

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Laura Margolis
July 11, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Laura Margolis, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on July 11, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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LAURA MARGOLIS

July 11, 1990

Q: Can you give us your name please?

A: My name is Laura Margolis.

Q: And would you tell us where and when you were born?

A: I was born in Constantinople, Turkey, in 1903.

Q: Would you tell us something about your family and your early life?

A: Yes. I was born in Turkey of Austria-Hungarian grand...grandparents and parents really. And...uh...my grandfather was Dr. Schwartz who...uh...was head of the _____ Jewish community in...uh...Turkey and also consultant to the...uh...Sultan of _____. My father, on the other hand, was born in Russia. I'll get to the marriage part and how they met which is also history...uh...and as graduated high school. But because of the anti-Semitic regulations there, he couldn't go on to college, so he decided to come to Palestine and see if there wasn't something there that he could do, and he spent a little bit of time in Palestine and...uh...decided that the thing for him to do was go to back to his father, get some money, go to Berlin and study agronomy, and eventually settle in Palestine. Now in Germany where he studied in Berlin, his professor of Botany was Dr. Otto Warberg, and...uh...there was a very close warm friendships between student and professor. They somehow clicked. Parallel with this period, my grandfather, Dr. Saloman Schwartz, in Constantinople had...uh...wanted some of his own medicines patented in Germany and was also in contact with...uh...Professor Otto Warberg for patenting his own medicines. This was all 19th century almost. And...uh...when my father graduated, his destination would have been Palestine straight, but Dr. Otto Warberg suggested to him that he first go to Constantinople and meet Dr. Schwartz and maybe he would put off his going to Palestine for a few years because Dr. Otto...Professor Warberg's idea was that there was land up in Asia-Minor and...uh...that with my father's training, he would...and with Dr. Warberg's money, he would be able to do some settling of Jews who were already running from the Soviet...from Russia, not the Soviet Union then...from Russia to Constantinople, and were becoming beggars on the streets, and he was already in those years thinking of making them farmers eventually to go to Russia. This was before EKA which was established in Paris and EKA was a philanthropic Jewish organization that was settling Jews in Russia. And Dr....or Professor Warberg really wanted to do an experiment with his own money up in Asia-Minor. So my father agreed. He was young. There was no reason why he couldn't do this, and he adored his professor. He came to Constantinople to Dr. Schwartz who had all the contacts with the Turks and my mother opened the door, and that's where the romance started. Now, they went together up to Asia-Minor. That's where they spent their honeymoon. And it was...uh...absolutely wild up there. And...uh...they did...were able to bring some of the Jews who were just hanging around and becoming beggars in Constantinople. They were prepared to take on these people, teach

them farming, agriculture, and train them for eventually going to Palestine.

Q: What year were they married?

A: They were married...1903. I was born in 1903. I think they were born in 1904. No. No. No. Oh, no. They were married in 1902, I think.

Q: I see. You were born in 1903.

A: That's right.

Q: On the honeymoon. Right. The story was that...uh...actually I think I was conceived in Asia-Minor (laughing). And...uh...in order to...I know that in order to give...uh...birth, my mother had to come down...she tells how she came down to her father, the doctor, in an ox cart. (clearing throat) Anyway, my...uh...these...in...in Hebrew it's called _____. This farming...this agricultural training in...uh...Asia-Minor was very successful, but there was a time when Professor Otto Warberg simply said he couldn't finance it anymore and...uh...so the job...my father still wasn't thinking of America at all. He was still thinking of...uh...uh...Palestine. My father was offered another job to go back to Russia and...uh...begin training Jews there on the spot. My father didn't want to go back to Russia. In the meantime, his father and the whole family had immigrated to the United States and...uh...my mother said, at one point, that she'd had enough of being...uh...uh...a farmer. She was not trained for that. She was a beautiful musician. And so my father...they agreed that my father would go to America where all...where his father and all the Margolis family had settled in Dayton, Ohio. He would see how he liked it. In the meantime, my brother was born, and his name is Otto. He's named after Professor Warberg. And so we waited in Constantinople until my father succumbed to the influences of his whole family and decided that we should come and...come to the United States. At that time, I was 5 and my brother was 2, and so we shipped off and that's the beginning of the family history in the United States.

Q: Now can you tell us what happened in your earlier life without going into great detail but maybe bringing us up to the time when your activities with regards to the war and the Jewish community began.

A: Uh...How far back do you?

Q: Well, from the time you came to the United States.

A: From the time I came to the United States. Okay. (clearing throat) Well, I was 5 years old. Now when I came to the United States, anyone who knows anything about the Middle East knows that you don't have to be literate or educated in order to speak 5 or 6 or 7 languages. And...uh...I came to the United States speaking French, German, Greek, Turkish and Spanish. But no English. And...uh...my mother brought the...uh...we...we sailed over to the United States with a maid because she couldn't handle two little babies. And...uh...the maid

was Spanish speaking, so for several years after I entered kindergarten in Dayton, Ohio, these languages became...had become a part of me. And...uh...some of this will later maybe explain why I even got started in the work that I did much, much later in my life.

Uh...Anyway, we lived in America where we...my father went into the business of his family. My mother continued with her music. We were educated. We moved from Dayton, Ohio, eventually to Lima, Ohio, where I went to...uh...where my father opened a shop. And we ended up really...I won't go through all the different stages of where we lived in Ohio. We ended up in Cleveland which was the important city for all of us. And that's where my father...uh...went into the insurance business. My mother continued with her music and her house. But at the end of the first world war, 1918, my mother took my brother and myself back to Constantinople for a whole year. My grandfather had died and she very much wanted to see her own mother and sister. So I spent a whole year sitting on a bench in a German school. That was our first trip back. Then we returned to Cleveland.

Q: Is that where you completed your high school and college education? In Cleveland?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you go to college?

A: I went to college at...uh...well, I started my...uh...my first...the college I went to sub...sub...not professional...uh...Ohio State, where I got my B.A. And then I continued with professional education at Western Reserve, School of Social Sciences they used to call it in my day where I graduated as a social worker.

Q: And what sort of a career did you embark upon at that point?

A: Very traditional career. Uh...I worked...always worked in the Jewish community. The Jewish Welfare Society, I think it was called in those years, of Cleveland, Ohio. Case work. And...uh...I think I...if I can remember at all, I did leave that work. I did leave Cleveland at one point. I felt that I had...I wasn't growing. I wasn't learning anything. I was becoming repetitive, and so I took a year off and...uh...came to New York. And...uh...without getting a degree of any kind, but just wanting to get some new ideas. And so I spent a year in New York, and then I was called back to Cleveland by the Jewish Welfare Society, offering me a job of training volunteers to do Big Sister work. And that became a challenge. Seems to me that I was always reacting to challenges, you know. To do something different and something new. So I came back to Cleveland and trained volunteers for the National Council of Jewish Women, I think about 3 or 4 years. (Pause)

Q: At what point did you become involved with the...with the Joint.

A: Well, the Joint comes much later. I'll tell you first...uh...after a couple of years of that in Cleveland, the same restlessness showed up. And I heard that there was a job in Buffalo, New York. In fact, I was told that there was a job and they were looking for a Director of

their Jewish welfare work. I went down for an interview. This was already in the 30s. And I was hired. So I left Cleveland, and that's the first time I ever left my parents' home, and was on my own. And...uh...started working for the Jewish wel...became...became actually the Director of the Jewish Welfare Society of Buffalo, New York. It took a long time to set up a good welfare service there which would be accept...where students would be accepted by the...uh... University of Buffalo. It took me about 4 years to do that job. I liked Buffalo very much. I had many friends. I was settled there. And then one day I got a telephone call from New York. 19...Christmas 1938. And it was Cecilia Rasoski on the telephone, head of the...uh...not Joint at that point...it was the...uh...Jewish Refugee Service because already Hitler was in. Refugees were coming in in the 30s, but they weren't running like much later. They were people who had means. Most of them professionals who saw the handwriting on the wall in time and got out. And we were receiving them in Buffalo like in other communities in the United States. And...uh...I thought I was really there for good until the telephone call came from Cecilia Rasoski of the Refugee Service, which was working together with the JDC, and now we'll call it the Joint. And she said to me she had heard from somewhere, somehow that I knew Spanish, and there was a very serious problem in Havana, Cuba. Refugees were beginning to flee from Germany and from other countries in Europe, and...uh...the boats were coming in, but there were problems in Havana. The money at that point was being given by the JDC, but the JDC didn't have the official...uh...it was working together with the National Refugee Service. I didn't even know that I was a employ...employed by the Joint at that time. And so what Cecilia asked me to do was to, with my experiences as a social worker, with my Spanish language...there were multiple problems down in Havana. Would I just go out or go...nobody flew those days...sail to Havana and look over the picture and be helpful? Also with...because of my language abilities with the Cuban government, which at that point in time was very corrupt. It was the time of Batista. (clearing throat) Some...uh...some people...there were two ways of coming into Havana. One was to get a false visa somewhere in Germany for \$165, and the other was to find...to...uh...to...uh... really...uh...have a \$500 legal bond which relatives in America would send...would send down to Havana. And...uh... would eventually ended in the S...in St. Louis...the famous affair of the St. Louis, was that...uh...Jews were coming in or the office I was heading was called the Joint Relief Committee. Already the Joint was coming in to it. Actually, the Joint financially always was there. And...uh...they...uh...those who had legal \$500 bond were allowed to land and some of them were taken into jails. It was very chaotic. And we heard that ships were on the way, and there was at...at one point my whole diagnosis of the situation was that this is no job for just a person like myself to deal with the government, and that's when I called the JDC on the phone direct.

Q: Where were you at the time?

A: In Havana.

Q: You joined the Havana office.

A: Havana. Still in Havana. Expecting boats to come in, ships to come in with refugees and

knowing that we wouldn't be allowed eventually to land them all because of this corruption inside of Cuba with Batista. And...uh...I phoned and told...uh...uh...whole story. And then we heard that the next ship that was to come in was the S.S. St. Louis. See, the JDC had offices in Paris, and we were in communications like this: New York, Paris, Havana. And so I insisted that this is nothing which I felt I should handle alone. It was more political than social. My Spanish language didn't do any good. Uh...And they did. The JDC went down. And I can't remember the name of the lawyer at this point, but a very competent, legal lawyer...uh...man and was sent down by the JDC who...uh...had his ends with Batista. And I don't think I have to repeat...there're books and stories. and everyone knows what the S.S. St. Louis meant. (Clearing throat) Our great problem was there were hundreds...I don't remember the statistics, but there were at least 5 to 6 hundred people on that ship. Only a few could disembark who had real \$500 bonds, and that ship was stationed there and not allowed to come into the harbor by the...by the Cubans, and it was going to go back to Germany. Well, the last thing we wanted was for that boat...that boat to go back to Germany because that would have been the end. So for about a week...this is 39...uh...we in Havana, JDC New York, JDC Paris...and it wasn't like today where you could fax and you could phone and you could do things...there weren't all those tech...tech...technological facilities, but we could telephone. I don't think we ever went to sleep. (laughing) Anyway, books have been written, stories been told. The S.S. did not go back to Germany. It was...disembarked in Holland, Paris, London. (Pause) And from then on there was no more illegal immigration into Havana. It was all legal or...or not, but... And here I'd like to say that only...in...uh... in retrospect it became...the whole thing became so sad, although we thought and we did our best to save these people from going back to Germany, many of them were caught when the Germans invaded Belgium, Holland, and France. But a lot of them were saved. Anyway, I then decided that I was going to stay on and do a...a nice job, a quiet job in Havana. And one of the things that I learned...I call this my in-service training period. I knew nothing about American immigration laws when I came there, but because of my own knowledge of the German language and I had a staff...we had a staff of refugees who knew many languages and the...uh...the American Consulate in Havana trusted us completely, we really became the right hand of the...of the...uh...American Consulate. Helping with interviews, with languages, with evaluations. They did the technical jobs, but we would...could do the interviewing. We could do...what they felt at least at that point...they really felt that what we could do was of great help to them. There were understaffed. And so I stayed on in Havana....39, 40, 41. And...uh...I...for some...I liked...I liked Cuba. I liked the climate. I liked the people. And I wasn't even restless at that point because we were...I thought we were doing a job. We were helping to get people to the United States. But one day, one morning the phone rang. And the boss at that time was Mo Levitt, Moses Levitt. And he said, "Laura, how are you doing?" (laughing) 'How are you doing' was not an expression in those years, but he said, "How are you?" I said, "Fine." "Busy?" "Yal, we're very busy here." Well...so...uh...he said, "How would you like to go to China?" (Laughing) I have to laugh when I think of it. I said, "China? Where in China?" "Shanghai." I said, "Oh, Yal. Sure. I'd like to go." (Laughing) I had no idea what he was talking about. I said, "What's the problem?" He said, "Well, we've been...first of all we've had a request from the State Department that you should go to China. You should go to Shanghai. Because refugees are pouring in from Germany. It's a open port.

No visas are necessary. The Chinese don't care who comes in. We've been sending money to a Jewish committee of local leaders there and...uh...the Embassy is swamped. The Consulate is swamped. The Embassy was in Peking at that time. The Embassy needs help. The...uh...the State Department doesn't have anyone who knows the German, and so...uh...and they've seen the kind of work you've been doing in Havana. Will you go?" I said, "Alright, I'll go." (Laughing) That's about as much of decision making as I've ever make. Anyway, I flew up to get really some basic orientation of what was going on there. Nothing was really going on. The Embassy...the Consulate was swamped. There was refugees there who had visas, valid visas that the U.S. was ready for accept for their coming to the United States, but there was no personnel. So...uh...and then, of course, by the time I got there, in 41...much later in 41, May 41...uh...there were almost...there were thousands and thousands of refugees. The situation as very chaotic. But I wasn't supposed to do much about that. I was supposed to help the Consulate. Just in retrospect which is (clearing throat) different from the way we travel now...uh...it took...I went over on the first Pan American clipper that ever trans...that ever sailed in the Pacific. It took 5 days and 4 nights. But it was very much more civilized than the way we travel now. Anyway, my...my...I had to get to Hong Kong first. I couldn't get to China on...on a Pan American, and I had to wait for a whole week in Hong Kong before I could get a ship up the coast to Shanghai. And when I got there my first...first place I went to as the embassy...the Consulate. They gave me an office, and I began interviewing, helping them. But at the same time I had to get to know the Jewish community structure there of local residents. The chairman was an ex-Dutchman called Spillman, very nice man. And they were they ones who were receiving the JDC money to feed these 8,000 people who needed feeding. So...uh...all this was done with JDC money. I got to...I got to...uh...but the refugees were already...had already heard that someone from the Joint was there. I wasn't supposed to get mixed up...and they were coming to my hotel. At the same time I was sending in all my reports of the situation I found among the refugees and how it was being handled. All of it went through the pouch, and I...very soon...it took me a month. In June...I got there in May...in June I issued a definite ultimatum to the JDC in which I wrote that if I were to stay on they would have to...this is not a one-man job. They would have to send out someone else to work with me. And I knew...I knew that Manny Segal, who also was a social worker whom I knew from Buffalo who was working with me in Havana, always said he'd like to come out. So I said, "Either you send Manny or someone else, but this is not a problem I can handle alone. Or else I'll come home." In June 1941, that ultimatum had been issued. I had no reply yet, but in June 1941, I think it was...the...the exact date isn't important. I think it was the 21st of June, the Germans had walked into the Soviet Union. We, of course, knew this by radio, but it was very distant. So I got a cable from the JDC a few days after that saying, "In case communications are cut, you are authorized to borrow on the promise of us to repay the amount of money which is required to take care of the needy" (because we had 8,000 eating out of our kitchen; we had a hospital to support, and there was a school). Now these sums seem like nothing today, but in those years it was a lot of money. And...uh...so I had this cable. That was June, July, August 1941. And I was just beginning to get to know the whole refugee problem. I continued to work with the...with the embassy...with the Consulate, but my focus was really upon helping these people. And...uh...August 1941, I got another cable. SHIP OUT TO MANILA.

DON'T...DON'T COME HOME. SHIP OUT TO MANILA AND AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS. Well, to get out at that point...the American marines were all leaving. There was a feeling of war, but nobody was thinking of Pearl Harbor, of course, as you will hear later. The Japanese had been fighting the Chinese for years before that, but they had never come into the international settlement. So to get a ship...the only ships coming out were ships with Army soldiers. Through the American Embassy, I managed to get on the ship. And I got to Manila. And I had the cable, DON'T COME HOME. So...uh...what does one do? There were...there was a nice Jewish community there. I used to take trips around the island, but I never could stay away very long because I was waiting for instructions. And finally, this is already August. Right?

Q: August 41.

A: Huh? 41. Uh Huh. September. Telephone call. (clearing throat) September 1941. September. Telephone call from Mo Levitt from New York. "Laura, we've just come from Washington. We've been to the State Department. They assure us there will be no war in the Far East." You can go back and Manny Segal is on his way. So I went back. And it was clear that we were taking over the whole program, using the local Jewish committee as advisory, but the money was coming to...in the bank to us. Manny Segal arrived December 1st, 1941. By that time I had a pretty good idea what was going on over in Hong Q which is a section of Shanghai where the Japanese were already...had already occupied, but they had not come over to the International Settlement yet. The refugees were all...those who couldn't afford to stay in the International Settlement were all housed in the Japanese sector. Uh...I had then, before Manny came, I had a pretty good idea what the problems were and what kind of reorganization was required, you know. So...uh...Manny arrived, I think it was December 1st, and I gave him an orientation and we started going out to Hong Q, and we organizing the whole thing and in Shanghai on December 8th in the morning in...uh...uh...Hawaii...where the Japanese struck.

Q: Pearl Harbor.

A: Pearl Harbor where the Japanese struck. It was December 7th, 1941. By us, it was December 8th, 4:00 AM. And our hotel was on the...on the _____, on the shore where all the ships were. Ships of all nations. Was the biggest port of China. We were bombed out of our hotel beds practically with the bombing. And we looked out the window and all the ships in the Harbor were burning. Japanese had come across the bridge, marched into our hotel, occupied the hotel. We were at war. That was it. People gathering in the streets below. We were...the first thing we did when we realized what it was all about was to tear up all the reports we had been sending to New York. We always kept...we didn't have a secretary. You couldn't trust...you couldn't have a secretary. You couldn't trust anyone at that point. We had been keeping carbon copies for ourselves and doing our own typing. But we realized we were at war and this is it, so the first thing we did, Manny and I, was to tear up all our papers, flush it down the toilet. Because we didn't know what was going to happen next. We were held in our rooms...there was an English broadcasting. The Japanese took over and broadcast in

English. We were just sitting there and watching broadcasting...listening to broadcasting. And down below people just mulling. Mulling, mulling, mulling. Millions of people. Couple of times, we went down to the lobby. We couldn't go out because every door, every exit, there were Japanese soldiers with bayonets. Then we got...uh...we were just listening...we were able to get food. Uh...we were listening to the radio the whole time, what was next. I think it was about 6 o'clock in the evening when the English broadcasting came over saying that people are now free to go out. So we went out and some friends of ours already, both Chinese and foreigners, were downstairs waiting for us. They had been waiting for us all day long. We went out and we had a good Chinese dinner. But what do we did next? Now, Shanghai in the pre-Pearl Harbor days was a very social kind of place. And...uh...I had to go through...my round...my round of dinner parties and entertainment and at many of these affairs, horse races, I had met Captain...Japanese Captain Inasuka. Captain Inasuka had been living in Shanghai for many years. He's Japanese. And...uh...I was told that he was very...he liked Jews. And that after that...Pearl Harbor, he had moved into the same hotel that we are living in, which was the best hotel in Shanghai and he was already up in the Pent House. He had already occupied Sir Victor Sassoon's Penthouse. So what do we do next? Refugees were in the lobby, scared stiff. They were all stateless. No passports. No identify of any kind. And I, Manny and I talked it over. I said, "Manny, go down and tell them we're working on it. Not to get excited. Not to worry. Something's bound to happen." And I made this decision. I had my telegram from JDC that I could raise money to be repaid at the end of the hostilities, wherever these hostilities would be. So I phoned up to Captain Inasuka. He remembered me...he remembered me because we had been to social affairs together and received me very nicely. Made the tea ceremony. Very nice. Very cordial. Then we got to the nitty gritty of what I came for. Showed him the cable. (Pause) And I told him that I was prepared to help him. It's true that I am an enemy alien. I don't know what's going to happen with me ext, but for the foreseeable future apparently I'm free, and I'm able to help him, meaning helping the Japanese. That I would be able to take over, Manny and I, the whole operation in Shanghai and keep feeding the people if he would give me permission to raise the money. Because without his permission I wouldn't be able to do it. And I think my last...what was my last sentence, which I didn't learn in the school of social work. Uh...I said, "Look," I said, "You, as an occupying power, cannot afford to have hungry people riot. You're responsible for them. On the other hand, I can help you, so they won't riot if you'll give me an okay to raise the money." And he did it. On one condition. That I do not...now what was it he said, "I do not take money from enemy aliens," meaning Europeans, but wherever I could raise it I...he also did something else that was very nice. The banks were closed. We had a remittance a few days before Pearl Harbor of money which I was already coming in our name, Joint Distribution Committee. He arranged for the bank to open so that we could get money out, because it was there, before we could start raising money. And then he also...then the American Red Cross had lots of cracked wheat which had been shipped over and stored and I...I had contact with the American Red Cross and they said, "Look, take it." But I had to have his permission. He gave it to me. So we had cereals that we could give to our kitchens. That's about where we were when I had to start raising the money. Break?

Q: No. Go ahead.

A: Now. People who... There was plenty of money. Shanghai was a city of wheelers and dealers with all kinds of black money, black market money. (Pause) I let it get around that we had something to sell. And money started coming in. The banks opened. Eventually the money started coming in and Manny and I took over. We went out to Hong Q every day. The whole year of 1942 we were free. We weren't interned yet. And...uh...

Q: We want to...we want to break now. We need a break now.

A: We need a break now. We really do.

Q: You're doing fine.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: Okay. Would you please continue?

A: Yes. Anyway, it was clear we were beginning to raise money and...uh...all of 1942, and we took over the program in Hong Q and...uh...we were giving IOU's to the people. And we also set up an entirely new committee. The committee which where...which I found when I originally came to Shanghai, most of them had already been interned by the Japanese. They weren't around anymore. And...uh...uh...so that I...we began to take on some of the old timers...uh...Polish, non---non-enemy nationals, Jewish...all Jewish who had been there for a long time and whom we could trust. And gradually while on the one hand we were working in Hong Q and trying to set up the programs for the helping and the hospital and the money ad all that and raising the money, we were also beginning to train another committee, voluntary committee, to take over because it began to be clear that we were not going to be able to stay out forever because we were enemy aliens. And we got a very good committee. Very, very good committee. Many of them had been...uh...there for many years. Russians who had fled the revolution and who had made their home in Shanghai and who were very fine community leaders and whom we could trust. And the...the one committee that we set up, Mr. Bitker...we called it the Bitker Committee, Mr. Bitker was the Chairman, and we felt very secure in giving him power of attorney after...if anything should happen to us to ensure that part. Then, of course, in the middle of all this, we did a very...uh...unusual thing. Uh...the old kitchens that were feeding the refugees when we arrived...when we took over, were very old Chinese kitchens. And they had to be stoked all the time with coal and more money was going...we made an analysis that more money was going into coal than into nutrition. So what can we do? Then we heard that one day that out in the French concession of Shanghai, there were some new boilers that had just arrived the day before Pearl Harbor and were standing there...uh...assigned to the Sassoon Company, but were never used. So I went up to the Sassoon Company, which was still in business at that point, and I asked them for permission and they said, "We'd be glad to give them to you but they...we as British...as a British company, can't give you that permission. We're as much enemy aliens as you are." So what did we do? We had a very good friend, a Polish engineer who looked at those...uh...boilers and said, "Laura, you've got to get them." So one night when it was dark and...uh...there were millions of people buzzing around on the streets all the time and the...and the rickshaws were going back and forth and nobody was paying any attention to anybody. We hired a group of coolies and this engineer, Manny and I went out to the French concession and we highjacked the two big (laughing) boilers, and brought them through the masses of people going into the...buzzing around in the streets of Shanghai. Nobody was paying any attention to us. Taking them over the bridge, and we got them to Hong Q. And from that point on, we built a new kitchen which was really giving nutrition and we burned up the old kitchens. That's one of our fun stories. Anyway, it got to be around the end of...uh...October, November 42, the rumors came and one day we were notified by radio...there were no television in those years...that the Japanese authorities are asking all enemy aliens to prepare themselves for internment. You would be allowed to take in anything you like to your camp. They didn't tell us which camp at that point. Your beds,

your...uh...linens, anything that you want to take in. Food...this is...they were beginning to prepare us. And then Manny got notified (pause) I think it was January 43 already that he was going to an all-men's camp over in Paoting. I had not received a notice yet. So we packed him off, and a month later I got notice. And...uh...I actually took my own folding bed and my own mattress and...and...uh....a trunk full of canned goods and stuff and things and...and then...the...the Japanese were a peculiar race. It's a...an interesting group of people. Uh...They were very, very permission with us, and I was taken to another camp of couples, and single men and single women outside of Shanghai. Right now the name of the camp escapes me, but it isn't important. It was the beginning of 43, I think February or something like that. We got to the camp which, of course, was surrounded by barbed wire. It was a old school house that had been bombed during the Japanese-Chinese wars and it was leaking here and there and everywhere. And...uh...I got into a room with 40 women, and...uh...first thing I did, when I saw the room was to see at the very end there were windows going...getting out to the campus. It was an old school. It had a beautiful campus, and I quickly took my bed and dumped it in that area so that I would...all the 40 women would be in back of me and I would see the campus. That was the first thing I thought of. Anyway, it was very cold. That night we turned on...they gave us fuel and they gave us an oven...stoves, and all of them lit...all of them were smoking, and so that was the end of that. We never burned them again. We just put on more clothes. Now, the Japanese were very good to us I think. Now some of the...some of the high and mighty people who had been the old Shanghailanders that we called it, were very resentful of having to be in those conditions and under the Japanese. But that's something I've never had. I've never had any kind of feeling about race, color, anything. I think they were absolutely correct in terms of the Geneva convention. They gave us everything that was due to us. They brought in the food. We had to cook it ourselves. And they said to us, "Listen, get organized. Put up your committees. Do what you like. We'll bring in the food. And organize your own social activities. Do anything you like, but do it yourselves, knowing that we are here and that we are supervising." And so the first thing that got...one of the things that go around in the camp was that I was there. And someone came to me and said, "We want you to chair our committee because you've had experience." I said, "I am Laura Margolis with no experience. I am a number. I have a number. I don't want to be...I don't want to be known. I don't want to have anything to do with all this. But you had to choose two...uh...everybody had to take on two jobs. So I made a very quick ____ as we say. I...uh...realized that when you're near the food, it's important so I took kitchen duty. And...uh...the other thing was...oh...the camp...there was barbed wire all around the camp. And out there were fields, and we were supposed to grow our own vegetables. And I've always liked farming anyway so...uh...and just being out of it is...is very important for me. So I chose the second chore and that was to go out and work on the farm. And that worked very well. But then came 4, 5, 6 months of that and people were getting sick. And that's natural in all of China. I mean they were carrying them out by the dozens to the hospitals, diarrhea and all that kind of thing. And...uh...nothing was happening to me. I was as healthy as a horse. But I decided I had to get out because I just could stand the collective. So I knew I wasn't going to commit suicide but I had sleeping pills and I wasn't going to commit suicide. But what I did was to eat less, grow weaker and...uh...put on my Sarah Burnhart act. And so I was sent to the doctor...to the doctor in the camp who was an

American doctor. And he gave me a permit to get out to the hospital because he said I was very sick, which I wasn't. And I got out to the...uh...hospital. It was a English hospital and Dr. Veal who an Italian was the head of the hospital and he remembered me from...from contacts we had before Pearl Harbor. And they put me in a ward, and when he came to make his rounds in the evening and he saw me there, he caught on immediately because no matter what he did, I was in good shape. But he said I was very sick and so he said, "Now, there are two things. You shouldn't be in a ward. I can get you a private room, but if you want a private room you'll have to...I have to notify...I have to write to Japan for permission. But I can give you a room with another lady on my own responsibility." I said, "I'd rather take the lady...the room with the lady." And what happened there was that she was really a lovely, lovely Russian girl who was a mistress of the director of the German bank in Shanghai and he used to come to visit her every day. And I had no right for visitors. And one day he said to me...he said, "You know," he said, "You are not allowed visitors. Wouldn't you like to tell your friends outside that they can use my friend's name and come up and see you?" And that's the way I saw Mr. Bitker. I saw my friends. I got...I got the message out. And...uh...I was there for 3 months. They kept me out in the hospital and then came August...July, August 43. Right? And...uh...Italy surrendered in the war...gave up as being one of the Axis and the next morning when that happened Dr. Veal came right in to see me and he said, "Laura, now I'm an enemy alien and I don't know what's going to be with me next, but before coming here I went to the Swiss Consulate because the Swiss had the authority over all enemy aliens." And he said, "You're on the list for the next prisoner of war exchange. So I'm going to release you now. You go back, start packing and in September you will...uh...be re...on that...on that exchange. Your name is on it." He said I also found out that your name was on the first exchange which was a diplomatic exchange, but the Japanese took you off because they needed you. (Laughing) So I went back. Before I went back, I saw Bitker once. For the last time! And I got a...because he had power of attorney to raise money and in...in the name of the JDC to repay. And...uh...nobody knew when the war would end you know. So I said, "Look, I'm going to be out of this pretty soon. Just give me a...uh...up to date account of what the situation is financially so I can get it back to New York. Well, he gave me the whole accounting up-to-date. When we were prepared in our camp...that was September 43, that we were to pack and we were going to go on a ship. This was the beginning of our repatriation exchange of prisoners of war. I had always these figures, and I took toilet paper because I knew that there would be a body of search...body search before they...before we were left to go. And...uh...I took the...uh...the toilet paper. I wrote every piece of...all the figures down, rolled it up and put it in the rubber pants...the... uh...top of my panties, so that...uh...it was invisible and... uh...started packing. And in September 43, I forget the date exactly, we were...those of us who were on the list from our camp and from other camps were taken on a...to go on a Japanese ship as far as Goa where the exchange would take place. That was in...it was Portugese Goa which was part of the Indian mainland. And...uh...we got on that ship. It was...uh...a ship...a Japanese ship which had a passenger capacity for about 100, and we were hundred and...one thousand five hundred, because we picked up people on the way. And what they gave us women were...uh...like stalls hat you put horses on and mattresses. And the mattresses were full of fleas. So the first...the first night we took all our mattresses (laughing)

Q:

A: The first...uh...night...we tried to sleep with those fleas, but we couldn't. We took...all of us women, took all the mattresses out and threw them into the Chinese sea and slept on board. Just took a blanket and slept on board all the way through. We picked up people in the Philippines. We picked up people in...uh...uh...what was...before Vietnam, what was it? A French...uh...anyhow, French port, and finally we got to Goa, where they...uh...Japanese were coming in on the beautiful, beautiful, beautiful... uh...uh...Swedish ship, the Gripsholm. And...uh... so we packed. We got...they got...they...they...uh...uh... they were coming from their beautiful ship to our Japanese ship and we were leaving the Japanese ship to go on to the Gripsholm. And it was...it was like...uh...a school, you know, each one going a different direction, not looking at each other. And when I got on to the Gripsholm, I felt like for the first time I was totally free. And it was my 40th birthday. And...uh...of course, we had the smorgasbord and we had a swimming pool, and then we started with the Gripsholm. From there on, it was all the way around South Africa where we stopped for 2 nights and the...uh...uh... Jewish community there took us and we had...it was fun. And then around the...around the Cape. That's right. We went around the Cape up to South Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro. And by...we got to Rio, the JDC had sent someone down to meet me, and...uh...to give me money. I didn't have a penny. And to...we were there for 2 nights, and so we went dancing. And it was fun, and then we up the South Atlantic to New York. And...uh...in New York, I got a message, we're not allowed...uh...ships were not allowed to dock in New York. No. Ships were allowed to dock...uh...to dock, but no one was allowed to come to the port. It was the height of the war. And the first shock I had was when I got the message that I should come to the...to which hotel I should come, that the...my friends in the JDC were going to be there...uh...that New York was standing. All the news we had...uh...way back in...in the...in the camps was that bomb...that...that the Hell had been bombed out of New York, and here were people were complaining about rations. Anyway, it was a wonderful, wonderful reunion. And...uh...I stayed in New York, and then before I was allowed to even go and see my family in Cleveland, I went to...uh...we went to...uh...Washington to give a report. I went with Joseph Swartz who was the then Director of the JDC in Europe, and with Mo Levitt and myself, we...we went by train to Washington. UNRRA had already become organized. That was the first time I knew about Hitler. I knew about Jews in camps, but I never, never knew...never heard the words Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and all that had really happened. I was...had been completely detached from all that. And (pause) the JDC at that point was giving a report. We went to the State Department. We reported to...uh... UNRRA, and then to the Treasury, Morganthal. Now, the JDC had been totally cut off from any communication with me. They could not get an okay from the Treasury, I guess, to send money through Switzerland to Mr. Bitker. And so we went to the Treasury and I...we had a long session with Morganthal, and gave him the whole story of how it's working. And he had one question. Are the Japanese getting any of this money? And I said, "Not a penny. It's all in the hands of the Bitker Committee," and I said, "This is what is keeping the 8,000 people we are feeding alive." And it was from that point on that the Treasury gave the JDC...this is the way...this is the way I remember it...uh...authorization, because we always had a delegate in...uh...during

all the wars. We always had a delegate in Switzerland. Sally Myer, a very famous, interesting man, a Swiss. And they...we were able to give an okay. They gave us...Morganthal gave us an okay to send money...uh...to the Bitker committee to keep the 8,000 Jews alive. Now, of course, the JDC was sweet and very nice and...and...uh...they put me in the hospital. They wanted to be sure that I (laughing) was okay, and I came out okay. And then they said, "Laura, you've really had it. We have another job. We don't want you to leave us, but we have another job for you. That's in Santi de Mingo, where there were...uh...Jewish farmers." They were training refugees to be Jewish farmers in Santi de Mingo. After I heard what I heard, I said, "No. I'm not going to go and sit under a palm tree anymore. I can't do that." "I...uh...", said, "that if you don't, it's alright. Don't want to send me to Europe, it's okay with me. I'll go to Europe with UNRRA because they'll be going." So that's...so one night I had dinner with Dr. Joseph Swartz who was the boss in...uh...in...uh...Paris, in Europe...not...at that time our office was in Lisbon, Portugal, and neutral countries. We operated in Europe through neutral countries. And...uh...he said, "Laura, forget it. You're coming with me to...uh...uh...Lisbon" where we had our office. And he said, "I have two assignments for you in Europe." Alright, my first assignment...I...I shipped off. I shipped off to Portugal, and the first job that I did there was I...I went up to Spain. Uh...We're already in 40...45, aren't we? I think so. Uh...The...France was occupied as we all know by the...uh...Germans and there were in...internment camps in France and children were becoming separated from their parents. The parents were being sent to where they were being sent. The children were hanging around and so the underground...the Jewish resistance movement in France organized a transport of children without parents at that point to be brought over the Pyrenees to Barcelona. But there was no one in Barcelona...we had an office in Barcelona, but there was no one who would know how to handle children, who would know how to handle...they could handle the money, the financial...uh...but we needed to set up a children's home to receive these children and to...uh...to feed them and to...uh...to staff the place and Dr. Swartz asked me if I would do that, and I certainly did. I certainly would. And so I spent 2 or 3 months up in Barcelona, going up...into the border lines, with the...uh...staff, ..the rest of the staff and bringing the kids down, and...uh...staffing the whole place so that the children wouldn't be in a panic. And thus...and those children...many, many years later, I met as grownup mothers and fathers in...in Israel. We had a nice reunion. Anyway, when that job was done, I went back to...uh...to...uh...what do you call it? To...uh...Lisbon, and then Joe said to me, "Look, Laura. I need someone to fly to Sweden." So I said, "Sweden's neutral. What's the problem?" He said, "Yes, but it's because it's neutral that we are able through the _____ the German...the Jewish...the...uh...Swedish-Jewish community to send parcels of food into the Germans...the camps in Germany for our people. And he said, "I would like very much...it means...it's a dangerous job. You have to hang around London for awhile and the...uh...the...uh... Germans are bombing the Hell out of London still. The flight, which is not a civilian flight, from somewhere in the British Isles and we never know where it's going to be from...to Sweden is not going to be an easy one. Will you do it?" I said, "Okay, I'll do it." I flew to London. And there's a very, very nice story in connection with that. London, of course, was bombed out as we all know. I had a reservation in the hotel for 2 nights. I could hear the B-1s, but I didn't have the sense...I didn't have enough sense...I slept through them. And then,

I was told by the hotel that my reservation was out, to please pack and go. Where do I go? I didn't know anybody in London. I knew where the JDC office was in London. So I took my...as we say in German, my ____, packed up, went to the office. And it was a bank holiday. Of course, it was closed. But the...uh...the janitor was there. I told him who I was and I said, "Just leave me in the office, that's all. Everybody will be in the office tomorrow, and they'll take care of me. And tonight I'm alright, so I'll put my fur coat on the floor and I'll sleep on the floor. What else can I do?" He let me in, and as I'm...just as I'm getting in the phone rings. I'll tell you there is a God that watches over me. The phone rings, and who do you think it is? It's one of the couples from Shanghai that I was able to get out in the last minute through my work in the Consulate through their uncle in New York. And they went on to London and this uncle had been...had been following me and wondering from JDC...constantly asking from JDC where is she now? And found out that I was in London, told his niece and nephew where I was. They phoned me at the office, came over right away, and took me to their house. Didn't have to sleep on the floor. Alright? Then I hung around London, and then I got all through this...all through the American Embassy. I had to report everyday...I had to report every place where I was in case we got the clearance to...to fly. So...uh...one day when I checked in they said, "You're flying tomorrow morning." And we were picked up. All this was done for us. We didn't have to do a thing. Uh...We flew to somewhere...I've never figured it out yet on the Iris sea. And the only other...other two people who were in the place cause no...cause there was no civilian flying...uh...were there and...uh...we were just hanging around waiting for orders what to do next. Just like the Army. And then one day we were picked up and taken to the airport and told that we had to get into parachutes. This was never told to us before. Because the last plane that flew over to Sweden was...uh...bombed down over the Ejords by the Germans who were in...uh...what's the other Scandinavian country? Huh?

Q: Denmark.

A: Denmark. Yal. Not Denmark. No. The other one.

Q: Norway.

A: Norway. Thank you. Norway. The last one didn't get through. So here put on your... There were two men going to the Embassy and myself. And you'll find blackout. When we're over Norway, the lights will go on. But if, by chance, the pilot tells you...he's opening the door and you jump, all you have to do is just take this zipper and zip it up. Everyone asks me, "When did you feel the most alive?" I said, "I think I felt the most alive in a parachute (laughing) when I didn't know what the next moment would bring?" Anyway, we got through. And then I did my bit. We had the money and consent already from the Jewish community there. They were able to make parcels and we started the...uh...parcel sending to...uh...Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz...I don't think Auschwitz was in that vicinity. It was mostly in the English and the...uh...English area, near....where they could. And after 2 or 3 months there, I again flew back and this time I flew back in a...uh...bomber where the...American.... You see, in Sweden you had to be so careful because the Germans were also there. It was neutral. Anyway, an...an American Captain and myself flew in the hub with

the...uh...with the crew. And we got to an air base in London. We didn't know where we were flying. We got to an air base in London and we...we got out. All of...all the...the whole...the whole base was around the plane. And we couldn't understand what was the big reception. Well, they had had a plane before that had been shot down, and they were wondering if this one would come through. So there we were! In order to get back to London, I had to sit in the camp there for a week, and...uh...that was a terrible thing because I could...I was there and I saw the boys fly out in the morning. And not all the planes came back at night. Wasn't nice. And then one day they said to me, "Alright, now there's a train going into London. Go ahead. Here's your ticket. Get into London." So I finally got back to London, went to the JDC office, and...uh...then Joe Schwartz was there and he said to me, "You know the...uh...the landings are going to take place very soon, and we'll be going into...uh...Germany...no, we'll be going into...uh...France." And he said, "I'd like you, if you will, to...to cross when...when I tell you you can cross, when they...when they tell us you can cross, and...uh...get into Belgium. But you have to get...you can't go into Belgium or Holland because the war is still on, but it...in France, in Paris that we are preparing staff, and you will have to get a uniform and you'll have to get army status for travel, but you can cross safely. So I crossed. When they time when they told me I could go, I went. In fact, that's the way...the only way you could work. You didn't ask questions. And...uh...and you didn't ask for a ticket either or a hotel. And...uh...I got to Paris, and there was...Paris was liberated already. And...uh...there was the...uh...office, what they called the Adjutant General's office, AGO. So I got my uniform. I got my army card. I got the rank of Colonel, which meant that I could fly back and forth all over Europe anytime with that card. And to get to Brussels, however, I had to take a train, and that took a whole day. Now, it takes an hour. Uh...I got to Brussels, and the Germans had just cleared Brussels. They had cleared the south of Holland. Belgium was finished. They...they had finished with Belgium. In fact, I think I was in Brussels on V.E. Day, when the war in Europe ended. Was the month of May V.E. day? I think so. But I was made...I had an office in Brussels, but I was...the Germans were still in...in Holland. They were just evacuating. Anyway...uh...I did get up to the south Eindhoven and there I found a Jewish community that had survived, went with an ambulance into Amsterdam. And we got into Amsterdam...I went with one of my staff. I wasn't alone. We got into Amsterdam, I think 24 hours after...uh...the Germans left, evacuated. I met with the Jewish community, got all the information we needed. I wasn't going to stay there. I stayed there a few days, but it was really to get a...a...a view of the situation and to be able to report back. I had that, and then it was time to go back to Brussels where my office was. And on the way back, I began to feel sick...tired. Tired! Tired! By the time I got to Brussels, I felt sick. And the doctor called...someone called the Belgium doctor, and he examined me and he said, "In your condition, you'll never be able to work again." So...uh...I said, "Alright, so I'll be going home." At the same time, Shave Mission, the American Shave Mission of Belgium was in Brussels, and Eddie Warberg, who was also the President, then and later became President of JDC was also at Shave Mission. And...uh...he and I used to see each other. And when he heard that I was sick, he came right over, and he said, "Don't take any Belgium doctor." He said, "Forget it. I'm putting you in the Army hospital." I was in the Army hospital for 3 days, and came out very healthy. And then I said to my boss, I said, "Joe, I'm tired. I want to go back to the States, spend time with my family, take a vacation in Havana."

He said, "Yal, but you're not going to stop?" I said, "No, I'm not going to stop. I just need a break." Which is exactly the way it worked, and when I got back, really had a good rest, felt good, fine, he said, "Laura, how would you like to go to Paris and take over the operation there?" That was already 46?

Q: This is after the war is all over?

A: The war is all over, thank God. Oh, sure. I said...uh..."Paris? Why not? A very attractive idea." I got to Paris in June 46. Headquarters of JDC were already open, but we were not in the same building. We had...they had their...their European office in one building and I was in the French...French operation. We had a different building. Joe Schwartz was there all...most of the time. That was the period when the camps were...the...the...uh...concentration camps were being emptied out of the survivors. Germany was a big operation. Uh...And Joe had his office in the office for France, in the office...in the...uh...Headquarters office, and I had...I was just...just France. I didn't want any more. I had enough. And that was a very challenging experience, a very challenging experience, because first of all I was already in good shape again, you know. And...uh...I had the feeling that now I could do some creat...some creative work. And...uh...it was a good idea, because that's where I met my husband. He's a very active person in the Jewish community and...uh...we were absolutely and completely working on the same thing. I as a pro, he as a layman. And one of the things we were doing and we were working with the illegal immigration to of Palestine with the Jewish Brichah as we used to call it. The survivors that were going to go, but illegally to Palestine. That was 46. And we really...that...that was a wonderful period, because I was no longer saving lives. I had a feeling of a...of a future. And then came the time when I decided that it was time for me to get married. (laughing) Because I found...I had found the person that I wanted to marry. (laughing) Some times when people in silly magazine interviews would interview me, they'd say, "What made you do all these things?" I said, "Well, I went around the world looking for my husband, and I found him."

Q: And he found you.

A: We found each other. Uh huh. And...uh...then...uh...we did. We just went to the ___ and got married and that was the end of it. No big wedding. He'd lost his wife during the...uh...well, she had really been with him all the time, but when the time came toward the end where they had to...where they came back and could find no house, no nothing and all his library was gone. The...the Germans had taken everything from him, he says...he once said...he had a wonderful sense of humor and he used to say, "The only time I enjoyed being...the only time I was ever on the sameness with the Rothchilds was when the Germans had my name on the list of people they were after." (laughing) So, anyway after I married I said, "Look, I'm so tired of running...very tired of running. How about our going to Israel?" That was before the...no...state was declared in 48...and this...I think I had this idea already in 47, but...uh...I didn't feel that my job in Paris was finished in building a new community and helping the community to build itself. For the first time I was able to use the real skills that I was trained for. And so we made our decision that in 53, we would both...uh...just...that was after the

state already, we would go to Palestine...we would go to Israel. And there I continued working and so does my husband, but...uh...I felt for the first time that I had roots. I had been floating. And...uh...it was really... uh...I...I think the first time in all my years since Constantinople that I felt...uh...real good and at peace.

Q: Were you there for many years?

A: 30 years. Yal.

Q: 53 to 83?

A: Uh?

Q: 53 to 83?

A: I didn't hear you.

Q: 1953 to 1983? Is that about it?

A: That's right. That's right. My husband died in...uh...(pause)...in 75. I continued working, but...

Q: What sort of work were you doing?

A: In Israel? Well, I was doing something more...much more creative. Something that I was...I was learning at the same time that I was working cause I really knew nothing about handicapped children. First of all, I was not working as an American there. I was working in the...in the frame of the JDC because there was the money, but I was...uh...not being paid in dollars anymore. I didn't want to. I really felt so strongly about that that I just wanted to be one of the country. I had to learn Hebrew, but this was one language I didn't...I wasn't born with, but I do have an ear and I used to go to the...to a teacher at 6:30 in the morning and take my lessons, and I was provided with a bilingual secretarial help, and I bluffed my way through Hebrew because of my ear, I could just pick up things. And...uh...after his death, I still kept working, kept our house, and it was only really after my family in America began saying, "Look, why don't you come and join us?" To this day, I don't know whether I did the right thing, but doesn't matter. Uh...I think the only time in all of my life that I ever felt that I belonged, that I had roots...there were many things that I didn't like there, just as you don't like anywhere else. You don't like everything.

Q: So you've been here since 1983, 1984, living in Teaneck.

A: Uh huh. Living in Teaneck.

Q: With your family.

- A: No. I have my own apartment. That was one condition because ...uh...I love them dearly, but I wanted to have my own life. And...uh...it's been a very good life. It's been a very satisfying life in the sense that I don't know how any of these things ever happened because I've never reached out. Uh...I have had students from the Hebrew University who are doing their thesis. One about anti-Semitism in Japan. One about anti-Semitism in...uh...in...uh...Cuba, so these...these young people catch up with me. And...uh...also, survivors of the Shanghai experience have caught up with me. And...uh...I...uh...and so actually I would say it's been a very good, comfortable, satisfying life.
- Q: You have many, many wonderful things to look back on and look ahead toward too.
- A: But this is the greatest experience I've had yet, coming and...and talking into so many machines. (Laughing)
- Q: Is there anything else finally that you'd like to say, to tell us, would like to leave on the tape?
- A: I wish I were 10, 15 years younger. Not much more. Because I find the world so interesting. I find what's happening now in the world very exciting. I can't be a part of it anymore. I can only be platonic. I'm a voracious reader. I think since I'm back I've enjoyed the pleasure of catching up on my love for history, and understanding so many things that I never understood before when I was in action.
- Q: You've lived through a great deal of history.
- A: I've lived through history, yes, and I'm very grateful for it, but...uh...I still feel that I...I don't know how to put it. That if I had a wish at all and I...I say this honestly, I would rather be in Israel than here, although I am very, very unhappy with what is happening there. But it...it's become a part of me. Now does it go back to my father and his love for the country? He also made the compromise and came to America. I don't know. I really don't know.
- Q: It seems to be that you can say and feel that you've done a great deal to make Israel possible. With that I think...
- A: I and not only I.
- Q: You yourself have had a lot to do with it, and that's something that you certainly can look back on with a great deal of satisfaction.
- A: I do.
- Q: It's been a wonderful interview and thank you very much for having done it.
- A: You're very welcome.

Conclusion of Interview