, there are a few things. First of all, I always felt on display in some ways, and, um, I was—I was modest in a way, but I—because I—because I always felt… For instance, um, one story that I always heard about was that when I was born that I was so adorable that my brother would bring his friends in and he was so proud of having a little… what did he say, was it—brother, and I was a display that way. And, um, the lack of privacy gave me some shame, I think, because I was embarrassed. And I didn't have my own space just to be me, and that was also reinforced by the—my father's pushing me down. My brother somewhat too, they were kind of bullies a little bit, and they pushed me down, and—and I—my father was—was right about everything, and he was—he used to physically hit and punch on my arm, and yell a lot. And, um, I think probably, uh, I was so close to my grandmother, and I was—and my mother became more my ally. So I didn't—I always loved being around, like if there was people—a group of people together in the family, or friends of the family, all the men would be doing one thing, and I always hung out with the women. And even in kindergarten, uh, I remember one particular situation where, um, the teacher said—it was like kindergarten or first grade—"Okay, all the boys go play with the blocks, and all the girls go into the make-believe kitchen". I mean, we're talking the 1950s. And I did—I was kind of uncertain what to do, and I ended up just going into the kitchen with the girls, because that's where I felt most safe and comfortable. And I related to it more. I was always fascinated by the conversations of all the women. My mother's friends and… and I was always more interested in that than what the men were talking about. You know. Um… I think looking back, and I've said this recently, it's kind of a funny thing to say, is that there's a little part of me, and I don't really want this, but I always wanted to be a boy. But there was a part of me that realized that I couldn't—there was a part of me that just couldn't be. I have that awareness now. I just… I was socialized—yes, I was brought up as male, whatever that means. I believe gender is socially constructed. But I was brought up more female, I believe. My mother—if my mother was alive, she would totally disagree with me. [laughter] But that's how I feel, and even as I… Growing up, you know, it's—it's kind of, uh, cliched with gay men and with trans women, I guess, or gender non-conforming, it might be, not completely, is that I was very frightened of competitive sports, and, um… So I used to make believe I was sick with my mother, and she was very lenient, and so she would say "okay". So I would sit with all the women talking and, you know, and… So that's how it manifested itself when I was young, and as a teenager I really only—and I was always embarrassed about my body, you know, and, um… I made a lot of friends in high school, I went

to Bronx High School of Science, which I really didn't want to go to, I wanted to go to Performing Arts, but I was afraid. So I went where my brother went, which was Bronx High School of Science. [door closing] And I made a lot of friends there. So I wasn't somebody who just grew up in the Bronx and Queens, I was more cosmopolitan than that. I—I grew up, all my friends—we would meet in Central Park, you know. So how did that manifest itself? I—I was aware of being attracted to men. I was aware of, um—they played sports, those friends, but they were more accepting. But I was treated, I was teased in some ways that were—I can't go into it all, but that—that, um… I don't know how to describe it without getting too specific, but I was treated in, um… I guess they made—there was space given to me because I wasn't a typical male. You know. I did play touch football and all that, but I sort of made myself seem… I somehow got through it because I made myself funny or something. And my—and my friends were more open. You know. Um… So I was al—I was always pretty aware that at the time, I was attracted to men. And I, um… My best friend, I had a best friend in high school who I was totally in love with. I would spend time with him all the time, and I followed him to college. I went to the college that he went to because he went there. And, um… and, uh… So that's another way, you know. I just—and I said to him, I confided in him, I didn't know what the word meant, it was used differently in the 50s and 60s and 70s, in 60s it was totally used differently then, the word, um, "queer". I said, "Sometimes I think I'm queer." [door closing] Now what that meant wasn't clear, all I knew—and—and that was the only word I knew, you know. And I said, "I have trouble with girls." You know. That's what I would say.

Tennenbaum: Do you know where you got your understanding of "queer", uh, back then? Or what you thought it could mean?

Anshel: Um… Well, it became apparent when I was so in love with my friend Mario. You know. It was so apparent. I once threw him a kiss goodbye and was so freaked out that I did that. You know. Um… say the question—when did I get the idea that I was queer in some way?

Tennenbaum: Um—

Anshel: That was the question?

Tennenbaum: I'm interested in that, and also where you heard of "queer", what your exposure to "queer" was by that time? Like, did you have any models you looked to, or… [door closing] Did you hear it in magazines?

Anshel: Well, my fa—It was strange, I mean, I had… Growing up, I had dreams that were clearly, um… I wasn't sure what they meant. I think I wasn't sure if I had abuse or not. And so, um… And I—I think I was queer because my—I didn't—my father was always trying to prove to people that I was stronger, and more of a boy. You know. Because obviously I wasn't. I—I didn't want to do Little League, you know, all that stuff. So that was the beginning of queer for me, and—and, um… I mean, there is a through line of violence in my life, and—and I had an operation when I was young, and I was exposed, my genitals were exposed. So again, there was another incident where I was being exposed. Living—not having private space, being exposed. So all that queerness kind

of came about from, uh, that too. Um, did I have a role model? Um… not really. Not at that point. [door closing] Not at that point. Um, I used to watch… I had a little bit of a feeling, when I was very young, I didn't dress up like a lot of trans people did, but I did do a couple of things that I was making believe I was female, a little bit. Very minor. But, um, did I have role models? Um, that came later on, when I was eleven and continues today, my role model was Barbra Streisand. And she was everything. And I look back, and I still am a fan. And I think what it was is that she was—I love—I love music, so she sang with such deep emotion, which I was obviously feeling inside. And she was Jewish—unabashedly Jewish. And she was a woman! And I just… I guess I always used to think I saw my mother in her, you know. I just realized that I left my phone on.

Tennenbaum: Okay.

Anshel: Should we stop for a second for me to turn the sound off?

Tennenbaum: Sure.

Anshel: So Barbra Streisand was my—is it on?

Tennenbaum: Mm-hm.

Anshel: Barbra Streisand was my role model. You know. I used to spend my time—I feel like I'm singing a song—spend my time in the living room, reminds me of a [inaudible] from Chorus Line. Um, lip-syncing all her songs, singing all her songs. I love to sing. And—at the top of my lungs. And performing, and everything, you know, and my parents let me do it. They just closed the door. You know. So… And my brother took me to see Funny Girl when I was—when it opened. It's—it's odd because he was into totally different music. But he always brought me to see Barbra Streisand. And, um… [inaudible] thinking something about that. His—the act of his bringing me to see Barbra Streisand was sort of a queer act, because he was recognizing in me that I wanted to do this, so in a way that felt queer. You know. [door closing] In some way. You know, and—and all my friends were into—when I got into high school and everything, they were all into Bob Dylan and heavy metal and all this stuff, and I was into—and Led Zeppelin and all that, and I was—I would say, "Please listen to just one Barbra Streisand song, and that's all I'll ask for. Just one." And they'd all groan, and I'd play it, and then I'd say "okay, you can play whatever you want now." And I used to love listening to Mario sing Bob Dylan songs. You know, so it was kind of like an adoring queer, whatever I was, sitting down and looking up at this guy playing Bob Dylan songs. You know. But I did remember, some of Bob Dylan's songs were sexual. You know, and some of it disturbed me, because I felt like it was objectifying women. You know. Um… so, um… I guess she was my role model. And I always liked, um… my favorite actresses who I identified with were ones that were the most vulnerable in some ways. I mean, Streisand—though she seems strong, she's very vulnerable. [clears throat] But I al—I loved Marilyn Monroe. I thought she was so underrated and I knew she was—she suffered so much, and she was very—seen as a sex symbol, and I—I connected to her vulnerability. And Elizabeth Taylor, also, because she was so bothered by the public that, um… I connected with her too, her—and she was—had a lot of

emotion and a lot of vulnerability in her voice, so these were role models for me. They were my role models. Women were my role models.

Tennenbaum: Uh, you mentioned that—

Anshel: [clears throat]

Tennenbaum: —there would be a couple things, um—I imagine this was in high school? Um, that you did to your, um… presentation? That weren't necessarily typical boy.

Anshel: Um… I mean, my mother clothed us, you know, but, um… You know, I grew up in the late sixties, early seventies, so I wore the clothes of that time. I was like a hippie. You know, and then I grew my hair, which turned out not to be straight, it turned out to be frizzy, and curly. What did I do as—I realized as I grew up and my life went on, um, I don't know when it started or anything, but I always—maybe I do, in a way, but I mean, in the early seventies, clothes—and I was in my—I was eighteen in the 1970s, so I went to college in the early seventies. So it was acceptable to wear, you know, platform shoes, you know, with heels for men, for males. And I don't really like saying that completely. And, um—the male part—and also, um, it was—clothes—clothes were colorful, and I—and I always stayed with that. I mean, people would always say—I would always buy sweaters and stuff, and people would say, "You wear such"—I remember at work, people would say, "You have such beau—colorful clothing." That was like a code, I think. I don't know whether it was gay or what. I mean, um, there's a whole 'nother story about how I came out, and all of that, as—as what I thought I was, as a gay m—I saw myself as a gay man. I wasn't sure what my—I was afraid of my orientation. You know. Should I move on from—to that?

Tennenbaum: Sure.

Anshel: Um… [clears throat] This is a tough part. Um, so I had friends in college, and I remember one friend who I just reconnected with said "You're gay." And—because I was avoiding it. You know. And I didn't know whether I wanted to be with men or women, that's how I handled it in my mind. And, um, she freaked me out by saying it, and I didn't like her saying it at first, but obviously it was—I was attracted to men. So—but the real th—and then I went to therapy, um, since the time I was nineteen. And my problems always are—surrounded my father, and I went—I even—at one point, my ther—I had a therapist who was female, through my brother I got these therapists, and she said I should speak to a m—a guy. Because I was so—I needed to talk to a male, because that's what I was presenting, that I had so many problems with men. Even though I was attracted to men. So I—after that period, I went to a therapist and, um, [inaudible] very long time. What happened was, I started to see this therapist who I ended up being with for seventeen years, when I was, uh, 24. At that point, um—so many details, I don't know what to—I don't have to say every little detail of my progression of life, I'll just—some of it we're moving around from themes. So we're talking about queerness. So, um, when I—I moved in—I lived with my brother for a few years, lived alone—I lived with roommates, I left that college that I went to with Mario.

Tennenbaum: What was the college?

Anshel: It was Bard College. And I worked there, I felt very guilty that I went there, because it was expensive, and my parents paid it monthly. [inaudible] say that. But I did work there and earn my own money, and it—and I took—I didn't know what to major in, because they asked you immediately. I mean, so I said, "I like Barbra Streisand, I'll sing. I'll take voice lessons, I'll sing." Which was like, at eighteen years old. And I didn't want to go to college at first, and my father said, "You have to go to college, because of the Vietnam War." I had a very low lottery number. And I knew that I—I would've never survived even—I used to—I always make a joke, I would have never survived boot camp. You know. Um, so moving on, um… I was always into the arts, okay. So moving on back to—I moved, lived with my brother for a few years, and he got divo—I lived—after living with some people for a year, I needed—I moved in with him, he was divorced, he had a young child, my niece, who is now deceased. And, um… I started seeing my therap—I moved out and I moved to Manhattan into a tenement, I lived there for 22 years. And, um… in the east twenties. And it wasn't a great neighborhood then. Lot of drug traffic, a lot of, um, prostitution. And, um—which I don't look down upon anymore, because I really—I didn't look upon it then, but it seemed like a bad thing then, but now I have much more insight into that. People do prostitution for all kinds of reasons. And, um… But what I'm getting to is the point that—in this tenement, I was seeing my therapist for around six months, and, um, I was raped. I was living as a gay man, and I was raped at gunpoint. I let somebody into my apartment—into our building, not my apartment—I was being followed on the street. And I held the door behind me, which I shouldn't have. I did look back to look at him, and I was discovering that I was gay. A gay male—gay, I don't want to say male. And, um… So I did look around behind me and see him, and… That's what you did in the seventies, you know, I was kind of cruising a little bit. And I just kept moving, and I just held the door behind me, why I don't know, because I just was. It was naivete or just—it was just an action I took. And as soon as we got to the first—it was a walk-up, it was when I got to the first level he pulled out a gun and put it to my head. It was a major issue—major incident in my life that has changed—that influenced my whole trajectory of gender, and, um, and violence that I had experienced before this ever happened to me, I always felt that this would one day happen to me. You know. And he forced me into my apartment, and, uh, tied me up, and, um… He made the assumption that I always—that I had sex before, but I never really did. Something very minor, because my friends said I was gay, and my friend—I had a friend that was bisexual, but nothing successful, and nothing really happened. I don't need to go into that. But—I was raped at gunpoint, he removed some of the wire from my hands because it was—my hands were getting numb, and he raped me. And people don't realize that one—this is the only time I'll say male—one in every six men are raped every day. People don't real—people think of rape as just happening in—of men happening in prison, it's not true. Men are raped—one of every five to six men every day, and women are raped every, you know, two or three. And of course, trans people are raped a lot. You know. Trans women, particularly. And, um, so… I—I had just moved in to that apartment, and I lived there for 22 years. So I changed a lot of things in the apartment to make it safer for me. So that's—that projected me—that was my trajectory into a gay life. So from 1977, it's 40 years this year, just a few days ago was—that's why I didn't want to meet on Monday. Because that was the anniversary. So I… That was—I had—it happened in '77, when I was 25, few—a few months after I turned 25, and I, um… From '77 to 30, I was into the gay male

life, where I would go to a gay—I went to a gay bar, not far from where I live now, ironically, which of course it's all different now. But, um, I went to gay bars, I would meet people, you know. I was very shy and scared. But I did meet one man in the bar I went to on Second Avenue and 54th Street, and—

Tennenbaum: What's the bar called?

Anshel: It was called The Last Call, it doesn't exist anymore for many years, and I—it was on 52nd and Sec—and Second, and I now live on 54th and First. I just moved there four months ago, so I'm having a lot of PTSD about that. So, um… uh, I remember him as being very kind to me. He lived—I lived on 25th Street between Second and Third and he lived in—in a tenement, and he lived in these beautiful nice buildings further over east, near the riv—East River. Um, and for about a year I was with him, but I didn't think of him as a boyfriend. I thought of him as this guy, who I had se—I would go to and have sex with, but it was always tinged of course with, um, that I was raped. But he was kind to me. You know. And then I explored with other people afterwards. You know, some anonymously, and s—one I met through him, and… But he—I think I always think of him when I try to think of the major people who cared about me enough, he was one of them. His name was Frank, and, um… He was, um, he went on to be very active in the gay community. You know. He was a tall, beautiful black man, and, um, very diverse friends—friendships of age and ethnicity and… And I feel bad because he once invited me in, too, after we weren't really seeing each other, to join him and I didn't, to be with his friends, so… So that trajectory of being raped affected everything for me in terms of my life. But when I was 30, I discovered, um, the Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, which is the LGBT synagogue. Then, it was called the gay synagogue. And it was—had exis—it was 19, uh, '82 and it existed since 1974. So I was pretty earl—there pretty early on. It was sort of just beginning to transition from its earlier history to its seventies history, uh, eighties history. And I was very involved with that, I stopped—I had one relationship early on in there, and I discovered that people could be in couples and stuff. But, um, I still operated as a gay man, but as the synagogue changed, and we had les—I was on the lesbian outreach committee, one of the very few, quote, gay males that were on the lesbian outreach committee, so there's the theme that I always was drawn towards female stuff. And the other thing was—is, um, just to say that all through those years I did seek help about the rape, and I was one of the earliest people when the Interviolence Project was formed, I was in the first group that was gay men who were—men who were raped. It wasn't a very good group. Um, but I was in one of the first groups. So it—it was a trajectory, and—and then I made—I went to Identity House and I made a whole group of friends, small group of friends, we were like a family. I sort of combined people from the synagogue and… and, um, a very prominent person in my life was my friend Noli [sp?] from the Phillipines and he—I met him in the late 70s, '80, before the synagogue, and I had an affair with him and he ended up being my best friend. And, um, they all treated me like the mother. Here I was, in a world of g—the gay male w—gay men, but I was really involved with the synagogue after that, and yet they were my family too, and… I was treated as female more than male.

Tennenbaum: How so?

Anshel: I was the mother. They called me "Mom" and they were my daughters. You know, it was common for gay men to talk that way, but I was definitely… I was right away the mother. You know, I was treated as female. You know. Um… A little—I'm just thinking back to, um… uh, people I looked towards, you know, examples of—of gender issues, um… I remember in my thirties or forti—thirties, I went to—late thirties—we went out to the movies with my friend and there was a movie with Gena Rowlands, who I loved, and, um… She was in m—a Woody Allen movie where she played a woman who was 48, which seemed older to me then, that was like ten, fifteen years old—ten years older than me, and that was a time when I first started to think, "When I get older, that's—that's who I want to be. I want to be an o—a woman in her forties or later female. I want to be a woman. That's what I want." As I grew older. Of course, 48 passed and it happened later. But, um, in my forties I was in a relationship, from my late forties to my early fifties. I was with a, um… I met somebody at the synagogue and he really didn't want—I met him there, but he stopped going, and I kept going, I was so involved there, I did everything there, and I… I led serv—I did everything. [laughter] You can imagine, I don't need to go into all the details, but one of the things I did was I led service—before we had a rabbi, I led services singing and doing the rabbi part at least five times a year, and then we had a rabbi. And I remember also… She no—I had a feeling she noticed me, it was before I met Larry, but—or just before I met him that, um, she saw me hanging out with—dancing with the women and hanging out with women more, and not just being with the men, so I had a feeling she noticed that. It was a little bit… This was in my mind that sh—her mind that she didn't quite get it. She was—she was, like, looking at me and seeing that, noticing that. You know. That was another gender issue. But… I'd say in my—at a certain point in my life, I guess it was my thirties, late thirties, before I met Larry, that, um, I said, "I wanna be older, I want—" At that time, it meant my late forties, and be a woman. I do remember when I was 21 going back, that I said to my parents—this is before I really came out to them as gay—I said, "Sometimes I think I might be gay." And my father told me the weirdest story about sometimes he imagines himself as a w—as the woman, which was really weird. And my mother said that she experimented with girls, like all the girls did. So that was their response to me, you know. Um, I just needed to put that in [inaudible] related to gender. So, um… So things obvious—I was with Larry for—we actually got married religiously, it wasn't legal to get—for two men to get married—and I knew at the… at the, uh—and I pushed for it, but I knew at the altar that this wasn't right. You know. And, um… I don't know why. You know. But I used to always make jokes with people at the synagogue that—and I know this is not unusual for lesbians or gay men, but I used to say "I'm a lesbian—I'm a gay man trapped in a lesbian's body." That's what I used to say all the time. And it made people laugh and it was… I don't know what it meant. I know there were a lot of lesbians that felt that way, that they were l—gay men trapped in lesbians' bodies. But, um, obviously I went on from there. You know. Anything—so…

Tennenbaum: How did Larry react when you said that you wanted to be an older woman?

Anshel: He didn't know.

Tennenbaum: Okay.

Anshel: I hadn't met him yet. And he knew I made those—uh, all [inaudible] know was that I was in the chorus, we had formed a chorus and I was in it from the beginning, and there was one guy in the chorus who Larry still is very close to, and he reported to Larry that I had said, "I feel like a—a lesbian in a gay man's body". And, um, I don't think Larry really—was angry, of course, and I don't think Larry really liked that. And… You know, our sexual life was not… good. I mean, some of it was okay. I had to learn how to be with somebody. But it wasn't fulfilling at all.

Tennenbaum: Hm.

Anshel: And of course I was quite scared, because of… I had some sort of abuse as a child, I'm not sure if it—if there was sexual abuse, but I'm sure there was violence, my father was a rageaholic, but—so that brought us together, but our response to it was very different, I always felt, um, I felt like I was being raped. A lot. You know. And… So I was with him from my early forties to my early fifties. And so I—I lived in—was in Englewood, New Jersey, I moved out of the tenement department, I lived there, and—for four more years by myself, and then, um, I was starting to transition in some way. I was still working. But, um, I guess I was looking to fit in somewhere. I didn't know where that was, I was starting to feel like I didn't fit in to the gay man's world. I wasn't meeting anybody new, I had lost ten years with Larry I felt, you know, and I—I'm always—I'm always looking for community. So I had community at the synagogue, it's not that clear to me, I had to look back, but all I know is that I started transitioning in some way when I was at work. When I was around… well, I left Larry and my relationship was over at 53, I moved in… well, and I started—I was still in New Jersey living alone, and I—my bo—I felt like my bo—I always had i—body issues, um, because of all the stuff that happened to me, and… But for some reason, not long after I—I stopped seeing Larry, I, um… What happened was, I was… I met somebody at the—in chorus, who was transgender woman. She's very well known in the transgender world. And, um… I still lived in New Jer—in Englewood, New Jersey, and she lived in, um… like, Nyack, and so I was on the way home, so she drove me home, and she would start talking of—she was transgender. And she would talk to me about it. And she had a son that she'd called, and she would tell—she would be open with me and tell me things, and I started to feel like, "This is interesting." And I always thought it was a political thing, but I was—it was a political thing I was drawn to. I had to sort a lot out, you know, and, um… still working some stuff out. And I, um… That's when it really began. So I went to the center, the Gender Identity Project, and I went to a group, you know, the… feminine spectrum, and, um, at first I didn't like it. And… I had changed my name a few times before I transitioned, which I found out later from a trans rabbinical intern who counseled me that it's not unusual on the path to be—to transitioning, to change one's name. And, um… So the names that I chose before I transitioned contributed to the female name that I chose. And, um… [clears throat] So, I don't know if I want to mention her name because she's so well known, but, um, she… I went to the Gender Identity Project and I was very attracted to this guy there, and that confused me, but he was, um… I guess f—very attractive but he was also free—free gender-wise, I guess, in some way. I don't know. I went a second time, and I was scared, but I—I liked it more, and I just wanted to fit in. And at the time I went by the name Rafi, but everybody was going around saying what their name was, and I didn't want to say my—a male name, I wanted to fit in. So I said "Rafa". And, um, people at the synagogue started to know me—and people knew me as Rafa, plus my feminization of my birth name. And, um… [inaudible]

like two names, but Rafi and it was Rafa with the other name, feminized. So, um… I, um… I got counseled for—for nine weeks by Cristina Herrera, who's very p—who works at The Center and was a big part of the Transgender Identity Project and I went to the groups, I quit the chorus because it was Wednesday nights and I went to Gender Identity Project to their groups, made new friends, trans friends, and got involved in that world. And… But I started the transition when—before I retired. And… and I left New Jersey, partly because I said "why am I still here?" I was here—I moved here because of Larry, and also I got to know all the people—all the women on my floor, and they would sit on the stoop and I would think—on the [inaudible], you know—and I thought, "How can I transition when they're all my friends? They all know me and they still see me as male, I can't transition." So I said, "I have to move." So I chose Jackson Heights, well, partly because Cristina said there were a lot of trans people there, LGBT people there, a lot of trans people there. So I th—I moved into, um, an older building and, um, I did—that's when I seriously started to transition. Because, like, people didn't know me. And people didn't seem to care. You know.

Tennenbaum: Did you find trans community in Jackson Heights? Or a queer community?

Anshel: At first, there was a—I was—I was like—I couldn't believe it. The first day there was a rally in front of the post office down the block from me which Melissa Sklarz was leading, and I said "Wow, I live down the block, and this, this—" I think a trans person was beat up or killed, and they were having a rally. And it was like the second day I was there. And three blocks away was Queens Pride House, and I started to go to their trans group, and I said "Wow, this is all here." But then Queens—eventually Queens Pride House became a place that wasn't good for me to be at because of the leadership, so… But I still had the Center in Manhattan. You know. But it was a good place for me to transition. You know. And people at work started to notice, especially somebody that I was able to come out to. She's—like, she—I walked in one day and she said, "What are you doing with your eyebrows?" You know, and I was polishing my nails, that's how I started, and, um… And I tried out wearing a dress walking along the main avenue in Jackson Heights, and it was too revealing. So I w—I just did it very fast and went back up home. But it was a place for me to transition. And then at—in 2011—I worked for the New York Public Library—in 2011, I… I got to a—I got to a tipping point, and they offered—it was the last offer that they gave for people to retire, I was one of the—I was there for, you know, one of the longest, my whole… Most of the people in my tier had retired, all the people in the previous tier had retired, and it came to the point where I just couldn't be me at the li—at work, you know. I… I think I was wearing a bra once in a while under my shirt, I'm not sure, and I was doing all those other things, and… and they offered me this, and that was one of the many reasons I left. You know, it was time to leave because I just couldn't do any more work. It was too overwhelming.

Tennenbaum: And how long had you been at the NYPL?

Anshel: 37 years. And, um… Like, 37 and a quarter years. From 22 to, uh, 58.

Tennenbaum: What became hard about starting to transition after being there for so long?

Anshel: You know, they were pretty open about gay people. And they even—I remember seeing on the bulletin board something about trans people, then I remember it being taken off. And I was starting to, in my own way, reveal to people about trans people, but I didn't always say it about myself. But, um, at some point that was when I started to—I think I was going to GIP before I—I, um, actually retired. Yeah, I did, because I was 58 when I was retired, and I started transitioning I'd say when I was 54, 55, I went to my ca—I went to Callen-Lorde, and I said to my—which was all in the same time as I was going to Gender Identity Project to learn more—and I said "I think I want to go on hormones." And she said, "Well, you can express your femininity in many ways." So then I waited a little while longer, and I said "I think I want to take…" I was scared, and I didn't mean to do it right away, but I said "I'm thinking about taking hormones", and she said "Okay, let's start now." And I wasn't quite ready. But I just went along with it. So I guess she figured you can either know that—and you can just stop if you want to. But I started. And I guess I was around 54 or 55. And, um… the groups became very important to me, they were every, uh, Wednesday then. I—every Wednesday I would go, and I made all these friends, some of who I still know. And, um, I found a whole new pl—a whole new community. A whole new community. It was really… And I… and I felt like I fit in. But one—one thing that was problematic is that I was at the synagogue so long, and I had to start—I was transitioning in front of the synagogue. You know. Which was my prime—was a home for me, it saved my life. And—[door closing]—and, um… I had—I had a very dysfunctional—difficult family. Lot of problems. And, um… Yeah. So I had to transition in front of the synagogue, and there—and—even… um… Yeah, so that was my—so that was the world I was in at that point. But I went back to the chorus, because it gave me so much. And I went through per—I had a long period where it was very hard, because it took—it's taken a long time for people to see me as female. And it took transitioning, and looking more female, and all that. And all I—I did… I just—you're not asking me questions, I'm just talking and talking, you know. But, um… I had, um… They were starting to ordain trans rabbinical interns, trans rabbis, in the reconstructionist movement, and now they're doing the reform movement. And I always wanted—we had rabbinical interns, and I always wanted counseling by them, because I wanted—it's slightly different than going to therapy, it was more, uh, spiritual. And I remember I had a trans rabbinical intern, and he—he really brought me to another level. He—I ended calling myself Rafa. He said, "You know, your name is Rafaela." He said, "Do you know what that means?" And I knew what Rafa—what it meant, that's why I chose my name. It means "God heals." It's—a lot of people don't realize it's a Hebrew wor—name. And—but he said to me, he said "Your whole name means 'God heals her.'" And so we had a retreat every year, so the next—that next year I stopped using Rafa, I used my nametag as Rafaela. You know. Um… I was gonna say something else about that whole period of time. Um… Anyway. So… um… I still went to the Center, you know, for different things, and, um… I really wish I had gotten involved in the Gender Identity Project in some way, and I still wish I could, but they don't have very many volunteer opportunities, and… And, um… I'm just telling my story. I… I had liver problems because of the spiro. Spiro is, um, I was taking estrogen, my doctor never gave me that much because of my age. She was very protec—Well, now my—my doctor is transitioning to male. It's about two years now, so I have to keep remembering that and calling him he. And he was very—was very protective of me, never gave me a lot of estrogen. I was taking estradiol, I was also taking a thing called finasteride, which keeps you from getting bald. And—because when you transition, it's—from female to male, your body hair disappears, but your facial hair doesn't, and not all—and I

was just beginning to get bald on top of my head, and the finasteride and the hormones stopped it. And, um, I was still at work, taking the hormones. So it was already starting, I hadn't retired yet. Because if I started when I was 54, 55, I didn't retire when I was—until I was 58. So, um… So I had spiro, and—I'm thinking of all these things, it's not all in order—um, I was taking spiro, and I was taking something for type 2 diabetes, and I—my doctor was so great, he sent me to—he made the appointment for me to go to a kidney doctor. Because my levels were high, and—and he immediately said to me, "You have to get off spiro, and you have to stop your diabetes medicine, and you can't ever take ibuprofen again." And after about 6 months my levels were okay, but my problem was—was that I started to have sexual feelings again, as a male. And I was starting to look at male pornography again. And here I was transitioning. And it was very hard for me. So I was doing electrolysis, which I still do with the same person, who became like family to me. And he said to me, "Did you ever hear of a—" I didn't know anything! I was naive, I didn't—I first heard the word "transgender" from my friend who drove me home, I didn't know the word "transgender". I didn't know what he said to me, because he dealt with a lot of trans women, he said, "Did you ever hear of an orchiectomy?" I said "no, I don't know what an orchiectomy is." He said, "They remove your testes, you know, so you won't have testosterone in you." So I said, "okay, I'm gonna do that." Mixed up with all this, my mother—my father had died, my mother was homebound, and then got sick, and she was in rehab, and I f—and I had a lot of trouble getting covered to have the orchiectomy. A woman named Dr. Barbara Warren, who's wonderful person, was the LGBT advocate at Mt. Sinai Beth Israel, and… and I remember her calling me up, I was in the ambulance with my mother, and she said "I have news for you, you got—" it's ambulatory surgery— she said, "You got approved." This was on—it was—life is ironic, I was on the ambulance with my mother, she had a urinary infection, I was—and that's when I got the call. And I was not getting along with my brother, he was very judgmental and every—He—he supported my transness from the beginning. He's a crazy guy, but that's something that he did. He—when I told him that I—I'm starting to identify with the trans community tentatively, I was, and he said, "I always knew." My crazy brother who… is an eni—I know—I understand him, but he's an enigma and very difficult, and I don't have a relationship much with him now, he said "I always knew." He's my older brother. So very interesting. I think it's because—I don't know why, he didn't go into details, but I was trying to think of why. And it didn't seem that I was trans, I didn't know what trans was anyway. So, um I had the orchiectomy. And, uh, that solved that problem. But then… um… I—I think this is the trajectory for me, part of the trajectory of the rape and the violence and everything, this was a big part of it, I think. I wasn't comfortable having a penis. And I decided to—that I wanted to have surgery. And I—that was like my—I would say to myself, "that is my primary reason, I just don't want this body part anymore." You know. And, um… I started to research doctors. And I found one in Philly, I wanted to go to the—I don't have a lot of money, my mother died, and the only money I had was from the apartment she had, which wasn't a lot of money. And I—and I was… The hospital in—in Philly covered me, because it was in my insurance. But he I had to pay a fee, and he was terrible doctor, he was not nice. He was very misogynist, self-centered, old—75. He should have stopped, and he botched up a lot of my surgery, I had a very bad experience, but I had a good rabbinical intern who lived in—a gay man who lived in Philly, and he visited me when I was recovering in this doctor's—he had a facility where you can recover, and I was there for ten—for ten days. Well, more—almost 2 weeks, I stayed longer because I had a very big wound. And I was home for 3 months, and—and since

then I started to venture out, it was very painful, and I still have—I'm still dealing with urinary issues with that. And I will—I had a couple of revisions of my, um, urethra, and I'm having one more. And—this is very personal, and I'm going to share it—I chose not to have depth in my vaginal area, which a lot of women want. But, um, I was scared off by somebody who said there—there are issues, you know, the women's anatomy is the—the urethra is very close to the—to the rectal area, so I was afraid of, um, there could be problems with that. So I said, "Oh, I don't—" you know, my main thing was just to not have a penis, so I said, "Just don't make it deep, you know…" So the first thing I remember waking up, because it was a very dark, I was very scared, I wasn't sure I wanted to do it, there were—there still were—I had a date, and it almost didn't happen, because they weren't functional at this doctor's office, and the Friday before I was supposed to do it, I had gotten the number to do it, you know, the approval, but they were telling the—my doctor's secretary who was his ex-wife that—that it wasn't—she called me that Friday and said "I don't think it's approved," but she pushed that whole day, and since I had the number they approved it. And I went in on that day, which was October 20th, 2016, and—exactly opposite my birthday which is April 20th. And, um, one thing that helped me to understand that this probably was the right thing was I woke up and I said, "I don't have a penis anymore", and I smiled to myself. I smiled. You know. But I struggled a lot, still, and a lot of time and therapy has been spent on working that through. It's better now, you know, but—working that through—but being a trans person is not easy. Being a trans woman is not easy. Especially if you're—have any interest in, um, having a—a partner. A l—a love, you know, uh, somebody to love. I think a lot of—this is my interpretation—a lot of women who don't have surgery, many who don't choose to, most can't afford it, um… And of course I hardly have any money left, because I used the money. And I didn't get—well, first of all, it's very hard to—if you ha—if you're trans, and a lot of men like trans women who have penises, I believe, you know, because they can have the kind of sex that they probably want, and still ha—be with a woman. But with me, I have a vagina now. I can't have vaginal intercourse, but—which is another issue which affects me and my whole issue around repression of sexuality, but I… so it makes it harder for me. It does make it harder for me. And I've heard other people say the same thing, and a lot of trans women I know are attracted—were with women. And… so they… they become like lesbians, you know, and I was attracted to men. And I didn't know that many trans women that were attracted to men. And I think my orientation is a little shaky now, you know, um, I think I'm more attracted to men, but I'm still have—a lot of fears about men and stuff like that. And—and I do consider—sometimes I think, "Oh, maybe I'll go out with a trans man." You know. And I—ironically, I have a vagina, but I don't—I've never had sex with—with somebody with a vagina. Unless I dated a man with a—a trans man who had surgery, which is not as common, not as easy. So… I had other things I was going to say, but I can't think of any right now. Um… do you have any more questions?

Tennenbaum: Yeah, um—

Anshel: Why don't you ask me some questions?

Tennenbaum: Sure. Um—

Anshel: Because I've just been talking nonstop.

Tennenbaum: Can you tell me more about the community you had and have at Gender Identity Project? Um, would it just meet at the Center, or would there be other hangouts? How was it structured?

Anshel: Well, I'm not part of G—GIP has changed, so that's not my main trans connection now, but, um, we used to meet every Wednesday, and we'd always go out to Good Stuff, on Sixth Ave—on, uh, Fourteenth—on Fourtheenth, between Sixth and Seventh. And that was a very big deal, because we were socializing after having a gigantic room of people talk one by one, whoever wanted to talk, and sometimes they had topics, and stuff, and, um… I've made a couple of lasting relationships, friendships, from that era. You know. And then, um, Gender Identity Project changed. I went to the Queens Pride House for a while, and then Gender Identity Project changed, they were having once a month drop-in, and then the other three weeks—excuse me—they had, um… stories, they would have—small groups working on specific topics, so I did that once, once or twice. I felt like I was—I didn't need to do it completely, but I still wanted to be involved in the community. So I did that, and then I stopped. And, um… and moving ahead, I—maybe—I had my surgery when I was 63, I'm now 65, and, um… I guess if—two or three years ago, um, one of my friends from GIP, Gender Identity Project, we were old enough for SAGE, you know, which is the LGBT senior center, and there was nothing trans there at all. We saw flyers that said LGB. "All LGB people invited." Or if it was just for women, you know, L. Nothing for—nothing trans. So Barbara I would say would be the main person that… pushed for this, and there was a programming director there at the time, Kate, a cis woman who was wonderful, and she started the program, and we have a trans womens' group. And—It's small, and, um, still my primary trans connection with other people. And, um, and then she left and we had somebody else, uh, a cis woman with very, very, um… sexually free and open, and does burlesque and all kinds of stuff, and again, another person who was very kind. And SAGE—it was weird going into SAGE, because I recognized people I used to know at the synagogue, and they—they were so clueless. They even had a—a group for allies, and one guy said to me, "You should go to the ally group." And I said "I don't need to go to the ally group!" [laughter] "You need to go!" You know, and I was very confused, and—should I—I pass most of the time, and I—I said, "Should I… do I want to be stealth there, or do I want to be trans? What do I want? What do I want?" Because at the synagogue, it was so hard to, you know, it was very hard, you know, it was like everybody knew, even the new people. And there was a group at the synagogue, a trans empowerment group, and it made a lot of change at the synagogue, and once it did all that and we moved to a new space and they incorporated all the things that trans people need, there's no group at the synagogue anymore. And it's a big loss for me. So at—But there… there are certainly trans con—it's one of the—the issues that they deal with that they definitely deal with there, and prominent, but there's just not a group anymore, and I would like there to be. And, um… So finally through these program—and there's somebody else who was a programming per—two programming people who were trans, and one of them, uh, at SAGE, a younger—a younger trans man, really helped me out. Got me a social worker. Um… really aff—affirmed me. And the other programming director became kind of a friend. Both younger, but they became kind of friends. You know. And the trans group that we had at the synagogue, I was basically the only trans woman, and I was the oldest. There was one trans man there who I was friendly with, but was a

pretty toxic person who I ended my relationship—that friendship, finally, I learned how to do that. And—and, um… But he really came. I still deal with people—it's better, and I've—after I had the surgery, it was hard—people misgendering me in LGBT settings. You know. And… and fr—still dealing a little bit with close friends. You know. Anything else?

Tennenbaum: Yeah. Can you tell me more about what it's like to not have as many trans friends or acquaintances of your similar age, it sounds like you're often the oldest?

Anshel: It's very hard. [door closing] There's no place to go. You know. My trans group twice a month is—is my connection, and some—a couple of them are from—people I knew from Gender Identity Project, and I've made friends with some new people. And that's been great. But, um… And SAGE has become friendlier. Um… as an older person… I'm dealing with being older, and it—and the trans thing sort of reinforces, like—I'm not sure I'm capable of being in a relationship, but it reinforces that difficulty in meeting someone. I mean, there are online dating services, if you look on most trans online dating services, they're stereotypical of what trans women look like. Supposedly look like. Big busted, gorgeous, had facial surgery, you know, all kinds of surgery, whether they had bottom surgery I do not know. But that's the image. You know, and that's not me. You know. So it's very—it feeds right into the aging process, it's part of what—the last year or so I've had deep depression, and when I moved back to Manhattan, even though it was a gift and it was helped by this—my SAGE social worker, I… I'm only there four months, and I—it brought up a lot of PTSD, and I don't want to be identified there, and only this last week, the people in the trans group said, "Don't worry about what people think." You know, I'm worried about—worried about my living situation, they said "Don't worry, just hold your head up high." You know. There was this one woman there who was—wanted to be overly friendly, and I couldn't deal with it, you know. So I feel more—there's only 12 people in the building, and I feel isolated. And they were having a get-together for an hour on July 4th, and I didn't want to go. You know. Because I'm an open person, and because, um… It's interesting having a lower voice, mine isn't so so low, but having a lower voice, women have low—cis women have lower voices than me, but there's something about being trans and having a lower voice that people, um… It's hard. It's hard. Going back, I—you know, there's this—there's this—services twice a week, it's a [inaudible] service at the synagogue, and there was a baby boom at the synagogue, and when the kids were young, a couple of people came up—one kid came up to me and said, "Are you a man or a woman?" I was not as transitioned, and I didn't know how to answer these questions, you know, and it happened to be one of the rabbi's daughters, and I feel bad saying that, and I don't think they handled it well. You know. Now I know what to do, and now that the kids are older, it's a little—it's better, you know, I can talk—you know, they can—they just greet me, and they know me as who I am, and their parents probably explained things to them. It's very hard being trans, and it's very hard being a trans older person. Very hard. Complicates things. [door closing] And I'm a single person who's been alone most of my life.

Tennenbaum: Do you have daily safety concerns, and what strategies do you use to keep yourself safe?

Anshel: I've always had safety concerns because of the rape. Um, even though in Jackson Heights it wasn't a safe building, some of it went away. In some way. But as a trans person, yes, it's—it's a different kind of safety issue. First of all, I'm seen a little bit—I'm seen as a woman more, so… um, I feel more vulnerable, and if I'm seen as trans I'm more vulnerable. So yes, absolutely, I feel unsafe. And I have experience of violence, so it's all put together—this building, the door closes to the building and locks, but the mailboxes are not inside the building, they're like an in between vestibule, so I feel a little unsafe about that. Yes, absolutely. It's definitely… is an unsafeness there. I used to go to a—I have a friend in…in Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn, and we used to talk until like 2 in the morning, and—even after I transitioned, and now I feel like I can't take a train at 2 o'clock in the morning, I have to leave earlier. You know. Um… It's not constant, but it's there. I have a new kind of vulnerability. You know. Definitely.

Tennenbaum: How do you cope with that, when you're out in very public places?

Anshel: Um… I'm always w—wondering how people see me. Um… I do go to rallies and stuff, so… But—I went to a rally about a y—a year or two ago, and I was walking with a trans man, and the rabbi—it was a Jewish thing, and the rabbis were getting arrested and everything, and this trans guy pulled me back, he said "Don't walk in the street, you're in—more in danger." You know. I didn't—again, I was clueless in some ways, about certain things in the beginning. You know. Um… how do I deal with it? I don't know. Just live with it. I live with it. I've had people treat me pretty okay, but there have been drunk men who… I just do what I normally—I just walk by them, you know, and—and once in a while s—I had somebody—I was at the beach by myself last week, and—and sitting on a bench on the boardwalk, and a guy came over and was kind of flirting with me, and I just—I don't expect it, and I just kind of… I didn't encourage it, either. And I was aware when I went to a cafe by myself, I said "I'm not just going to a cafe by myself, I'm going to a cafe as a female person, as being seen as a female person on my own." So I'm remembering that it's different, you know, to go to a—a cafe alone. A lot of people afraid to go alone to places, but I'm realizing that I go places by myself, and… it's seen differently by other people, probably. So there's a vulnerabi—How do I deal with it? I just um… I try to, um… mostly try to just keep my dignity and keep to myself.

Tennenbaum: Do you feel that, um, when you're out and you're read as a woman more, people—and you're alone, you're seen as more approachable?

Anshel: Hm. I think being older makes me less approachable. But, um… I've had people—like if I go to—approachable in a good way too, you mean, or just approachable?

Tennenbaum: Just approachable.

Anshel: Well, when I go to Starbucks sometimes, pe—guys say "honey", or "sweetheart", which is… again, treating women in a certain way, as an object, and, um, I'm given seats on the subway as a woman sometimes, and as an older woman sometimes, and… because sometimes women give me seats, so I realize they're giving me a seat as an older woman. And men sometimes give me a seat as female. You know. Sometimes I see people stare at me. I think they're staring at me,

and… And, um… at this point in my life, and I'm not sure why they're staring. In the old—when I was first transitioning, definitely I felt like people, especially kids, were like laughing, or—or trying to figure me out. And sometimes I feel like that still happens. So even though I realize a dress means nothing, people dress—there's a whole spectrum, people dress in different ways, I still feel like—like today, I feel badly put togethe—this is like an ongoing thing my whole life, too, like I say "Okay, I'm wearing these jeans, they're more feminine jeans, but I'm carrying this bag, which feels more masculine, I can't stand it, I want to get rid of it, I shouldn't be carrying it." I was looking for new bags today, you know, because I carry a lot of things, you know. It's very painful, you know. So am I more approachable? Um… I think in some ways, people feel less afraid of me as male—as female. See? I misgendered myself. But I think people feel—yeah, less, uh… yeah. Yeah, I had to get used to being seen as—I had to—there was a point, a tipping point where I said, "Wait a second, I don't have to be paranoid that people are going to misgender me all the time." Even though it still ha—when it happens it's a shock, now, and it always is hard, it's like a slap across the face. But the less and less—and I used to have arguments with people, because it seemed like I was not misgendered, and then I'd be in a certain place, and I was. It's not happening anymore, but sometimes it does. And—and usually, they—it's my voice, which is ridiculous, and then they look up at me and I—I say "Ma'am." They look up at me and they say "Oh, I didn't see you." You know. But am I more approachable? I think in some ways yes, because I'm seen as less threatening. And I sing in the street sometimes, and I think I have a feeling it looks like a smile. So I have to be aware of that, for safety reasons, and also, you know, I'm… for safety reasons. Am I more approachable? I think I'd say, in some ways, yes. Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Do you want to speak at all to your connection to music and singing?

Anshel: Yeah. A big problem for me… I was in the chorus for the better part of 25 years, and, um… About the time I was transitioning, or a little before, I got older, and my voice—I was always a tenor, and I—and you have to have voices, you know, you can't be in between, you're either a—a soprano, alto, bass or tenor. I was always a tenor, but then I became a bass, and for several years I was singing as a bass, the only trans and female-identified woman, and I hate the word "identified", as, um, in, well, singing with all the men. And I didn't think about it that much at first, but once after—during the—the hol—big holidays, one man said to me, was a really nice guy said to me, "You're very brave." And I didn't even realize I was being brave, and I started to cry. You know. Um… But now it's an issue for me, and I tried, a few years ago I went up to my music director, I said "Can I try tenor?" And she called me aside, and this is after being a really s—I used to coordinate the chorus, I was very much a part of the chorus, she said to me, "I think you're more uptight being in the tenor section, I think you really belong in the bass section. And I want to keep you in the chorus," which really scared me, because I never considered that I could not be in the chorus. The chorus is a mixture of amateurs and… and, um, some professional people. And I haven't been in the chorus now for about—I was in once just for Pride, last year, not this year, and, um, I'm not a—I'm not a sight reader or anything, it's very hard for me, and, um, and I'm not good at disciplining myself, but I really—I just started voice lessons again with a voice teacher, and, um, my main concern was trying to be a tenor again, but I don't know if I'll be able to do it. And, um… But I think it's good therapy for me, although I'm not sure how it's going to be with this—this teachers and everything. But I'm glad it's in my—I—I've been in a very

deep depression, especially since I moved, so I thought this was one thing that I should try. You know. And, um, I did it on my own, I didn't go to other people that I knew other people were going to, I just put in, uh, voice lessons for transgender people—men, transgender people women, you know, trans people. And—and, um, they said "We'll—we're okay with th—all of that." So [inaudible]. I've just been twice so far. You know. So singing is primary to me, in my life, and it's been a real big loss for me not to be in the chorus, because after doing so many things for the synagogue for 25 years in—out of my—out of my—and much of my… Most people don't know about my early years, they know me—they always knew me as somebody who sang and who was—who was in the chorus, because the population grew at the synagogue, a lot of them—lot of gay men died from AIDS, a lot of—and when the rabbi came who's female, a lot of women came to the synagogue, so, um… What was my point there? Um… the point was is that it's hard to be in the—oh, this—so it's been my longest—this has been a ye—a year and a half, about, to two years that I haven't been in the chorus, and they seem like they've become so professionalized. And I'm afraid for that reason, and I'm also afraid because I don't want to be in the bass section. I—I need to—uh, somebody would say to me that's inner transphobia. And… I have it, I have some inner transphobia. You know. If I was totally self-accepting, I would say, "Okay, I'm—trans women's voices don't change unless you train it, to some extent you can find a level that feels okay." And I did that briefly. But I stopped, and I, um… if I was really comf—totally comfortable with myself, I would just put my head up high and say, "I am a trans woman who sings the bass part." The thing is that there are tenors that are men, cis men and cis women, and this—and the cis wom—the trans woman who started me off, who helped me in the beginning, she was—she's an alto. She's a—she had a woman's voice. So… it's hard. So I—some of the ways I handled it in the past was—before I had to stop after the surgery was that I—I, um… I—there was one song that was just for men, and another one for women, and I—and I made a decision not to sing that year. And my rabbi was supportive of it. You know. And then the year after, women and men were singing it. But it was a learning ex—it's a learning process for the—for people, you know, and a lot of people in the synagogue as far as names are concerned, they were introduced to me as Rafa, and it's hard for them to transition to Rafaela. You know. People get so used to things, and they—it's hard for them to switch. Singing is primary for me. It's a very important piece of my life. Always has been, always will be. [door closing]

Tennenbaum: Hm. I know you've already shared a lot of your story with, I believe, StoryCorps? About your time at the LGBT synagogue. Um, is that something you'd like to also mention or go into any more depth in here, um, particularly during the AIDS crisis and what that did to the community at the synagogue?

Anshel: Well, I was a little bit in denial, um, during the AIDS—well, first of all, the synagogue saved my life. I had a community, I remember going there, and s—I first went there with a friend, because I was afraid to go by myself. Not Jewish, he knew I was—I was trying to find—I never felt like I had identity, you know, and I was very uncertain about myself all my life. And, um, I was always looking—I'm always looking for identity, and, um… And, um, I found a community. And—and I realized that I need spirituality and religion to—which I see as one, and my rabbi sees as one, is—I needed it to survive, and I had a community in the first ten years—I remember in my 30s it was—I was in heaven. I was there every single day doing something. Washing the floors

before we had professionals, washing the floors, and emptying the garbages, and working in the kitchen. It was like I was saved. I had a community, I had a family. Because I was so intertwined with my personal—my biological family, because my—my niece's mother is scizophrenic, and my niece—I helped—was part of the family unit of raising my niece, we were all like one, I didn't have a—a concept of being separate. So the synagogue became my family. You know. And, um… And then I met Larry, so he was kind of family, but… And then my niece became mentally ill in some ways, and then she died, at 43. So… During the AIDS crisis, I lost two of my best friends. I lost one man that had converted to Judaism and, um… actually gave me a new way of looking at being Jewish, and Judaism, because he was a convert, so he was appreciating all these things—I almost felt like a convert, because I—I came from a family that was pretty assimilated, even though they sent me to an Orthodox synagogue, because it was close, my mother said, and… But I came home, and what I was brought up on—in a very non-kosher home, and lot of my relatives were—were intermarried, and, um, I celebrated Christmas, because my—as well as Hannukah, but Christmas because my cousins were brought up Catholic. And then there was a lot of hiding in my family about being Jewish. But getting back to the synagogue, it became my family, and—and it fulfilled me so much. It became—every Friday I go, and I start going on Saturdays when I can, when I can get up, and… and, um… I lost two of my best friends, Josef, who changed—he became—that's what he took on as his Hebrew name, and, um… He, uh, helped me in other ways, too. And my experience with him was, um… I—He called me before he died, and—a few months, and he's—I was like the only Jewish person he knew that he was close to. His family wasn't Jewish. His boy—his han—his partner wasn't Jewish, even though he knew a lot of Jewish stuff because he came to synagogue all the time, he was Puerto Rican Catholic. So he asked me, he said "Will you say Kaddish for me?" I said "Sure." So Johnny and I spread his ashes, and we—I'm talking so much.

Tennenbaum: It's okay.

Anshel: Is it?

Tennenbaum: Yeah.

Anshel: So, um, we spread his ashes and we both said Kaddish. My other friend who passed was Noli [sp?], and, um—not connected to the synagogue, and, um… that was hard. Losing him. And I always felt guilty about not visiting him enough. But it made me, um… I remember we—I was like the first one he told that he was HIV positive. He told me things that he wouldn't even tell anybody, not even… He told me things he wouldn't tell anybody else. And, um, he, um… I remember we—he had soda, in those days everybody was scared, he had soda, and he said "You want some?" And because it was Noli, I shared the soda with him. So yes, I was—and I used to wake up thinking I had thrush, because I knew people who had thrush, which is like an infection in the mouth that makes your mouth feel cottony. So I would wake up in the morning with my mouth dry, and I would think it was that. So yes, I—we lost a lot—so many people to AIDS in the congregation. And the rab—and Rabbi Kleinbaum remembers them every year, and talks about it, and a book was—big book was put out about us, our history, and I was always feeling bad because I wasn't in it enough, you know, I want to feel more important at the synagogue and

right now I'm not doing very much. But it's out there. So… I feel—I've been feeling isolated. So, yeah, the synagogue, is, um… has been my home. It's been my family. It's changed, of course, now that I'm older. I used to have a group of friends there, and then we—things change when we have the rabbi, and a lot of the people I was friendly with didn't want a rabbi, and then we had—we became too big to have Friday night services in—in our space, so we went back to the church that it began in, and we went to a church for ten years or t—more, and then, um, we moved to—we finally have our own space now for about a year and a half. So, um… yeah, that's my, um… my steady place. The only problem is is that over the past few years since I've had surgery and all this stuff, and since I'm so seen as trans, it—it—I was really having problems with it for about a year or so. I'm starting to feel more comfortable with it. You know. And people are start—and people—even though I don't—I've always felt separate from people. My mother used to say, "Everybody likes you." But I was—I probably was depressed and felt different, I felt—probably because I felt queer. And I just… and—and afraid, and I just didn't go out, of course I was—I felt very crippled by my father. So yeah, I think that was—all those things kept me a—occured throughout everything and became more pronounced as I transitioned at the synagogue, and even though I was accepted, and… But after the surgery, and who do I tell and who would I not tell, and I was very private, and then I started to tell people individually, and… there was a whole issue of who should I tell and who should I not. And I told some people before, and people reacted in different ways. You know. So… um, I had a year that—the year I had the surgery was very difficult for me. Because I wasn't—I wasn't telling—I didn't make an announcement. Some people, they wanted to have a ceremony for people who wanted to if they changed their name or they had surgery, but I wasn't willing to do that. And I thought I might go to the mikveh, but I didn't do that either. Maybe I still should, I don't know. But I don't think I want to—I just tell individuals sometimes, I tell individuals that I'm not as close to, and sometimes I tell individuals that I'm very close to. You know.

Tennenbaum: Is it important that your close friends know?

Anshel: That, um?

Tennenbaum: That you had the surgery. Um, your surgery a couple years ago.

Anshel: That I have close friends? Is it…

Tennenbaum: Or… is it just, like, the friends that you did have? Was it important for you to tell them?

Anshel: Yes. They knew before. And I learned afterwards that they were worried about me. My doctor wants me to talk on a panel at the Philly Trans Conference… [inaudible] I don't hear it too much. Should we turn off for a second?

Tennenbaum: Um, sure.

Anshel: Yeah, it was very important for me to tell—to tell them. And they worried about me dying, but I used to remember saying, "I don't care if I die on the table, I'm doing it." Even though I had a dark moment before, like should I do this, and I can't go back, because people will say—I was afraid of people judging me, and everything. But, um… Yeah. And I had different reactions to—from close friends, and I still had issues recently with one of them. But I'm learning a little bit better how to discuss things and work it through, and apparently one of my friends has gotten better at expressing herself, so we just had a very serious conversation recently. We were at a, um… She misgendered me a lot for a while, and then she got better at it in the last six months—last year. And then we were at a study—study night, and, um, we were in a group, we went to a class about HIV, and it was led by one of my rab—my social justice rabbi, and talking about being positive about sex in Judaism, and it's a good—it's—it's a good thing. And she was—I knew where she was going, she wanted to express herself, and she said "I don't know how—" and she has trouble expressing herself, so she said "Well, I don't know—I'm a woman," and she pointed to a guy and that—"I don't know how it is for men," and then she pointed to me and she says "I don't know how it is for trans people." And she outed me to—I didn't even think of this, because the guy afterwards said to me, who I know from the synagogue, said to me, because I talk to him privately, he said, "She made you unsafe." I didn't even think of the safety part of it, all I knew is I felt—I was dying inside, because I was treated as other. You know, I'm the one that's supposed to say, "this is my story," but she was telling—and she didn't treat me—she treated me as a s—maybe that's part of my transphobia, but she treated me as… I don't go around saying I'm a trans woman, you know, I just go around saying I'm Rafaela. So if she's treating me as somebody—a different gender than male or female, you know, and I was… that's not what I wanted, and it's up to me to take care of this too. You know, I'm realizing a little bit more that I'm genderqueer in some ways, because I've had prostate problems and it's affecting my urination, and so I'm—it's interesting, I'm on estradiol and I'm on Flomax, which is a—which is a medicine for prostates. So even though I got rid of my penis, I still have male parts in me. But my great doctor, who's transitioning to male, said to me that women—cis women have prostate tissue in their bodies. So… he knows what I need to hear, and it—and it's true. So… But, uh, yes, it was very important for me to tell close friends, of course. And they were helpful, and—and, uh… Yeah. They were helpful. Yes, it was extremely important. I told some of them—and I told most of them before. You know, the ones—the closest ones. I have less really, really close friends now. I don't have what I had when I was younger. It's another hard thing. You know.

Tennenbaum: Can you tell me more about genderqueerness and when the first time you heard about gender nonconforming?

Anshel: Yeah, there's a transgenerational theatre that happened twice at SAGE, trying to mix people who were younger and older and make a theatre project, with a couple of people who've—who've had PH—who had—getting their master's in—in theatre, and you know, and who are—are queer and gender nonconforming, and… Last year I didn't get involved because I felt a little uncomfortable, you know, with people, probably because of their gender nonconforming, because that's new for me. It's a new generation of gender nonconforming people. And this year it was a combination of things. Of gender nonconforming, getting used to that, I was in a lot of—I was having constant urinary infections, and it was very time consuming.

And also I had studied theatre when I was young, and they were doing improvisation and stuff, and physically, and—and it was hard for me, and I wasn't interested. And, um, I'm working on that now, I'm starting to feel… I'm starting to take that in more. Gender nonconforming. You know, and—and now I see myself as, uh, I'm accepting myself a little bit more as… I've always believed there's no binary, intellectually, but emotionally I wasn't—wasn't there. And… and now I—you know, I'm having prostate prob—I have pros—I'm on prostate medicine, so I said to my—my urologist, I said, "I'm a woman with a prostate, I'm a queer person." And he said yeah. You know. You know, and when I go out, you know, uh… Dress means nothing. You know, I'm… I'm not wearing a dress, you know, I have a little makeup on, I'm—I'm feeling less of a need to put makeup on all the time, and sometimes when I put makeup on, and I've heard this from other people, I say, "What am I doing?" You know, I happen to like makeup, but I mean, um… I don't have a need to polish my nails as much, even though I like it. Um… yeah, I'm starting to take it in more, and even—and get a little bit more comfortable with that, and—and I'm also seeing myself less on the binary, that—that there… Even when I say that I use she and her, there's a little bit of a twinge there. I mean, I—I do want to be called she and her, but it doesn't really describe me completely, you know. It really doesn't. You know. I don't know what that is, it's partly my comfort level, and it's partly… I'm beginning to un—maybe I'm beginning to understand that Rafaela is Rafaela, which is many things. I am, you know… Look, I don't—I might—I am one of these people who… I look at my body, you know, and I see that I don't have breast implants, I have a prostate, I haven't had facial surgery, you know. At first I was judgmental, I said, "Oh, I had surgery." But I—and a lot of the trans women in my group haven't, and I've worked on—I'm working on all those things, because I truly believe it's a spectrum, you know. There's a little camaraderie between other people who have had surgery, you know. There's one woman I know who needs that, so there's a little more—there's a little certain kind of connection, that we've been through surgery. But it's, um… But she certainly is more feminine in some ways than I—I'm a feminine person, but I think she's much more outwardly feminine than I am, you know. But she's been out there much longer. You know. She started out as—as a kid, you know. For me it was different. So, um… Yeah, it's changed. It's changing. It's changing. You know. And definitely having had the surgery, like I said, has changed my sense of, well, what do I—and I'm not—I can't have vaginal sex, so it's like, there are so many issues that make me complex. I think everybody is, but I—talking about myself, I'm a complex person. You know, I have a prostate, I can't have vaginal sex, I just want my urethra to be fixed. People say, "Do you want your vagina fixed?" I say "No, it's—I don't want to go through all that." You know, I've been through the surgery, I don't want to have to deal with dialating and all that stuff. I just want—you know, it's painful, but I just… yeah, so it's—there's…. there has been, uh, movement in that area for me, in ways of seeing people and seeing myself. You know. But I'm not all just one thing. I'm really not. You know. We all have our ways of wanting to express ourselves. You know. Even people who say "I'm a woman," they may wear sweatpants all the time, and—and men's clothes, and they can still call themselves a woman. You know. People are complex, and I am complex. My body is complex, my mind is complex, my soul is complex, you know. So I'm working on that. I'm ashamed of some of my discomforts and stuff, but I've—it's—I'm working on it, and I'm seeing myself that I'm complex. My body is a very complex thing, and I always felt that way, but I've—now I see the physicality of it, it really is. So in a way I'm gender nonconforming. You know.

Tennenbaum: Do you have any future goals for yourself?

Anshel: Future's very hard for me now. I did start the voice lessons. Um, I want to practice more, I don't—I'd like to get back in the chorus, I think, but I'm terrified. Um, I was interested in this because I thought it'd be a good fit, because everybody said it'd be a good therapist, so I said okay, so this is a way I could relate to people. I mean, you're very good at this, so I hope I can do the same, you know, I hope I can be the same. You know. You have a per—you have a really good personality, you're very suited for this.

Tennenbaum: Thank you.

Anshel: You're very gentle and, um, I wish I'd allowed you to ask me more questions, instead of just talking and talking and talking. Guess I have a lot to say.

Tennenbaum: They've all been wonderful stories.

Anshel: Have they?

Tennenbaum: Yes.

Anshel: Thanks.

Tennenbaum: Is there anything else you'd like to be remembered?

Anshel: Anything else what?

Tennenbaum: Anything else you'd like to be remembered? Anything else you want to share?

Anshel: Um… I'd like to be more… One of my goals is to—to try to reach out more. You know. And I want—I can't afford it, to take big vacations and stuff, so it's hard for me to get—every time there's a beautiful day, it's like I want to be able to get myself to do things, and I don't always have to do them alone. You know. I'd like to become more uptight about certain things—less uptight about certain things. [inaudible] more uptight. I'm very, um—it's hard for me to let people into my home, partly because of, um… I never had—I don't have a bedroom, partly because of, um… Even—I just—I don't need to go into all that, just… It's my space, even though I'm still getting comfortable with the new space, it's been hard. Anything else? I want to say something positive. Um… Trans people are pretty amazing. You know? I love all the stories I know now about people who've had to prostitute themselves, and people who, uh… I think it's amazing the people—things that trans people—trans people are pretty amazing people. And I'm learning that gender nonconforming people are pretty amazing too. It's like, it's taking risks in this world, and—and also it's just… It's interesting, you know? It's amazing that we're—that—I don't want to talk about myself—I guess I should talk about myself so I feel good about myself. Trans people are amazing people. You know. There's a lot of wisdom in it, you know, being trans. You know. There's a lot of wisdom in being a lot of things, but we're talking about transness, and there's—

being trans is a very particular—special life experience, you know, and I think what's happening now, with gender nonconforming and trans people, all in one package, is that people who identified as cis are starting to understand that they may feel queer, you know. I mean, I know people who were lesbians, and they say, "Sometimes I'm mistaken for male." You know, doesn't mean that they want to transition, it just means that they're seeing more of the complexity of gender. You know. But I do—I'd like to say that trans people are pretty amazing people, you know, and I'd like to be more comfortable with my own, wherever I'm at, complexity, and—and I really, truly believe in holding it all at once, you know. Holding everything. All the feelings, past and present. I really believe that it's possible, that everything is not all one thing or all the other thing. You know. It's hard living in the world that way. It's harder for some than others. You know. So… I think I'm a little luckier in some ways, and, um, and unluckier in others, I guess, but… There's a lot of loss, but, um… but like any community or any connection, there's other connections that are made based on that commonality. You know. I guess we can end there, unless there's anything else you want to ask me.

Tennenbaum: No.

Anshel: Okay.

Tennenbaum: Thank you so much for your honesty, your stories, your wisdom.

Anshel: Thanks.