



# Barbara Gaffin Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: This is an interview with Barbara Gaffin. I am sitting with her in her office in Downtown Boston. And the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum and the date is July 11, 2000. OK. So, I think the best place for us to begin is for you to tell me a little bit about your childhood.

Barbara Gaffin: OK. I was raised mostly in Newton. My family -- I first lived in Dorchester -- and my family left Dorchester in 1962 when I was in second grade, and both my parents were and still are very active in the Jewish community and very active in volunteer work. My father was a longtime activist, particularly with the Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister Association. At the time, it was Jewish Big Brother. And they were both also involved with B'nai Brith and they organized Halloween parties for children at various hospitals. They held barbeques at the Fernald School for the Mentally Retarded. They had all kinds of programming and festivities for children who are disadvantaged in whatever way. And it wasn't necessarily just Jewish, as I said, since they had Halloween parties for -- and they got donations from all kinds of people and they organized people at B'nai Brith in their lodges and in their chapters to work with them. And I just remember my basement always being filled with donations from various places that my parents would then package up and bring to the hospital or to the school or whatever.

JR: Did they involve -- did you have any siblings?

BG: Yes. I have a sister and a brother.

JR: Did they encourage you to be involved in the kinds of projects they were involved in or --



BG: Not really. On occasion we would go with them to the Fernald School, but I don't have any memories of going to anything else. And I don't remember really helping to pack up things. So not in a real overt way, no.

JR: What did your parents do for a living?

BG: My father was and is now retired, a CPA, and my mother in the early years of their marriage worked as a secretary for various companies and for my father at one time and then she was a housewife for most of her life.

JR: How did your family identify Jewishly?

BG: Conservative.

JR: Conservative.

BG: Yes. Strong Conservative.

JR: So what -- how did you celebrate holidays and Shabbat?

BG: We celebrated all holidays. We actually in our younger years, particularly in Dorchester and maybe in the beginning of Newton, we celebrated all holidays -- Sukkot, Shavuoth, Pesach -- and I don't remember any real celebration of Shavuoth, but I think that's fairly typical. But we stayed out of school for all of the Jewish holidays, and we were taught not to write on Shabbat. We didn't do laundry on Shabbat. And, any -- Shabbat activities were pretty minimal and it was going -- we went to Shabbat services.

JR: At what synagogue?

BG: Mishkan Tefilah. Either Friday nights, definitely Saturday mornings, and as we all got older, this waned a little bit. But that's my strong recollection, certainly during my childhood, was certainly observing the holidays.



JR: And how has your Jewish practice changed or --

BG: It hasn't changed. It's pretty much the same. There are very minor differences. For instance, we -- we have a Havdalah Service on Saturday night which I didn't grow up with, but we do it now. Growing up as a child, I had a whole chevra, group of kids that went from Hebrew school to Shabbat services, so it was a fun, social time for me. My children don't have that. They are pretty much the only ones in their Hebrew school class that go to Shabbat services. There are probably two or three other kids that go and they aren't necessarily friends with them. So there is nothing really there for my kids, which makes it harder.

JR: How old are your kids?

BG: They're now 10 and 8. And they've -- I've been taking them to Shabbat services since they were very young. And then we also -- how else is it different. I'll write on Shabbat. I don't have any problems with driving on Shabbat. I won't do laundry. I don't shop on Shabbat. I don't travel if it's work-related. I don't do anything work-related on Shabbat. I never, ever have, actually.

JR: As a child did you go to any Jewish summer camps or --

BG: Yes. The most Jewish camp I went to was Pembroke, which is a Zionist camp. And I actually rebelled against going and really had no interest. It was when I was probably in 8th grade or so, so it was a time when I was really rejecting doing anything that was really overtly Jewish. But I enjoyed it. I still may have resented some of the Jewish practices, but I still enjoyed camp and I enjoyed the friends that I made there. And then I went on to get an undergraduate degree at Brandeis in Middle Eastern and Judaic Studies -- Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, and also in Psychology, so I really continued on the Jewish path.

JR: Have you spent much time in Israel?



BG: Yes. Yes. I -- my first trip was in 1972 and I loved it and I went back every year or couple of years for many, many years until I got married and it just was becoming more expensive, and then having children, that made it -- that really put it -- now I go on occasion for work, so yes, I -- the first -- once I started in 1972, I probably went 10 times in a 15-year period.

JR: And how did you get involved in your work here?

BG: My current work, actually, I've been doing for over 15 years. When I first graduated college, and I knew I wanted to go to work immediately, I was looking for a job in the Jewish world preferably dealing with Israel. Not preferably -- actually -- that was the only thing I was interested in, was doing something that had to do with Israel. So I got a job as a secretary at the Zionist Organization of America. Ideologically it didn't matter to me. It was a Jewish organization and I could sort of get involved. And from there I started initiating all kinds of programs and activities for young adults. I ran an Israeli coffeehouse in Brookline and I had all kinds of young adult activities, not just there but young adult Zionist programs.

JR: Were your parents Zionists as well?

BG: Not really. No. They had gone to Israel once, but Israel was not centerfold in our home. Being Jewish was, but Israel was sort of a sideshow.

JR: Were your siblings also involved in --

BG: No. My siblings weren't involved at all. They did the bare minimum and, after that, did nothing. And that's true to this day, too. The -- so then after I was working at the Zionist Organization of America, then I took another job at another Zionist organization and then I applied for a job here at this organization, which was in 1979, which didn't -- it only had a minimal part of dealing with Israel. But at that time, I felt that career-wise I needed to broaden myself. It's really -- Israel still is an important part of my work, but



there is certainly not that need anymore to have it be the center of my focus.

JR: Why is that do you think?

BG: I think that -- I hate to put it all on Israel, but -- Israel has changed over the years. In 1972 when I was 17 or 18 years old and everything was new and exciting and fresh and I think Israelis felt that way, too. Certainly on a superficial level. And with the Lebanon War there was -- I saw it as a depressed Israeli state. It was a time of a lot of self-questioning by Israelis. And I certainly was part of that and it just became a maturity and a realism that Israel, unfortunately, is like any other state and its people is like any other people and unfortunately, therefore, is capable of all of the ills and the racism and all of the negative stuff that comes with human nature. And, so it just became less of an up feeling whenever I went. It was almost like a down feeling when I went. And there was so much -- with the tension between the Ashkenazi and the Sephardim, and then when I started working on behalf of Ethiopian Jews and I saw all the games that the Israelis were playing, it just -- it sort of burst my ideological bubble. And I think it -- yeah, it was all around the same time with Lebanon and Ethiopian Jews. So there was a lot of questioning. And I remember when I was in high school having a very close friend who was not a Zionist. She was raised Reform. And I remember her telling me that her parents thought that Israel was irrelevant in their lives. Being Jewish was important, but it was really -- they were fully satisfied being American Jews. And I couldn't relate to that at all at the time, because, to me, I assumed I was going to make Aliyah. I was involved with only Zionist activities and Israel was the guiding force in my life. And now I finally understand what that family had felt because, in a way, I can see -- American Jews, we do have such a full life, and we can live here in whatever way we want without the same kind of tensions that Israel experiences among its people.

JR: Particularly, I think, for Conservative Jews.

BG: Particularly, right. Right.



JR: I've experienced that.

BG: Right.

JR: So tell me a little bit about how you got involved in your work with Ethiopian Jews.

BG: Well, I was working here at the time. I was a community relations associate. And I was receiving -- just working at a JCRC at the time, I was one of many JCRCs that was receiving material about what was going on in Ethiopia. And the material was coming from the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, an organization based in California. And I guess most organizations were ignoring their material, but I read it and I thought it was very disturbing to hear that Jews were being killed in Ethiopia and what's going on. Nobody is doing anything about it.

JR: What year was this?

BG: This was in '79. The end of -- probably closer to 1980. Yeah, just about the end of '79, '80. And fortunately I had a very dedicated lay leadership. Judy Wolf was chair of our World Jewry Committee at the time. And we developed a very good relationship with the people at the American Association for Ethiopian Jews. And we listened to the reports and we sent out their materials and we got a lot of people involved. And then in 1981, the CRC in Los Angeles decided to organize a trip to Ethiopia. And fortunately my organization was very supportive of my going and I decided to go.

JR: How many people were on the trip?

BG: There were about 12 people from the United States and Canada. And what was important about my organization allowing me to go, even though I actually -- I footed my own bill. It's not something an organization would normally do. They'd pay for your trip. But, at the time, it was important because this trip was not sanctioned by the Jewish establishment and because of that, that meant that our JCRC was really doing something



out of line by letting me participate in the trip. And also, CJP was not particularly involved on behalf of Ethiopian Jews and they were -- not that they didn't -- they didn't express any support or negative -- they weren't against my going, but there was no great support coming from there either. So we really were all alone in embarking on this at the time.

JR: Tell me about the trip.

BG: Well, the trip was quite amazing because we were told that we would be able to visit the Jews in the villages. Now, this was important because the villages, we had learned, had been closed off to outside. It's not that so many outsiders were going, but there had been occasional people who were able to go. So the government, at the time, which was a real ruthless government -- it did massacre people over the past couple of years and it was really a horrific, dangerous government. So they said, OK, you can come and you can go visit the Jews. Now, I don't know how the real start of that -- like how we even found out, because Los Angeles was taking care of all of that. And also, we had to pretend that we weren't Jewish. So here we were -- we're not going to go visit Jews. We're pretending we're not Jewish. The whole thing was just this pretense, and then when we got there, there was a woman who met us at the airport in Ethiopia who just started talking to us in Hebrew.

JR: Interesting. So she somehow figured out --

BG: [Laughs.] Well, I think they all knew.

JR: Right.

BG: You know, I think the farce was on our side, not on their side. So we all pretended that we didn't understand what she was saying. And then she said, oh, if you don't understand Hebrew, I'll speak to you in Yiddish. And then she spoke to us in Yiddish. [Laughs.]



JR: Was she Ethiopian?

BG: She was Ethiopian. She had -- see, Israel and Ethiopia had had very good relations before the Marxist regime. So under Haile Selassie, there were all kinds of Ethiopians who were studying and training, and I'm sure there were secret police, well, I'm not sure, but I assume that they were getting all kinds of training from the Israelis and there were Ethiopians who were brought to Israel for education. And there were Israelis in Ethiopia. So this woman probably lived in Israel for two years.

JR: Right.

BG: I mean, that's what I'm guessing. I know -- and obviously a very bright person to pick up both languages. So we just felt like such idiots. [Laughs.] So then we had -- we had all kinds of people in charge. We had my colleague from Los Angeles who had actually lived in Ethiopia during the Red Terror. So he knew what the government was capable of. Then we had someone with us who was a professional photographer who had spent many years in Ethiopia. And he was the one who said, OK, we'll figure something out. He had actually been a prisoner in Ethiopia and -- all kinds of bizarre stories. And he said, all right, if you want to go visit the villages, we're going to have to pretend that we're tourists climbing, or hiking, the Simien Mountains, and if we were lucky, we'd be given sleeping bags and if we were still luckier, they would not be lice-infested. And of course what we're doing is illegal, our going to the Jewish villages, since they're closed. So we had to -- and we'd go by horseback and by mule through these mountains that drop 14,000 feet. So we had to decide as a group whether we wanted to take this risk. And we also understood that not only could it cause us harm, but the Ethiopian Jews, just visiting them, because Americans were Zionist conspirators and CIA agents -- I mean, you were scum. So, we basically decided that we were going to go for it. So --

JR: Were you in touch with any of the people in the villages themselves?





BG: No. No. So we ended up -- excuse me -- hiking for several days. It took us much longer than they told us it would, because I think they didn't expect us to be so slow. And by the time we got to the village, it was dusk. Now, the problem with this is that we weren't going to be able to stay very long because you definitely don't want to be there at night because that's when the security police come check through. We also -- we were going to have to leave the same way we came and we didn't want to hike through the mountains on horseback and by mule at night.

JR: Right. Right.

BG: So there were all these things that we had to be concerned about. When we got to the village, they, of course, didn't know that we were Jewish and they had heard that, you know, that white Jews were supposedly coming because that kind of stuff gets out. But they didn't trust that we were Jewish. So we had to go through this Jewish geography game and talk Torah and all kinds of things to prove to them that we were, in fact, Jewish. And that was quite amazing as you can imagine.

JR: How large were the villages?

BG: This particular village -- I don't know because I don't know what the boundaries of it was. Were. But we probably, I mean, we probably saw about 50, 60 people. And I don't know if that's --

JR: And people couldn't communicate with you in Hebrew?

BG: No. No. We had numerous translators.

JR: Oh, OK.

BG: We had our Ethiopian translator and then we had -- and you'd say, well, how is it that, you know, you're playing this spy game, but you've got an Ethiopian translator. I



don't know. I think we just bribed all of these people.

JR: Bribed, yeah.

BG: But we also had -- we brought with us a Yale student who had taught himself Amharic. So he was kind of our undercover person. So when we were there we started asking all kinds of questions, and that's really when we got all of the information that we then brought back to the United States. All of the information about Land Rovers going in and about people disappearing, people escaping to Sudan, that the Land Rovers were -- that the secret police were imprisoning women and children, and if a family member was missing, then they would imprison the whole family. That kind of stuff. So -- and we also had known that -- ORT had been conducting some Hebrew lessons for children. They had been kicked out that past July, the previous July. So we asked whether there was anyone there who spoke Hebrew, and they brought us out this 13-year-old boy with a Hebrew primer, just like the ones we have here and it was quite amazing. And he read to us in perfect Hebrew. And, it was quite -- it was just incredible. I mean, I had my tape recorder, which I had smuggled in, and so I taped him. And, at that point, I think it was right around that point, our Ethiopian guide said you've got to get out of here. It's dark and you've got to go. So most of the group left. I stayed back with my colleague in California and the student, Brett, who was our translator. So we stayed back and we interviewed more people and then our Ethiopian guide came back. This was about an hour later. And he said that you've been spotted by the police. So we had to close up and it was like, oh my -- what does this mean. So he said, we must report to the police right now. [Laughs.] So, Barry, my colleague, says, Barbara, get rid of the tape. Get rid of -- it was the tape that I had recorded the 13 year old boy. And Brett, who was younger than I, was saying, he's lying. He's just scared. He just wants us to leave already. Don't throw it out. Don't throw it out. So I had to decide, what am I going to do. Was I going to risk our lives and the lives of the Ethiopians, or did I want to help make history and bring this tape back? So I decided that I had better listen to the words of caution. It was in my



older -- my older colleague with experience. So we're on the horse, it's dark, and I'm trying to destroy this tape. And I couldn't do it. You know, I'm holding on, the branches are coming, it's dark, and I'm trying to rip apart an audio cassette. It's a very difficult thing to do. So I figured, maybe I'll just have to throw it out. But then -- but you spend one day in Ethiopia and you see that there is no litter.

JR: Right.

BG: Nothing. Not an extra piece of anything. So I decide to test my observation. So I'm on my horse and each of the horses had Ethiopian boys sort of walking the horses. So I took a dirty piece of Kleenex that was in my pocket, just a little piece, and I dropped it nonchalantly behind my horse. Just -- not making a big deal about it. Within seconds, the Ethiopian boy who was leading my horse had run around, picked up that little piece of Kleenex, and gave it back to me. So I knew right then there was no way I'm dropping an audio cassette. [Laughs.] There was nowhere in Ethiopia you could hide this cassette. So then I motioned I had to go to the bathroom and so I got off of my horse, I went into the woods, I dug a hole and I buried it. And there it is to this day. Maybe. As it turns out, we did not have to go to the police, so Brett was right. The trip was harrowing. We ended up having to sleep outside, and we had Ethiopian guards with guns, rifles, to protect us from the bandits and leopards. I mean, it was all said in great drama and nothing serious happened to us. But, there was this constant refrain that danger was just around the corner and we got home safely. No one confiscated my film. No one confiscated my tape recorder. Even when we left the country, you know, we had left a lot of cash back there. You're supposed to count -- you're supposed to report how much money you have, so as you're being frisked, the Ethiopian woman tells me to count my money and it was obviously much less than what I had reported, and so she said, oh, you just must have miscounted when you came in. Just totally -- loose. So that was it. And after that experience, I mean, it was just so obvious that we had to tell the world what we had seen and many of us on the trip made it into a major campaign and it was -- that was



in 1981. It was 82, I then, lived with Ethiopian immigrants in Beersheva in an absorption center.

JR: For how long?

BG: For a month, and that was quite an eye-opener, too, because you got to see -- see them once in Israel. And then '84 was the first rescue. So it was only, it was several, it was a few years later. But they were quite -- you know, the Jewish establishment was just very slow, in responding -- very, very slow.

JR: What kind of obstacles did you face when you brought back the kind of material that you had collected there?

BG: There were actually no obstacles, except from the real Jewish establishment that -- I mean, I was speaking -- I was probably giving five or six talks a week. Everywhere. I was going all over the country. And you know, primarily, obviously on the east because the people in California were doing their share. [inaudible radio interruption] But really the biggest obstacle was from the Jewish establishment. I mean, I would get, I mean, my boss would occasionally -- he was very good at protecting me, I suppose, but occasionally I would overhear somebody say something to him about the work we were doing in Ethiopia. And occasionally somebody would --

JR: What kinds of things did people say?

BG: Oh, they're saying I'm giving it too much high profile. We should be quiet about this. This should be all behind the scenes. This shouldn't be raising -- you know, this shouldn't be raising awareness. And I also had somebody who was working in one of the National Jewish agency offices, and he would send me memos, confidential memos, that people had written about -- the fact that I was out there speaking. So that was it -- but fortunately my boss was entirely supportive. So, as far as I was concerned, nothing really stopped me. There was really no real obstacles, even though people tried to make



them. But they didn't succeed.

JR: When you were speaking and writing stuff after the trip, were you speaking as a representative of the JCRC --

BG: Yes.

JR: -- or sort of as your own?

BG: Oh, no. As the JCRC. I mean, I had full support from the JCRC. I reported to our executive committee when I came back. There was absolute full support. And we had a very active Ethiopian Jewry committee at the time. So, it was -- it was absolutely full, complete support from this organization. Not a breath of opposition.

JR: What were the greatest challenges for you in doing this kind of work? [inaudible radio interruption]

BG: I guess it was the challenge of working against my own community-- or the Israelis. That was weird because the Israelis aren't my enemy, but in this situation, they were the opposition. And so I had to couch everything in a way that I didn't want to sound like I was bad-mouthing these -- I always, always said, you know, the Israelis are doing this and that but we still need to do more. So I always put a spin on it because I really did not want to bad -- and, you know, they were -- the Ethiopian Jewry activists who were the extremists who would say the Israelis are being racist and they would attack everything the Israelis did. And that was not my style at all. But it was a challenge because I could have been backed into a corner and I'd say, well, if they are doing so much, why aren't they real -- there were too many unanswered questions.

JR: Like what kinds of things?



BG: We were able to smuggle students out of Ethiopia. Now, that's [on a] one by one, but the Israelis were operating in Ethiopia. I mean, we met Israelis in Addis Ababa. They were there. They could have, in retrospect, I think, done more to hasten the Jews coming out. And it was very terribly upsetting to know that Jews were dying, dying in Ethiopia, trying to get to Israel, and yet if one Jew died today in the Soviet Union or even in Iran, look at what we're doing on behalf of the Iranian prisoners, you never saw rallies on behalf of Ethiopian Jews. You never saw people -- people wouldn't know the names of Ethiopian Jews that died. It was almost like, well, you know, they're Africans and Africans die --

JR: Right.

BG: -- and people were just much too accepting of it and that was frightening to me. That was frightening that, here -- I'm part of the Jewish community. I'm working for and with and on behalf of the Jewish community and my own community, which just went through a Holocaust, could be so nonchalant about Jews that were dying in Africa. It was so painful to me and it still is so painful to me that even liberal Jews, you know, that are so quick to condemn the conservatives, they were just as bad, just as bad. There was no -- so I think that that is just a very painful realization and made it a real challenge in doing this work.

JR: So why do you think there were those -- that kind of distant response?

BG: I think on some level people don't see -- they don't relate to Africans. And, you know, I work, now, I do a lot of work with Jews in Ukraine, and people are always saying, oh, I want to work with them because that's my ancestry. People can relate to it. And, to me, it's like, wow, we're really getting -- because they're Jews, it's OK, but to get so narrow that because they're Eastern Europeans -- does that mean that Jews in another part of the world aren't part of your people? And I just have always had a problem with that attitude and unfortunately, I know the tensions between, and I think they're very



unnecessary tensions, you know, between Ashkenazi and Sephardi and Eastern European, you know, German Jews and Russian Jews and it's sick to me. It's really -- it's -- Jews, unfortunately, I think Jews are no different than other people. And because we're fewer in number, we probably are able to do things differently, but I think it's just a harsh realization that we have our prejudices along with everybody else.

JR: How did this work, or maybe, did this work change your perceptions of the Jewish community and your role or placement in it?

BG: Well, I guess it's pretty much what I said. It hardened me.

JR: Mm-hmm.

BG: Which is unfortunate, but it hasn't driven me out. It's still my work. I see this -- I can't imagine doing anything else in my life except [besides?] work in the Jewish community. So, yeah, it just kind of was a wake-up call. That's all. And I suppose that's OK. I mean, that's the way it is. So, you incorporate it with other things in your life and say, OK. But I'll do my part to make things better. I mean, when I get -- when I speak and people ask me, do the Ethiopian Jews inter-marry, I always sort of take that opportunity to say, well, why is it inter-marry and who do you mean -- who do you mean by inter-marry? Are you talking about non-Jews? No. No. No. We're talking about Israelis. Well, what Israelis do you mean? Do you mean Yemenite Israelis? Do you mean Polish Israelis? I mean, what does inter-marriage mean? Do you mean the real dark Africans versus the light-skinned Indians, I mean, what does it mean? It's like inter-marriage is Jew and non-Jew. But a dark-skinned Jew and a light-skinned Jew is not inter-marriage. And then I -- I also take it even farther. I say, it's weird because they think, oh, a black Jew, they sort of think underneath -- oh, maybe they're not really Jewish. And I said, what's more probably not Jewish is my having red hair. That's -- that's more of an anomaly for -- not a Jew today in the year 2000, but certainly historically. Jews are from the Middle East and so --



JR: Originally dark skinned.

BG: Yeah. Yeah.

JR: What was most rewarding about this work for you?

BG: So much. Seeing people respond. That's very rewarding.

JR: Americans or in Ethiopia itself?

BG: Americans. Yeah. Because Ethiopians couldn't really respond and Israelis, you don't really see it. Seeing the change-- but the change -- there is still a lot of negative stuff going on, so I can't say that that's really rewarding. I have a feeling that I guess I played a small part in history. That's -- that I didn't -- that I saw an opportunity and I took advantage of it and -- so that, in itself, that is sort of a self satisfying -- satisfying from an internal way. But when I see Ethiopian Jews in Israel, I mean, it's just -- it's just -- like I -- it's quite overwhelming. It's quite overwhelming. I see -- when I was there this past January, in Haifa, a woman spoke to us. She was a teenager, incredible English. Now, I've never met an Ethiopian who lives in Israel who speaks incredible English because there is no way that they would speak incredible English. And it was incredible. You know, she was stunning and articulate. And I started to ask her questions afterward and it turned out that she was from Beer Sheva, and it turned out that she was one of my campers when I was there in 1982.

JR: Oh wow.

BG: As a young child. So that -- you know, to see her grow and -- wow. Just become a spokesperson. That's the best. That's the best. To see these Ethiopians. I don't like seeing that they've lost their heritage, because the Ethiopian culture was an amazing culture. And that, too, kind of makes me sad because that will be lost. But, to see what they've been able to make of themselves and yeah, maybe they would have been able to





make of themselves in Ethiopia, too, but the odds are that they'd probably not be alive right now if they were in Ethiopia still.

JR: Right.

BG: Or at least sickly and starving. So that's the biggest reward.

JR: In what -- does your work, now, still involve Ethiopian Jews?

BG: Yeah, it sure does. Because there are all kinds of issues in Israel with their education and, unfortunately, the Israelis are repeating a lot of the same mistakes in their absorption of the Ethiopians. The Sephardic Jews still bear resentment after 30 years, they still bear resentment. And so --

JR: Thirty years isn't really that long when you think about it.

BG: No, it isn't. But people keep saying -- you're right, it isn't. You're right -- because some resentment goes back hundreds of years, doesn't it, and thousands of years, so you're right. But it was a short time in how -- in when they came --

JR: Right.

BG: -- it was over the course of a couple of years and their treatment of a couple of years. But, you know, but you're right. It's actually a very good point, so I'll adjust my perception of that. But the -- so when people say, oh, we'll just have to accept it. We'll lose this generation of Ethiopians and the next one will be fine. But, after looking at how the Sephardim feel, I'm not confident of that. And I think there is a lot of potential for creating a real angry group of Ethiopians. And so what will we have accomplished? You know, we took them from their homes and then what? And then you treat them, you know, teach them -- so that, too, is very -- that's painful. That's sort of the flipside of the satisfaction that I've gained. So we do a lot in trying to raise awareness about the



Ethiopians in Israel and what could be done to help them to raise funds or to visit activists and get a sense of what's happened there. And then it's also the whole situation of the Falas Mura in Ethiopia, that we do some work on their behalf. Because they're, right now, in limbo because they're just waiting to be brought to Israel and the Israelis don't want to really take them out. And yet some of them qualify because they have family members in Israel. So that is also another very sad situation.

JR: Are you involved with other Jewish refugee populations? Maybe refugee isn't quite the right word.

BG: Yeah.

JR: Jewish International?

BG: Not really because there aren't that many anymore. I mean, we do work on behalf of the Iranian Jews. We had a big rally here yesterday. We do a lot of work in Ukraine with our sister city in Dnipropetrovsk. That's our way of being involved with another Jewish community. They obviously don't -- they have very different problems than the Ethiopians, clearly, but those are the main focus -- that's the main focus that we have. And if there is ever a need for us to be an advocate for a Jewish community around the world, we'd be there. But it's not the way it was 10, 15 years ago where there were a lot of communities around the world. You know, we did a lot of work on behalf of the Jews in Argentina and Jews in Syria.

JR: What other kinds of community service or activist causes have you been involved in?

BG: I used to do a lot of work on behalf of abortion rights. Haven't done that in a long time.

JR: Were you involved in the woman's movement?



BG: Not really, because when I was working here, I ran our women's issues committee, but once I got to get a feel of the women's movement, I got a little turned off.

JR: By what aspect of it?

BG: In-fighting. Disorganization. I mean the Jewish community -- I was spoiled. In the Jewish community, we are so organized, we are so professional -- I hate to use the word professional, but we know what we're doing, and we do it right. And so to get a glimpse at other non-profits and other movements that aren't quite as developed. And the women's movement from what -- at least what I saw here -- I didn't find as developed. So how do you go from being in the most sophisticated to those who are just beginning, I found it hard. And the in-fighting, I just find in-fighting, I just have no tolerance for it. I mean, it's one thing, in the Jewish community, because I guess I was used to it and identified with it more, but I had no patience for it in the women's movement. So what other -- I can't even --

JR: I mean, they don't have to be about the women's movement. I was just asking --

BG: I guess my pretty major focus was the Jewish community.

JR: Mm-hmm.

BG: You know, and all that entails.

JR: How have your contributions affected others do you think?

BG: You'll have to ask the others. [Laughs.] I don't know. You'd like to think that maybe a talk that I gave here or there got someone involved. I mean, you don't really know. I mean, there are some people who I know for a fact, I was the cause, I was the impetus to get them involved. But generally you don't know what kind of effect you have, so --

JR: It's kind of a leap of faith.



BG: Yeah. You just kind of -- you just have to assume it because, I mean, I get positive feedback, but whether people then do anything with it -- I think a certain percentage does. It's always a small percentage, but that's the way it is in any cause I've worked in. Within the Jewish community, I spent many, many years working on behalf of the Soviet Jewry movement, on behalf of the Syrian Jews, Argentine Jews -- all of these movements and I see what it takes. It takes a lot -- a lot of work and effort and it's still -- you get a return, but you have to put in so much to get that return. So I don't think that this was any different.

JR: How do you think your work has affected you?

BG: I mean, I guess I would have to repeat myself. On the one hand, I have so much passion for this work. On the other hand, I'm quite cynical about it and--has the work made me cynical? I think that in part, there's a lot to be cynical with life, and it's quite a balance between seeing people's limitations and yet accepting them, and seeing all of this horrible stuff that goes on around the world, deaths and massacres. And the Jewish community plays its little, oh, well we have to be involved in that but we don't have time for that or they always make excuses but why they can't get involved in something, and then they [I?] sit back and say, you know what, I'm part of the problem, too, because we all have our limited energy and we all have what turns us on. But when I sit back and I look at the collective Jewish response to things, it's painful. But it's not painful enough to make me leave. I mean, I still -- so, I don't know if the work created me or I found the work that fit into what works for me, because I was not, as a child, I didn't consider myself an activist, and in high school I wasn't a big activist. And certainly in college, too -- it really wasn't until -- I mean, the Ethiopian Jews, it just really -- it felt right to me.

JR: Did you have any particular role models in your life or now or earlier?

BG: I don't know that I called them role models. There were people who I looked up to. I certainly always looked up to my parents, even though they did a very different kind of



work than I did. But it all stems from the same sentiment. It's just how you apply it. So they were going to hospitals and making children smile, so I was rabble-rousing on behalf of Ethiopian Jews. I mean, it's the same intention. Certainly my boss when I was working here, you know, during those first few years, he just gave me so much support, when I, really against so many -- when the tide was against him and he really was just completely there for me and fully supportive and the fact that he didn't let anybody really stand in my way. I think that was really important to me. And I think I appreciated then, but I certainly appreciated looking back to see how difficult it may have been for him to have done that. You know, there were -- there was somebody who worked here -- it was the Jewish Community Council at the time -- in 1970 or '71 or so when I was leafleting on behalf of Soviet Jews. She was just someone who took me under her wing. And I remember her. And I remember my first boss out of college who was so kind to me, who was still working -- still working here at the American Jewish Committee who just -- people who were -- gave me full support. So that's really the kind of -- instead of role models, people who let me do what I could do and encouraged me. And they were not obstacles in my way. Those are people I guess I would consider role models or certainly supporters, mentors.

JR: Do you bring the issues that you work with here and, you know, around the world home to your family or --

BG: I do, but I'm not pushy on it. My husband also works in the human rights field. So we don't -- we don't overwhelm our kids with it. We expose them to it. And my kids have been to my talks, and when there are rallies or any kind of public gathering -- I mean, I would have brought my kids yesterday, but it was more of a logistical nightmare. But we expose our kids. I mean, I take them to the Yom Hazikaron service every year and I like to take them to the Holocaust Memorial observance every year. So I do, in that sense, my husband and I both -- and my husband actually has spoken, not about me, but --



[break in audio]

JR: Were you married at the time of your trip to Ethiopia?

BG: No, I wasn't. And not only was I not married, I was living with somebody else and -- but I met my husband because he was working for Congressman Barney Frank and I was working -- I was lobbying him in his office to work on behalf of Ethiopian Jews. [phone rings] So, I mean, he was -- you know, he was the chief of -- he wasn't the chief of staff at that time. He was the foreign policy person, so he was -- he had a human rights background and we really -- I mean he was great to work with and then when I came down to give a talk on Ethiopian Jews, I guess it was a few months after my trip we actually met, and I guess all of the rest is all personal stuff.

JR: But I assume that he is supportive of you and what you do.

BG: Absolutely. He's more than supportive. He sometimes pushes me to do things that I'm not ready to do. I remember in 1988, this was before we had children, we were both planning to go to Nepal and Yemen and I had a last-minute opportunity to run a trip to Ethiopia. And I said, well, I can't do that because I'm going with my husband to Nepal and India. And Doug said, you absolutely have to do it. I said, how can I do this. He said, you'll just meet me in India. You'll go and you'll fly from Ethiopia to India. I said, that's ridiculous. I'm not just going to meet you in India. He said, yes, yes, yes. And I -- I can't -- I mean, I was never nervous in Ethiopia. I was so nervous when I had to fly, and I still remember the moment, getting on the plane from Ethiopia to meet Doug in India and, you know, India is so -- there are so many people and you go into the airport and it's mobbed and it's -- just crowds and crowds of people. Plus my husband's uncle was dying and we didn't even know if he would be able to make it. So just this anxiety -- I was so full of anxiety about meeting my husband in India all by myself. But he said, no, no, no, you'll do it. So he's always pushing me to do these kinds of things and in my heart, I'm really a scaredy cat. [Laughs.] In my natural state, I am not somebody who just, you



know, runs out and does these things. I need to feel that it's OK. I need to have the support and people around me. But, on my own, on my own self, it is not natural for me to have done this trip. I never would have done it by myself. Only with the comfort of 11 other people.

JR: Have you -- so how many times have you been back to Ethiopia?

BG: Just twice.

JR: Just twice. Is it very -- when was the second --

BG: '88.

JR: Was it very different then?

BG: Yes, completely. It was so different that it wasn't even -- I never even tell people that I went back the second time because it was so -- nothing -- it was -- we went to a village that was legally sanctioned by the government. It was very closed-in. The people were so used to seeing Americans that it was a ho hum. They had the whole tourist thing out there selling us their wares. You know, it was like -- it was nothing. Nothing -- no information to bring back. You know, the government was in there watching everything we're doing. The people didn't even seem afraid. You know? So it was just OK.

JR: Just --

BG: Yeah. Yeah.

JR: Is there anything else we haven't covered that you'd like to tell me about?

BG: I don't think so. I don't think so.

JR: That's pretty much the extent of my questions, I think.



BG: OK.

JR: One other thing I was wondering, how many women were on the first trip that you went on.

BG: About half and half. Barbara Ribikoff Gordon was on that trip. She was the one who went on to create the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry. She's still the Executive Director of that organization. The irony is that I was about 26 or so when I went, 27 -- Barbara is probably 10 years older than I am and there was another woman my age, there was another woman -- maybe it wasn't quite half and half. Maybe it was less. There was another woman who also continued to be a major activist who was probably about 20 or 25 years older than I was. And yet another woman who is also -- so there were two women my mother's, my parent's age. Barbara, who is, you know, about 10 or 15 years older than I am. And then another woman my age. And the older women were terrified, really scared. I wasn't at all. I thought this was -- I wasn't flip about it. I didn't say oh, what fun, what fun, what adventure. But on some level, that's really how I felt. There was an excitement about this whole thing. I loved being outdoors. I loved being on the horses. I loved being in the mountains. I loved the -- I just loved the whole excitement of it and they were terrified. Absolutely terrified. And they're the ones, in my mind, who deserve more credit, because for them to do something so terrifying, but to still do it, was so much harder than for me who wasn't that scared. So what did I -- I mean, I didn't really think I was losing anything. And then we always joke about how at the end, when we left the village and we were all safe and sound, we all sat down and cried. Now, they were crying because they were so relieved. I was crying because it was over. [Laughs.] And we always talk about that fact. But, they're the ones, you know, again, in retrospect, now that I have children and I'm older. And obviously when you get older, you generally are more hesitant to do things, not always, but generally, and to me I just can't imagine, you know, they were 60 years old and had children, not young children, but they had families at home and they took that risk and that, to me, I still think





about that. I still think about, wow, what guts they had. Not what guts I had because I was, you know, I didn't see it that way for myself. But they pushed on despite the anxiety and the fear. So --

JR: Well, great. Thank you very much.

BG: Thank you for doing this.

[END OF INTERVIEW ]