

Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with Ilana Rovner

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
Illinois Statecraft – Gov. Thompson Oral History project

Interview # IST-A-L-2020-004

Judge Ilana Rovner, who served in the Thompson administration as deputy governor from 1977 to 1984, was interviewed on the date listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Illinois Statecraft – Gov. Thompson Oral History project*.

Interview dates & location:

Date: January 10, 2020 Location: Phone interview between interviewer's home in Providence, RI and Rovner's home in Longmeadow, MA.

Date: January 17, 2020 Location: Phone interview between interviewer's home in Providence, RI and Rovner's home in Longmeadow, MA.

Date: January 28, 2020 Location: Phone interview between interviewer's home in Providence, RI and Rovner's home in Longmeadow, MA.

Interview Format: Digital audio

Interviewer: Mike Czaplicki, ALPL volunteer

Transcription by: _____

Edited by: _____

Transcript
being processed

Total Pages: _____ Total Time: 2:06 + 0:49 + 1:15 / 2.1 + 0.82 + 1.25 = 4.17 hrs

Session 1: Work as an assistant U.S. attorney, then service as deputy governor

Session 2: ERA in Illinois and hiring a Women's Advocate

Session 3: Art Quern and the good government wing of the administration, the 1982 election, becoming a federal judge, and reflections on contemporary U.S politics

Accessioned into the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Archives on August 7, 2020.

The interviews are archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

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Abstract

Ilana Rovner, *Illinois Statecraft – Thompson*, IST-A-L-2020-004

Biographical Information/Overview of Interview: Ilana Kara Diamond Rovner was born in Riga, Latvia, on August 21, 1938. Rovner's father soon came alone to the United States, but her mother didn't overcome her reluctance to leave her family in Latvia and join her husband abroad until September 1939, narrowly escaping the Soviet and Nazi German occupations. The family settled in Philadelphia, where Rovner's father was active in organizing relief for Latvian refugees, supporting civil rights, and emphasizing the importance of the rule of law in conversations with his daughter. His example and her family's experience were enormously influential on Rovner's worldview, and by the first grade she resolved to become a lawyer.

Despite the obstacles to this dream thrown up by institutions that reinforced prevailing attitudes towards women's role in society, Rovner was encouraged and well-prepared for her path-breaking course by the rigorous all-women's education she received at the Philadelphia High School for Girls and Bryn Mawr College. She then spent a year studying law at King's College London followed by two years at Georgetown Law, but moved to Chicago-Kent College of Law to finish her education after her husband's career took him to Chicago. After taking time off to raise her son, Rovner went to work as a researcher for future Cook County Board president Richard J. Phelan (1971), then clerked for federal district judge James Benton Parsons (1972). It was in this role that she met Jim Thompson, who was then the U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Illinois.

Thompson hired Rovner as an assistant U.S. attorney in 1973, part of a talented group of prosecutors that attracted press attention for their work, particularly their offensive against corruption in Cook County. Part of Rovner's work included election fraud and civil rights violations by the police. Soon after she was hired, Thompson dubbed Rovner "the fairy godmother" of the office after she did not object to a defense attorney's request for leniency on behalf of his elderly, convicted client. The nickname stuck, and would reappear during Rovner's time in state government. Despite the teasing, Thompson had great respect for Rovner's abilities and elevated her to deputy chief of the public protection unit in 1975. Thompson's successor, Sam Skinner, named her chief the next year, making her the first female supervisor in the Northern District.

After winning the Illinois governor's race in 1976, Thompson asked Rovner to join his administration as the deputy governor in Chicago and legal counsel. She agreed, and served in this role until 1984, when President Reagan successfully nominated her as a district judge. This was the vacancy that Jayne Thompson had hoped to fill, before withdrawing her name in the face of opposition, which Rovner discusses. In 1992, President Bush successfully nominated Rovner to the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, making her the first woman appointed to that court.

Those interested in learning more about Judge Rovner's early life and legal career should consult oral histories she produced with the American Bar Association (2007) and the Federal

Judicial Center (1995). Although this interview touches on these areas, it focuses primarily on her career in Illinois state government. In particular, Rovner discusses her close relationship with Jayne and Jim Thompson, writing the first sexual harassment policy for Illinois state government, working with Harold Washington and Paula Wolff to create the Illinois Department of Human Rights, the fight over ERA, hiring the state's first Women's Advocate, and setting up the Office of Interagency Cooperation in Chicago. More generally, she offers her reflections on ethics in government and what she views as the "good government" wing of Thompson's administration, the perceived division between the program staff under Paula Wolff and the budget staff under Robert Mandeville, and, as much as possible given the constraints imposed by her role as an active federal judge, the political culture of the U.S. at the time of this interview.

Subject Headings/Key Words: Arthur F. Quern; election fraud, Cook County; Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois; ethics in Illinois government; Ilana Rovner; James R. Thompson; Jayne Carr Thompson; Office of Interagency Cooperation; Paula Wolff; program staff; Women's Advocate; women in government

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

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