HARRIMAN INSTITUTE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of
Rachel Denber

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The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Rachel Denber conducted by Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux on August 3 and 8, 2016. This interview is part of the Harriman Institute Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.
Q: Today is Wednesday, August 3, 2016. This is Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux, and I’m here with Rachel Denber, the Deputy Director of Europe and Central Asia Division at Human Rights Watch. We are at the Human Rights Watch office in the Empire State Building, and this is for the Harriman Institute Oral History Project. So, Rachel, thank you again for your time today.

Denber: My pleasure.

Q: As your son just mentioned, you are the 2016 Alumna of the Year at Harriman—

Denber: Woo-hoo!

Q: —so we’re very excited to talk to you. I know that [Harriman] Magazine article just came out.

Denber: I was very, very honored and humbled at having been chosen Alumna of the Year, and I think I explained in the article it came as kind of a surprise. I gave Alex a hard time about it because no one ever picked me to be anything like that before, and so I had a hard time
accepting, but—

Q: But it seems a very well-merited recognition.

Denber: Thank you very much.

Q: Well-earned. So, as I just mentioned, we’d like to start with a little bit of background about you. I know you’re originally from New Jersey, right? Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and growing up, and what were you interested in as a kid, and a little bit about your family?

Denber: I grew up in South Jersey in a suburb of Philadelphia. What can I tell you about my family? My family origins are from Eastern Europe, so we’re Jewish. That was probably a pretty important factor for me when I was growing up because I was one of three, I think, Jewish families in our school system—very few. And at the same time as I went to public school I also went to Hebrew school, so I always had these dual identities. My family origins were from Eastern Europe, as I said, and, gradually, as I grew up I learned more and more about my—I was always very curious about my grandmother’s origins, my mother’s mother’s origins, and always wondered about her and why she was the way she was.

She left her village, which is now in Ukraine, when she was, I guess, ten or eleven years old, soon after, a couple of years after, World War I, with her father. Then she came to America, and
the plan was always that she was the eldest of four daughters, so she would come with Papa.
Papa would get a job, start working and bring everyone else. Except Papa died.

Q: Oh.

Denber: Yes. So I think that probably—and her family stayed behind in [unclear] in what’s now Ukraine, what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire and then, I guess, Czechoslovakia. So you imagine what happened to her sisters and her mother. And, being a Jewish family, and—yes.

But some of them survived, and she corresponded with them sporadically after World War II. I mean, after the fall actually, after the [unclear] fall, corresponded with them a little bit. And then at one point they just said, “Please don’t write anymore.” I mean, this is more than what you need, but when I look back on my grandmother, and she was very controlling of my mother and always obsessed with identity, with the identity of my friends. Like, I would talk about this friend or that friend, and what do I know? I’m just some stupid kid. And she was like, “Oh, are they Jewish? Are they Jewish?” I thought, why does that matter so much to her what their religion is? Because for me it was just a religion, and I had to go to Hebrew school and blah, blah, blah. But for her it was, this is the community, these were the people who aren’t—I’m guessing—these were the people—for her, it was a primordial thing because of where she came from and what she went through. And to basically lose your mother and your sisters, leave them behind when you’re eleven years old and never see them again. I guess I think about that more and more now when I see the refugee crisis now that’s been played before our eyes in Europe.
Although there’s been a migration refugee crisis for many years, it’s only quite recently that it’s become so visible to many people because it’s been in Europe and places that we’re more likely to see these ordeals.

So I have always been very interested in Eastern Europe, I guess, because of my family origins and because when I went to Hebrew school we learned about Soviet Jews when I was a very small kid. And this was the Cold War and this was just in the early 1970s when the whole issue of what are called “refuseniks,” Jews who wanted to emigrate to Israel but weren’t allowed to for various reasons. Or the Soviet government put up many barriers to emigration, as you know. So we learned a lot about Soviet Jews, and I became very interested in the Soviet Union because these teachers would tell us all about this place where Jews lived supposedly very badly, and I didn’t know anything more about that place other than Jews lived there. And it always sparked a wellspring of curiosity within me.

Q: So that’s what you were learning in the Hebrew school. Were you learning about the Soviet Union in your public school?

Denber: Goodness, no!

Q: No? Not even in a fear, threatening kind of way in the middle of the Cold War?

Denber: No, no. I think the public school system that I went to is now a lot better than it used to
be. But when I went it was a terrible public school system. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know who Stalin was until I was 16.

Q: Okay, yes.

Denber: So, no. [laughter] Really, really not.

Q: Right, right.

Denber: But I did know that—when I was a junior in high school, that’s when I first learned about Stalinism. But there really was not at all a focus on the Soviet Union, and I was always very curious about it from the other part of my life.

But then I guess, as I learned about the Soviet Union and became more interested in it, partially also through model UN because I participated in all that. This is something I forgot to tell Masha [Udensiva-Brenner]. Maybe I told her and—I don’t know. But anyway I participated in model UN when I was in high school. You don’t get a choice in what country you’re assigned to, and I was assigned to the Soviet Union. So that made a big impression on me. And ironically, not only was I assigned to the Soviet Union, but you’re assigned to various parts of the UN. So some people are assigned to be in the Security Council, some people are assigned to be in the General Assembly, and I was assigned to be on the Human Rights Committee. [Laughs]
Q: Wow! It was written in the stars.

Denber: Yes, I totally forgot about that. She’ll kill me when she finds out. Would have been a good part of the story. And the way we approached it was, well, we just have to turn everything upside down. Black is white and white is black, because we had to pretend that we were the guardians of real rights.

Q: Well, that’s a good paradigm shift, you know? Good thought experiment, I guess.

Denber: Yes, yes. So I had one prism of enormous curiosity about the Soviet Union, and I had family roots also. And also I guess I had an allergy to conventional wisdom. So the Cold War was on, and there were many conventional wisdoms about the Soviet Union, some of which have truth in them and some of which of I wasn’t willing to accept. I thought it was wrong for people to accept without knowing actually the facts themselves. So the conventional wisdom was that people lived badly in the Soviet Union and it’s a terrible place and this, that and the other. And I rejected any kind of conventional wisdom that came passed down onto me without—from people who hadn’t people who hadn’t been there and didn’t know. People actually had lives there, and many people had happy lives. And there was always political life. No matter how oppressive the state was, and it’s very oppressive, there were always different kinds of politics that happened at a lower level. Or at other levels, different kinds of politics. So I just had a massive, massive curiosity about this place. This was probably a very long answer to your first question.
Q: No, it’s a great answer. And so then I guess it’s safe to say that you were very interested in international relations and politics before you even got to Rutgers [University] for your undergraduate work.

Denber: Oh, yes. I did model UN, so [laughs]—

Q: So that proves it. [Laughs] And then tell me about college and your studies there and how that influenced your next steps.

Denber: So I went to Rutgers University in the early 1980s. I graduated in 1983, and at that time most universities didn’t have international relations majors or international affairs majors. There was political science, there was history, there was economics. There were graduate programs in international affairs. But Rutgers did not have an international relations major, but they were open to people creating independent majors, so that’s what I did.

Q: I see. I wondered about that. I thought it was very early. Maybe Rutgers had been ahead of the trend. But, yes.

Denber: I think some universities had International Relations as a major, as an interdisciplinary major, but Rutgers did not. I don’t think that it was standard for universities to have that as a major.
Q: And so why did you decide that you would craft your own major instead of just doing political science or—?

Denber: I think because I was—first of all, because I’m a dilettante. I didn’t want to just take political science because then I’d have to take lots of political science courses that I didn’t have a lot of interest in or had no relevance to what I was doing. Stupid me. I should have. But I didn’t want to take political philosophy. And I wasn’t terribly interested in the American political system. I didn’t want to spend any time working on it. And I was very interested in history, but I thought that the best way to approach international relations was to understand, have background on comparative politics and international relations but with a very solid background in history because, obviously, history is crucial context for understanding why things are the way they are, and economics, because that’s the other big driver.

Q: Absolutely. That’s really interesting. So what were you thinking during that time at college studying international relations? What were your thoughts about what your future career path might look like? What were you envisioning then?

Denber: Well, you have to understand that the possibilities then were much different because it was the Cold War and because the Soviet Union was not an open place, because there were no field offices of many different organizations and international organizations. I imagined myself working in some international organization like the UN. I honestly don’t remember. [Laughter] I
was also vaguely interested in diplomacy. I thought about the State Department, the UN, or some kind of humanitarian organization, refugee organization.

Q: Okay. So, I mean, not that different from where you ended up.

Denber: No, it’s actually a miracle.

Q: Yes, pretty consistent.

Denber: I was very interested in France actually—

Q: Your junior year you spent in Paris, right?

Denber: I spent my junior year in France.

Q: I did too.

Denber: Really? Where?

Denber: Oh. I was in Tours.

Q: Oh, I spent my first month in Tours and then went to Paris. Yes.

Denber: Oh, we did the opposite. We had our first month in Paris and then we went to Tours, which I loved. Did you like Tours?

Q: I loved it. I had the nicest host family there, and it’s such a warm and lovely little city.

Denber: It’s lovely, quiet, very bourgeois. I think people live very well there. [Laughter]

Q: Yes, I think so too. [Laughs]

Denber: What was your question? Oh, France, yes. So, I mean, I studied French in college and in high school also, and I wanted to live in France. Because back then you couldn’t live in Russia. I really wanted to live in France, and I did. I spent a year teaching—after my junior year, I came back and did my senior year—
Q: I did too.

Denber: Then I went back.

Q: And taught.

Denber: Really?

Q: Yes, I did too.

Denber: You were an assistante d’Anglais?

Q: Yes, I was.

Denber: Oh my gosh, where?

Q: In Orléans.

Denber: Nice! So not far from Tours.
Q: Not far at all.

Denber: That’s lovely. Did you love it?

Q: I loved it. You did too? Yes. Where were you that year?

Denber: Brest.

Q: Oh, nice.

Denber: Everyone says, Oh, the weather. It’s so dreary. And, you know, it is dreary, but I loved it. It rained all the time, and there were there big tempêtes. And the coast—Brest isn’t the most—you know, it’s a post-World War II industrial city that had been completely bombed out, so it wasn’t very beautiful, wasn’t easy on the eye.

Q: Right. Not old, right.

Denber: But all the surrounding areas were just so dramatic and beautiful, and I loved it. But, yes, another dream was, Oh, maybe I can work for some organization in France.
Q: You know, it’s funny that you mentioned France because a couple other people we talked to for this project who have studied Russia and spent their career looking at the Soviet Union or post-Soviet states have said it’s such a difficult place, and they wish they had been interested in someplace like France and had a more fun fieldwork experience that way.

Denber: Maybe. France is a nice place to go to clear your head.

Q: There you go. It’s still there. It will always be there.

Denber: It’s still there, yes.

Q: And then you started a graduate program at Columbia [University]. So what made you decide to go that route and continue your studies? And why Columbia?

Denber: Well, because in college I had a very, very strong interest the Soviet Union. Most of my courses were in Russian history, Soviet politics, Eastern European politics. That was definitely what attracted me most, what fascinated me most. And, again, I think I felt that there needed to be fresh or different thinking about the Cold War and about relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. Of course, I didn’t know anything. I guess because the vast majority of people who I knew who were interested in doing, even as an undergraduate, Soviet-area studies,
they were all mostly focused on nuclear issues, disarmament, the very high-profile, big-picture issues. I was much more interested in knowing what was going on beneath that. So I just knew that that was what I wanted to do. And, the only—I mean, the best place to study the Soviet Union was the Harriman Institute. You know, it was Columbia University, and that was the only place I wanted to be.

Q: So that’s what really drew you to Columbia?

Denber: Oh, absolutely. Oh my goodness, yes, without a doubt. I applied to one graduate school, I think. I’m trying to remember. I was in France when I applied. I took my GREs in France. I remember applying—yes, I remember doing that all from the Lycée de Brest—what was the place called? The LCEM, Lycée de something de something. I can’t remember.

Q: Wow.

Denber: But on the Rue de Prince de Joinville. That’s what I remember. That’s where it was.

Q: You have a great memory.

Denber: What did LCEM stand for?
Q: Lycée Centrale—

Denber: No, something else. I don’t remember. But LCEM de Brest. But I remember applying from there. I remember taking the train to Paris to take the GRE. I remember thinking, Oh, maybe there are a bunch of not-native English speakers taking the GRE. Maybe compared to them I’ll do better. [Laughter]

Q: It’s all relative.

Denber: And I remember getting my acceptance letter. I remember seeing the word “fellowship,” and I thought, Are you serious? And I thought. Maybe I don’t really know what a fellowship really is because I think fellowship means that they pay for the tuition. I thought, That can’t be true. They’re not really going to pay, are they? And then I felt that I needed to look “fellowship” up in the dictionary to make sure it was really what I thought it was [laughter] because I just couldn’t believe that they would do that for me.

Q: Oh, wow. So then it was an obvious choice to go there after France?

Denber: Yes, I just knew that’s the only place I wanted to be. It was a renowned program.
Q: So its reputation really preceded it.

Denber: Yes.

Q: Wow. And so what was the Harriman like when you arrived to do your graduate studies? What did you find when you got there, to campus?

Denber: You’re asking me to go back thirty-five years in my memory?

Q: It’s not that long ago.

Denber: What do I remember about it?

Q: Who was there? What was the environment like?

Denber: Okay, who was there? Jonathan Sanders was the deputy director of the Harriman Institute. I can’t remember whether Bialer, Seweryn Bialer was the—I don’t think he was the director. Who was the director then? Marshall—
Q: I think [Marshall D.] Shulman was the director.

Denber: —Marshall Shulman was, of course! Marshall Shulman was the director, the late great, great Marshall Shulman. Jonathan Sanders was the deputy director. Bob Legvold was a star. Seweryn Bialer had just recently published this landmark book called *Stalin’s Successors*.

[INTERRUPTION]

It was a slim but very influential book that I think he had somehow smuggled out some archives—somehow got archives out of Poland that were about the Soviet leadership. And it was a very readable book, too. It wasn’t one of these massive tomes, and it wasn’t full of jargon. It was very straightforward about what was wrong with the Soviet system, and why it worked and how—not so much what was wrong with it. That’s, I think, what I liked about it. It was why it worked and how it worked rather than a judgment about how bad the place was. So he was there.

Q: Mark von Hagen, I think.

Denber: Mark von Hagen came—I can’t remember if he was there the first year I was there. I think he was. I know he was definitely there the second year. But, yes, I’m sure there the first year. And Cathy [Catherine Theimer] Nepomnyashchy was there. It was really a golden era.
Q: What a rich environment.

Denber: A rich environment, and many of the students, not that year but like a year or two later—starting I think in like—my first year was in ‘84, and then like in ‘86, there was a group of students who I stayed sort of vaguely in touch with, but who all ended up with careers in the former Soviet Union because we were at the cusp. We got to be studying the Soviet Union just before glasnost started. So it was really a privilege to be studying the Soviet Union when all this stuff was taking place.

Q: Yes. What an exciting time.

Denber: It was a very exciting time. I mean, I remember when the archive started to open up, and Mark von Hagen, you know, he was—it was a very exciting time for him too. [Laughs] Let’s just put it that way. You never thought that you would live to see that, and we did.

Q: So as a grad student, did you have a lot of access to and contact with all these professors and experts and—

Denber: You have to understand that—I mean, I think I said this to Masha. And I said it a lot in the article. I was not a very good graduate student.
Q: Yes, what do you mean by that?

Denber: Well, I was pretty intimidated. I didn’t have a lot of self-confidence. I was pretty intimidated. I wasn’t curious enough. I didn’t get myself to the Soviet Union. I don’t really want to get into it. I just don’t think I was a very good graduate student. But there were great people to hang out with. Did we have access to professors? Yes, I thought people were fairly accessible. If you wanted to have access to them, you could. Bialer was a superstar, and he wasn’t going to make time for people who weren’t his top graduate students, but I knew that I wasn’t one of those, so I didn’t really care. Mark von Hagen made himself so available to his students. He was always so generous with anybody who was interested. He’s just a rare human being, in equal parts smart, brilliant, and generous. And same with Cathy. I’m trying to remember who else. But who I remember more than professors aside from—Mark, I know, obviously, and I am still in close contact with him. And Elizabeth [K.] Valkenier was always lovely and brilliant and always made lots of time for students and had such a broad range of interests and made them come alive for people.

But I think I remember best the graduate students who all went on to do very interesting things because we were studying during the cusp. So when the 1989 Revolutions happened and 1991 happened, we were just finishing or had already finished our graduate studies at a time when there were so many possibilities. Well, me for example. To be done with graduate school and looking for a way to start my professional life at a time when anything was possible. It's the end of 1991, the coup has happened. But even before the coup happened, things had opened up
enough that Human Rights Watch could think about having a pied-à-terre in Moscow. So that’s kind of a rare perfect storm of circumstances.

Q: And did you realize it when you were in it, how exciting it was in that moment?

Denber: Definitely. I definitely realized how lucky I was to have a front seat to history. Being in the ’90s in Moscow, you could see things that would take decades or centuries to happen, that you read in history or political science books and taking decades like the formation of markets and the development of national identity. You could just see it happening day to day. Not in a linear way, and more often than not in a highly chaotic way, not in a peaceful way. It was, I think, in many ways very traumatic for a lot of people. I’m not saying it was a beautiful thing to watch. What I’m saying is it’s a privilege to be in a position where you actually get to be a direct witness to it, even when it’s very ugly, or can be very ugly.

Q: I want to learn more about your time in Moscow, but before we get to that, I did want to just ask you about—you know, you edited The Soviet Nationality Reader, and—oh, do you have a copy right there?

Denber: Yes.

Q: [laughter] Oh, yes. And it’s still in Columbia’s library as well.
Denber: Gathering dust down there.

Q: So what was it like to work on that, while you were still in school, right?

Denber: More or less, yes. I was realizing that I didn’t want to be a graduate student, so
[laughs]—

Q: That’s a tough realization, yes. So tell me about this project and how it came about and how you pulled it off.

Denber: Well, it came up because someone else had started it and he had to go on to do other things. And he said, “Do you want to do this?” And I was like, “Sure, what the hell.”

Q: So you took over?

Denber: So I took it over, and it was just a question of finding the best articles that presented the challenges of running a multi-national state posed for the Soviet Union because there were theories that the Soviet Union was going to break apart into fifteen different national republics. Not for the reasons that it did because actually many of those national republics didn’t want
independence. It was thrust upon them because of the way the political elites were and how dependent they were on Moscow and this, that and the other. But that was actually what I was extremely interested in, in Soviet studies, was the nationalities issue. That was one of the first classes I took at the Harriman Institute, was on Soviet nationalities.

Q: I mean, that seems to go right back to your interests from childhood, from growing up, about understanding your grandmother a little bit more.

Denber: I guess. I didn’t realize that, but maybe. To me, it was also, this is what lies beneath the big questions about nuclear security and balance of power and all this, but this is the life—

Q: The human story.

Denber: —the human life that’s really happening. So I was always interested in it, and someone else was working on this volume to put together the twelve or fifteen articles that most clearly described what the challenges were. Actually, it just fell in my lap, and I did it.

Q: Well, it’s a great work. It stands out today, I think.

Q: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And tell me about your courses in nationality studies at Harriman. I mean, just in general. Was it something—you said before even in Rutgers a lot of people were more interested in geopolitics and security studies and things like that. But was there a group of you at Harriman that was interested in nationality studies?

Denber: Absolutely, there were a lot of people interested. But the thing is, I think it was kind of a misnomer because it’s called “nationality studies,” but really what it was is looking at politics at a local level. To be sure, a very strong element of that was national identity and how the Soviet authorities tried to cope with national identity. Someone I left out when you asked who was there: Alex [Alexander J.] Motyl, who’s now at Rutgers. He taught one of the classes that I took on nationalities in the western part of the Soviet Union, and I can’t remember if he taught the other Soviet nationalities course. But he was terrific and also very generous with his time and very influential on students.

Q: We just interviewed him last week, actually. He’s great.

Denber: Alex is great. I don’t necessarily agree with everything that he says, but [laughter] that’s okay.

Q: That’s okay. So, I was also wondering, was there a focus of human rights at Harriman back
then? I think there is more now, for sure.

Denber: There is more now. There was a human rights program. It wasn’t part of the Harriman Institute. Was there a human rights in the Soviet Union class? I think there might have been. I didn’t take it. A lot of Alex’s classes were about human rights. [Laughter] I remember very clearly his course on the Soviet west. We learned about the famine in Ukraine and the suppression of national identity in the Baltic states and the treatment of—

Q: Minorities or—

Denber: Well, they weren’t minorities. They were majorities in their own states. And the deportations and things like that. So it's not a class on human rights, but you can’t—

Q: It intersects.

Denber: Of course. You can’t take those issues out and claim to have a comprehensive history of that region.

Q: Right. You know, he did say something in his interview last week about how it’s easier to study human rights in the Soviet Union after it collapsed because then there was—
Denber: Access to archives and you can interview people and—

Q: —access, and also just easier to be fully critical after it failed.

Denber: I think that’s right. That’s absolutely true. It’s easier to be fully critical. It’s also easier to talk to people without so much fear of someone coming after you, although that’s changing now.

Q: We’ll get to that too, I hope. Yes. All right, well that’s interesting. Okay, so tell me about how you left Columbia and took your first job.

Denber: But there’s one more thing I want to tell you about.

Q: Oh sure, please!

[IntERRUPTION]

Denber: The one thing I wanted to tell you about that made a big impression on me of the Harriman Institute, what I think is burned in my memory, is the Soviet TV project.
Q: Oh, tell me about that.

Denber: No one’s told you about it yet?

Q: No, not yet.

Denber: Oh my god! What a scandal. And how many people have you spoken to?

Q: Well, only a handful so far.

Denber: Okay. You’ve been to the Harriman Institute, right?

Q: Yes.

Denber: When you walk into the Institute, immediately on your left, there’s a room, and that room used to filled with televisions. And those televisions were somehow equipped to view Soviet television, and there were a whole team of people who watched Soviet TV.
Q: Really?

Denber: Yes. They watched Soviet TV. They watched the news, they watched the other shows. I don’t know if they watched the entertainment shows. And they logged all of the programs that they watched, and I think they had a brief description. It was a huge project. No one told you about it?

Q: Not yet. You’re the first.

Denber: Wow. I wasn’t part of that project. I wanted to be. [Laughter] I should have been.

Q: [laughs] Wanted to watch TV.

Denber: Yes, it was cool! I thought it was really cool.

Q: I mean, it’s such an interesting window into the Soviet Union at the time.

Denber: Yes, yes. And I think they watched the game shows also. That’s how I first heard of Vladimir [V.] Posner. Do you know who Vladimir Posner is?
Q: I don’t.

Denber: Vladimir Posner was a Soviet journalist, and I think he grew up partially in New York and partially in Paris, so he was quite worldly. And because he spoke perfect English—I mean, without an accent—I think his mother was French and his father maybe was a diplomat, and that’s why they lived here. I think he spent his formative years in New York. He was the person who the Soviet TV masters would dispatch to America to tell about—he carried a lot of credibility as the interpreter of all things American and Western. So he was the one who would talk about how the benefits of American capitalism were all fake, that it was all a smokescreen, that people lived very badly, that there was racism. Yes, of course there’s racism. And homelessness. Of course there’s homelessness. But that these were always the primary characteristics, the primary features. And how hypocritical the West was. So he was the main purveyor of all of that—

Q: Wow.

Denber:—because he was perceived to be quite sophisticated on those issues. So now—he’s still a journalist, but now he’s one of the few liberal voices that’s still allowed on Channel One, Russia’s main state TV channel. But of course he has a weekly program, and that’s of course only comes on after eleven P.M. [laughs] But, yes.

Q: Wow. A whole room of TVs.
Denber: He’s an interesting persona because he doesn’t repudiate what he did. He said, “Well, those were the times.” And that’s what he did. And he did some things I think that he thinks—you know, that he’s not proud of. But he’s kind of one of the last standing voices for some modicum of—you know, one of the last standing voice that you can hear on Russian TV that stands for something different.

Q: Wow.

Denber: You know how the Russian government will always allow just a tiny window of space so that they can say that there’s no press censorship or no super control—

Q: Just so they can point to that for—yes, a counterpoint.

Denber: Yes, his show is probably one of them, but better that it’s there than not there. So—

Q: And now, I guess, more than TV, there’s the Internet.

Denber: There’s the Internet. Well, the Russian government’s trying to take care of that too. So there was this big Soviet TV project, and they all sat around and watched it and studied and analyzed Soviet TV programs.
Q: Wow. I wonder who that—was that with a professor?

Denber: Jonathan Sanders led it. I hope you’re going to interview Jonathan Sanders.

Q: I hope so too, yes.

Denber: Say a big hello to him for me.

Q: I will, I will. Oh, wow, that's super-interesting. I will look at that room and think of that the next time I’m there. So you were thinking about leaving grad school, you said, even when you were finishing up the book. You knew you were maybe done with your studies.

Denber: I knew I was not destined to be a PhD. I never did a PhD thesis. I just knew that that was not going to be for me.

Q: Okay. And what made you think that, just seeing the inside of the—

Denber: because I don’t like to write long things.
Q: Well, that’s a good reason.

Denber: I don’t think anyone should write anything that’s longer than ten pages.

Q: Concise and to the point. So was it difficult to leave, to tell your advisor and to make that choice?

Denber: No, it wasn’t difficult.

Q: Were people supportive?

Denber: No, I don’t think it was difficult. It was not a—graduate school and me were not a good match.

Q: Okay. And you wanted to leave academia, so what did you want to go do? What were you looking for? Were you—

Denber: Well, things were starting to open up in the post-Soviet—well, it wasn’t post-Soviet yet, but in 1989, ’90, things started to look very different. And I had a job working on a bulletin on Soviet law—editing this bulletin on Soviet law that was for the Parker School of [Foreign and]
Comparative Law, which is at Columbia. And I could see that there were all kinds of opportunities, all kinds of interesting things that could be done because people were opening offices in Russia and—well, in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia back then, and Poland. This little law bulletin was just supposed to be a little update for lawyers who had offices in these places or who needed to know what the legal developments were in this very fast-paced environment. So I knew I didn’t want to be in academia, and someone I knew quite well had a one-year fellowship at Human Rights Watch. It was called Helsinki Watch.

Q: Right.

Denber: And he was getting another job somewhere else, but he said that I should apply. And I did. And I got the job. I don’t know why!

Q: So you were looking to maybe go to the Soviet Union or to go to—

Denber: Oh, yes. Oh, most definitely. I was dying to go to the Soviet Union.

Q: Had you been once when you traveled your junior year abroad?

Denber: Yes. I was really dying to go. Well, more important, I was really eager to do something that was meaningful and to do something that was in that field. I was doing something already
that was in the field. This law bulletin wasn’t post-Soviet yet, but it was Soviet/Eastern European law. I wanted to actually have a job that would bring me into direct contact with people instead of laws and papers and things like that. This just seemed ideal. I really wanted to do something meaningful. I have a profound interest in human rights that comes from my own family background and, I guess, my feelings also about the death penalty in America and other issues in America. And to be able to spend my days doing something that connected with people and gave people some kind of hope, that strove to make people’s lives better or to correct an injustice, and to do that in a place that interested me most intellectually and personally, that was a gift.

Q: And it was Jeri [Laber], right, who was the—

Denber: Yes. Did you interview her?

Q: Not yet. In the fall.

Denber: You will, though, right?

Q: We will, yes.

Denber: Oh, wonderful.
Q: So she’s also a Russia Institute alum.

Denber: Yes. I think she was—when did she graduate? Maybe she was one of the first?

Q: I think in the ’50s, yes.

Denber: In the ’50s, yes. No, not one of the first. But in the ’50s, yes. Well the first woman. I think she might have been the first woman alumna.

Q: Really?

Denber: Yes.

Q: Good for her. So that’s great. So did she interview you? Did you—

Denber: Yes, she did. And I can’t believe it, but she actually hired me. Yes. She interviewed me twice. And Aryeh Neier, who was the head of Human Rights Watch back then, also interviewed me. It was very intimidating.

Q: I bet.
Denber: Yes. [Laughter]

Q: And it was your job to basically go to Moscow and set up shop there, right?

Denber: Yes, we had an apartment. Jeri had managed to find an apartment through somebody else. But we wanted to establish a presence and equip it and have people get to know us and network and be a presence in Moscow, not just a physical presence with an office but a presence in every other sense, a source and an actor.

Q: Because before that, I guess it was impossible to get in, right?

Denber: It wasn’t impossible and certainly, by—because Jeri went several times during the toughest times in the Soviet period.

Q: Wow.

Denber: Yes. And then I think after a while she had problems getting visas, and then in ’89 or ’90 they started to be able to get visas again.
Q: Wow. So, talk to me about the importance of actually being on the ground in a place like that.

Denber: There’s no substitute for it, really. I mean, you do the best you can when you can’t be on the ground, when you can’t see people face-to-face, when you can’t meet with them and connect with them the way you’re connecting with me now. Of course there are substitutes, and we have to do that all the time because we deal with a lot of really closed countries. But if you can be on the ground, there’s just no substitute for it. You know, the way you can build networks with other organizations, the way you can build trust. It’s very hard to build trust with people when you can’t actually see them face-to-face or be able to, at the drop of a hat, go to a meeting or interview somebody who’s only in Moscow for an hour, who has an important story to tell. Or to be able to be on the ground so that, at the drop of a hat, you can go somewhere else when something important is happening that you need to document.

Q: Yes, makes sense. And so what was it like? I mean, you had visited briefly years before. What did you find when you arrived?

Denber: Chaos.

Q: Chaos. Tell me about it. I’m just so curious about what daily life was like and what you saw.

Denber: Well, I would wake up and say, All right, I have to do A, B and C today, and at the end
of the day I had done X, Y and Z, but didn’t get anywhere near A, B and C. There were also no cell phones, and most pay phones didn’t work. And Internet was just starting.

Q: Oh, really early on, yes.

Denber: Yes, end of ’91. So, we had email occasionally. So all that was just starting, and it was hard to get things done. It was hard to get hold of people. I’m still trying to understand how I ever managed to find people to talk to, but somehow we did! And it was chaotic to try to get things done bureaucratically, like trying to register the office was very challenging, trying to find the right people. It’s not that they put up big obstacles, but they were just not thrilled about what we were doing. I think there was a lot of suspicion about this organization, about who I was as an American. A lot of friendly people, a lot of very friendly people, but I think officials who were disgruntled and understandably confused and upset at what was happening to their country. They saw their country falling apart. They saw them losing their savings and they had no idea—it was a very, very scary time, I think, for a lot of people in Moscow then.

Q: So, I guess any optimism or hope was already fading by then.

Denber: Well, no, I don’t think the optimism and hope was fading then. I think that there were some people who were very hopeful or at least who understood that, yes, this is chaos, but something better will replace it.
Q: That it would take time.

Denber: Yes, yes. But the civil servants I talked to were just very confused. The civil servants that you had to talk to to resolve your visa issues, to get the office registered, to get notary stamps, anything that you needed from local authorities. At the same time, the government was very open to Human Rights Watch when we needed to speak with them on substantive issues.

Q: Wow.

[INTERRUPTION]

Denber: So on the one hand, in terms of trying to get things done and, bureaucratically speaking, it was very chaotic and difficult to find people, and civil servants were understandably grumpy. Not that they aren’t anywhere grumpy, but they were particularly grumpy for the reasons that I talked about before. The country was falling apart and nothing was predictable for them. At the same time, when we needed to meet with government officials to talk about substantive issues, their doors were open. They met with us. The Foreign Ministry would meet with us. I remember having a meeting with a Foreign Minister, which is almost unthinkable today. We met with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. We even met with what is now the FSB [Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation]. And it’s not that they said, Oh, gosh, yes, you’re right about everything. No. Up to the second Chechen War we even got meetings with the Ministry of Defense. So they
were more open to meet and talk. Even if we had diametrically opposed views of things, there was at least a discussion.

Now, today, there are still some issues that we have substantive, constructive, serious conversations with among Russian government officials concerning certain issues like disability, for example, or children’s rights. But now, for us to have a meeting with the Ministry of Defense, I think that would be rather difficult. Or even the Ministry of Internal Affairs—rather difficult. And to meet with the Minister of Foreign Affairs? Not today. [Laughter]

Q: Wow. It’s surprising.

Denber: So there was definitely an openness to engage with us on a wide variety of issues.

Q: These people that you met with in the government, these ministers, were they in these positions for several years? Were you able to build and sustain relationships with them over time, or did they just kind of come and go quickly?

Denber: Back then, the Foreign Minister didn’t stay that long. It was Andrei [V.] Kozyrev, and I don’t remember when he left office. I guess maybe ’95 or ’96. I can’t remember. It was a very long time ago.
Q: Yes. But you were able to build some type of relationship and level of trust or at least a rapport?

Denber: I wouldn’t call it a level of trust. I would call it a level of understanding about who each other were.

Q: Okay. Yes. You’ve got to start somewhere. And I was just curious. It said in Masha’s article that when you got to Russia you really fell in love with Moscow.

Denber: Love at first sight, without a doubt. Even though it was covered in thick layer of dust [laughter] and so many buildings needed reconstruction, you could just see that there was so much beauty and harmony in the different architectural styles, and it just felt like home to me. It felt like a home that was just waiting for me to come.

Q: Wow, that’s amazing. I guess that explains why you stayed so long too. [Laughs] And the people too? The Russian people were—

Denber: Yes, the people I met in Moscow—

Q: You were fluent in Russia by the time you got there, right?
Denber: Eh, not so much.

Q: Oh, really? Okay.

Denber: I spoke it okay, but I got much better very, very quickly as a matter of just necessity. So I was very lucky because I met the person I eventually married those first few months when I was in Moscow, and he showed me a different world of Muscovites that I might not have seen otherwise. I mean, I obviously got to know the human rights world, which is a community of really extraordinary people, and it’s easy to fall in love with a place just because of them. But I also got to see a whole other world of people and communities and places through my husband, who knows every square millimeter of Moscow. And so I got to see the other part, the part that had nothing to do with politics, the part that had nothing to do with human rights, the part that was connected to Moscow’s deep history, the part that knew all the quirks and the permanencies, the things that have been there forever that are just waiting to be seen or not seen.

Q: How did you meet your husband? Was it through work or was it through just chance?

Denber: Well, everything’s chance.

Q: That’s true.
Denber: There was a man from the dissident movement who was like a fixer for us, who helped us find things, like to get our reports printed and help us solve problems—like I said, he helped us find out typography, he helped us find out how to get visas registered. He just knew the city and knew journalists. He knew how to get things done. And the first time I met him, he said, “You know what? You really need to see—.” I think he could see that I was this dumb American, but with some potential. He said, “It’s really important that you see what a good Muscovite intelligentsia family looks like.” So he said, “It’s my nephew’s birthday tomorrow or next week or something, so you’ll come to the birthday party.” So I imagined a birthday party with like a ten year-old kid, and cake and candles and ice cream, and it turned out it was his—I don’t remember how old Dimitri was back then—twenty-five, twenty-six year-old nephew. And it was a rather grown-up birthday party with every form of alcohol on the table [laughs] that you could possibly imagine that was all drunk in close succession, one to the other.

Q: [laughs] The true experience.

Denber: That’s how I met him.

Q: Wow. Well, okay. Well, I think I want to get more into your work, but maybe we can—

Denber: I think we can stop and take a pause—
Q: —we can do that next time.

Denber: Yes. Thanks. I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]
Q: So today is August 8, 2016, Monday, and I’m here with Rachel Denber for our second session for the Harriman Institute Oral History Project. This is Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux. So Rachel, the last time we met, last week, we ended with you arriving in Moscow in ’91 and despite the chaos, you fell in love with Moscow and also your husband. You were telling me about that, so I know you spent the next six years there. You were there for—five years? Okay. So tell me about your five or six—your career in Moscow, how you were able to investigate the human rights situation in Russia and the surrounding states and the challenges and triumphs that you encountered.

Denber: Okay, well, those first five years, from the end of ’91 through ’97, mid-’97, I lived in Moscow with an interruption for maternity leave. Actually, most of the work that I did was—during that period, was not on Russia but was on other states of the former Soviet Union. So I did work on the armed conflicts in Georgia, in South Ossetia, and in Tajikistan and Nagorno-Karabakh. We have two people who covered the former Soviet Union and so I was one of them, and so I ran around doing that. I spent time in all of those places, going back several times. You have to remember that the Soviet Union had crumbled and there were fault lines along which it had crumbled and unresolved—there were lots of unresolved identity issues. There were unresolved territorial disputes and unresolved political conflict and elite conflict and conflict over resources, and it in many places turned violent and you had political entrepreneurs who mobilized people and made them take sides, and so we had lots of armed conflict.
So some of my first work for Human Rights Watch was documenting violations in these armed conflicts, looking at the conduct of each side, whether it’s the South Ossetian militias or the Georgian forces. It had just become independent, or even before they became independent of the Soviet Union, or Nagorno-Karabakh, whether it was the Armenian, the ethnic Armenian forces, or the Azerbaijani forces. What their conduct was and how it measured up against the Geneva Conventions, international humanitarian law—so things like indiscriminate shelling, indiscriminate air bombardment campaigns, which was Nagorno-Karabakh but not in the first war in South Ossetia, hostage taking, several massacres, communal violence, violent retribution. That was a big part of my work back then.

Q: So these documentation trips, that you meant you actually traveled to these areas?

Denber: Yes, of course.

Q: And collected materials and sources on the ground? How does that—

Denber: I gave you three examples, but there was other work that I did, also. I mean, I also did do some work in Russia, on Chechnya, obviously. We did a lot of work on Chechnya, and we did a lot of work on the police crackdowns against non-ethnic Russians in Moscow. That was work that I also was involved in. I was also involved in work on ethnically motivated discrimination and the violence in parts of Southern Russia, and I worked on other issues as well. I worked on
issues having to do with the treatment of the ethnic Russian minority, or the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltic states: Estonia and Latvia.

Q: So, across all these situations—

Denber: Well, most cases, what we would do—what I would do—well, you know Human Rights Watch’s methodology is a three-part methodology, which to put it very simply it’s document, expose, change, or investigate, expose, change. So we investigate abuses, we document them, we expose them through various types of reporting, whether it’s a big, thick report, whether it’s a press release, whether it’s a letter. Some kind of documentation that shows that we have looked at a situation as comprehensively as we can and brought it to the world’s attention or the attention of the authorities that are in a position to make a difference, and then change. To engage in advocacy, to engage governments, to engage international organizations, to engage the media—whatever it takes to move a situation in a positive direction.

So, a key part of that is investigate. So I would go to many different places and interview people who had been directly affected by these situations, directly victimized—if there were civilians who were taken hostage or civilians who lost loved ones or limbs or otherwise were injured as a result of indiscriminate shelling or other indiscriminate use of force. In some cases interviewing not just victims but also witnesses, people who might have seen something happen, lawyers, other human rights organizations—anyone we could to get a very full picture about a particular situation.
Q: And how did you get people to sit down and talk to you? Did Human Rights Watch, at that time, have this credible brand behind it?

Denber: Well, it was a long time ago. [Laughter]

Q: I mean, how do you even get that trust from people?

Denber: We were very, very lucky that even twenty-five years ago—twenty, twenty-five years ago—it was still a very young human rights movement, young in chronological time. But there were still groups on the ground that Human Rights Watch knew from even before the breakup of the Soviet Union, and you would meet them first and obviously, we have shared purposes. We tell them what we want to do. Often we were working on the same thing, and they also want to get—I mean, we have a shared mission. Sometimes we would find people to talk to through local human rights groups, but sometimes we’d just—if it’s an armed conflict, we would go to places where we knew refugees were living and just knock on their doors and say, Excuse me, do you have a few minutes to talk? I’m from this organization in New York, and we know that this is a very difficult situation and would you let us talk to you?

The first person you talk to at great length, maybe they’ll tell what they know, or they’ll say, No, I don’t want to talk to you, go away. It happens a lot, but you just make clear that—just say who you are. I’d be honest about who I am, why I was there, why I wanted to talk to them, and even if either nothing violative happened to them or if they didn’t want to tell me, maybe they know someone else who I should talk to, and it builds from there. If it’s a situation of an armed conflict
where—in the early years, that’s the kind of work I was involved in. So it would be places where
refugees were living. Sometimes we would just go to hospitals because that’s where you find
people who have suffered as a result of indiscriminate shelling or other abuses having to do with
armed conflicts.

In other situations, we would talk to lawyers either whose clients had been affected by certain
kinds of human rights abuses or who knew other people who had been victimized in one way or
another. Diaspora groups.

Q: So what did you learn through all these investigations about talking to people—specifically,
how to listen to them and how to ask the right questions?

Denber: One of the hardest things is—our mission is to name names. To name names of agencies
or, when possible, individuals who are responsible for abuse. That’s a pretty heavy
responsibility. It’s a heavy responsibility and it means that you really better have your facts right,
even if you’re not naming anyone’s first name and last name. Even if you’re saying, Government
X is responsible for Y abuse. That’s a big responsibility. You really need to have your facts right.
At the same time you need to build trust and you understand that the people you’re talking to—
many of them have been through a very traumatic experience. It’s a difficult balance to, on the
one hand, make sure you get the facts but, on the other hand, not re-traumatize the person you’re
interviewing.
So, what did I learn? I guess I learned that sometimes you just have to let—I learned the hard way—that at the beginning, you just have to let people talk. Once I was clear about who I was and what I was there to do—what I wanted to talk with them about, what I would do with the information, I just let them talk and sometimes they’ll talk for a long time without interruption. But I would know that that wasn’t going to be what we would use in the report. I would just let them talk because they need to get it off their chest and, you know, I would try to make notes. It’s very hard when they’re talking without interruption. This isn’t every case; this is just in some cases, and then I would just start over again and say, You know, you mentioned X. Can we talk about that a little bit more? Then I would start asking who, what, where, when, why, how do you know? Who told you? But it’s hard to do that without being invasive, especially when you’re asking, Why do you think they did that? Or, Did they say why they were doing that?

In some cases, you know the answer to the question. In some cases, the questions to them might seem just like I’m from Mars. Like, What’s the matter with you, woman? Don’t you know? Isn’t it patently obvious? So sometimes, I say, I know this might sound like a silly question, but I have to ask it. If you’re just honest with people, they understand. Or I say, You don’t have to answer this question. I know it might be really hard, but—

Q: You said in a lot of these situations, there was violent conflict. Did you ever feel unsafe or particularly vulnerable?

Denber: I probably should’ve, but I was too stupid. There were a couple times. It’s not that I felt unsafe. It’s just that it was unpredictable. But I feel even silly here telling about them because
these days our researchers go to much more dangerous situations. They do it all the time. But the two that stick out in my mind are: once when we went into—and this tells you how old this memory is, because it was 1992 and we went into Nagorno-Karabakh. I don’t know if you know where that is.

Q: No.

Denber: That’s in Azerbaijan. It’s an ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan over which Armenia and Azerbaijan had been fighting since then, basically, since ’92, even before that. So, I went to Nagorno-Karabakh and there was shelling—I can’t remember if there was shelling and aerial bombardments—and the plan was only for us to go in for one night and then come out. We had been interviewing refugees both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Going to Nagorno-Karabakh itself was just to confirm some things. There’s no need for us—at least back then, we didn’t think there was a need to actually be inside a war zone when the war is happening. [Laughter]

Q: Okay, good.

Denber: But we went because the war would be on, it would be off, it would be on, it would be off, and so we went during what we thought was a quiet period. But then we got stuck. I think we got stuck just an extra day because there were bombings happening. There were bombardments and we didn’t want to be on the road.
It’s not that I didn’t feel safe, I just wasn’t sure when we would get out of there and this was before cell phones. People were waiting for me, expecting me to call at a particular time. I think that was more—I was worried more about other people who were—

Q: Would worry.

Denber: —who would worry about me. Then the second time where I felt unsafe was—I think it was 2001? Maybe it was 2000. I can’t remember—it must have been 2001. There had been an incident in Chechnya where a Russian colonel, from the Russian federal forces in Chechnya, had raped and killed a teenage girl. They would detain people, bring them to the base, and yes. He was completely drunk and he was a brutal, brutal person by all accounts, by several accounts. This is not going to be court testimony, so— [laughter]. His name was Yuri [D.] Budanov and he was actually brought to trial because it was a pretty well-documented case. And I think he was a bit unstable, and I think even some of his people who he commanded were ready to testify against him.

He was put on trial in Southern Russia. Southern Russia is hyper-patriotic and felt that this man was a hero and that he shouldn’t be on trial, that Chechnya should be on trial. It was a very, very tense trial. We documented the case. I was at the trial, at the trial’s opening, and after the session ended, I went outside and I wanted to talk to some general who was there. I went up to him and I can’t remember what happened, whether he shooed me away or he told me to ask someone else the question I was asking. Then suddenly a mob formed around me of local—I assumed they were local—Russians from the area, because they heard I was a human rights activist, which for
them was a dirty word, like a profanity. They surrounded me and they were nasty. They were just hissing and saying all kinds of things. Who sent you here? You’re with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. Why don’t you stick your nose in your own country’s business? What are you doing here? They were very aggressive, What about the genocide of Russians in Chechnya?

It was very, very, very aggressive and I wasn’t sure how I would get out of there. I don’t think they were actually going to physically assault me. They were getting very—they were very close, and there were a lot of them and it was like you could almost see the foam in their mouth. They were very angry, and I didn’t think they would physically harm me, but I just didn’t know how I would—I didn’t want to seem like a coward and run away, so I just bull-shat. I said, “I’m very surprised that you’re reacting this way.” [Laughter] “I’d always thought of Russians as always open to different views and full of hospitality, so I’m actually very surprised at the things that you’re saying.” Rather than try to convince them of something they could never be convinced of. And then eventually some journalists who I knew, who also were monitoring the trial, they pulled up in their car and I think they saw what was happening and they said, “Rachel, Rachel, come on, we’re late.” I was so grateful because that was a graceful way for me to get out.

Q: That was an exit, yes.

Denber: It was an exit because—I don’t know how long the incident actually lasted. The memory plays tricks on us. But I could see that the temperature was starting to decline in the crowd, so probably after maybe five or ten minutes they probably would’ve lost interest. At least these
journalists pulled up and got me out before I had to wait for that answer. I’m trying to think when else. I’ve been very afraid for other people, for sure.

Q: And even if not just for your immediate physical safety, but were you ever worried that on a higher level you were being watched or monitored?

Denber: Oh, I’m sure at a higher level I’m being watched and monitored. I’m sure that our office is under surveillance. Absolutely. Maybe even my husband’s apartment was under surveillance, with the phone tapped. I honestly didn’t think about it that much.

Q: I guess you can’t, because—

Denber: Yes. I mean, you’re asking me about me, but another set of questions is, I am responsible for a number of people who are in the region now and have been for a long time, so these are the things I think about regarding them. I think about their security all the time. I think about what it must be like to be them in a much more repressive environment now than it was twenty-five years ago, and where we’ve had really, much more unpleasant, nauseating experiences involving evidence, surveillance and harassment based on surveillance. And one of our colleagues was murdered. Not from Human Rights Watch, but from the—

Q: A reporter? Yes.
Denber: Well, she was a human rights activist who my colleague was very, very close to. We’ve seen our colleagues attacked, beaten, marginalized, demonized, I mean, all over the region. I’ve seen my colleagues go to jail. We’ve seen our colleagues go to jail. Lots of our colleagues go to jail in Azerbaijan, just recently in the past few years. Almost everyone we worked with either had to leave the country or was thrown in jail. There was a big crackdown there. A really close colleague of ours from Kazakhstan, they went to jail for two years. That’s really hard. It’s really hard.

Q: So, how does that affect you? I mean, in many ways this work must be so hard not to feel it personally all the time, from even back when you were collecting stories of abuse and sitting across from victims, to the things that have happened to your colleagues. And yet, you are still at Human Rights Watch twenty-five years later, almost.

Denber: Trust me, it’s not that I’m a glutton for punishment. This feels like this is the right thing to do, and this feels to me like the work I was always supposed to do. The people who I work with feel like the people I was always supposed to work with and when people tell me their stories and I hear about them through my colleagues, I think it’s easy for me to hear them directly. It’s easier for me emotionally to hear them directly than to hear about them from another colleague who told me about another’s stories, because I think when I’m talking to someone directly I have two missions, and one is to—the main mission is to tell that person’s story. They’re trusting you with it, so I have an obligation to tell it and to tell it right, but with that comes a tremendous duty to get the facts right. Bear in mind, a lot of this is happening—most of the time, I’m interviewing people in Russian. I speak Russian fluently but it’s not my
native language. It’s stressful to know that you better get the facts exactly right and you’re not
speaking in your native language.

So, I have a lot of other things on my mind that prevent me from feeling despair for this horrible
plight that this person has endured. But also, I think I feel filled with a sense of almost
empowerment, that even if I can’t change what happened to them we can tell their story. What
happened to them will be part of the bigger picture that will help establish a fact pattern, and
that’s very powerful. But I think mostly I’m too anxious about getting the facts right and that sort
of allows a curtain to come down, almost like a translucent wall that makes certain parts of my
emotions shut down. It’s different when I’m hearing about a story that one of my colleagues
heard about or documented because they’re just telling me about it and I’m not trying to sift fact
from—they’ve already done the sifting.

I just am editing a report right now about Chechnya, and it was horribly upsetting. Just so
upsetting. I can’t imagine what these people—Chechnya right now, it’s just a little republic of
tyranny. It’s just awful. Ramzan [A.] Kandyrov, a local leader, has built this personality cult and
a totalitarian state, and hearing intelligent, cultured people talk about what it’s like to have to
grovel? It’s really hard to take. And that’s a case where their physical security and health hasn’t
been violated. Then there are other stories. It’s very hard. Very upsetting, I should say. Hard for
them, upsetting for me.
Q: So, but yet you have been here for almost twenty-five years now. What do you see as some of the biggest successes or victories along the way? The bright spots that make it easier to keep going, I hope.

Denber: Oh, there are lots. There are bright spots all the time. I think one is happening even as we speak. So, last week on July twenty-ninth, in Armenia, there was a very, very tense situation where—back up a little bit. In the middle of July, a group of gunmen seized a police station in central Yerevan. They raided the police station and they took some hostages, and so this crisis started. You have to bear in mind that Armenia is just a—people are just in despair. The government is corrupt—and this is really not for public. Is this going to be published anywhere?

Q: You have the right to redact anything later if you want to.

Denber: People there are living with a lot of despair and frustration at what they perceive to be as government corruption and incompetence, a poor economy, economic distress. When they saw basically this gang of bandits take a police station hostage, they came out on the streets to express their discontent at the government and they said, Oh, these guys are daredevils. They called themselves daredevils. So they supported these hostage-takers, but mostly they were despairing about the directionlessness of the country. So, the protests went on and off, on and off, and then July twenty-ninth, as there had been in previous evenings, a big crowd gathered near the police station. There was a police line, you know, a cordon, police with their shields, and about twenty meters away there was the crowd. I’ve seen videos. It’s not like they’re friendly, but they weren’t violent. They weren’t throwing rocks or anything.
At one point the police told the protest leaders, you could see in the videos—I wouldn’t really call it a conversation—there’s an animated conversation between a couple police and a couple of the protest leaders. They say, Scram, get out of here, and they trade insults or whatever. Then, suddenly out of nowhere, the police start throwing what are called stun grenades. It’s a plastic explosive that you use when there’s an active threat to life. For example, they’re used in situations where someone is actively taking hostages. You throw a stun grenade instead of firing live ammo. A stun grenade is kind of like live ammo, but you throw a stun grenade because it disorients, because it’s very loud. It emits smoke and it also fragments, right? So, this is what you use in an active, threatening-to-life situation. But here, you had a big crowd. They weren’t moving on the police. There was, like I said, a twenty-meter distance between the police cordon and the crowd. They start tossing these stun grenades.

People got injured really badly: third degree burns all over their legs and arms and one guy lost an eye. We documented this, and also of course the police started running after—the first step is that they started launching these stun grenades, and then they moved on the crowd. Just pulled everyone they could, beat the crap out of them, hauled people into stations. It was absolutely unacceptable, excessive way to do crowd control, and utterly avoidable. It didn’t have to be that way. So, my colleagues, Giorgi Gogia and Jane Buchanan—Giorgi is our director for South Caucuses, and Jane Buchanan’s our associate director—they were already on the ground by July thirtieth, the day after that happened, and they just started interviewing. We have a pretty solid network of contacts among other human rights organizations and lawyers and journalists in
Yerevan, so they did lots of interviews with people who directly suffered either from the stun grenades or from the police brutality, the beatings, the detentions.

They visited people in hospitals, they talked to doctors, they talked to lawyers. July thirtieth in the morning they started documenting and August first we published a ten page report: this is what happened. Documenting based on as many interviews as they could do in a couple of days how the police used excessive force against this crowd. And it’s not just the documentation, it’s also a legal analysis, which I think is our really big value added. We’re not just journalists. We’re saying not just, This is what happened, but this is why it’s wrong, and this is what the government should be doing instead. We published that very quickly, and then on Friday we published another mini-report, fifteen pages long, documenting all the arbitrary detentions: how the police just hauled people in without any violations, with all kinds of detainee rights violations. They hauled people in and beat the crap out of them, and in some cases, no detention records. Didn’t let people see their lawyers. Didn’t let people call their families and tell them where they were. Held people at these makeshift holding centers. I mean, it was just outrageous. So then, on Thursday they met with the investigative authorities in Yerevan, in Armenia, who investigate crimes committed by law enforcement. They had a big meeting with them. Friday this investigate service makes an announcement that they’re suspending some police, and they’re going to be reprimanding others, and then today we find out that they’ve actually sacked the chief of the Yerevan police, city police.

Q: Wow.
Denber: Yes. That’s a very recent example.

Q: Yes, indeed.

Denber: But there are many other examples. I think one thing that always stays with me is—I’m giving more recent examples because they’re fresh in my head, but—the Sochi Olympics. The Olympics were in 2014, so starting in 2009 we started to keep an eye on what was happening in Sochi in terms of worker rights. Were migrant workers getting paid and treated in accordance with the law for the work that they were doing in building all these venues and hotels and such, conditions that were directly related to the preparations for the Olympics, right? So, infrastructure, roads, hotels, venues, things like that. Olympic Village, all those construction projects. And we also were looking at property rights—people who were expropriated, turned out of their homes and denied adequate compensation because their homes were eminent domain, and government seizes land.

So we published a report fully a year before the Olympics started, before the Games started, on violations of worker rights. About how migrant workers, how in some cases they didn’t get paid or their wages were delayed, or in many cases the employers wouldn’t give them contracts or wouldn’t let them have their contracts, or confiscated their passports, because if you confiscate a passport, guy can’t go anywhere. You can’t find some other place to work, and then you’re at his mercy. We engaged a lot with the International Olympic Committee and then the Games opened in February 2014. And in January 2014, we found out that the government had run an inspection and found that—mind you, this is Russia. This is Putin’s Russia. They ran an inspection and they
found that the equivalent of $8 million in wage arrears hadn’t been paid. As a result of their inspections, the money would be paid. That’s pretty sweet.

Q: Wow.

Denber: That was very, very big. Very, very big.

Q: Yes. That’s amazing.

Denber: We just had another piece of impact in Ukraine where we did a report on secret detention. I don’t know if you’re following what’s happening in Ukraine? So, there’s a breakaway region. Well, there’s Crimea. There’s also Eastern Ukraine. We just published a report. This one, called “You Do Not Exist,” about people being held in secret detention. People being held in secret detention—you can keep that—meaning that police don’t register their detention, no one knows where they are, there’s not official information. We published this report, we do a press conference in Kiev, we meet with government officials and a week and a half later, six people were released. A few more days later, five more people were released. That’s pretty great.

Q: Wow. Well, it’s nice that there are so many of these examples that just come to mind.

Denber: It makes it worthwhile.
Q: You are seeing that impact. So, tell me about when, in ’97, you come back to New York, right?

Denber: Yes.

Q: So what led you to leave Moscow and come to New York, and how did your job and life change?

Denber: The director wanted me to become deputy director.

Q: So, a promotion.

Denber: Yes, I was promoted and actually she promoted me and wanted to promote me a year before and I said, “But I’m really happy here in Russia. I want to stay here another year.” So, that’s why.

Q: Was it difficult to come back, or did you feel like a lot had changed even here?

Denber: I think I was ready to come back because in Moscow you’re just responsible for everything that happens in the office, and I was ready to not do that anymore. But I also went back all the time, you know, so—I was very sad to leave. Very, very sad to leave but I do go back all the time.
Q: About how often do you travel?

Denber: It depends. There was a period when I felt like I was there every month.

Q: Oh wow.

Denber: It depends. Some years, four or five times a year. Other times, six times a year. Other times, for a couple months at a time or a month at a time a couple times throughout the year. So I try to go at least four times a year and sometimes for a month at a time.

Q: Wow. That’s a long time.

Denber: Yes. I feel like it’s my home.

Q: So nice. So, since you’ve been back in New York—

Denber: That’s like the past almost twenty years!

Q: Almost twenty years now, it’s a while.

Denber: I travel all the time to different parts of the former Soviet Union, so in July I was in Kiev, for example. I hope, knock on wood, that I’ll get another Russian visa and I’ll be back in Moscow as soon as I get another visa. I go to Kyrgyzstan a lot. I go all over the place.
Q: But since being back, I’ve seen on Harriman’s website over the past few years, the past decade, you’ve been on many panels and you’ve been kind of involved with them, so did coming back to New York kind of rekindle your connection with Harriman?

Denber: It’s a good question because I always feel like I’m not spending enough time—I don’t spend enough time with my former Harriman colleagues because they’re right there. It’s just a subway ride away. I should be up there every week. There’s so much ferment there. There are such great talks there and really smart people and a great vibe. I really should be spending more time there. But I go up there every few months for a panel or a round table or a lecture. Like I said, they have such a rich schedule of events and some of my friends from graduate school now are senior people at Harriman. Tim [Timothy M.] Frye, I went to graduate school with him. You know Tim Frye.

Q: Oh yes, yes.

Denber: Yes, I went to graduate school with him. So I feel like I’m not there enough. I should be there more.

Q: There’s only so much time. You talked about—last week, you talked about your friends, your cohort, from graduate school and how they were really one of the best things you got out of that experience, so I was wondering about the Harriman network and how people still come into your life, personally and professionally.
Denber: Quite a lot. It’s hard to convey this to you without it sounding like a bunch of shameless name-dropping. [Laughter]

Q: Drop away. Go for it.

Denber: But, I think a really special moment was—it must have been ’92 or ’93, I can’t remember. I was definitely in Moscow and somebody from the Harriman Institute—maybe it was Claire—what was her last name? Claire—she worked for CNN [Cable News Network] for a long time. Claire, Claire—is it Shulman? Maybe she’s одна фамилия [one name] with Marshall Shulman? I’ll tell you who it was. [Sound of typing] She eventually became a White House correspondent.

Q: Oh wow.

Denber: Yes, she was a big deal. Claire Shipman!

Q: Shipman. Close!

Denber: So, Claire Shipman, I remember she was in Moscow with CNN, I believe, and she had a get-together—I think it was she—had a get-together at her apartment and there were all these Harriman people there, and we were all doing such interesting things. It was such a wild coincidence because there we all were. There must have been like ten of us, which is—
Q: Kind of a critical mass, actually.

Denber: —a critical mass, yes. I come across Harriman people all the time. I come across Harriman people who are working in the State Department, who are working for other NGOs [non-governmental organizations], who are working for the UN [United Nations]. A lot in academia, but whose expertise is invaluable. Journalists. It’s quite a network.

Q: Can you think of any examples of when you were able to call someone for help or—

Denber: All the time! I don’t know if I want to share it, though. [Laughter]

Q: Or maybe they call you!

Denber: That happens too. Trust me, it happens a lot. To me, that’s one of the most valuable things Harriman gave to me was that network of contacts.

Q: I think there seems to be this perception in academia that academia’s influence on policy has declined, especially in area studies, maybe over the past half century, but maybe not.

Denber: I can’t assess whether it has directly declined because that’s just not the world I move in.
Q: Right, right. But you see impact in other ways.

Denber: And also, you know that I don’t like to make statements about things I’m not an expert on—

Q: That’s right, that’s right.

Denber: —so it’s hard for me to assess whether that’s the case and what it is that influences policy. I know that we’re trying to have an influence on policy all the time, and we’re not an academic institution. I think that academia as the preparing grounds for people who are eventually going to make policy is extremely important, but I think it’s also important for academia to continue to have an influence on policy because of the expertise that people continue to develop and hone and steep themselves in. If it’s true that the academy has less influence on foreign policy than it did twenty years ago, then I think that that’s a real loss.

Q: It’s also hard sometimes to directly measure impact.

Denber: It’s very hard to measure anyone’s impact. Was it Human Rights Watch that—I studied political science when I was in graduate school but I always thought, Why do they call this a science? How do you really know? Was it our work that caused the Russian government to launch that investigation? I think so. I’m almost positive. I know that that’s what the International Olympic Committee told us. But there were certainly other people who were doing the same work. Well, there’s one local partner we worked with. It was his work too, but we
wrote the report. There are many examples of impact where everyone had a contribution, so how do you apportion that? How do you scientifically distill what was the tipping point?

Q: It’s hard to do. So now you go back to Harriman, you participate in these round tables and panels. How do you think the Institute has evolved or changed since you were a student there?

Denber: It’s so—oh, come on. In some ways it’s a different world, just because the empirical world we’re dealing with is just upside-down compared to where we were twenty-five years ago, but of course now it’s moving in a much more—

Q: Circling back a little bit.

Denber: Yes, a little bit! But it never circles back exactly the same way, so the empirical world is finding a different path. It seems much more dynamic. Much more dynamic, much more interface with people from the region, much more diverse range of topics of inquiry and much richer themes both in terms of what people are doing in academia and obviously what we see from it—we meaning outsiders—in terms of conferences and round tables and external events. Much, much more dynamic. Really, hats off to Alex [Alexander A. Cooley] and Tim and the late, great Cathy [Catherine Theimer] Nepomnyashchy and everyone who preceded. There’s a long legacy of excellence in leadership in the Harriman Institute.

Q: Does Human Rights Watch have any younger staff who have come out of that program?
Denber: Oh, yes. Oh my gosh, yes, yes. You’re probably going to interview one. Are you going to interview Steve Swerdlow?

Q: I’m not sure, maybe.

Denber: He’s our Central Asia researcher, one of our Central Asia researchers. He’s a Harriman alum. Our associate, [Catherine Zerr?] is an alum. That’s an entry level position. Who else came out of the Harriman? I think that’s it, actually. But I used to look around and see, Who might be interesting staff material.

Q: Recruiting ground, yes. That’s great. I think, as we said last week, there is more of a human rights focus now at Harriman because of directors like Cathy and Mark.

Denber: And Mark, yes. Especially because of Cathy and Mark.

Q: Yes. Seems that way. You also said last week about how important it is to be on the ground for human rights investigations and reporting. Now Columbia has these global centers, but they’re kind of this other thing. Do you think it was a missed opportunity that Harriman never set up a branch in Russia/the Soviet Union back in the day?

Denber: I’m not in a position to judge. Really, I’m not. Every institution makes choices about how they spend their resources.
Q: Hard to say.

Denber: Is that what other people are saying?

Q: Some, you know. Varying opinions, of course.

Denber: Harvard doesn’t have one, do they?

Q: No.

Denber: In fact, a lot of the big ones don’t.

Q: That’s right.

Denber: But there are other universities that have them, and you can use them. Those universities don’t have the same academic excellence in Russia area studies as Harriman does.

Q: There has been talk about a decline in exchange between students in Russia and the U.S. that’s become—

Denber: That’s really sad.
Q: —just, interest-wise and practicality-wise, has become more difficult. Everyone thinks that
that’s really—

Denber: In every way, it’s becoming more difficult, which is really, really sad, and I hope can be
reversed.

Q: Right. Yes, that would be good.

Denber: I’m starting to get tired again.

Q: Oh, that’s fine. Let’s wrap up.

Denber: My voice is getting tired. [Laughter]

Q: Is there anything to end with that you want to say about what we can look forward to either in
the region or in Harriman or hopes for the future? We have an election coming up in the U.S. Is
that going to affect—any final thoughts?

Denber: You know, I’m not going to be a phony and say human rights and democracy have been
victorious in the former Soviet region. I mean, really. [Laughter] It’s tough. It’s been very, very
tough to see what’s happened in the big picture, in terms of big picture rights issues in Russia
and in Central Asia, most Central Asian countries and in most parts of the former Soviet Union.
There are obvious areas where we’re able to have an impact. There are obvious places where
there is a push for greater public accountability of government. That’s always going to be—no matter how hard you push, that’s always going to be something that’s a little bit beyond our—more than a little bit beyond our control. So, it gives me inspiration, and what I think I would flag more than anything else is, I hope, permanence, community of human rights activists and journalists who are interested in human rights all over the former Soviet space. That’s really something to take inspiration from. That’s something that history won’t ever forget.

History—Mark, I hope you’re listening—history is very, very long and this has been one twenty-five year trajectory. Who knows what’s going to be in the next twenty-five years? And maybe in 200 years we’ll look back and maybe this will be the beginning of a positive cycle, who knows? I hope what stays permanent and what morphs and gets the support to remain and morph and continue to be a positive driving force is this really extraordinary community of brave and persistent and dedicated people in human rights movements and around it.

And Harriman? What was your question? Final thoughts? How could I have been luckier? How could I have been luckier than to have been mentored like people like Mark and Alex? Alex Motyl. Alex Cooley, of course, was probably still in high school when I was at Harriman. [Laughter] He wasn’t even born yet. How lucky I am now that he’s in the advisory committee? And Cathy, who taught me not to be afraid of literature. Everybody else, you know. Мне очень повезло, as they say in Russian. I’m incredibly lucky, incredibly fortunate.

Q: Well, that seems like a great place to end. Thank you again, Rachel, for all your time.
Denber: You’re welcome. Thank you! Thank you for letting me share all this.

[END OF INTERVIEW]