Work/Cited Episode 11 Transcript

Rebecca Federman: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to work cited. My name is Rebecca Federman. I am the managing research librarian at the New York Public Library Stephen A. Schwarzman building and today's work cited is a program series that showcases the latest scholarships supported by the rich collections at the New York Public Library, but the behind-the-scenes look at how the finished product was inspired, researched and created. Today's work cited is a conversation with Meredith Man, librarian for manuscripts, archives and rare books here at the New York Public Library and Debby Applegate. Debby is a historian and biographer based in New Haven, Connecticut. Her first book, The most famous man in America, the biography of Henry Ward Beecher won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for biography and was the finalist for the Los Angeles book prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography. She is a graduate of Amherst College and was a Sterling Fellow in American Studies at Yale University, where she received her PhD. And just this month she published her newest book Madame, the biography of Polly Adler, icon of the Jazz Age. Our guests will speak for about 30 minutes and then we'll open up the conversation. Please, use the question-and-answer function rather than the chat function to share your questions and comments and questions can be submitted throughout the talk. If you wish to remain anonymous, that's fine, just make sure to click that option before submitting your question. And if you'd like to chat and share comments with all of our attendees, please switch your chat audience over to panelists and attendees. Before I turn it over to Debby and Meredith, I'd like to ask you to take a few seconds to fill out this quick poll, so we can learn more about you and what brought you to work cited today. And I'm going to turn it over now to Debby and Meredith.

Meredith Mann: Great, thanks Rebecca. So let me bring up some slides. There we go. Everyone can see these? Alright. So, Debby, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm really excited to be talking about your new book and your time here at the library, so thanks for being here. And I think that for the first question, you know, you were -- You were researching Henry Ward Beecher before. Polly Adler is a bit of a shift. So what inspired you to move your attention and write an entire book about her?

Debby Applegate: I -- I was never going to write another book again after that first one. That was much more difficult than I had planned, it took much longer and I felt like a Victorian school boy who would study too long by candlelight and ruin my health. But, you know, I was feeling vain, I think because it all worked out so well and I got suckered in by my vanity. I mean, it was really -- Perhaps a fool's move but I was talking with my editor and my agent and I had a double date and [inaudible] said what about a book about the 20s? And who doesn't love the 1920s? It was just -- So I felt, I'll just look, I'll just look and I'm a big advocate of open stacks in libraries. I have many opinions about libraries. And, as you might imagine, [inaudible] my whole life certainly my wasted youth in libraries. And I saw this little red volume in the 1920 section at the

Yale Library Stacks and pulled it out and it was the memoir that Polly Adler had published in 1952 and it was just a great book. In retrospect, I quickly learned of course that it was whitewashed, maybe a lot of memoirs are, but I -- [Inaudible] there was enough in there that I thought she could carry a big American story because for me that's -- That's what I like about Biography. That biography is a vehicle to tell us a larger epic story about the culture we live in. Little did I know -- No, I should've guessed, I guessed that moving an entire different century and moving from ministers to Madam's would be a bigger task than I thought. I should have known.

Meredith: [Inaudible] from Ministers to Madams should be the title of your autobiography?

Debby: Which I'm never writing. Much harder even still to write an autobiography than a biography.

Meredith: So -- Well, so here's the -- Oh, let's get there. There we go. Here's the cover of your book here. So you're saying that you were interested in how a person represented their period and America as a whole, so maybe if you want to just give us a brief overview of the life of Polly Adler and how you feel like it encapsulates her moment in American history.

Debby: Polly was basically a twist on a very classic American immigrant story. She was born right around 1900, her birth date is a little unclear, in the [inaudible] of Russia, at a time when immigration from Russia and southern Europe was huge, waves and waves, hundreds of thousands of people coming in every year. When she was 13, her family decided that they were going to immigrate to the United States but they didn't have enough money to do it all at once which was very common. Which was a little less common was that the -- Polly was the first to go. She was only about thirteen years old and -- But in the Jewish world of Russia women often, actually, were a little more worldly, they were not the scholars, they were not the people studying the Torah. They were the ones out in the marketplace who we're dealing with money and running businesses. And so, it was not uncommon for a young Jewish teenager, female teenagers to go to the United States alone, get a job and send back the money so the next way of her people could -- Of the family could come. And that was the plan but within six months of her arrival to the United States, World War I comes and shuts down all travel between Russia and the United States. And she is left, not entirely alone but pretty much on her own. She had some family she goes to stay with in New York City, in the very, very Jewish neighborhood of Brownsville New York City, where she encounters like a lot of immigrants, a lot of poverty, a lot of hardship. She becomes a garment factory worker. She falls in love with the thrills of Coney Island and the life of a teenage girl with very little supervision and a little money in her pocket. Things go wrong and so often they do for unsupervised girls running around the city. She is raped. She has an abortion. She decides she's going to get a better deal out of life and she goes, ends up getting lured into the underworld. That's where the twist comes. She feels like she's a classic American success story, as she says from a five -- Making $5 a week in a garment factory to making a couple of hundred dollars a week as a hustler, to a better address, to a new fur coat, to Park Avenue establishment. She feels like she didn't do it the normal way,

she didn't do it the respectable way but she did it the American way. At the same time, of course, Americans are obsessed with fame, we're obsessed with glamour, the illusion of those things at least. We love money, [inaudible] people, but we don't feel so comfortable with women who sell sex. So she [inaudible] against a lot of prejudice, obviously, and -- But in the end, she feels like she redeemed herself by writing this memoir and becoming part of the sexual revolution in a new way in the 1950s. And, you know, there is a lot to be said for the case she makes for this being the American dream.

Meredith: Well, and you are -- You -- I think you do a good job of pointing out that when she's younger and she is, you know, living in Brooklyn and going down to Coney Island, the kind of dynamic between men and women is -- She's subject to the same power and balance as a -- As a sex worker would be but she just doesn't have the protections and the, you know, the self-sufficiency that the power to like push back against that. So I think that, you know, there are clear parallels between her time as a young woman and then why she decided to get into the sex trade.

Debby: Well, it's a question -- Of course, I spent a lot of time on it. Prostitution is very serious and sensitive subject and there certainly are people who are trafficked into prostitution who do not choose it. I think most people wouldn't choose it. It's a very -- It's a very hard row to hoe. But, on the other hand, it is also quite clear that in a man's world which certainly was then and some would say still remain so, that men were willing to pay three, four, five, ten, twenty times for access to women's bodies than they were for access to their minds or their labor. And I think for someone like Polly, for a lot of young women, it starts to look like a sign of self-respect that you're taking care of yourself with your own resources, you are -- You are getting even with a system that is not in your favor. And that that was one of the more sensitive things to write about how people choose this path because it does come with a lot of disadvantages and a lot of dangers, but I think understanding that it feels like a choice of power when you're seventeen years old and barely able to put a roof over your head and eat, feels like a feeling of power that you could do this, you can take care of yourself with nothing but your own resources.

Meredith: Yeah, and I think maybe we'll circle back to that later because I think that especially is challenging to write about. And then, especially for the 1920s, because the 1920s has this kind of like, glamorous, Jazz Age, flapper mythos. And so you have to kind of, you know, be respectful of the people that you're writing about and accurate about the kind of underbelly of it all while, of course, the parties and the music and everything else is still going on.

Debby: I did [inaudible] feel like I was writing about the underbelly of the underbelly. That one of the things that is so clear, the double standard growing. I spent a long time trying to be like -- Like if you want to go screwing every woman you meet, then why marry? And what if you want to be married? Why then go screw every woman you meet? And I thought, no, no. It took me like a year of thinking about it to be like oh, people just like to have their cake and eat it too. And, of course, it didn't require all that analysis. And I think that one of the things I found fascinating was whether you were a bootlegger or a captain of legitimate industry, the attitude

towards women being a gentleman was you didn't swear in front of women or tell dirty stories, you pay your gambling debts and you never let your mistress and your wife meet. I mean, that was sort of the attitude which is, you know, as long as you don't talk about sex, then you can do almost anything and, of course, that didn't always work for the women. But that -- If the 20s seems glamorous, it's partially because of the efforts of people like Polly, especifically Polly who threw these Gatsby-like parties in which everyone mixed, criminals mixed with debutants. And she -- She [inaudible] that glamour and she was not interested, quite frankly, in telling about the underbelly until much later.

Meredith: Yeah. So that was something that really struck me in your book is that, you know, Polly is, you know, she's either throwing parties or she's attending parties hosted by other people. She's bringing her, you know, her girls that work for her as kind of a menu almost to these parties. But people at the parties are, you know, we've got, like, a member of the Mob who is sitting next to a Bob Benchley, who is sitting next to it like a Cafe Society girl. You know, it's men and women. It's [inaudible] people to, you know, [inaudible] poor people. But, you know, not so --

Debby: Adler people. Yeah.

Meredith: So was this -- What was -- This feels really unique, is this a product of -- Is it prohibition just kind of the illegality forcing everyone together into one room, one room or how do that about?

Debby: Well, she referred to what she offered in her brothels as a speakeasy with a harem handy. And so that was part of it. So she -- What prohibition does is by getting rid of the saloon, it meant that if you wanted to even have a glass of beer, you had to consort with criminals. And so it gives the underworld, the rather sleazy world of vice which had always been around but did not have any social cachet. It kind of makes it hip. It makes -- She could -- Makes it slamming is the word that everyone wanted to go slamming into these these little basement dives, where, you know, you didn't -- You had a great dance, [inaudible] liquor, but everyone was sort of sharing that feeling of naughty misbehavior and sticking it to that unfair puritanical law. And I think that opens up -- Once you start down that [inaudible] path of hey, I'm willing to break the law to have a drink, I'm willing to bend my morals to sit next to someone who I know is a murderer, maybe other sexual behavior starts to seem much more acceptable. And it's also a time when -- It's really the last generation of men who were born around the same time, 1900, who were raised with red light districts, when they were still -- Opened red light districts. They all died out around the same time as prohibition comes in. It's part of the same morality crusade. But it was pretty common -- It was common. It may still be common. I'm not sure [inaudible] my young son is going to lose his virginity with a prostitute. That's how they're going to be introduced to sex. Again, remember, the good women and the bad women. That's how -- That was not such an unrespectable thing as it is now. I think maybe the best -- The best correlation with now might be going to strip clubs which obviously there are a lot of people who do not approve of going to strip clubs but there are tons of people for whom surely went to a strip club

for a bachelor party or for -- With a bunch of clients or just because it's Saturday night and it's not -- The atmosphere is not that different. In fact, Polly would say her brothel was probably more respectable than that. So I think that's a big part of it, but even still sometimes, to this day, it still [inaudible] my mind sometimes. But here she is sitting with Dorothy Parker and, you know, asking, you know, this is one of the stories, asking Katharine Hepburn who is a young wannabe actress trying to break into the business saying, you know, if you ever need some money, you ever find yourself between jobs, you just come to old Polly. But would you mind wearing a nurse's uniform? Because you're an unusual looking young lady. So -- I just -- I'm not even absolutely -- I could never prove that really happened, but that was a rumor and it's not impossible. She would pitch any young woman she saw who she thought was attractive.

Meredith: And so -- So we've got kind of the rumors that you encountered in your research. We've also got -- I know that you mentioned that, you know, her birth records were destroyed, so we don't know exactly when Polly Adler was born. So what was that like -- And, of course, she was involved in illicit trade, so she -- And was known for her, you know, not giving up her clients and --

Debby: Very discrete. That's what she would say. I [inaudible]. I wonder -- Do we have a picture of her when she was sort of at the peak there? There we go. This is her in 1927 at the [inaudible] prize fight in Chicago. That you can see she's dripping with her jewels. She's got like five bracelets and a quite large diamond ring on their shoes and her fine feather and she loved fur coats. Sorry. I didn't want to interrupt. Yes. So, go ahead. Sorry.

Meredith: Well, yeah. So what was that like for you as a researcher to have contradictory accounts or just gaps in the evidence and how did you -- I know that a lot of times in your book, you're just very clear. You know, we don't have decisive proof but there's a lot of kind of circumstantial evidence that [inaudible].

Debby: Right. Well, it's a problem any researcher and historian has. And I had feared that it would be worse because you're dealing with legality as you say and a lot of shame and a lot of lying, but I found many other researchers have found this but, in some ways, criminals are better documented than average Americans because of the bureaucracy. The New York City Municipal Archives had her arrest records, even though I had to search very long and hard to find her various aliases and I never found all of them, but there they were. The New York Public Library, which we'll talk a little more about, that she was mentioned in old memoirs, in old -- In reporting from old newspapers and, of course, in the Committee of 14 papers, which I used extensively, she also, because she wanted to be famous. She wanted to be rich and famous. And like [inaudible] Americans, I guess. And so, and she knew that she was in the swim of American culture at a crucible time, the Jazz Age New York City scene between the two world wars. She [inaudible] Alley, Broadway, Wall Street, Washington DC, she had entertained many new dealers. You know, Madison Square Garden, the Friars Club, she was at the center of all those streams of culture interacting. So she kept programs and newspaper clippings about her and her friends. She kept big scrapbooks. She had a photo album and that's where I'm pointing

to the picture here on the screen. That's where these came from. And she had a ghostwriter for her memoir, which she did not like to admit. She always said that she wrote it herself and she did write a lot of -- She wrote manuscripts beforehand but to actually write a really good book, she needed someone who knew what she was doing. And her ghostwriter, a fabulous editor and writer named Virginia Faulkner, kept her notes, her writing notes and some of the list of big names that have been changed and the facts that had been cut out. It wasn't everything but it was a lot. It was a list in the notebook, in Virginia Faulkner's notebook. It said people not to be named and included literally every single major gangster living in 1950, which cut out a lot of people. Luckily, they're a lot of dead gangsters too. So, I thought I wouldn't have much. I thought I would just go with the memoir and what I could fill out from public records, but it really felt like the muses wanted me to have as much -- I didn't have everything. Of course, like any historian, I can tell you everything that was destroyed or thrown out that I still regret but it was -- It was more than I deserved. It was more than I could have expected.

Meredith: And how did you feel when you encountered the document of people that should not be named in --

Debby: Oh, oh. Part of the reason it took 13 years to work to write is almost all that I am a research addict and this was like some kind of like drip, drip, drip of cocaine. But every week, virtually every week, there was some new discovery. Partly, you know a lot of -- In the course of 13 years, a lot of digitalization happened. So I started to be able to look at more newspapers. I spent a ton of time in this -- In the New York Public Library's Committee of 14 papers -- which led to all sorts of clues and it was a constant hunt. I should have perhaps turned off the tap earlier and not, not -- You get greedy because you know -- I could tell there was more out there. And the excitement, the excitement of writing well is great but it's not anywhere near as much fun as the excitement of finding things. If you've seen me, many times I was -- All I could do to not shrink in the archive. I'm sure they remember me well. [Inaudible].

Meredith: Well, yeah. So let's talk a little bit more about the Committee of 14 and speaking of people who would be very sad to hear about, you were saying that, you know, the prohibition -- You've lost the [inaudible] path. And so, once you'd kind of decided to partake of liquor, then you might partake in another vice as well and that would just be a horror to their ears. So let's -- Tell us a little bit about the Committee of 14, how you -- So we have their records here at the New York Public Library.

[Inaudible]

Debby: In her less glamorous moment --

Meredith: And also -- Also a connection to the New York Public Library because when she was appearing at Women's court, that is now the Jefferson Market Ranch.

Debby: Yes, it's a really beautiful -- I urge anyone who is in New York City to stop by the

Jefferson Market Courthouse, Women's Court. Now it's a library branch. It's an absolutely stunning building. I believe it's under construction, you guys are doing some exciting new thing there. But it was, of course, beautiful as it is from the outside and how wonderful it is as a library, was a place filled with corruption and it was a constant cycle of being arrested and paying off bribes to the assistant district attorney, to the cops, occasionally to the magistrate's themselves to be let go. And, in fact, she did not go to jail until the 1930s. That's how good she was at the corruption game.

Meredith: Yes. She knew who she had -- That she had to pay and who she had to pay.

Debby: Exactly. And the Committee of 14. So here we're looking at the [inaudible] to the Committee of 14 papers, which is quite large and what the Committee of 14 was, was a coalition of reform groups and Social Service Groups that got together to fight vice in New York City. They were part of the anti-saloon movement, part of the anti-gambling movement and they focused in particular on sexual vice. And they were actually, in many ways, extremely successful. Part of the reason we don't have open, you know, red light districts anymore. It's [inaudible] in large part to their efforts. But it was also -- It remains a losing battle. In my opinion, we will never fully eradicate prostitution and that's something we can debate until the end of our days but probably would never fully erradicate. But they were determined and what was amazing is they had undercover investigators who would fan out across the city going to speakeasies and bars and dance halls and nightclubs and report on what they saw, trying to inquire, to find out what was the situation, what was the vice situation. And they're quite detailed and sometimes they have dialogue, they have color -- This world, the underworld would not -- We would not know even a tenth as much about New York's underworld without these papers which is probably not what they meant, to them to be used for -- They wanted to know at the underworld but they did not want it necessary to be glamorous or turned into books for amusement. But really, it did a great service for historians and readers.

Meredith: Yeah. So let's look at some of these reports. So this first one is just pulled up to show how some of them were almost forms, that they were, you know, ticking off boxes, they were saying, you know, the number of unaccompanied men and women and they broke, you know, they broke it down by race, into black and white. Guests of these establishments, they, you know, if they were licenced, if there were prostitutes present, if they were, you know --

Debby: There was jazz. Don't want Jazz, no Jazz. That's just going to lead you down the wrong path.

Meredith: And then, but then I wanted to kind of -- So this is earlier on, but I wanted to quickly move into a couple that you used in your book.

Debby: Let me just -- Can you go back just one, I just one point out. So up here, I'm [inaudible] the screen again. At the very bottom, you can see the investigator's HK and he was -- This is the problem. I could have spent so much more time because I wanted to know who these

investigators were because one of the things that most prostitutes, most Madames said was you can bribe almost any cop, but the Committee of 14 really were pretty impermeable, they were pretty incorruptible. And that HK, I spent so much time trying to sort of follow his trail and that I'd leave it to somebody else to really push that out. So you can go on again. It was just wonderful to see him. To see him there again at the bottom of the bridge. I miss him. Yeah. So here. So this is -- There are just files and files, boxes and boxes of reports that look just like this and they're not well organized except by address, they're crossed. They're a little bit crossed [inaudible]. So you really had to read every one of them, but they are terrific. They, I mean, if you could spend a little time, you can see the detail here. So Tony's Speakeasy, the one that's marked in red, is for anyone who knows the Algonquin Round Table characters in history, that was one of their favorite spots to hang out, was a little cheaper than the 21 Club and a little more hip than the Algonquin Hotel. And -- But nobody ever talks about, as this said, investigator came in this is an ordinary Speakeasy, patronized largely by theatrical people. Some prostitutes also frequent the place. You know, just that would never -- That's not in any of the other accounts. And yet here it -- And here it is and because I can see ok, well this place that's in Literary History has this underbelly, I could look a little -- It's let me down [inaudible] way. So I ran across a memoir that nobody reads anymore and by a fellow named Jeffrey Amherst who mentions oh, I was brought there and he describes it in his own way, theatrical people and prostitutes. Oh, part of the reason it's so popular, he says, is because the owner also sells cocaine. And, you know, that's the tie -- So those are the moments when you're really excited. I know it's sleazy sounding, but the fact that this literary legend has this whole side to it, I think opens up what we know about those people in a big way.

Meredith: Yeah. So these reports, you were kind of mining the names to then triangulate with your other sources to see, you know, what are their connections, who are their clientele, what were their connections to organized crime and getting -- Getting that -- The way of the land that way.

Debby: Because once you start knowing, "Wait a minute. What is that politician doing at that hotel? That hotel is clearly a nest of prostitutes and bootleggers." Does anyone know it? But, of course, once you know then they all of a sudden -- And so, I try to be very careful about casting aspersions because, you know, it is a very sensitive subject. On the other hand, people do need to be careful about where they go. People do put together clues.

Meredith: Yeah, sort of like [inaudible], like every source has its intended audience and when you've combined enough of them together you get a clear picture of what exactly was going on. And so, you know, even for Tony's is pretty beef but some of, like you mentioned, some of the other ones, they go into a lot of detail, you know, they have phone numbers for these places, which these were clubs that were not, you know, probably advertised a lot of times. So just the telephone number is big or having a contact. Sometimes they had the names of the women who worked there. They had their rates. So some of these locations had a lot more detail than others.

Debby: And in fact, at some point, they -- Polly gets on their radar because she's become famous enough that people now are saying, you know, what about her? And funny enough, they had not heard of her partially because she was more secretive, partly because she was expensive and they needed to have real expense accounts to be able to go into these places. The more expensive it was, the less likely it was to get one of these reports because a $20 cover charge in some cases, that's a huge amount of money. [Inaudible] amount of money now, but that certainly is huge there. And so you can -- There was a moment where you'd see they're starting to figure out who she is, that she's somebody they care about, they just can't find her. Yeah. And then they -- If they do find her, they need to be able to figure out how to get in.

Meredith: So, yeah. So let's go to this next report. Fifi's interactions with the committee of 14, because this end -- Tell me a little bit about how you came across this report and what you -- What you felt when you read it for the first time.

Debby: Well, so this is a perfect example of triangulation. So first of all -- When I -- First I ran across this. This is my first item and Mrs. Fifi Seballe, Mademoiselle Fifi Seballe, what this is right here is she was not the brightest young woman, but apparently very attractive, very busty for it, at a time when people were not so busty or wasn't as cool. And she -- Some -- One of the investigators kind of picks her up, starts talking to her, she's a chatterbox and she just starts talking about yeah, I sometimes step out after I get off work at the nightclub. And then she says listen, what about -- You want to go? Oh, you're interested in these places? Without him telling, you know, he just -- Oh, hey, where are we going to go next? She says listen I know this lady and that's the part you got here, red. Turned out red. I know this woman. She's got apartments all over the city because she has little places for her girls to meet up with dates and oftentimes she had women who were sort of freelancing for her, who would pick up somebody and then go up to an apartment, which is what Fifi says she's going to do. She's -- But Fifi is such a chatterbox, she says like oh, look. She offered me, she asked me to come work for her full time. You could make $200 a day. But you know, it costs a lot, $1,500 a month for protection? The idea that I would find a woman who worked for Polly with this kind of almost dialogue, in fact it is dialogue and some actual dialogue describing in her own words to somebody who she doesn't realize is taking down all these notes, I literally almost exploded with excitement. And here was the fun part because she's a dancer. She's a burlesque dancer. She actually could be traced in Variety, the magazine for entertainment showbiz. She could be traced in ads in -- When she's showing up on the burlesque stage and there was enough there that she actually -- I had to not make her a bigger character than I wanted. I could've written a whole chapter just about Fifi and her friends. It was really a -- I don't know. And now I'm all excited just remembering about it. Sorry. I've lost the train of thought. Just that I [inaudible] a lot of time on Mademoiselle Fifi Seballe and every time I thought you are kind of dumb, just like they say you are. But nonetheless, you are one of my favorite characters.

Meredith: Yeah, the qualities that you're looking for and its source were very different than what Polly was looking for.

Debby: Yeah, yeah. She's literally -- I mean, I thought, if Polly had ever read this, she would have throttled her. She would have, as actually said in the book, Fifi was a snake dancer. So she would sometimes actually dance with a snake and just imagine what Polly would've done with that snake if she read this report.

Meredith: And then, I also wanted to bring this up too because we have -- Just speaking of, you know, Polly had these apartments, she had to keep changing them, changing her name that they where -- That she was listed under. And so, this is her business card. Is that right?

Debby: Yeah, and so you guys do not, the public library does not have this card. This was from the private collection of what was left of Polly's, of Polly's memorabilia. But you guys do have quite a few Speakeasy cards. It was very common because speakeasies were [inaudible] and brothels. Like Polly's were constantly having to close because they were being chased down by the cops or being shipped down by some gangster, or whatever -- For whatever reason, they would constantly having to close and move or maybe even stay in the same place and then have a new name and if you needed to be secretive, like you did not want to let in just everybody which most of them did not, that you would -- You could have [inaudible] card. It doesn't have Polly's name on it, as you can see. It doesn't say what she's doing exactly. It just is if you have this card that meant you got it from somebody who was supposed to have it and that was like your own little key to go in. And so, it was very -- It was very important. Also it was one of the ways that you would let people know where you were because if you're moving all the time it's very bad for business, as probably herself would say. So she tried to keep -- She worked by telephone and that's why all you see there is a telephone, not an address. So you would call her. If you had this card, then you could call her and then she would screen you, or if you're a regular customer, she'd let you tell you where to go. Because it wasn't always obvious.

Meredith: Yeah. I feel like this card, everything about this card is the opposite of Fifi Seballe.

Debby: Yeah, exactly.

Meredith: It's just if New York, you know, she's got this, you know, Polly, I'm assuming this is, you know, kind of like a “Polly wants a cracker?” connection to her name that just -- Here's a number and it's somewhere in New York City. And that's all you need to know.

Debby: I do have customers, you know, obviously the more respectable customers in general did not talk about knowing Polly, but plenty of the people in showbiz like Desi Arnaz was a big friend and client. He wrote a -- He's probably our best documented. But a lot of the showbiz people were not -- it wasn't the most respectable profession back then. And they said, you know, the biggest problem with Polly was you couldn't find her half the time. That she was [inaudible] moving around somewhere somehow. So the phone -- Something like this was critical.

Meredith: And speaks to the challenges for you as her biographer, if the people alive working

with her and wanting to do business with her couldn't find her, then --

Debby: Yes. As her -- The correspondence between Virginia Faulkner, her ghostwriter and the publisher and her agent, her literary agent, is all at Columbia University. And she talks a little about the challenge of going through Polly's notes and her early drafts because hey, Polly does have to lie herself. It is as -- Virginia says, a vocational necessity or certainly a habit at that point, but also just Polly herself -- There were so many addresses that neither Virginia nor Polly came close to remembering all of them. And so that, at a certain point, I have maybe 25 addresses but I just -- There's too many. I couldn't -- That couldn't be my main, my main avenue of research.

Meredith: And she was giving the aliases to the cops and to the courts as well. Like you were saying that she -- You can kind of get through a court case with a fake name and no one would really verify that, which is insane.

Debby: And that's why for her the question of fame, fame was very important. It was important to her personally. She wanted to feel like a person, like a you know, a true -- A person of consequence, but it was also important because it's -- [Inaudible] can't advertise openly. You need to have word of mouth, but the problem is, at a certain point, all the cops knew she was. You couldn't -- She couldn't get away with that anymore. And that's when the tide starts to change. And that's when you see to go back to that -- We don't need to go back, but the picture coming out of the [inaudible] wagon is that moment where no, her fame has now outstripped her ability to control it.

Meredith: She has to pivot. Also, Rebbeca is back. So I think that we've got some questions from our audience for you.

Rebecca: Yeah, we have a couple of questions. Well, one question I have was about her autobiography and was there a reaction to it after? I mean, what was the response from [inaudible] she talks about it.

Debby: It wasn't easy to get it published because every publisher in the city, and there were a lot more publishers back then, saw it, saw the manuscript. Most of them, almost all of them said oh, this -- This is a great book. This is going to be a big book but we can't publish it. It's just -- It's too -- This was [inaudible] 1950, when she's shopping around. It's too hot to handle. And what's fascinating is the people who really made her ladder career, her retirement and her -- Well, she says that she was able to retire so well because Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a client and she was being paid off for her silence. That was the money part, but the part about her ambition to write a book, she really is only able to do it because there are a number of women, very few women in the publishing industry of much -- Of great stature, but they're the ones who said Mary Rinehart, the famous mystery writer is the one who says no, let's buy this book. This is going to be a big best-seller. And, in fact, it was. It comes out in 1952 and it is just huge. It sells two million copies by the time it is all through in paperback and hard copy. She -- It is made into a

movie, eventually. It's not a very good movie. It's really, it's really not. You can see it on YouTube, in not a very good form. Because what were they going to do? It's not easy to make a movie about a brothel in 19 -- By that point, 1963. And -- But it really -- There are plenty of people who I actually met who remember it being in their house and being like tucked away on that top shelf. Or I have one friend, an elder gentleman,who remembers that his father, they were on a cruise, they were on a ship, going I think to England and -- Not a cruise, but an actual ocean liner and he just finished and he was standing at the rail and he saw his dad throwing the book overboard into the ocean after he saw him read it. I mean, it's not that he didn't read it and then threw it out. Why? He said I don't want your mother and your sister to read this. So, of course, it caused quite a stir, but it also had a huge effect because in 1953 is the -- I'm sorry. Did I say 1953? It was 1953, is the year that Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* is published. That's the year Playboy comes out. It's when Alfred Kinsey writes the Kinsey Report on female sexuality, she became friends with and really just shook up a moment of the Fifties when things feel very conservative and staid, especially sexually, just blew open talk about sexual revolution in a very different way. And she was very gratified. Nothing she liked more than being a published author.

Rebecca: Alright. We have a couple of questions. Some questions about her family. So one question we have is what was her relationship with her family once they came? And also another question about Polly's family in Russia, were they able to emigrate to the United States? Is there any record of them coming here?

Debby: Yes. And in fact, that is something she tries very hard not to discuss in her memoir, other they are there a little bit. She brings them all over, one by one, and then a little clumps and by -- They're all in the United States by the end of the 1920s. It is very hard for her. She both wants them there and it's important that they get out of Russia, but -- And she hadn't seen her mother since she was 13. When her mother arrives it's been more than 10 years. And yet, she had mentioned she had to lie in ways that were extremely stressful. It was already a career full of subterfuge and now it added just a level of stress on top of a lot of trauma and a lot of a lot of difficulty. So for her, she had a tremendous ambivalence. They did not know. Her father probably did know. Her father signed a lot of documents, she put a lot of property when she would buy property and put it in his name. Stock, she'd buy stock and put in his name. And he was a man of the world and that was more common than -- But her mother did not know until she gets involved in a big municipal scandal called the Seabury scandals in the early 1930s. And then, her name is all over the newspapers and then there's a murder and then there's -- It's just one thing after another and now she can't hide it anymore. And that was devastating. That was devastating to her parents, it was devastating to her. To the end of her days, she takes care of her family. She basically supports them all on her illicit gains and yet, at the end of her life, they still are ashamed of her. They will not have her at the Seder table for the high holy days or, I mean, at the high holy days or at the passover. And it hurt her feelings tremendously. It was -- Would probably the greatest thorn in a life that had a lot of thorns.

Rebecca: There's other questions about Polly's Jewishness and anti-Semitism. At the time

effect, Polly's aspirations or activities and did the effect of her being Jewish affect her life and career?

Debby: Well, there's -- Of course. Of course it did. I mean, this is a time where New York City is a huge ethnic stew that -- And we were not also sensitive about treating people with alternative identities kindly. So frankly, if I wanted, I could've filled this book with nasty words and epithets for all kinds of people because it was a [inaudible]. It was, yes -- There was a melting pot that was also a roiling stew of people rubbing up against each other and not always happily. So certainly, anti-semitism was big part -- That's why they wanted to leave Russia. That is exactly what drove them out of Russia and it was certainly something she encountered throughout her life, even in -- Even in the underworlds there are cases where some Irish gangster doesn't like some Jewish gangster and she gets caught in the middle of that. It is also true that this was the phase where they were quite a lot of Jewish criminals. It was quite a big Jewish underworld, just as it was a big Italian underworld and a big Irish underworld. A lot of that has passed for good reasons, demographic reasons. But if you recall, I was saying that it was common to send Jewish girls alone to the United States because they had more experience out in the world and it often worked in the marketplace, and that was true in the underworld as well. Jews were about 20% of the population at the time Polly entered the business. They were more than 50% of all madams, and that is in part because they had a better education. They could do math, they could speak multiple languages, they knew how to run a home and run a business. The phrase in Yiddish is, they were Balabustas. A balabusta is someone who could make it all. Be the hostess and keep the business going and make it a homey place. And for that period of time, there's a reason she was so good at it, because she was in fact, in a way, trained for it. She wouldn't have said it that way, I think, and it is no longer true. That is no longer the case, but it was very notable at the time.

Rebecca: We have a question about the brothels themselves. Were they strictly segregated at this time or was there race mixing among the residents, if not the customers?

Debby: Yeah, it really kind of depended on where you were. There was, like every place at the time, there was a color line in general, in tradition. If you went to certain kinds of brothels that were more, you know, more wild, maybe up in Harlem or maybe down in Greenwich Village, you might have more interracial mixing. There certainly were plenty of black on, black round brothels that catered to white men, absolutely. Polly, my impression is that for the most part she tried to -- It was white women. However, if you -- I'm pretty sure that if you wanted something different, she would -- Could arrange that. It is also true that most of her customers were white men but that's partially an economic thing, that they were the ones who had money. But it is also true that she was very close friends with and hired a lot of black musicians and black entertainers who certainly -- It's plenty documented. Like Duke Ellington who she was quite good friends with and played at a lot of her parties. There was at least one of the girls who had a great crush on him who dated him -- Of her girls who dated him on the side. There are certainly stories. Plenty of musicians and entertainers came through in [inaudible]. It just wouldn't have been very common. The real thing that was very common was that you needed an African -- You didn't

need, but that was how it worked at African-American laborers, maids and cooks because Polly depended heavily on her second-in-command, a woman, a very formidable charismatic woman named Showboat, was her nickname, which I think is related to an [inaudible] classic novel and musical which happened at the time. And I have a lot of theories, but I could never prove quite -- I do know Edna Ferber did not want that name used in the final manuscript. And so, I feel like that was confirmation a little bit. But she -- If Polly had not had showboat as her really -- And who was clearly as smart as she was, as tough as she was, as good a negotiator with a lot of [inaudible], the gangsters loved showboat, she could not have climbed to the heights that she did. And that part, I think, didn't get enough attention at the time and sadly doesn't get enough attention in my book because at the very end, when Polly's writing a memoir, showboat, remember I said she's a tough negotiator, she says I'm not -- You can't use my name, you can't use my story in your book unless you pay me upfront a licensing fee and Polly was very tight with the dime, that also is very important. You got to know how to save money in the brothel business, she refused to pay her and had to write her out of the book pretty much, which is a real -- As historian, I can say it was a tremendous loss to the historical record as [inaudible] the story.

Meredith: Are those pieces still in the files that her ghost writer had?

Debby: There's a little but there's not really Showboat's story. Like I don't really know. I think I know her real name, Marie Gould [phonetic], I think, but I couldn't really track her out very well. And yeah, most of it, none of -- There -- Here's the sad part. Remember I said there were all these trunks, the keepsakes that Polly had and we were talking about her family. Well, at the end, when her last surviving brother, the last member of the family was ready to pass away, he inherited all of that, inherited all the money that she left. And, in the end, he was embarrassed still, even at that late-stage. I think he died in the 80s and he threw away most of it. And so, there were earlier transcripts. There were earlier manuscripts, there were reel-to-reel tapes that she had made of herself reminiscing and he threw away almost all of it. So maybe it's out there somewhere. I hope it is. I hope someday somebody finds it, but that was part of what was going on and I still regret it.

Rebecca: We have a question about the places she lived and worked and if you went to visit those places. And if so, are any of the buildings still standing? And the question is also about if Polly Adler went to the Bialystoker Synagogue on the Lower East Side where some of the big Jewish gangsters worshiped?

Debby: So [inaudible] say the last one, I would guess not. I did not -- even though she had a religious upbringing and was rather proud of it, that she could read a little Hebrew and write in Hebrew, that I never found her attending any kind of service. I'm not saying she did not. I'm just saying that -- And she actually did not -- She was down on the Lower East Side for just a little while. So it's possible. She certainly -- Sometimes there are family members who recall her occasionally showing up to bar mitzvahs and that sort of thing, family events. But in general, I don't think that was a comfortable place for her and she basically skipped over the Lower East

Side, moved right up to the Upper West Side which back then was alright [inaudible] where you -- But I'm sorry. The first part was not -- Oh, the places. There are some people, I think there might even be some people on this -- Watching right now who are historical tour guides and I took a group or I went with a group of historical tour guides of the West Side, Upper West Side, where a lot of places were and a lot of those still exist. They were -- She liked to be -- They're not very interesting buildings. They liked anonymous apartment buildings where, you know, they were large and couldn't really -- Nothing very exciting going on, nobody famous living there. So they still exist. Sadly, this was crushing to me this last month. Her main brothel on West 54th Street, which is sort of the last there's still the last of the speakeasy district still there. It was a very unattractive building, just a plain brick box and kind of shabby but I loved the fact that it was still there, right in the middle of the heart of midtown and we were going to go -- We were going to go see it on the store and we got there and it had been torn down in August and July. And so it's just a hole in the ground which I guess -- I guess that's the way New York is. New York, the great city if they ever stopped working on it.

Rebecca: Alright. I think maybe there's time for one more. Here's one about the overlap between Polly and Mae West, [inaudible] like an inspiration for some of West.

Debby: Yeah. I would have very much liked to find some real overlap. They certainly ran on the same circles and that building that I was just saying, the one that was torn down, on West 54, right next to it, it's now called the Albamarle, I believe this is the name of it, but it was the Hotel Harding at the time and that was a nest of bootleggers and women of loose morals and gamblers and it was a speakeasy run by Texas Guinan. It was owned by [inaudible] Texas Guinan with the head of the Committee of 14. She's trying to prove that they're just nothing, nothing but respectable young ladies. That is what this is and you can see the look on his face. He looks pretty pleased. Although she looks like she just [inaudible] his head off. And so -- And many of her young ladies who worked in her chorus or danced in her chorus line and worked in her nightclubs did moonlight for Polly. And Polly knew Texas quite well. But this Hotel Harding, which still stands, where there were a number of murders, right down its doorstep, which is owned by Arnold Rothstein, the great Jewish crime boss, crime leader, [inaudible] the Irish gangster, the Irish gangster and Dutch Schultz, big Jewish bootlegger and when legs when Owney Madden owned it, the Irish, big Irish bootlegger, he had Mae West run it. Her mother was the proprietor and Mae West lived. So they were actually neighbors right next to each other for some period of time and I wouldn't say May West was inspired by Polly but they come from the same kind of cloth. Kind of watching many more of Mae West and if anyone, night after night may I recommend a movie, it takes place exactly in that little corridor of the feverish 50s and it is where Mae West makes her debut as a terrific, a very fun movie, dirty and an innuendo laced and lots of, lots of gangster talk too.

Rebecca: What was the name of the movie?

Debby: Night after Night.

Rebecca: Night after Night. Ok.

Debby: Yeah. George Raft is the lead and she also knew George Raft. And that's the thing, she's sort of the Forrest Gump of the underworld. It's true.

Rebecca: Well, thank you both very much for this conversation. We are at the close, unfortunately. But for all of the attendees today, stay tuned for blog posts with a video recording and related resources and links to these resources will be emailed to everyone who registered for today's event. And you can also see recordings of our previous episodes on our blog, which is nypl.org slash blog, slash work cited. And we also encourage you to stay in touch with us for news of our free public programs, researcher services, and more via our social media accounts and our monthly newsletter which is all listed here. And we'll be taking a break next month for the holidays. So our next work cited program will be on Wednesday, January 12th at 1 p.m. when [inaudible] of NYPL's manuscripts archives and rare books will be speaking with Lisa Hurwitz on her upcoming documentary on the Automat. So that should be great fun. Details and registration are coming soon and you can check nypl.org/work-cited for all the event listings as they're announced. So thank you to Debby and Meredith and to all our attendees for a really great discussion. This was a lot of fun.

Debby: And hey, just let me say it's an honor to do anything for The New York Public Library, greatest public library in the world, and your archives in particular. So thank you, thank you so much.

Meredith: Thank you, Debby. This was great.

Rebecca: All right. Take care, everybody. Bye, bye.