

Ruth Ault Oral History Interview

Interview Conducted by
Severine Stier
Dahlia Krutkovitch
Cathy Xu

February 22, 2019

Collection: Davidson College Archives

Title: Ruth Ault oral history interview, 2019 February 22

Description: Ruth Ault describes her Jewish background prior to Davidson College: raised in Conservative Judaism and being in non-Jewish communities, like Pomona College and the University of Utah. Ault recounts her interview process for Davidson College in 1979, as the first hired Jewish professor at Davidson, and the college's Presbyterian tradition and bylaws. She recounts how her arrival to Davidson was received by the local community, and in relation to the Linden Affair. Ault then discusses the growing presence but overall lack of Jewish community members, as well as inclusive and exclusive practices and bylaws. She also explains her less visible but not purposely hidden Jewish identity at Davidson, in contrast to her identity as female and to the experiences of other Jewish professors and students. Ault traces the major changes in reception of Jewishness at Davidson College, including the hiring of Rob Space and the foundation of Kool Tikvah. She talks about the role of religion in Davidson's Board of Trustees, hiring process for professors and college presidents, and when she received tenure. Finally, Ault responds to the 2018 doxxing of neo-Nazis at Davidson College and current Jewish Studies activism.

Biography: Ruth Ault grew up in a Conservative Jewish family in Chicago, Illinois. She earned her Ph.D in psychology in 1972. After teaching at Brigham Young University for seven years, Ruth Ault was hired by the Davidson College Psychology Department in 1979. She was the first Jewish faculty member in the College's history. She received tenure in 1982 and retired in 2014 after teaching at Davidson for thirty-five years.

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Interviewer: Severine Stier, Dahlia Krutkovitch, Cathy Xu

Transcriber: Olivia Harper

Editors: Olivia Harper, Cathy Xu

Reviewed by Ruth Ault

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Setting Description: Interview with Ruth Ault, Dahlia Krutkovitch, Severine Stier, and Cathy Xu in Davidson College Library Rare Books Room, Davidson, North Carolina.

Transcript Notes: The following transcript has been edited for brevity and clarity.

RA: Ruth Ault

DK: Dahlia Krutkovich
SS: Severine Stier
CX: Cathy Xu

CX: The names of the interviewers today are Severine Stier, Dahlia Krutkovich, and Cathy Xu and the name of narrator is Ruth Ault. The location of the interview is the Rare Books Room at Davidson College. The day is February 22nd, 2019 and the purpose of the interview is for the independent study called History of Jews and Jewishness at Davidson and to document the Jewish experience at Davidson, and so now I'm going to ask for oral consent. Do you-

RA: I consent.

CX: Okay. Specifically do you consent to being audio recorded and video recorded?

RA: I do

CX: And do you consent for this to be added to the Davidson College archives?

RA: I do.

CX: Okay, thank you.

RA: I now pronounce you man and wife. [Laughs].

SS: So, we have approximately an hour for this interview, but I know since we started late if you have—okay, great. So approximately an hour or maybe a little over. We'll pay attention to the clock and break in when we have a few minutes left. Okay? Is that okay? Great. So to start, if you could briefly, or whatever, however long these responses take, we'll welcome everything, tell us a little bit about your relationship with Judaism before you arrived at Davidson.

RA: I'll be happy to. My parents raised my brothers and me in Conservative Judaism which meant, given my age, that my brothers were Bar Mitzvahed; I was confirmed. I did not learn Hebrew, although they did, but we really were not very practicing Jews. We celebrated Hanukkah and Passover, but not the High Holidays. So, I think probably the coincidence of Hanukkah around Christmas and Passover around Easter was more a nod toward giving us something alternative to what all our friends were doing than any deep-rooted religious beliefs. When I was just entering first grade, my parents moved from a community in Chicago proper to a suburb which was explicitly not Jewish. Two of my aunts had moved to Skokie and that's where an awful lot of suburban Jews lived, and my parents wanted to have a different experience. They thought that would be self-ghettoizing, so my brothers and I were the only Jewish children in our elementary school. I think there might have been seven or eight others in junior high, and I remember a conversation when I was in high school—I was in my last year of Confirmation class, so I would have been 15 or 16—and the rabbi was trying to talk us out of interfaith dating and I remember saying to him, "Hell no." There were five hundred students in my class, in my high school, of which 25 were Jews, half of them were girls, and that didn't leave

a really big pool of dating. So, I just ignored his advice and dated whoever was attracted to me or vice versa. So, I don't think that I had a very strong religious background compared to a lot of people. And then I went to Pomona College as an undergrad, and the motto of Pomona was "Our Tribute to Christian Civilization." So, that should tell you something about the kind of experience in which I lived. And my first job was at the University of Utah, and as you may know the whole state of Utah is heavily dominated by the Church of Latter Day Saints and therefore, although the university is secular, and all the good Mormons go to Brigham Young University, it was still an environment where I was going to well be in a minority.

CX: We were wondering so what brought you to Davidson?

RA: The job.

CX: Okay.

SS: How did you hear about it?

RA: I read an ad in the psychological papers, where ads were posted. I had not received tenure at the University of Utah, so I knew I had to get a new job and what was particularly attractive to me is that it was a small liberal arts college, and I had enjoyed my time at Pomona, so I was hoping that Davidson would be equivalent and luckily for me it turned out to be. I had been a graduate student at UCLA and then teaching at the University of Utah, so I had both a big university experience and a small liberal arts experience, and clearly I was a better match for a small liberal arts, highly respected college than I was at a big state university.

DK: Can you give us a sense of time as far as, you know, when you were in high school, when you were in undergrad, grad school, and then of course the year you came to Davidson.

RA: I graduated high school in '64, 1964, college in 1968. I got my PhD in '72 and was at Utah from '72 to '79. So my interview with Davidson was in the spring of '79 and I actually moved here early June. Most faculty don't come until August, but my husband had a job in Charlotte, which started, so I had a couple of months to get used to the town before I had any formal commitments to the college. So '79-'80 was my first year here.

SS: Was there a community of Jewish faculty at Utah?

RA: Surprisingly, there was. The department that I was in had 30 faculty, seven of whom were Jewish and only two who belonged to the LDS faith, so we actually outnumbered them, because, as I said, most who were strongly faithful were at Brigham Young or elsewhere. So yeah, there was a community there.

DK: And what did you know about Davidson before you interviewed here?

RA: Nothing. I had had a graduate student who had gone to Hollins, up in Virginia, and she had either herself dated or some of her friends had dated men at Davidson, because that would have been just at the point where Davidson was shifting from all male to co-ed. But I really knew nothing other than that, and in the absence of the Internet, I really couldn't find out too much more until I had a pre-interview phone conversation with the department, before they brought me up to campus.

DK: Do you remember your faith coming up in any interview processes leading up to your offer of employment?

RA: It did, and I actually tried to refresh my memory by talking to one of my colleagues who was in part of that interview process and neither he nor I thought it was a dominant aspect of it. But, somehow, I'm sure that the chairman of my department, John Kelton, knew, because he told Sam Spencer who was President of the college. And when I had my interview with the President, he started by showing me the trustee statement that said, and this is, okay, a 40-year-old memory, or something, so I'm not sure that it's going to actually match what the documents say, but my interpretation of it is that he was given the authority to hire non-Christians in a limited number of cases as long as they could live with respect for the Presbyterian heritage of the college. That's the phrasing I remembered. And I, he literally put this document on my lap, and we read it out loud together, and then he said, "Is that alright," and I said, "Yes sir, it is," and then we went right on to talk about all the other things that would be important in an interview, and when the interview was formally over he stood up, and I stood up, and he dropped some of the formality that is imposed in that situation, and he put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "Now seriously, Ruth. Is this going to be a problem for you to be with Presbyterians?" I said, "Sir, I've lived among the Mormons for seven years. I think I can handle Presbyterians." He laughed, and I laughed, and we just—it was never mentioned again until I came up for tenure.

DK: What did you feel when he showed you that document?

RA: I was a little surprised at the adjective, "limited number," but otherwise, I was not surprised. I thought any school that had an explicit affiliation with a church would—it would be reasonable that they would want to control what they exposed their students to, and so I was not surprised in that sense at all.

SS: Had you heard of the Linden affair prior to you coming here?

RA: No, I had not.

SS: When did you find out?

RA: I would bet a week after I showed up in town. As people began to hear that I would not be joining the Presbyterian Church, and when I would tell them why I would not be joining the Presbyterian Church, they would immediately say, "Oh, have you heard of the Linden Affair," and they would tell me about it, so, but it did not come up during the interview, certainly.

DK: Or during your campus visit at all?

RA: No.

DK: And how—so you show up in town, having just moved here, and you're gonna start your job in two months, and people meet you and say, "Oh great, did you hear about this Jewish professor who couldn't get a job here?" How—did that feel like a warm welcome to Davidson or..?

RA: It was so often put in the context of we're really glad you're here. We want to put that behind us. Attitudes have changed slightly. We hope we're welcoming. I actually got the feeling that people were going out of their way to be explicitly saying, "If you've heard about that, don't think badly of us. We want to make you feel comfortable here." I do remember walking down Concord Road in front of what would now be the congregation house for DCPC, and coming—I was walking with the chairman of the department, John Kelton, and coming toward us was the then pastor of the church, and John Kelton introduced me to Charlie Raynal, and Charlie began to phrase, "Welcome, and we hope you'll come to church." You could see that that was what he was going to say, and he got about, "We hope you'll—Oh, wait a minute. I'm so glad you're here." And he just shifted gears, and I took it as people are awkward. They don't know how to deal with me, but that's okay. I mean it just did not strike me as unwelcoming. It just struck me as they need to learn some things, and I guess I'm gonna be the teacher of what they need to learn.

SS: So do you feel like it—maybe in part your hiring was a direct response to Linden or—

RA: I do not.

SS: —no correlation.

RA: I know what the department was looking for in terms of specialty areas, teaching experience, and having been involved in subsequent interviews from the other direction, I don't know who else was in the pool, but they [the department faculty] were clearly thrilled that I had had small liberal arts experience. We always look for faculty who have either been a student or have taught there before. I had at that point published a book as well as some journal articles, which was probably more research orientation than most of their applicant pool. They were probably more excited about my being a woman, because the Psychology Department has always

attracted women students, and they were explicitly hoping to have more women represented in the department. I was not the first but at the time I came, there were no other women on tenure tracks in the Psych Department, so that was of much more importance.

DK: Shifting gears a little bit, were you involved in the Jewish community on campus or off-campus during your time at Davidson, or even now?

RA: I certainly—there was no Jewish community on campus when I first came. I think the person who first tried to really get something going was Rosemary Zumwalt in the Anthropology Department. She was a convert to Judaism and was much more interested in explicit practices of faith. She held a couple of Passover Seders, in which she explicitly invited all the Jewish students that she could find, all five or six or seven of them, and a couple of faculty. So that began the limited expression of Judaism on campus, and subsequently I tried to attend all of the Seders, but there really wasn't anything else going on campus, and there was no North County Jewish community, and I was not about to go down into Charlotte, since I was not particularly a practicing Jew anyway. I would consider myself a cultural Jew, rather than a practicing Jew, so I didn't seek it out. It may have been going on elsewhere, and I was just oblivious to it, because it was not that important to me. By the time Irwin Goldstein came, he was a member of a temple. I wanna say in Statesville?

DK: Beth Israel or?

RA: I think so, yeah. So, there became more identifiable practicing Jews on campus that I think the students, if they were interested, would have gravitated to rather than seek me out. I was not nearly as visible as they would have been.

DK: I guess a better question to have started with would have been, do you remember if there were any Jewish students on campus when you arrived and, if there were, how many—or when did you first start noticing a Jewish community? Around the '80's, would you say?

RA: Well I would—I started in '79 so—

DK: Or I meant later '80's, but yeah, sorry.

RA: I probably became aware of it when I got on the admissions committee and saw on the form—the cover page for all the applicants—what their religious affiliation was. And we had some conversations in the committee about that, often with a flavor to it of, "Do we have enough students on campus so that students coming in feel comfortable?" But you've got to start somewhere, and so we would make offers and hope that Jewish students would accept it. I had the feeling there were a couple, maybe a dozen, but they did not form any sort of coherent group. When did Rob Spach come?

SS: He came in the '80's.

RA: '80's.

DK: Well, he was a student. He graduated in the 80's.

RA: I'm sorry. I meant when did he come back as Chaplin?

SS: Yeah, that was in the mid-eighties.

RA: That would be the time when Jewish students would have found much more explicit support for their religious outlets. He was committed to helping them hook up with whatever they wanted in the way of Judaism.

SS: In what ways did you see that manifest when you came?

RA: It manifested in him arranging for students to go to Shabbat services with families wherever he could find them. Making sure that they had transportation to whatever temple they wanted to go to. And it manifested in the way he did opening or closing prayers at Davidson functions. And I remember the very first time—it was probably a Fall Convocation of his first year here, and he's got a phrase that I'm sure all of you are now familiar with, but at the time it was just a revelation when he said, "I pray in Jesus's name, but there are other people in the audience who pray in other people's names, and I just ask you all to join me," and then he would go into a prayer and not explicitly end his prayers necessarily with, "in Jesus's name," or something like that. It took longer than that for the strict faculty situations to get a little less Christian... There was a practice of having an opening prayer at faculty meetings and it—after probably my first year here I figured out that people were being—faculty were being asked to lead the prayer. And I remember asking my chair, "If I get asked, may I refuse," and he said, "Oh yes. I'm sure you can. Other people have for other reasons." And so when I eventually did get asked, I just said, "No, thank you." And they went away, and I think I was asked, "Is that just for this meeting that you can't attend, or is it forever," and I said, "Forever," and I never got asked again. But as we acquired more Jewish faculty and as we acquired some Catholic faculty, the prayers became much more differentiated by whoever was leading the prayer seemed to do it out of their own religious beliefs and that gave it a very different feel than the routine Presbyterian, same old thing every faculty meeting.

CX: And I guess on the part of the faculty, are there other particular instances where you felt that they exhibited ignorance or maybe even intolerance?

RA: I don't think I ever saw intolerance, and most faculty here come from elsewhere, and so they have had much more experience in multi-cultural environments than our students do, so I don't really remember any episode that I would consider even ignorant...I had more trouble with Southern culture and being a woman than I did being Jewish.

DK: Did you ever feel tokenized?

RA: No, I don't think so. And that may be because, I did not wear my Judaism on my sleeve. I suspect half the faculty didn't know I was Jewish, and 99% of the students did not know, and therefore it wouldn't have come up. Again, I was much more likely to feel tokenized by being a woman, because people would say, "Oh we need to have the woman's perspective on this committee. Let's get Ruth to do it." When I came, there were only a dozen or 15 faculty women, and so we were a very visible but small minority, and that tokenism was much clearer.

SS: In terms of acquiring more Jewish faculty, do you recall when that happened, and who came in? Because you said as the College started to acquire more Christian and Jewish faculty when did that happen during your time?

RA: I think it was more accidental. I don't think there was any department that explicitly said, "We want to have a Jewish person." At the time that I was hired, the Religion Department was the only place on campus where there was an explicit requirement that their faculty be Christian. And you would have to ask somebody else what year it was that that changed, but that was the last bastion of anybody caring what the religion of the faculty was, and they struggled with that, I know, as a department. I'm under the impression that the second person to have been hired was Alan Singerman in the French Department. As I said Rosemary Zumwalt was in Anthropology, or Irwin Goldstein was in Philosophy. There's nothing particular about any of those departments that would say, "Oh we have to have a Jewish faculty member," so I think it was just Jews are so well represented in higher education, you were bound to get some, and as long as it wasn't explicitly forbidden, then the natural acquisition is what Davidson—it seemed to me, it was just whoever was out there got hired.

DK: Did you feel like Jewish faculty were more or less likely to stay because they were Jewish?

RA: No, I think the people who left, like Rosemary Zumwalt became a Vice President for Academic Affairs, so they were leaving for promotional reasons rather than anything that had to do with religion. I suspect that if someone would have felt like Davidson wasn't the right place for them in terms of religion, they never would have come in the first place. I have no idea who didn't apply for a job, because they didn't think Davidson would be a good fit for them.

CX: And the answer to this question might be similar to what you answered before, but you listed some ways that the school was trying to support Jewish students, but how—were there any ways that they were trying to support the Jewish faculty as well?

RA: No, but I don't think the Jewish faculty needed support in that same sense.

DK: Do you remember conversations with students, specifically non-Jewish students, specifically, about what they—about Jews or Jewishness in any way? I know the faculty are kind of worldly or at least more cosmopolitan, and that may or may not be reflected in our student body all the time, and certainly not 20, 30, 40 years ago. Do you ever remember overhearing anything or participating in the conversation?

RA: Probably not. When I taught child development, which was my specialty, I tried very hard to be multicultural, in the sense of different countries, because different groups of people raise their children differently, and I thought that would resonate with students in getting them to think about explicit child rearing strategies. But I think the way Jewish people in America and Christian people in America raise their children are not that different, so I would not have used that as an example in any way. I remember one episode when a student gave me a Christmas tree ornament as a thank-you gift for the semester being over, and I just thanked him for it. I didn't tell him that it was inappropriate, or that I was Jewish. I just stuck it up on my bulletin board along with other little ornaments that students over the years had given me, and so I don't think that most students were aware of what my faith was.

DK: You've already sort of answered this, but I just want to ask for clarity's sake. Did you experience any antisemitism in the surrounding town of Davidson, just interacting with community members or even instances where people said, "Oh I didn't know you were Jewish."

RA: Um...The only town question that was very common, especially when I first got here, there were several, um "Who's your daddy," "What church do you go to," and um "Do you have any children," and all three of those questions were awkward for me, because nobody was gonna know my daddy, he lived up in Chicago. We didn't belong to a church, and I didn't have children. So depending on my familiarity with the person asking the question, I would either just say, "I'm not interested in your church." I might not even have said, "I'm Jewish," but the people who would ask those questions were doing it as conversation starters. They obviously wanted to know who I was, and so it didn't have any feel of town protectionist, "We've got to keep the Jews out." It was just, you know, tell us who you are, and to them it was a natural question. "What church do you belong to?" There was a woman who wrote the weekly town gossip column, and she would talk about where people had gone on trips very carefully after they had returned, so there would not be any robbers going to their house while they were out of town, and the first week I was on campus in the job, so late August, she came to my office and asked if she could interview me for the gossip column, and I said yes. And at the end of it she said, "You know of course you're welcome to come to Davidson College Presbyterian Church. I'd be happy to introduce

you," and I just said, "Thank you, but I'm not interested." And she said, "Well if you change your mind," and I'm thinking, "Don't think I'm going to change my mind, but thank you for the invitation," you know. I took those all as warm-hearted gestures, and that I really didn't need to go around educating people in that sense to be sensitive to the issue, because it was not offensive to me. It was just the South.

DK: Certainly. Was there a reason you weren't telling people that you were Jewish? As much as—

RA: It just didn't seem to come up in conversation. I wasn't trying to hide it but if somebody asked me to identify myself even today, I would talk about where I grew up, who I was married to, what my career had been, and religion would be down there in number 25 of the things I might tell somebody about myself, so it was just not that important of an identity element to me, and I think identity politics is just much more prevalent now than it was 40 years ago, 30 years ago, 25 years ago, so it just didn't matter.

SS: Right, so looking back now, would you say you were content with the way Judaism functioned in your life as you started working?

RA: Certainly in my life. Um, I know there were others who were much less content.

SS: Others at Davidson?

RA: Yeah.

SS: Could you expand on that?

RA: Um, some of the students, in particular, had felt they had been a little misled about how many Jewish students there were, or the central role of DCPC had been downplayed when they were being courted to come to Davidson. Much more so students than faculty—I think faculty were much more aware of what this experience was going to be like, and we had more resources to get together if we wanted to. It's easier for us to find each other than I think it would be for Jewish students to find each other without someone helping them.

SS: How did you hear about the dissent? Was it through *Davidsonian* articles?

RA: Oh no, it was through students talking to me.

SS: Coming to you?

RA: Yeah, if they happened to be psych majors, and they said something about being Jewish, I would at that point probably say, "Oh, I am too," or "Oh, I understand because," and in that sense, tried to be a little more public and welcoming to them. Um...I think if one had a characteristically Jewish name, Irwin Goldstein comes to mind as someone that students would be much more readily able to identify as probably Jewish than me. Neither my maiden name Sugar nor my married name of Ault would necessarily connote that to people and so...yeah.

SS: Do you remember bringing any student's concerns to the administration or like passing them off to someone else? Like do you remember them being that serious? Or—

RA: No, no.

SS: It was just more like complaining?

RA: Like venting.

SS: Venting, okay.

RA: Venting, yeah.

DK: Do you remember where these Jewish students came from, geographically, like where did they come from?

RA: Um probably the Northeast.

DK: Yeah so like Jewish hotspots, like New York for instance, or Chicago?

RA: Or New Jersey, yeah. Or Washington DC.

SS: So speaking more broadly, what were the major changes to the treatment of Jewishness and Jewish identity at Davidson that you were able to witness during your time here?

RA: Certainly, Rob Spach's coming was a major change. When the trustees opened up spots for non-Christians, that was a huge deal. Formation of Hillel would have been very obvious. The—as the faculty routinely looked at the curriculum, we regularly talked about whether religion courses had to be part of the requirement for students. When I first came, the distribution requirements were such that students had to take three courses in the philosophy-religion area—two of which had to be in the Religion Department—and I don't think there were any—Max Polley taught Hebrew, so there were a few Jewish courses, and students did not have to explicitly take a Christian religion course, but every time we re-examined the curriculum and tried to fiddle

with how many courses in which departments and how were departments aligned in sections, the religion question would come up, and it wasn't explicitly Judaism—it was just any non-Christian religion. Would that be required to expose Christian students to non-Christian religions or only non-Christian students to Christianity? So that was part of the mix every five or ten years when we'd re-examine the curriculum. When—you know there are some plaques downstairs in Chambers in the lobby that are excerpts from the New Testament? Do you know about those? Have you seen those? When those got put up, that created a lot of discussion on campus, and it was not started by the Jewish faculty. It was started by the Presbyterian faculty, who were sensitive to what that would convey and how that might be off-putting, both for faculty hiring and student admissions and staff hiring for that matter, so there were little episodes like that would be flash points for the discussion of religion and religiosity among the students and the faculty.

DK: Do you ever remember having any conversations with Irwin Goldstein about being Jewish at Davidson, and what his experience was? We can't interview him, of course.

RA: Not, no. I don't have any specific anecdotes that I can share with you. I know that he was much more obvious about his faith and much more religious practicing, but it was—when we got together for Passover services, he was not a particular organizer of that or leader of that. Neil Lerner was much more involved, and Rosemary Zumwalt before she left was much more involved. Irwin came, but he—I don't recall any discussions, even with any of them about "Ooh, what's it like to be Jewish at Davidson?" Which I took to be a good sign, that there weren't grumblings out there about it, and there were a number of faculty who either had been themselves products of mixed marriages or had a mixed marriage, which I also have, so the tolerance/recognition that families differ in how they display their Jewishness was—it wasn't necessary to talk about it, because we all experienced it anyway.

DK: Asking, sorry, specifically going back to the question about changes you've witnessed. Did you notice a particular reaction to—I'm thinking of two things: the foundation of Kol Tikvah, which is the Lake Norman congregation, and the official de-affiliation from the Presbyterian Church on the part of the College in 2000?

RA: Okay, I didn't know about that.

DA: Well, I can't remember when specifically this was, but there were some trustees who resigned in protest when the college explicitly de-affiliated from the Presbyterian Church.

RA: When did the college officially—

DK: I think early 2000s. John Belk resigned specifically.

RA: Oh. Oh okay. I would not have called that an official—

DK: Oh an official de-affiliation?

RA: Oh no, no, no, no. Yes, I do remember that. That was when trustees could be non-Christian.

DK: Ah okay, the way it was phrased to me was de-affiliation.

SS: That is strong. I get that.

DK: Ok, fair enough, yes.

RA: I do not think that's how—that connotes other things to me that I do not think it's right. Yes, I remember when the—a couple of Trustees resigned in protest. And your question was? I'm sorry.

DK: Sorry yeah, I was—basically, how did you think of yourself as a non-Christian? How did—what was your reaction to these events? You already talked about how trustees—but even the foundation of Kol Tikvah, did that change your relationship to students? Or did the presence of a Jewish faith community nearby change anything for a Jewish life on campus?

RA: I presume it did, but I was at a sufficient distance from it that I would not be able to say exactly in what way. When Rabbi Shields gave the opening prayer at graduation, that was the first time that had occurred. I remember he very explicitly had asked the President, “Was it going to be a problem if he said a very short prayer in Hebrew?” He was quite nervous about how to handle that, but most of us when he—we had no idea who was gonna be doing the opening prayer, and when he got up and we all went, "Wow, okay Davidson! One more step into the future!" Or into the present. So, there were times like that when I think there was quiet acknowledgment that the college had made yet another step toward recognizing some practices, which reminded people of their Presbyterian heritage and sometimes it was appropriate to do that, and sometimes it was just gratuitous, because that's how it was always done. And in those gratuitous times, I think there was some explicit rejoicing of dragging the college into modern times.

DK: And if people were rejoicing who do you think was keeping the college back, if you will? Is it just institutional change?

RA: Yes, I think it was just tradition. It's always been done like that, and somebody who was in charge just never thought it through of how it might seem, and again I think Rob Spach, behind the scenes, was probably a very excellent choice of a spokesman, because no one could doubt his

Presbyterian heritage and affiliation, and so for him to make the argument, I think carries more weight than when the out-group tries to carry the argument. The other time—let me get back to your initial question. When the institutional requirements are more visible is every time there's a change in the presidency. Because—and this is why I was startled when you said that there was a disaffiliation, because I was on the search committee when Carol Quillen got hired, and there was a lot of conversation about whether or not the President still had to be Presbyterian, or what did it mean to say the President was Presbyterian? Did she have to join the Church or affiliate with the Church or be an elder in the Church? And there really was that kind of level of conversation about it. So until that is broken, and until there are no quotas on either having the Presbyteries elect trustees, or the Trustee Board paying attention to it, I would not say that we were disaffiliated and that reminds me of another anecdote. I know I've told Severine before, but I wanted to share with you. I was the faculty liaison to the athletic committee. And because I was the faculty liaison to the trustee athletic committee, I got invited to a retreat. And the topic of the retreat was, "Does the new President have to be Presbyterian?" And at the time, the student body President was a Catholic, and he very much wanted to come back to Davidson in his adulthood to be President of the college, so he was pushing for the policy to be dropped and I went to this retreat thinking, "Oh, this should be interesting." And the initial hiring language of "Live with respect for the Presbyterian heritage," I took to mean that I should not be the spokesperson for any disaffiliation, any cutting back of the Presbyterianness of the College. That was not my place as a non-Presbyterian. So I was not going to argue about faculty opening prayers, but a couple of Presbyterian colleagues took up that battle, and I was not about to argue that the President could be a non-Presbyterian. So, we got divided into focus groups and a trustee led each little focus group. And there was a couple of students and a couple of faculty and a couple of trustees who were in each group, so I got into a group. And the trustee who was leading our group said, "Before we start talking about whether the President should be Presbyterian or not, we probably ought to say who we are and give a little bit about our background, just so we know where you're coming from when you make comments." They pointed to me and said, "Ruth, why don't you start?" I remember going, "Okay," and I introduced myself, what department I was in, how I was a trustee liaison, and then I said I was the first Jewish faculty member to teach at Davidson College. I was careful to phrase it that way, and he reacted with genuine surprise, and he said, "Really? I didn't know we had any Jewish faculty."

DK: Do you remember what year that was?

RA: Well, that's why I'm saying. It's either at the beginning of Kuykendall or the end of Kuykendall. I don't remember which new President coming in we were talking about. And I remember thinking, "Okay, you're a trustee. I would think you would have known that." It must have been at the end of Kuykendall, because when I think about—Rosemary Zumwalt was already here, and Irwin Goldstein was already here. I think it had to have been—so however many years, when did Kuykendall, you'll have to look it up, but that would be the year of it. And it was—he was clearly surprised, but it wasn't an unwelcoming or we made a mistake or

anything like that—just "Oh, I didn't know we had any. Well good for us." You know, "let's go on and meet the next person." Um, but I was surprised he was surprised.

SS: What came out of the broad, the retreat itself, the focus groups, what did everyone—

RA: Oh they agreed that the President had to be Presbyterian. That was just kind of a no-brainer. When the conversation arose again with the hiring of Carol, the trustees had been pushed hard by the search firm that was hired to help. The search firm said, "We've gone out and tried to solicit some candidates that we think would be good for Davidson, and they've refused to apply, because they don't like the requirement, even if they themselves are Christian. They don't like the requirement that the President has to be Presbyterian." So that put the discussion on the table front and center, and I thought it was very interesting, because it wasn't coming from students, or faculty, or trustees, or alumni. It was coming from the outside world saying, "You're limiting your potential applicant pool. That's not good for Davidson." At that time the trustees said, "We're right in the middle of the search. We're not going to change horses in the middle of the stream. Let's just go ahead." But we promise, after Carol is hired, or whoever it turned out to be, that we would have a conversation about it. So they did. There was a very broad discussion among all the different constituencies...And I remember being in a meeting, predominantly of trustees who were asking the opinions of those of us who've been on the search committee, and one of the questions that the trustee asked was whether I thought any faculty would resign if the trustees maintained the rule that the President had to be Presbyterian. And it was my opinion that none of us would resign. That we knew what the College was when we came here. We knew what it was when we got tenure. We would continue to work for that if we felt that was the appropriate path for the College, from within rather than from without. It doesn't hurt that faculty jobs are not that easy to come by, that you've got those kinds of considerations as well, but I think it still was true that we limited our pool, and that's a real-world consideration that Davidson will continue to have to face. I don't know—I know at the time, right after Carol was hired the Trustees talked about it and voted and decided not to change the policy. I have no idea what'll happen the next time around when there's another shift, because I think that the environment is different. Not only the presence of the students and the faculty and the alumni, but just the outside world and what that will say about Davidson.

SS: Why do you think that even today Davidson struggles to employ and also just retain Jewish faculty?

RA: First of all, do you think that's accurate? Because I don't have data on that. I don't know who's been recruited, who's turned down offers. Assuming you're correct, and I have no reason to doubt you. I just don't have any first-hand knowledge of it...I would imagine that for those who feel that they want a more intense Jewish experience, or they don't want an experience that has the history and overlay of Presbyterianism, this would not be the place they would choose to go. The faculty we recruit, the staff we recruit, are so competent that they can really get jobs

anywhere in the country that they want to, so they will choose where to go depending on how important it is to them.

DK: You mentioned that your faith didn't really come up, at least thinking about the hiring process, in your tenure at Davidson, it didn't really come up again until you were up for tenure. Can you talk about what those conversations were like?

RA: Yes—

DK: And what year—sorry, what year you were up for tenure?

RA: I... '82? I had been given credit for my prior teaching experience, so I came up after three years at Davidson rather than the traditional six years. Another colleague who was affiliated with the Presbyterian Church had come up for tenure before me, and he had been grilled about why didn't the Psychology Department teach a Psychology of Religion course and why wouldn't he go out of his way to do it as a good Presbyterian. And so, I was steeled for, "Okay, I might get some religious questions," but in fact the Academic Vice President, who was Price Zimmerman, had prepared the trustee committee and had told them (a) that I was Jewish and that everyone was supporting my getting tenure: my Department, the college level committee, the Vice President, the President, were all supportive, and so they were kind of on notice that they should tread lightly. In words that echoed my interview, "You are aware of the trustee policy on..." and I said, "Yes sir, I am." "Are you comfortable with that?" I said, "Yes sir, I am." That was the end of the conversation. It didn't get raised to my way of thinking at all. It was everybody in the room did a big subtle sigh of relief that "okay, we've passed that hurdle. Now let's just talk about all the things we normally talk about." So, it came up. It got dismissed. We moved on.

DK: And it didn't come up after that as you kind of ascended the Davidson—

RA: No, not as far as I know. It did not come up again at all. I would—probably a couple of times, I got asked to meet with faculty candidates, who were Jewish, who wanted to know what it was like to be Jewish here. So I would have in—I didn't think of that—going back to your tokenism question, I didn't think of that as tokenism. I just thought of that as I had expertise that they wanted to bring into the interview process for people I would not otherwise have been involved in their interview. In the same way that I was brought in for women who was being hired back when we didn't have very many women, in the same way that faculty of color were brought in when they could lend an ear or two to candidates' questions. So, I made myself available for that.

SS: Do you remember encouraging the Jewish—those interested faculty to come?

RA: Yes, I would have said, “I love this place. I'm very happy here. I think you can be very happy here, unless you're looking for kosher food, which you are not going to find, unless you're looking for an Orthodox temple, you're not going to find, but if you weren't at that level of wanting to be in a Jewish community, then I thought this would be a fine place to be.”

CX: And in relation to, like, the College trying to diversify itself, how do you think your Jewish identity contributed to your involvement in diversity initiatives on campus, like the Love of Learning Program that we found?

RA: Oh, I don't think it came up. The Love of Learning Program was run by the Assistant Presbyterian Chaplain. It was so much more focused on students of color that religion wasn't a part of it. All of those students were not—none of those students were gonna be Jewish, so my involvement in the Love of Learning, my Judaism was just completely irrelevant to. I was not involved in the hiring of Rob Spach or any subsequent—I was not involved in his hiring any of the rabbis to be part of the student group. I wasn't involved in the Hillel organization getting founded. I was just not involved in that, so other faculty may have been. I don't know who they were. It was just one year, I came back, “Oh, there's a Hillel now. Well good for us.” That was the end of it.

SS: So you never felt like you should have been? Okay.

RA: No, I didn't think that I was the right person for it just, because I didn't really care that much.

DK: You've spoken some about your experience as a woman specifically around the time Davidson went co-education, and this may not be the case, but did you ever feel like your identities as a Jewish person and a woman ever intersected or compounded or that affected your experience here? Or was it just totally separate?

RA: Yeah, I saw them as totally separate. When you're counting on your hand how many of something there is, the intersectionality is just gonna be there as a coincidence.

DK: It's incidental rather than—

RA: Yeah.

DK: That's fair. And then getting into some of this stuff that's kind of happening on campus recently, what was it like to learn about—I'm assuming you know about what happened last semester. What was it like to learn about the unmasking of students with neo-Nazi affiliation?

RA: That was a real blow. I thought Davidson was better than that. I was—I've been off campus now five years since my retirement, so I can't say that I've been up on what's going on on campus, but for that to happen, it's just a real shock to me. I've been here 40 years. That's the first episode that I can recall of something that's that obviously antisemitic. There have certainly been homophobic and racial incidents on campus of the same magnitude. So from that standpoint, I'm not surprised, and I think it speaks more to the broader politics and where our country is than it speaks to where Davidson is. That's how I interpreted it, but then my household is likely to blame a lot on the current presidency for unleashing things that ought not be unleashed. What I prefer to remember is when the Ku Klux Klan wanted to march in Davidson, this community said, "We're not going to watch. We're not going to give you an audience. We're going to have a counter-event on campus and invite the African-American community to come onto campus and participate." So we were all very explicitly down at the Union partying at the time of that parade and that to me was the Davidson reaction. That made me proud; this episode clearly doesn't.

SS: Did you feel like the administration handled this past instance effectively? How did you hear about it?

RA: I am still on some of the lists that address employees and faculty, so whatever the administration put out as a campus-wide [email] to faculty and to staff, I saw. So I think I got it pretty quickly, and I know enough about the privacy regulations to understand what the administration would and would not be allowed to say publicly. I assumed, when I heard that the students left campus, that there had been a quickly called Honor Council, Code of Responsibility Council kind of investigation. That, I think, was the impression that was allowed to be out there. So my initial reaction was, "Okay, the College has mechanisms in place for dealing with this, and somebody must have held court and determined that they would not be on campus anymore." I have subsequently heard—I don't know how accurately—that they chose to withdraw rather than have any proceedings go on. That's also an acceptable outcome from my point of view. I know how long it takes to prosecute honor code violations. I've been in enough of those as a faculty member that I thought the college reaction was speedy, and from what I've heard, the focus on keeping everybody safe was paramount, and that's what should have been paramount. That you need to make sure both the students who were committing that act and those who might have been targeted were kept apart and kept safe, so I have no reason to fault how the administration handled it. But that's not to say I know very much about it. There could have well been little things going on that I'm just ignorant of.

DK: I don't know how much you know about kind of student activism, like Jewish student activism on campus.

RA: I know about the petition for a Jewish Studies program.

DK: And that's kind of what I was going to ask, how do you feel about that? What do you—

RA: I signed the petition.

DK: Of course, we saw.

RA: That's how I feel about that. But I did it from the standpoint of, anytime there's a large group of students who feel like they want to learn some topic that the college isn't offering, the college is obligated to say, "Is it within the liberal arts tradition to offer that?" If a group of students came together and said, "We want a medical school here," I would say, "Well, timeout, that's not the mission of the college." But as a liberal arts college, a Jewish Studies program clearly fits, and then it's a question of what competing other new study programs are on campus, have support, and somebody's got to weigh how we decide whether or not to offer it. How many new faculty would have to be hired? What departments would they be in? Those are very complicated questions as far as the administration and the faculty are concerned. But I think the legitimacy of asking for the program is certainly a good sign that those programs which aren't of interest to students anymore maybe need to be let go and bring in programs that are of more interest.

SS: And earlier this week Davidson put up an advertisement up on their hiring page, their employment page, for a visiting professor in history with a focus on Jewish studies.

RA: Good. That's a good first step, and it will be little steps like that, and I remember that's how it is for every department. Whenever you want something, add a visitor or see if that person attracts the students who really actually sign up for the courses when push comes to shove, and I think history is a fine place to put it.

DK: You never taught Freud in a psychology class and said this is Jewish Studies? I'm making a joke.

RA: No, that would not come up.

SS: So we do want to respect your time, so is there anything else you'd like to add to the record today? I know we can continue this conversation as the semester goes.

RA: I think I've trotted out every anecdote.

SS: Yeah this is great.

DK: Yeah thank you so much. This has been wonderful. Yeah, and we really appreciate it again you're speaking to us and taking your time.

RA: More than happy to do it.