

**VILLAGE PRESERVATION
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

LUCY KOMISAR

By Sarah Dzedzic

New York, NY

September 27, 2023



Lucy Komisar, 2023

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Lucy Komisar

Sound-bite

“My name is Lucy Komisar. I’m a freelance journalist. I was born in the Bronx and grew up in Long Island, then moved to Manhattan while I was still in college. Very quickly, after a little bit of time on the Upper West Side, I moved to Greenwich Village, where I have been ever since, for decades.”

“Well, this was about ‘69, ‘70—I testified before the New York City Council on a bill that was sponsored by Greenwich Village councilwoman, Carol Greitzer, to end discrimination against women in bars and restaurants. There were bars and restaurants that were men-only, including those that pretended to be private clubs.

Then one day—it was August 10, 1970—Grace Lichtenstein of the *New York Times*, who I knew because she was a fellow journalist, she phoned me and said, ‘Is anyone from NOW going to McSorley’s?’ It was a famously male-only bar in the East Village, ironically owned by a woman. This was the day that the public accommodations law went into effect. I told Grace, ‘The NOW women are at the Statue of Liberty for a demonstration supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, and I stayed home because I have to work on an article.’ She said, ‘Lucy! I have to write a story!’

As a favor, I agreed to meet her at four o’clock for a beer at McSorley’s. She was not there at the appointed time. I had to push myself in against a bartender holding the door shut. I was stronger. One of the patrons came over to hassle me. He tipped over his beer mug and spilled some brew on the front of my purple jumpsuit. I still have it as an historic memento. I think it belongs in the Smithsonian. To deflect him, I grabbed his glasses and threw them across the room. He bolted for the specs, and the incident was over...

Now, Grace arrived sometime later with her photographer, and I left not long after that. There were no other reporters. The photo got around, and the next day the *New York Daily News* had an editorial page cartoon of the Statue of Liberty wearing my jumpsuit. I filed a legal complaint against the bartender who tried to prevent my entrance, which was by then now a violation. At court I settled for his \$500 contribution to the NOW Legal Defense Fund. End of story.”

Additional Quotes

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homosexuals and wanted to be served. In some of the places, people said, ‘Sure! You can be served.’ But they wanted to make a point. They finally got a refusal at Julius’, and that led to a change in the law.

Now there’s a plaque referring to the reporters and the photographer the Mattachine people had in tow. That was about us, and another reporter I don’t recall. The plaque was put on the wall of Julius’ last April at an event that the Village Preservation co-sponsored.” (Komisar p. 3)

“My work in NOW focused on trying to change the system, which included affirmative action for women. One of the most important things I did, which doesn’t get a lot of publicity because it’s not as dramatic, but as vice president of NOW, I worked with the late Ann Scott—another vice president of NOW—to get the federal government to add women to employment affirmative action goals and timetables required by the FCC for media and required for federal contractors. Women who got jobs in TV and radio at that time never knew that we got them a job. I once met somebody at an event who told me how interesting it was that when she applied for a job in radio, she was told, ‘Oh, yes, we’re now required to hire women.’ She didn’t know that NOW got her the job. That was the most important thing I think I did in the feminist movement.” (Komisar p. 5–6)

“I had been annoyed at a lot of the advertisements that I saw not just in magazines or the media, but also on the subways, so I made—I myself drew and designed and made and ordered stickers that people could post on the ads in the subway that say, ‘This ad insults women,’ and, ‘This insults women.’ I distributed that at the conference, at this Congress to Unite Women, and people started writing me to buy them, so I had to get more made and sell them at cost to the people that wanted them.

Years later, I went to an art exhibit at MOCA, which is the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and there was an exhibit that was dealing with those years. They were flashing screenshots on a video, and all of a sudden I saw, ‘This ad insults women,’ ‘This insults women,’ and I thought, ‘My stickers are now art!’ Somebody made it into art [laughs] at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I thought that was wonderful! [laughs] Sort of funny, but also sort of wonderful, that it became history. And it was just that I was annoyed at the ads in the subway.” (Komisar p. 7)

“I was very interested, in the ‘80s, in developments in other countries where there were movements for democratization against repressive governments. I went to a number of those places starting in the mid ‘80s. I was in the Philippines when Marcos was overthrown. I visited Zaire. I visited South Korea. I visited Chile. I found out in talking to the oppositions, they all said the dictator has looted the country and the money is all in Swiss banks. That was Marcos in the

Philippines. That was Mobutu in Zaire. That was the Duvalier clique in Haiti. Later I found out—it was published that Pinochet in Chile had also used offshore to hide money that he stole. I thought this was very important, because I had never read anything about the offshore system.” (Komisar p. 11–12)

“Well, there have been a lot of advantages that women—the consciousness about women has changed since those days, very much, and that’s very good. On the other hand, it was probably naïve to think that everything was going to be better if just women were in charge, because we have some horrendous women who have gotten elected to office, who are running corporations where the policies are the same as they were before. In effect, ironically, what we’re saying is, yeah, women are equal to men; they’re just as bad! Some of them are just as good and some of them are just as bad. So that’s a change.” (Komisar p. 18–19)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Lucy Komisar

Lucy Komisar has been a resident of Greenwich Village for decades. Having grown up in the Bronx and Long Island, she then moved to Manhattan when she was a student at Queens College. She became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and briefly lived in Mississippi while she served as editor of the *Mississippi Free Press*.

This piqued her interest to work as a journalist, through which she has covered various political issues throughout her career, from the now-famous Mattachine Society Sip-In at Julius' Bar, to movements to overturn repressive governments in countries throughout the world, to financial corruption within New York City and abroad. She is the author of books on the feminist movement, the history of American welfare, and former president of the Philippines, Corazon Aquino. On her website, *The Komisar Scoop*, she publishes work that exposes corporate crime and corruption, as well as theater, art, and travel.

Komisar was also a national vice president of the National Organization for Women in 1970–71. In this role, she was instrumental in getting the federal government to add women to employment affirmative action goals and timetables that resulted in new requirements for the Federal Communications Commission to hire women in jobs related to radio and television. She also testified in support of a New York City law to outlaw the exclusion of women from men-only establishments. On the day the law went into effect, Komisar entered McSorley's Old Ale House, and—after some dispute and commotion—was its first woman customer under the city's new regulations to be served a beer.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

General Interview Notes

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by contributors to our oral history collection do not necessarily reflect the views of Village Preservation.

THANK YOU

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Before we begin the interview, I am going to read a land acknowledgement. Today we are on the traditional land of the Lenape people, and we acknowledge, for this archival recording, the Lenape community, especially their elders past and present, and express gratitude for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography, and for the use of their language as place names.

Today is September 27, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Lucy Komisar for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. We are connecting via video call. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief, couple-sentence introduction?

Komisar: My name is Lucy Komisar. I'm a freelance journalist. I was born in the Bronx and grew up in Long Island, then moved to Manhattan while I was still in college. Very quickly, after a little bit of time on the Upper West Side, I moved to Greenwich Village, where I have been ever since, for decades.

Dziedzic: Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit about the places where you grew up and your family?

Komisar: I lived in the Bronx in a six-story apartment building which was a one-bedroom. My parents didn't have a lot of money so my brother and I slept in the bedroom, and they slept in the living room on a convertible couch. When I must have been about ten, they moved to Long Island, were able to get a house with three bedrooms, and that was a big difference. Also I went to a very good school, Hewlett High School, graduated, then went to Queens College. I was living at home until the first year, and then for reasons I will explain as we get into it, I moved to Manhattan, shared an apartment with some other students.

Dziedzic: Can you tell me about your early interest in politics and journalism and where that came from?

Komisar: When I was a freshman in Queens College, in 1960 the sit-ins started. I became active in the Civil Rights Movement, first just picketing Woolworth's. I took part in Route 40 Freedom Ride, going into a restaurant with a Black student and spent a few days in jail in Elkton, Maryland. Then I wanted to do more. I took a leave from Queen's College in September '62 to

go to Mississippi where I became editor of the *Mississippi Free Press*. There is a section on my work there in a book called *We Believed We Were Immortal*. It was published in 2017 by Kathleen Wickham, a professor of journalism at the University of Mississippi, about journalists working in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement.

But that made me want to be a journalist. Before that, I thought I should be a teacher. My mother said, “You have to be a teacher, because that’s what girls do. You just have to pick the subject.” I was going to be a Spanish and French teacher because I loved learning languages. After Mississippi, I decided to be a journalist. So I returned to school a year after being in Mississippi for one year, in September ‘63. I came back via the March on Washington.

Then in ‘64, that was the first article I wrote for *The Village Voice*. It was about the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. The story was called, “Don’t They Know They’ve Won.” Now, the Mississippi Freedom Democrats, Black Democrats, were demanding seats at the convention. Lyndon Johnson initially refused recognition. He feared a walkout by Southern whites. But the Freedom Democrats’ testimony to the credentials committee was so moving, and the liberals’ reaction to a walkout by white Mississippi delegates also had an impact. They got two seats. The Freedom Democrats got two seats. They were very disappointed. But I wrote that this was an opening, and from there came others, and for the long term, they had won.

Dziedzic: Can I ask you a couple follow-up questions?

Komisar: Yes.

Dziedzic: As I was doing some more research about your organizing and activism, I learned that you had been involved with the Young People’s Socialist League. How did you learn about this, and what was the activist scene like in New York, even before you went to Mississippi?

[00:05:09]

Komisar: Well, that was before I got involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and it’s one of the reasons. I was always interested in politics and in history. When I was a freshman, there was a conference at Yale called the Yale Challenge Colloquium. Students from around the country were invited to participate for a weekend. They had everybody from Norman Thomas to Barry Goldwater. One of the people there, who was not an invited speaker but he showed up, was Allard Lowenstein, who would go on to be a congressman. The sit-ins had just taken place in

Greensboro, and he told everybody about what was going on. I had no background at that time in civil rights, and I was astonished and moved and distraught to find out that this is what was happening to people.

At that meeting, there were people from the Young People's Socialist League, the YPSLs, which was a youth group of the Socialist Party. The most famous member was Michael Harrington. But another person that was involved in that movement was Bernie Sanders. I got involved with them because the New York group was organizing picket lines against Woolworth's, which was the lunch counter where the students had done the sit-in. So, I got involved with them as part of being able to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Then I learned a lot about politics from them, from meetings that they had. Though, I was never very much an ideological person. I was more of an activist. I was interested in the Civil Rights Movement in particular.

Dziedzic: I know you've talked a lot about your time in Mississippi, and it has been written about, as you said. When you came back to New York from there, what sort of other knowledge and strategies did you bring that you were applying to what was going on in New York?

Komisar: I wrote about the Mississippi Freedom Democrats, but I also had a broader vision now, and I was able to write generally about human rights, about labor rights. One of the early stories I did—in 1966 I wrote about a Julius' Bar sit-in that was later called a sip-in. That was an assignment from *The Voice*. I and photographer Fred McDarrah followed some Mattachine Society members visiting Village bars and announcing they were homosexuals and wanted to be served. In some of the places, people said, "Sure! You can be served." But they wanted to make a point. They finally got a refusal at Julius', and that led to a change in the law.

Now there's a plaque referring to the reporters and the photographer the Mattachine people had in tow. That was about us, and another reporter I don't recall. The plaque was put on the wall of Julius' last April at an event that the Village Preservation co-sponsored. By the way, I did other stories in that vein, of human rights, civil rights, labor rights.

But in another area, which I got more interested in, I did a more complex story for *The Voice* in 1999. That was about a Russian mafia connection to the United States. It was called "Russian Cons and New York Banks." Seven billion to fifteen billion dollars had been siphoned out of Russia through the Bank of New York and other New York banks, including Chemical,

Chase Bank, Citibank, which were, and most likely still are, conduits for the proceeds of international financial crime, with then at least a thousand shell-company bank accounts laundering the dirty cash. Offshore financial corruption, the use of these tax havens, was going to be a major focus of my work. But I felt that it was really part of civil rights and human rights, because the dirty money that was being laundered was taking money away from taxes and from uses that governments could put to that money, which would help, particularly, poor people.

Dziedzic: I have a couple questions about Julius', including the corruption angle. Was that something that you were assigned to?

Komisar: Yes.

Dziedzic: What was the feeling of the group of journalists and the photographer following this group of men around? Was it boring? Was it exciting? [00:10:00]

Komisar: Well, it wasn't a group. It was just—there was Fred and me, and there was one other person. It might have been somebody from the *New York Post*, because I remember at the Village Preservation event somebody saying how pleased they were with my story, because the *Post* story had been nasty, about the Mattachine people.

It was fascinating, because I had never been in this kind of an attempted sit-in. I had been in the civil rights sit-ins, but not this one. Also, we were very curious about, how come they kept on saying, "It's okay, you can—" I remember we went to—one place was a Howard Johnson's, which is no longer there, in the Village, and they said, "Of course you can—we will serve you." So it was sort of funny, in a way. It was a lark, but it was very serious.

Dziedzic: Do you remember when it changed to being called a sip-in from a sit-in?

Komisar: Oh, I think that was quite recent. I don't know, because I haven't read about it until recently. I have a feeling it was recent. It was clever. But it wasn't called that at the time.

Dziedzic: Then I was thinking about the connections that we now draw between this event at Julius' and the event that happened at Stonewall a few years later, and the underlying, I guess, infiltration of gay night life by the mob. I wondered if that was something that was involved at all with how you were interpreting the events at Julius' as kind of a secondary story to gay men being served.

Komisar: I wasn't doing the other story. Those kind of stories have to be best done by people who can go inside. It's really difficult if you're a total outsider. How do you get into dealing with the mob? You have to be on the inside, and maybe you have to be working or connected to people who are running some of these restaurants and bars, but I was not in that situation, so that kind of criminality, the mob criminality, was not what I was focusing on. I began to be focusing on the so-called legitimate—the banksters—the banksters, their criminality. The big banks! I was interested in that and the offshore system. Some of these more—you could call them smaller criminals, although they're not small when they wreak havoc—they may have been using offshore, probably were, but it was not my area. I wasn't doing police crime. That would really be police crime.

Dziedzic: Can I ask you next—I guess I'm looking a little bit chronically—about your involvement in the feminist movement and the National Organization for Women [NOW]?

Komisar: Okay! Let's see. I met Betty Friedan in 1969, so we're going back about 30 years before I did that story about the banksters. There was a meeting at an Upper West Side apartment with a handful of National Organization for Women members. Somebody had told me about the meeting. The feminist movement was really just getting started. She found out I was a journalist, and she virtually appointed me to be NOW's press secretary. It was an unpaid job, which I could not refuse. Then I was elected to the position of vice president to do the press for NOW at the next NOW congress, and I served a year and a half until 1971.

At the same time, my journalism had taken a turn toward writing about women's rights. I wrote "The New Feminism," a cover story in *Saturday Review* that ran February 1970. A publisher, George Braziller, asked me to write a book aimed at teens, also called *The New Feminism*. That was published in March of '71.

My work in NOW focused on trying to change the system, which included affirmative action for women. One of the most important things I did, which doesn't get a lot of publicity because it's not as dramatic, but as vice president of NOW, I worked with the late Ann Scott—another vice president of NOW—to get the federal government to add women to employment affirmative action goals and timetables required by the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] for media and required for federal contractors. Women who got jobs in TV and radio at that time never knew that we got them a job. I once met somebody at an event who told

me how interesting it was that when she applied for a job in radio, she was told, “Oh, yes, we’re now required to hire women.” [00:15:03] She didn’t know that NOW got her the job. That was the most important thing I think I did in the feminist movement.

Dziedzic: Absolutely. I think I was watching a press conference from President Biden recently, and all of the people who asked questions from the audience, from the press, were women. I think my partner commented, “I wonder when it started to become that there were more women in this field than men.” I thought, I think I know exactly when! That is really significant. We certainly see the impact of that all the time, even if we don’t know that that’s the origin. What was the impetus to focus on that particular industry, media?

Komisar: It was a way that we could get leverage. How do you get companies to hire women? Well, if there are rules—the federal government already had rules for media under the FCC, and they had a federal contract compliance regulation, but it was—it was about race. Probably it was also about religion. It didn’t include women. It already existed. So we got somebody from the ACLU to propose a rules change to add women to it. At that point, it was something that was very doable, much easier at that time than getting a big corporation to suddenly hire a lot of women. So, you find the leverage where you can find it.

Dziedzic: In terms of the book that you wrote, I’m wondering, what was the role of books in young women learning about feminism or young people in general learning about feminism at that time?

Komisar: There wasn’t much about feminism or history of women in existing books, so everything that we added had to be important. But I also added a lot of personal things to talk to women. Particularly, teens needed to understand about themselves, their bodies, how to deal with men, those kinds of questions, in addition to history of employment problems. I don’t know how that affected individuals, never did a study on that, but I think all the books that came out—and there were a lot, at the beginning—certainly had an impact.

In one of the books, I did an article about the image of women in advertising, and even today I see that it is cited by people, academics, doing papers. A lot of them! A lot of them are citing this, because at that time nobody had written about the image of women in advertising. We don’t realize that.

One of the funny things that also had an impact was there was an event called the Congress to Unite Women that took place around that time. This took place on West 11th Street, in the Village, at public school 41. That was something that I went to. I had been annoyed at a lot of the advertisements that I saw not just in magazines or the media, but also on the subways, so I made—I myself drew and designed and made and ordered stickers that people could post on the ads in the subway that say, “This ad insults women,” and, “This insults women.” I distributed that at the conference, at this Congress to Unite Women, and people started writing me to buy them, so I had to get more made and sell them at cost to the people that wanted them.

Years later, I went to an art exhibit at MOCA, which is the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and there was an exhibit that was dealing with those years. They were flashing screenshots on a video, and all of a sudden I saw, “This ad insults women,” “This insults women,” and I thought, “My stickers are now art!” Somebody made it into art [laughs] at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I thought that was wonderful! [laughs] Sort of funny, but also sort of wonderful, that it became history. And it was just that I was annoyed at the ads in the subway.

Dziedzic: Were there other organizing events that took place in the Village specifically around feminist issues?

Komisar: I don’t recall any. I think that there were small groups that met, and some of them met in the Village in people’s apartments. [00:20:04]

Dziedzic: Yeah, I wanted to ask about that.

Komisar: The big events were—there was a big march, but that wasn’t a Village thing. I don’t remember any particular things that had to do with the Village that had to do with feminism. Feminism became a New York City operation. The groups that existed—like NOW, there was NOW New York, and I was part of that, and that was a New York City activity. It wasn’t a Village activity.

Dziedzic: Were there other kinds of consciousness-raising groups that you might have been part of or informal networks that were happening anywhere throughout the city, that you recall?

Komisar: Yeah, I was in one for a number of months. It met at people's apartments. Some of them I think were in the Village and some maybe elsewhere. It was informal.

Dziedzic: Let me ask you about McSorley's. I know that connects to the work that you were doing or that NOW was doing. Can you explain what the legal issue was there and the event that took place?

Komisar: I had testified before the—this was about '69, '70—I testified before the New York City Council on a bill that was sponsored by Greenwich Village councilwoman, Carol Greitzer, to end discrimination against women in bars and restaurants. There were bars and restaurants that were men-only, including those that pretended to be private clubs.

Then one day—it was August 10, 1970—Grace Lichtenstein of the *New York Times*, who I knew because she was a fellow journalist, she phoned me and said, "Is anyone from NOW going to McSorley's?" It was a famously male-only bar in the East Village, ironically owned by a woman. This was the day that the public accommodations law went into effect. I told Grace, "The NOW women are at the Statue of Liberty for a demonstration supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, and I stayed home because I have to work on an article." She said, "Lucy! I have to write a story!"

As a favor, I agreed to meet her at four o'clock for a beer at McSorley's. She was not there at the appointed time. I had to push myself in against a bartender holding the door shut. I was stronger. One of the patrons came over to hassle me. He tipped over his beer mug and spilled some brew on the front of my purple jumpsuit. I still have it as a historic memento. I think it belongs in the Smithsonian. To deflect him, I grabbed his glasses and threw them across the room. He bolted for the specs, and the incident was over. I thought it was a good feminist lesson, using brains against brawn, not the barroom fight that maybe makes better reading. Women may know how to handle such situations deftly instead of being passive victims.

Now, Grace arrived sometime later with her photographer, and I left not long after that. There were no other reporters. The photo got around, and the next day the *New York Daily News* had an editorial page cartoon of the Statue of Liberty wearing my jumpsuit. I filed a legal complaint against the bartender who tried to prevent my entrance, which was by then now a violation. At court I settled for his \$500 contribution to the NOW Legal Defense Fund. End of story.

Dziedzic: I agree that the jumpsuit belongs in the Smithsonian, for sure. You had said that you had responded in a way that women kind of know how to respond and end the confrontation in some way.

Komisar: They should know, yeah.

Dziedzic: Thinking about other kinds of sit-ins, sometimes those are, I don't know, somewhere between passive and—but in a group, and so it becomes more active through that. I just wondered what sort of other experiences that you had had that had taught you how to comport yourself in these situations that are the kind of daily activism of existing as a marginalized person.

Komisar: I hadn't gotten any training in it, though I certainly knew from the Civil Rights Movement what tactics were, what nonviolent tactics were, though I had never had to use those tactics in the South. I think I just figured it out very fast, just thinking on my feet, how to get this guy away. Let him run for his glasses. Get him away from me, and that's the way I could—what do you do? What would a guy have done? Pushed somebody? Punched them? No, you just take off his glasses, throw them across the room, and he runs off for his glasses. [00:25:01] That was a nonviolent, very-quickly-thought-of way to get the guy away from me. And it worked.

Dziedzic: Have you ever been back to McSorley's?

Komisar: There was a funny time, I was walking on the—it's East 7th Street, in East Village—with Ann Scott, the person from NOW who worked with me on some of these attempts to get affirmative action for women. We were walking near McSorley's, and a car pulled over with some people in it, and somebody leaned out and said, "Can you tell us where McSorley's is?" Ann thought it was so funny! She pointed at me and she says, "Do you know who this is? Do you know who this is?" [laughs] We told them where McSorley's was. I think I might have been back. It's not my favorite place. It's a place with peanut shells on the floor, and beer—and I prefer wine—and liverwurst sandwiches. I think it's not really my style. The issue was that it had to allow women in, and Grace wanted her story.

Dziedzic: Were there any other kinds of confrontations like that at other bars that had been men-only?

Komisar: No, but when my book on feminism came out, we had the book party in the former Men's Grill at the Roosevelt. The Roosevelt Hotel.

Dziedzic: That's great. Did you see any similarities at the time between the events at Julius' and this at McSorley's?

Komisar: I didn't think of it at the time, but it certainly [laughs] was true. It certainly was true.

Dziedzic: I also had some broad questions about working at *The Village Voice*. I wanted to ask you to talk about some of the things that you were interested in at the time and how that manifested in the stories that you were able to write.

Komisar: I was freelance. I was never hired. I can't even find the clippings. I must have done maybe a dozen stories over the—but they all had to do with human rights, civil rights, women. Then to me, the most important began looking into offshore corruption and the involvement of the big banks in that. That was my idea. It was not really a local story. It was just something that I wanted to do.

Dziedzic: The ones that I think either you or I were able to find, there was an article about the strike at the Henry Street Settlement.

Komisar: The connection I had to Henry Street was not writing about that but was theatre, because Henry Street is where the Abrons Art Center is. Beginning in 1998, I started writing theatre criticism. I became a member of the Drama Desk. The reviews appear on my website, The Komisar Scoop, and on *New York Theatre Wire*, whose editor Jonathan Slaff runs the website from his apartment in the West Village. Among the plays I found very important were *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, which put a progressive feminist spin on the 1960s show; *Wormwood*, which was a stunning 1985 Polish underground theatre attack on communist repression. Then, as now, I was very interested in political plays, and the Abrons Art Center was also interested in political plays. That was my connection to Henry Street.

Dziedzic: What about the political connotations of the Halloween Parade, which you've also written about a lot?

Komisar: Yes! Closer to home, in my neighborhood. I have gone there for years, and my focus is always the political commentaries that are reflected in the costumes and the signs that people wear, and how they have changed over the years. All of those are on my website. I think the Halloween Parade is really important, and it ought to be considered and given credit as an art form. I had suggested years ago to the person organizing it, who thought it was a great idea, that this needs to be treated as an art form, and the people who do very smart, focused costumes, commentaries, ought to be recognized. [00:30:05] I don't think that has happened yet. Maybe it will.

Dziedzic: If you were working freelance for *The Village Voice*, what are some of the other outlets that you were working and writing for?

Komisar: Over the time, I have tended—not necessarily starting then; I'd have to go through my resume—for a while I did a lot of traveling abroad in the '80s and early '90s. Particularly before the internet, I was able to write a lot of stories for newspapers—just standard, daily, American newspapers—who didn't have people in certain places. They didn't have somebody in the Philippines, or they didn't have somebody in Honduras, or they didn't have somebody in Zaire. I wrote stories and was able to write stories that were duplicated. That is, you could sell the same story to four or five different places as long as they were in different parts of the country. Those were some of the places I wrote for. I wrote for everything from the *New York Times* to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, maybe to *The New Republic*, to many places.

That was a different time. There's an advantage of having the internet for resources, but there's a disadvantage because you can only sell something one time. But those were the kind of places I wrote for then. I wrote some for *The Village Voice*, but if you're not a full-time person and you're not getting paid full-time, you have to find other places, and that's what I did.

Dziedzic: What led you to do so much reporting and research in countries abroad?

Komisar: I was very interested, in the '80s, in developments in other countries where there were movements for democratization against repressive governments. I went to a number of those places starting in the mid '80s. I was in the Philippines when Marcos was overthrown. I visited Zaire. I visited South Korea. I visited Chile. I found out in talking to the oppositions, they all said the dictator has looted the country and the money is all in Swiss banks. That was Marcos in the

Philippines. That was Mobutu in Zaire. That was the Duvalier clique in Haiti. Later I found out—it was published that Pinochet in Chile had also used offshore to hide money that he stole.

I thought this was very important, because I had never read anything about the offshore system. I began to look into it. Then when the revelations of Jewish money in Swiss banks came out in the late '90s, I started to write articles about the system—the first was in the *Los Angeles Times*—saying that, look, there is Jewish money hidden in Swiss banks. There is money hidden in banks offshore all over the world, and not just the Jewish money, but the money that is hidden also for very bad reasons.

Nobody was writing about this. So, that became a focus of mine, and that became a focus not just writing about political movements but this particular aspect. Because I had written about movements in Europe against stationing U.S. missiles in Italy and Turkey, and changes—and movements into communist governments in Eastern Europe. I went to Russia at the time of Gorbachev. Other people, to some extent, had been writing about these things too, but nobody had been writing about the offshore system. If you're freelance, the best thing you can do is write about something that's very important but nobody else is doing it. So I began for the next year to write a lot of articles about the offshore system.

I found some [laughs]—a couple of interesting things happened. I had written an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal*, because I had been to East Germany and it turned out I had been followed by the Stasi, their secret police. When the Wall fell, and I could get my papers, I had a thick [laughs]—I mean, a few hundred pages of documents—where they had followed me! And they had actually taken pictures of me talking to dissidents. [00:35:05] So I wrote an article about my Stasi file, and that was published by *The Wall Street Journal*. Of course, they would like something that was critical of communists.

Then I proposed to the editor a story about offshore. I wrote many drafts, and none of them were acceptable. Finally, the editor liked one where I focused on the corrupt leader, the corrupt boss of Antigua and how they were moving drug money offshore through offshore banks. Well, I realize now—because before, I had wanted to write about how this system was terrible, how it was cheating people, and how big corporations were using it to avoid paying taxes. Of course, *The Wall Street Journal* is not going to run a story about big corporations using offshore to cheat on taxes! What could I have been thinking? They would run the story about this little island in the Caribbean where some crooked guy was running drug money; that was okay.

My other experience was—I'm a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. I have been for almost 30 years, since 1994. I proposed to the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, of the magazine—the editor, James Hoge, who just died—an article about offshore. He assigned it. So again [laughs] not realizing—I wrote a story talking about this crooked system that allowed corporations, the very rich, criminals of all sorts, to move money, hide it offshore, to evade taxes. Not only did Hoge not—an editor, usually, if they want some changes, like *The Wall Street Journal* guy, will contact you and say, “Well, I think we want to change this. Can you focus more on this?” I didn't hear from him, at all. I got a phone call from the secretary saying, “Where should we send the kill fee?” How corrupt is that? How corrupt! In the *Times* and the other papers, when he died just recently, there were lots of wonderful praise of Jim Hoge. I'm telling you, he was corrupt.

I found that there are certain things that the mainstream media, the corporate media, was not going to write. So you had to do it in other places, and that's what I had to do! I had to go to places like 100Reporters, which is an investigative website. I've done a number of things for them. You find that you have to write for those kinds of places. But that led—very interesting—my writing about offshore, because I did get printed, even if it wasn't in *The Wall Street Journal* or *Foreign Affairs* magazine, not the story I wanted—I got a phone call in 2012—that's about a decade after I started writing about these things—asking me would I be interviewed for a film about naked short selling? I said, “I never heard of naked short selling.” It was not being written about either. But the man on the phone said they wanted to talk about the role of offshore in naked short selling.

Let me explain what naked short selling is. In short selling, a trader is allowed to sell a stock he doesn't own as long as he borrows or buys it and sends it to the buyer in two days. In naked short selling, the seller never delivers the shares. The buyer still has a digital entitlement that he can sell. That means there are now two shares in the market where there was one. More shares means the price goes down. This hurts the legitimate shareowners. Then the naked short seller can buy the shares cheap and finish the transaction. Or maybe never deliver, because I've discovered cases where they push the price down so far the company fails, and they never have to deliver the shares that they have received money for.

I began to investigate naked short selling and to write articles and do videocasts about it. Most recently—because people listening to this will know—were stories about GameStop. There

have been movies. There's a new movie out about it called *Dumb Money*. There have been other movies out about GameStop. GameStop was—is—a company that sells video games, and it was the target of naked short sellers. But a lot of local small investors called retail investors, who were gathered together through Reddit—or Subreddit—on the internet, they gathered together, and instead of letting the price be knocked down through naked short selling, they started buying up GameStop. [00:40:13] It went up huge. The numbers were massive. It went from a small amount like eight or ten dollars to hundreds of dollars. Companies that had been participating in this short selling had to buy the shares at a very high price. One of the companies went out of business. A major million-dollar company went out of business.

I wrote stories about GameStop in *The American Prospect*. I wrote a couple of stories about how this worked. That led me to be hired as the investigative reporter for an HBO Max documentary called *Gaming Wall Street*. Next I hope to do a book on the subject, going back to the crash of 1929, because that is blamed in part on watered stock, counterfeit stock certificates, which is another variety of naked short selling, making two shares when there's really one share. That's how one thing leads to another when you learn about something, and especially for freelance, something that is not being written about by the mainstream press or even a lot of the independent press.

Dziedzic: What kind of advantage or disadvantage has it been for you to be based in New York and writing about financial corruption in one of the financial centers of the world?

Komisar: For me, it's an advantage to be in New York because I love New York. A lot of the work I do is by phone, by email, on the internet. Generally I don't have to go to people to do those interviews. I work a lot on documents, and you get that from people who have access to documents, or sometimes you get them because they have actually been filed someplace but a lot of people are not paying attention. So, I don't think New York matters for my work, but it matters for me, because it's a city that I love.

Dziedzic: How do you find some kind of grounding or levity when so much of your research and work is around not just corruption but kind of unfettered, unstopped, squashed stories about corruption?

Komisar: Two things. I play tennis. I play tennis at the public courts on 96th Street and the river on the West Side. I try to play every week. And, I go to the theatre. And I write about theatre. I'm a member of the Drama Desk, as I indicated, so I particularly go to political plays. I go to the major plays. Those are the two things that I like a lot. Also I have to add: restaurants in the Village. I love restaurants, and I love the Village, especially now during the time of COVID the outdoor restaurants. Since COVID—which I have not gotten because I'm very, very careful; I wear a mask anyplace indoors—I don't go to restaurants that are indoors, because you can't wear a mask while you're eating. But those are the things that give pleasure to a life that is filled with a lot of tough stuff in terms of the subjects that I'm dealing with.

Dziedzic: What are some of either your old mainstays in terms of restaurants or any other establishments that you like to visit downtown or ones that have recently become very important to you because of their acknowledgement of the dangers of COVID?

Komisar: On West 13th Street, Da Andrea, a terrific Italian restaurant. On West 12th Street, Café Cluny, a terrific French restaurant. I like them both.

Dziedzic: Are there any other bookstores or grocery stores or any other kind of place that you've been going to for decades that are really valuable to you?

Komisar: The Union Square Market is fabulous. I take my bike and go there once a week. Also then of course, Whole Foods is right across the street and Trader Joe's is a block away! I do my bike shopping, great for exercise, and for carrying purchases. But I do love the Union Square Greenmarket.

Dziedzic: Going back to media for a second, you had talked about needing to go to some independent outlets, so I wondered if you could talk about, if you know enough being a freelancer there, the different phases of *The Village Voice* and what it meant as it went through different owners and the media landscape changed. [00:45:16]

Komisar: I think after it was sold by Wolf and Fancher, it really became just something to make money. Dan Wolf and Ed Fancher, working with Norman Mailer, had made it a very exciting paper. They first sold it to Carter Burden, and that was the beginning of the commercialization,

even to the point of pages of sex ads at the end of the paper. It changed very much when Dan and Ed sold it, and I stopped being involved with it.

Dziedzic: Yeah, that was kind of the era when I first started picking it up. [laughs] I'm kind of at the end of some of the questions that I sent you.

Komisar: There are two things I could talk about, talking about stories that the mainstream will not print, one of them that I've been working on a lot. These connect in various ways to the offshore system or to hidden accounts. Once you understand how the system works, you can see how it plays out in many ways. I could mention those two. Most recently—and these are important, because again, if anybody is reading the mainstream press, they have no idea of these stories.

One is the William Browder/Magnitsky hoax, and I wrote about that for 100Reporters, the investigative site, and I've done numerous video interviews about it, all connected and all linked to on my website. William Browder is an American who gave up his citizenship for a British passport to evade taxes on assets stashed offshore. The U.S. taxes all your assets. The British do not tax assets offshore. Of course, they run a lot of their offshore islands, so of course they want to have an advantage for those clients. He ran a stock trading company in Russia, the Hermitage Fund. It was started with money from the Brazilian-Lebanese banker, Edmond Safra, and Israeli investor, Beny Steinmetz. It was an offshore operation. The shares were held through companies in Guernsey, the Channel Islands. Again, part of the British system.

Browder, to evade taxes, set up shell companies in Kalmykia, a majority Buddhist region of Russia, which gave big tax breaks to companies if fifty percent of their workers were disabled. His accountant, Sergei Magnitsky, went to Kalmykia and paid manual laborers to say they worked for the company, which was a shell with no employees. In the early 2000s, the Russian authorities got wise, investigated, discovered he failed to pay forty million in taxes, ordered him to pay. He would not. He went out of Russia, as he would do from time to time. On his return in 2005, he found his visa was canceled because he was a tax cheat. But Magnitsky was still in Moscow.

Browder shell companies were then involved in a scam in 2007 against the Russian Treasury, where his companies agreed to pay a fake claim from colluding shell companies that reduced Hermitage company's profits to zero. You promised to do this. You didn't do this. You

have to—you owe us this much money. You have to pay this. Which was a billion. A billion. The Browder companies applied for return of the taxes paid, 230 million. The man who ran the scam later was arrested. He said Magnitsky was an accomplice. In 2008, Magnitsky was detained, not for that, because that had been revealed later, but for the tax evasion. He died in prison of pancreatitis which was not properly treated—rotten medical care, as, by the way, is common in U.S. prisons.

Then with a former State Department official, Jonathan Winer, Browder invented a story that Russian officials had done the tax refund fraud, not Browder's companies, and Magnitsky had been beaten to death. There is zero evidence for that. But the media—I call it—other people call it the Anglosphere media, U.S., U.K., and Australia—are uninterested in evidence. They even called Magnitsky a lawyer when he was an accountant, which his investigations confirm. So, this is a major story that is going on now. [00:50:00]

It's the first pillar of Russiagate, which was part of many other fake stories demonizing Russia. Those were written about by a former *New York Times* reporter named Jeff Gerth. He spent over a year showing how major newspapers, including his former employer, had written fake stories, and none of them—this was printed, by the way, in the *Columbia Journalism Review*—none of them acknowledge his evidence.

Then last year, I did two stories for 100Reporters about how major for-profit life insurance companies, including Athene and MetLife, scam policyholders by setting up subsidiaries that claim as assets—which they are required to hold—letters of credit, which are just a bank's promise to provide future credit and not assets. They hide this in a handful of compliant states who keep the subsidiaries' books secret. Some of these assets, these letters of credit, are connected to subsidiaries in offshore Bermuda. Again, here is offshore, where nobody can see the books.

This was I think an important story, because all of this is done to have money to enrich the executives and the shareholders. The major media are not writing about this. None of this interests the corporate press. That's why I write so much for independent press online. People need to understand there are two kinds of journalism. There is the corporate journalism, which will not run a lot of stories because it is against the interests of the people that they represent; and another kind of media, which serious reporters increasingly are turning to, to get the stories out. I

hope people will look at my website because they will see all the stories I've done on Browder and the stories I did on the life insurance companies.

Dziedzic: Thank you. Since you've been involved in journalism through many different phases and focused on many different topics, do you think that the landscape now for, as you said, corporate journalism or independent journalism—how has it changed from the era where there were unchecked, unresearched, unfounded articles written about things that Black men were doing in order to build hatred and foster racism? How do you think that this has changed or morphed or stayed the same over all this time?

Komisar: Sometimes maybe the enemy changes; the system and the tactics don't change because people are still attacked, accused. Look at Julian Assange. He is the most famous political prisoner in the world. He is in Belmarsh Prison in the U.K., because the U.S. got the Brits to do that, for his crime of reporting on American war crimes during the Iraq War. Major papers have called for his release. They don't really make it a prime case, but they every once in a while say he should be released. But that is horrific. If people are afraid that they're going to go to jail if they write something that the American government does not like, this destroys the possibility of a free press. So, the tactics may be the same, because he was attacked in lies that the U.S. put forward, and therefore that's why he's in prison. The tactics are the same. Unfortunately, the tactics are the same.

Dziedzic: You might have answered my last question a little bit, but I'll ask it anyway and give you some opportunity to comment on it. I had watched the town hall with Norman Mailer. I think you had indicated where you had stood up and made a comment. That was great to watch! [laughs] I only watched a few minutes, but it was pretty amazing to hear what people had to say and of course, horrific to hear what he had to say. I believe that what you had said was something about how we must shift the framework away from one of domination to something else, in order to exact revolution. [00:55:18] I wanted to ask you, how that's going? [laughs]

Komisar: Well, I don't know if I talked about revolution. I probably talked about change. Well, there have been a lot of advantages that women—the consciousness about women has changed since those days, very much, and that's very good. On the other hand, it was probably naïve to think that everything was going to be better if just women were in charge, because we have some

horrendous women who have gotten elected to office, who are running corporations where the policies are the same as they were before. In effect, ironically, what we're saying is, yeah, women are equal to men; they're just as bad! Some of them are just as good and some of them are just as bad. So that's a change.

We have to shift from just the issue of male-female—we have to shift to issues of justice and honesty. Those are much more difficult to deal with. Easy to say, “give women some more jobs.” Well, one of the things that I object to now is identity politics. Senator Menendez, who was found with a huge amount of—well, \$100,000 worth of gold bullion in his house, and hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of envelopes filled with money—now says, “Oh, it's just because I'm a Latino.” Which is obviously absurd. Anybody who is a crook deserves to be put in jail—well, to go to trial, and he should probably be put in—I mean, the evidence is so clear.

But the problem of identity politics is that it doesn't really solve the problem. For example—obviously, I spent a year in Mississippi. I have been very committed to civil rights. I think a lot of the decisions of groups like Black Lives Matter have been wrong. Now, yeah, we don't want statues of the Confederacy, okay, but focusing on these things—on statues, on somebody who says something in a class that you don't like—well, how does that help anybody get a job? How does that help some kids get education? How does it help a family get healthcare? It doesn't. It's a diversion. It's so easy to say, “We knocked down this statue. We changed the name of this building. This teacher said something we don't like, and we got this teacher fired.” That doesn't help any poor family at all.

That's the problem of identity politics. The other things are performative. They're virtue signaling. They have no impact, or very, very little impact. They make a lot of people angry, some people happy. They change nobody's life. That's one of the things that I have learned through all these dealings. The corporations that wave flags—pride flags, some other kind of flag—it's cheap! It's easy! They put up a poster on their building; that costs them nothing. Suppose you make them hire a lot of people for real wages instead of low, low wages. Suppose a big corporation that has people getting the minimum wage—oh, it's all right. We put up a flag on our building. We're still paying these people the minimum wage. They have to work two jobs. They probably are still getting Medicaid and Food Stamps and all the things, which means the rest of us are paying their wages because they don't have enough to live on. But it's okay because we're waving a flag. There's a real problem with identity politics now, and that's

something I learned, that all of these movements seem to have gotten, to some extent—not all of them—some of these movements have gotten bogged down.

You have to ask for real changes, for things like money for jobs and money for education and money for housing. Those are real issues. But those are tough. Those are not easy issues. That's one of the things that I have learned after writing about a lot of these things. Look, it was easy when it was just a question of, you can't have a restaurant that doesn't allow women. You just get the rules passed, the law passed; it's over. This was true for race, although it was much more difficult to enforce it on race, particularly in the South. But some of those things can be changed by law. Other things take a lot of money, and it takes much more difficult organizing to get those changes. [01:00:03] I think that's one of the things I have learned, and that's probably behind the fact that I now really focus on what I consider the crimes of corporations, because those are the things that really hurt people, hurt people a lot more than some statues. That's one of the things that I have learned.

Dziedzic: In a sense, the money that is taken by corruption, you see so many more practical purposes of it than being held offshore to make somebody rich, or hidden, or so on and so forth.

Komisar: Of course.

Dziedzic: That this is the way that people's lives can really meaningfully improve.

Komisar: Yeah. Well, in terms of industrialized countries, the U.S. is the only one in the entire world of the industrial countries in the West that doesn't have a national health system. We have a health industry. It's to make money for the people that own hospitals or that run clinics. We don't have a health service. That's why many more people died of COVID in the U.S. compared to its population than any other country in the world, because we don't have a decent healthcare system. All of these things cost money. That is increasingly clear to people.

But these other issues I think are diversions. That's a reason why I focus on the money questions, which to me, one aspect—because you can't do everything—one aspect is the offshore system that helps big companies and very rich people launder their profits. That has been my decision. Also the naked short selling, which is an aspect of it, because a lot of those scams of naked short selling have hurt small companies and have pushed some small companies to the floor and made them go bankrupt. Those are the things I have been focusing on because I

think they're very important and because I believe the mainstream media has not been focusing on them. But, it's about the money. Remember Clinton said, "It's the economy, stupid." It's the money. It's the money that is what matters.

Dziedzic: Thank you for your reporting on that. I think we've gone through all the questions that I had, and so I wanted to ask if there's anything else that you wanted to include in our interview today.

Komisar: No, that was [laughs]—that's long, and it has been many, many years, and sometimes you—it's interesting to see the trajectory of how things started. I think the trajectory has been very direct, of my life. Each decision and each new focus was connected to the one before. I wish these subjects got more attention, but I understand why they don't.

Dziedzic: Yeah, and I agree, looking at the work that you had done over the course of your life just briefly when we first started communicating, I thought, oh, it's here, it's here, it's here. But of course, learning more about what has driven you and all the connections that you've laid out here does, of course, make them seem like they are all, like you said, part of the same trajectory. Thank you for explaining that and sharing that history.

Komisar: Thank you for persuading me to review all of this and what I've done in my life, and to tie it together.

Dziedzic: You're very welcome. I think that will end our interview, and we'll be in touch at some point before the end of the year with the transcript that you can look over, and that'll be it!

Komisar: Good.

Dziedzic: Okay! Thank you so much, and have a great evening.

Komisar: You are welcome.

END OF RECORDING

Oral History Interview with Lucy Komisar, September 27, 2023

Narrator(s)	Lucy Komisar
Address	West 12th Street
Birthyear	1942
Birthplace	Bronx, NY
Narrator Age	81
Interviewer	Sarah Dziezic
Place of Interview	remote
Date of Interview	September 17, 2023
Duration of Interview	64 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y (LK sole copyright)
Photographs	Photo provided by LK
Format Recorded	32 kHz
Archival File Names	-
MP3 File Name	Komisar_Lucy_VillagePreservationOral History zoom.mp3 [38.5 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	53 [#2 2023]