

Blanche Wiesen Cook

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Interviewer: BETSY NEWMAN

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Betsy Newman: So, would you like to start by talking about the relationship between Eleanor Roosevelt and Bernard Baruch?

Blanche Wiesen Cook: Well you know it was a surprisingly close relationship. When Eleanor Roosevelt died, Bernard Baruch said they had been friends for 50 years, and in the early part of their relationship they loved to dance together. I mean he was a great dancer, 6'4, she's over 6 feet tall and, you know, the two sports that she really enjoyed were dancing and horses. And so they had this incredible friendship. When FDR died Eleanor Roosevelt was a little bit annoyed that a group of her friends, John Golden, the producer, and Bernard Baruch, thought they would start a committee to take over, to protect her, to take over her money and finances and, really, just make sure she was safe and solid. That annoyed her very much, she didn't really like that.

But they went to the theater together. I don't know how that worked because they were both a little bit deaf and they both fell asleep, so I think they both kept waking each other up over time. At one point, and I don't know when it was, but I think it was in the 50's, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a friend, "Have you heard, Bernie has proposed marriage. Isn't that controlling?" And that's as close as we know they got.

There's really kind of an interesting part to Bernard Baruch, which is the women in his life. I mean some day somebody will write about Clare Boothe Luce and Eleanor Roosevelt - somebody has, and I forget her name. She was the editor of *Vanity Fair* and very close to Clare Boothe Luce, but she wrote about how Bernie Baruch would come back

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with presents from all of his trips abroad and the biggest presents were always for Eleanor Roosevelt, and the second biggest were for Clare Boothe Luce and the third biggest were for her, and I'm sorry I forgot her name but I'll send it to you. I was looking for that book today and I couldn't find it. It's in the country I think. It's a very funny book.

So, they were lifelong friends and she actually – one of the reasons I asked you if he were progressive is because she trusted him and she wanted FDR to appoint him to various committees in terms of, you know, comparable to the War Industries Board, because he believed in certain things that she believed in, and I think that by the mid '40s – by about '42, '43, she thought he was progressive on race. She wanted to see more integration than FDR, who was always juggling the Dixiecrats, could go out for, and she felt Bernard Baruch was on her side about things like that. And so she's, you know, she consults with him, you know, they meet really regularly. It's not just that he sits on a park bench outside the White House waiting to be summoned. I mean he's... he and Eleanor Roosevelt have a regular correspondence and friendship.

BN: would you talk about Eleanor's and FDR's attitudes toward Jews, and their growth away from anti-Semitism?

BWC: You know one of the things that is very interesting, is anti-Semitism and racism are a staple of upper-class white culture, and at some point Eleanor Roosevelt really changes and Sara Delano Roosevelt really changes, so that Mary Mcleod Bethune becomes a great friend first of Sara Delano Roosevelt – and this is very early in the '30s – and then a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. It's in the '20s that they become very close to the Morgenthau, and Eleanor Roosevelt's very close to Elinor Morgenthau, and Henry Morgenthau is a big part of FDR's team. It's not until later that the Jewish radicals around Joe Lash become really part of her entourage, the inner circle of her inner circle.

When I first started this book, it's all because of Joe Lash. It was really because of Hick, how it first started, there were all these love letters, Eleanor Roosevelt and Hick, and I said to Joe Lash who's a friend of mine – he blurbed my Crystal Eastman book, saying, "This

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is a book that should stay in print forever.” You get to be friends with people who blurb your book that way. So we had dinner one night and I said, “What’s up with you not having Hick in your book?” and he said, “I hated her and what I’m gonna do is a book of letters to show that Eleanor Roosevelt wrote letter like that to everybody, including me.” And I said, “Don’t be ridiculous, she didn’t write letters like that to you.”

Well, the truth is, she did. She meets Joe Lash around 1940 and about 1941, maybe it’s even 1940, he meets Trude Lash, who is Gertrude von Adam Wenzel Pratt at the time, a German anti-Nazi, who gets her PhD from the University of Freiburg, comes to the US, teaches at Hunter – and this is like in 1931 – goes back to Germany, having met Elliott Pratt - Pratt Oil, Pratt Institute - one of the richest men in America. He follows her back to Berlin, she runs an anti-Nazi paper, the Nazis destroy her paper, kill her editors, ransack her house. Hitler comes to power in January; they come back to the U.S., get married. They got married just before Hitler came into power and they’re in the U.S. in February, 1933. She has three children, and by 1940 falls in love with Joe Lash. And Eleanor Roosevelt gets so involved in this extraordinary binational Jewish-Christian relationship that it really becomes a great romance for her.

She promotes Trude Lash’s divorce and she and Elliot – they’re very tall, very blond, very gorgeous – Elliot writes to her, “Why do you want a divorce? You have all the freedom in the world,” and it’s clear they both have an open relationship. Eleanor Roosevelt marches in and encourages this divorce and this marriage and it’s the most amazing thing – and it’s that romance – that we can love each other across all our borders – that’s one of her driving forces. And it really does define the complete emancipation, if you will, from bigotry in her life. And I think that her own friendship with people like Joe Lash and Bernard Baruch who is, of course, you know, from a different class and caliber but still... That’s a very far removed from her first 1915 letter or so. I think it’s like 1915 in which she says “The Jew party was appalling.” You know, there’s none of that left, so that’s one, for me, of the great changes.

The most disturbing thing as I finish up this project is the failure to rescue the victims of Hitler’s Europe and I don’t really understand. I just truly don’t understand. Eleanor

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Roosevelt really gets very involved because of Trude. Trude is part of the German anti-Nazi underground, and she was never was given credit, she didn't want people to know that she was really the driving force in the Varian Fry rescue operation. But before she died, I said, "What's up with nobody giving you credit for this?" And she said, "Don't write that!" and I said "Well I'm going to write that." So finally she wrote me a letter saying it was true and I could write about it.

So that's in volume three. You have to read volume three for the full story. But the Varian Fry rescue operation is the only rescue operation where the U.S. is – you know – Varian Fry with his sort of covert, secret agents is getting people over the border, across the Pyrenees into Portugal and into the U.S. and other places. It's the State Department that closes down the rescue operation, and FDR supports all of the people in the State Department like Breckinridge Long, who Eleanor Roosevelt calls a fascist. "You know he's a fascist." FDR doesn't move away from him until, I think it's as late as 1945, maybe January, 1945, when the War Refugee Board is set up by Henry Morgenthau and there is a report from his agents, his associates in the Treasury Department called, "The U.S. Complicity in the Final Solution." It's a report about how the State Department has held people back. But Eleanor Roosevelt, she's horrified by the exodus, which is not the exodus by the SS St. Louis, which is returned, and she personally invites the Quanza boat to stay when it lands, as her guest. She does very specific things to be involved with this rescue.

But I don't know, where is Bernard Baruch on this issue, where are other you know, people who should be involved like FDR's famous speech writer, Sam Rosenman? You know there's no, there's no protest. And Baruch has a fantasy of finding safe spaces for lots of, lots of different safe spaces, but he gets no support, he gets not support from anybody and nothing comes of it. So it's really very disturbing and I don't understand it.

BN: Bernard and Annie Baruch were hysterically worried about Belle, who was in Europe in the late '30s.

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BWC: Right, she doesn't come back until '38. Yeah, that's very late. I mean, you know, Dachau opens in 1934. You know, it's very late. It's before the war and before, you know, France is taken over by the fascists so it's not as late as it, you know, it could be. The Varian Fry rescue operation to save folks who have gotten sort of stuck in France, like Wanda Landowska and Hannah Arendt. I mean these are people who got out of Austria and Germany and are in France, and then they're endangered in France and that's when the rescue operation out of Marseilles...

But, yeah, they know what's going on, everybody knows, I mean the question of when did they know well they didn't know, they knew, everybody knew everything all the time. And you know Churchill's biographers give Churchill a great pass, which is insane, because it's Churchill and it's the Brit's who, you know, stop rescue operations into Palestine. So it's, it's bizarre.

BN: You may never know the answer.

BWC: You may never know the answer. You know, it really is one of those compound tragedies. The more you know, the more incredible it all is. So if you look at it from Eleanor Roosevelt's point of view... I mean there are biographers who say that Eleanor Roosevelt did everything, that FDR did everything possible, but if you look at what Eleanor Roosevelt asked him to do, or suggested he do, or even fought to do covertly herself with, you know in alliance with Trude Lash, who is you know... I mean and the German underground... you know that he did nothing.

BN: Something we talked about when you were at Hobcaw – the milieu of Paris in the 1920s – we're making a big leap here – the lesbian subculture that was so vibrant there. As far as we know Belle Baruch was not involved. I wonder if you could sort of paint a picture of what it was like anyway, with the thought that, gosh, she must have known some of those gals.

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BWC: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, I've asked my friends who have done work on Paris in the '20s, you know, if Belle ever comes up, if her name is ever mentioned and, as far as they know, unless she took another name while she was in Paris... Maybe she took a French name, maybe you know, she spoke fluent French, maybe she passed as French in that lesbian community. It was an international community of lesbians in Paris, and, you know, it was just really very freewheeling and...I'm forgetting the names of, I'm sorry I, yeah, the various books. I had notes on that and I didn't bring them...But I can send them to you. I did ask some of my graduate students if they ever found any evidence, and so far there's no Belle Baruch in these really rip-roaring lesbian circles which were very well known in Paris.

BN: I still think it must have been freeing for her.

BWC: Oh absolutely, absolutely.

BN: When Baruch was targeted by Henry Ford – can you address that?

BWC: He wrote about Jews taking over the economy and Jews being really a dangerous factor in the United States. One of the things that I think is so important, there is a book by Patricia Spain Ward on Simon Baruch, about how South Carolina was so welcoming to Jews that even the Klan, in the first wave after the Civil War, the early Klan welcomed Jews, and that's how Simon Baruch became a member, not only a physician in the confederate military but a member of the South Carolina Klan. Annette Kolodny has written about how welcoming South Carolina was to Jewish immigrants, including her ancestors.

However, Bernard Baruch, you know, identified as Christian. His father, I think, his father went to synagogue on high holy days. But he married a Christian woman, but the bigotry followed Baruch, and a lot of people think that's why he never ran for office. You know, he just did not want to deal with the bigotry that existed. And in fact one of the

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things that, when I've wandered around talking to other historians about how they understand the failure to rescue, some of my friends have said there is as much anti-Semitism here as there was in Hitler's Germany, and that there was just – politically, the folks that dominated Congress, there was no way to get rescue plans through.

So there was this Jewish children's bill which Bernard Baruch supported. Wagner is responsible, Wagner and several other really progressive Democrats with a Massachusetts member of congress named Rogers, who was a woman – so the Wagner- Rogers children's bill. But people opposed even letting children come – 20,000, no they can't come. It was really interesting. Yeah, well it's right up there with slavery and racism and the ongoing new Jim Crow that's exploded all over the country. You know, at some point we're gonna have to realize, as Wendell Willkie did, that we're all one world, you know, and as Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in *This Troubled World*. She ends her wonderful book, 1938, *This Troubled World*, you know, "At some point we're going to have to recognize that we're all one world and we're going to have to love each other across all our differences." And she really believed that. That was a faith that moved her into the UN, and you know, her Universal Declaration of Human Rights. People had to be economically secure if they were going to be internationally peaceful. It's gotta happen and the bigotries have to go. I mean, look at Ebola, "Oh Africans are dying? Let's not even think about it." It's unbearable.

BN: It's interesting to think about Eleanor looking to Bernard Baruch as a model for treatment of African Americans.

BWC: Yeah. Well I could be wrong about that. You know when she wanted equal opportunity and support for equal opportunity in the military, you know the Fair Employment Practices Commission, she thought he supported that but I could be wrong.

BN: Well, I don't know. I think he saw himself as doing good things for the black people who were living on Hobcaw when he bought the property. He lways people the going rate...

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BWC: But didn't you say there was no sanitation and there was no indoor plumbing?

BN No electricity...

BWC: Yeah, yeah. See Eleanor Roosevelt really wouldn't approve of that, because when she builds these model communities like Norvelt and Arthurdale, I mean they're segregated, but she insists that they have indoor plumbing when 80% of rural America does not yet have indoor plumbing. This is 1934 and she insists that all, there are 80 of these communities that she personally takes charge of. And Harold Ickes, who is very progressive and a member of the NAACP, writes to FDR saying, "Do you know what your wife is doing down there? She's spending money like a drunken sailor. If she has her way how are we gonna tell the rich from the poor?" And Eleanor Roosevelt says, "Well, in matters of such simple dignity and decency, we should not have to tell the rich from the poor."

And that's one of the things that she champions – housing in Washington, which is viciously segregated and quite disgusting during the war. It gets worse, and she's in favor of new housing for poor people and for war workers, who are white and black, who are the rainbow of America. And she wants there to be quality indoor plumbing, electricity, you know, sit-down kitchens. So she would not approve of how folks are in Hobcaw, in my opinion.

One thing I wanted to ask you is, FDR stays in 1944 when he's so very sick, he's really dying. He's supposed to be there for two weeks, he stays for a month. He comes back without this very big blemish over his eyebrow.

BN: Is that when it was removed?

BWC: I think it was removed while he was at Hobcaw, and I think of course it was a melanoma and what he really has is cancer. But there's no evidence for it, there's no evidence in Hobcaw that...I mean there's all the secret service, there's all the, you know, all

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of the 50 staff people are there, phone lines are brought in, there's no evidence that physicians are doing anything and that he's being attended to?

BN: I'd be very surprised I doctors weren't there...

BWC: Well he had, you know, this is removed, at some point it's gone and it looks from the pictures that it's gone after Hobcaw. And that would explain why – you know, we know what cancer looks like these days...that's what cancer looks like... everybody says he has a heart condition. Well, yes he does, but he also is a man who is not eating and, you know, wasting away.

BN: I agree – he did look like someone with cancer.

BWC: That was one question, the other question is, Eleanor Roosevelt learns that Lucy Mercer is with FDR, not only when FDR dies at Warm Springs but she visits at Hobcaw... Bernard Baruch makes the trip possible. She forgives Bernard Baruch after a while, but she must have been very angry for a little while, I have no. there's no paper trail about that, is there any?

BN: I think that the question of his relationships with women is as...

BWC: As secret as Bernard Baruch's, yeah, yeah. Well there's no really good biography of Clare Boothe Luce to date. So one waits, you know, one waits for folks to do this research which hasn't been done yet. Bernard Baruch and Clare Boothe Luce, that would be interesting. What happened there? I mean she visits several times.

BN: and they saw a lot of each other in New York. I'm pretty sure they had a thing.

BWC: Right. Yeah, they had a thang.

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PATRICK HAYES (CAMERAMAN): the audio is so much better now. Could we ask the opening question again – about Eleanor’s relationship with Bernard Baruch?

BWC: I don’t remember exactly what I said, but one of the things is, they had a surprisingly close relationship. One thing they loved to do together at parties was dance. He was 6’4” and she’s over six feet and, you know, they dance. And then they loved to go to the theater together. John Golden, who was one of their close friends, John Golden’s always giving them tickets for openings. One wonders about how that was, given that both of them became very hard of hearing. We know Eleanor Roosevelt fell asleep, and so did Bernard Baruch. There’s evidence that they kept waking each other up at different times. And then there’s this amazing moment in the ‘50s when Eleanor Roosevelt writes to a friend, “Have you heard? Bernie has proposed marriage. Isn’t that controlling?” So that’s the extent of what we know. But their friendship is more than Bernard Baruch sitting on a park bench outside the White House waiting to be consulted. ER was frequently interested in what he thought about different things. She’s always promoting him, for posts that come open. And she really trusts him, politically, much more than one might think she should.

BN – Do you think she made it easier for him to have access to FDR?

BWC – Oh, I think so, I think so. I mean, she encourages him. She invites him to different events, and these are roles she takes seriously, First Lady as hostess. On the other hand, the other connection is Churchill, so when FDR becomes so close to Churchill, Bernard Baruch’s in that mix, because Churchill and Baruch are very close – surprisingly close. You know the story about Churchill gambling on Wall Street? Bernard Baruch realizes he doesn’t know what he’s doing, so he has him followed, and every time he takes a, he risks some money on this, Bernard Baruch counters it with some other investment. Anyway, at the end of one of these extravagant days, Churchill comes in practically weeping – he’s lost everything, even Chartwell

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– and Bernard Baruch assures him, “No, you haven’t lost anything.” We’ve monitored you, and you’ve broken even. And they become – that really the origin of their great friendship.

End of Interview