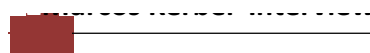




### Interview with Marcos Kerbel

- Interviewer:** We are interviewing today Marcos Kerbel, K-E-R-B-E-L, for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs project. Today's date is September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. My name is Kathy Hersh. So, Marcos, you mentioned that you came over to Miami on the Pedro Pan airlift.
- Marcos Kerbel:** Yes, I was one of those.
- Interviewer:** There was a big difference in you, that most of the children who came were Catholic, correct?
- Marcos:** I would say so, yes. Because our group was smaller.
- Interviewer:** So, tell us how your group was different and how it came to be, that you were in this airlift.
- Marcos:** Okay. I did really not know that I was even on Pedro Pan until many years later. Thanks to a researcher that basically told me that if I came along, I came with a visa waiver, as they were called, and I was in foster homes or living with other family members, I was a Pedro Pan, even though I did not come with a Catholic church. Because when the operation was approved, which involved, of course, the department of state and also health education and welfare at the time, it was approved for all three religious groups, Catholic, Protestants, and Jewish.
- It is known, at least about 14,048 kids came, most of whom were Catholic but there were about between 700 to 1,000 children who were Protestant background. There were 396 Jewish children. So, I came with that group.
- Interviewer:** So, you were one of that 396?
- Marcos:** That's correct.
- Interviewer:** Were they handled differently in any way?
- Marcos:** Well, remember the Catholic Church was not prepared for such a large group. Because, as I read the stories and heard some of the stories, they were only preparing for about less than 500 children. Originally, I think it was only 200. Then, once the Kennedy administration came in, I think an individual by the name of Abraham Ribicoff was appointed the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. I probably understand that he might have been familiar with the Kindertransport that the Jewish children that came out of Europe, out of Germany, Austria and on to, I think, into England. He, when he met with Father Bryan Walsh, who later became a monsignor, basically gave him full support.
- If I remember correctly, he gave him the first million dollars. So, the first children, the two siblings, came in on December 26, 1960. The operation really takes a lot of steam after the Bay of Pigs invasion, which started on April 15, 1961, with the air bombardments. I remember it was a Saturday morning. Then, right after that, a lot more children start coming out of



Cuba. So, I came right after the Bay of Pigs invasion. I was in Cuba when it happened.

**Interviewer:** How old were you?

**Marcos:** I was 14.

**Interviewer:** So, you must have been very much aware of the Bay of Pigs invasion?

**Marcos:** Oh yes. As a matter of fact, I remember sleeping, I think, three days with my clothes on, because we didn't know what was the result or what was it going to be.

**Interviewer:** So, the fact that, that invasion was not successful—

**Marcos:** Right.

**Interviewer:** It wasn't going to depose Castro, then was more incentive for people to send their children out?

**Marcos:** That's correct.

**Interviewer:** I had never—

**Marcos:** Because as the government consolidated itself, then the rumors started. One about a draft, and two, that the parents were going to lose control of their children, as they know in Spanish, "la patria potestad." That the children, after school, in the summer, would have to go up to the mountains to alphabetize the peasants. Then, especially the parents or the girls became very, very concerned.

**Interviewer:** So, there were more girls in the exodus?

**Marcos:** I don't know the exact number of that – the statistics.

**Interviewer:** What was your experience then, when the decision was made that you would leave? Was there a family council that decided?

**Marcos:** Well, basically, I found out about it through two of my cousins, who, on a Sunday, tell me, "We're leaving." Which was going to be around the Bay of Pigs area, but I think it could have been postponed. Then, I said, "How are you leaving? Why are you leaving?" So, then I went to see her father, who was my godfather, and I said, "You know, the situation, it doesn't look..." He went ahead and said okay, so he helped me with the contact.

**Interviewer:** So, you pretty much made the decision? You wanted to leave?

**Marcos:** At a certain point, I realized that, you know? Because all my friends were leaving. We used to meet on Sundays. Every Sunday we'd meet, this one would go, the other would go, they were going. Then, I realized also at a point, I had in mind that I want to come to United States to further my



studies. So, that was, I guess, an opportunity. It was very difficult on my parents because they had already immigrated to Cuba.

**Interviewer:** Where did they immigrate from?

**Marcos:** My grandparents were born – I always said depending on the year. My grandfather was born in, I think, White Russia. Then, they left with a Polish passport. Now, it's Belarus. So, my parents got married in Cuba and I have an older brother, who is six years older, and we were born in Cuba.

**Interviewer:** Did he come out as well?

**Marcos:** Yeah. He left before me.

**Interviewer:** So, tell us about the day you left.

**Marcos:** Well, it was May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1961. Of course, my parents were very sad. I didn't know where I was going to go, I thought I was going to come to Miami, just because my cousins had found a foster home that took care of them. All of a sudden, when I land, it was around 2:15 or so, there was a fellow from the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, as known as HIAS, which is a global organization been around for over 100 years. He says, "Here is your ticket. You're flying tonight at 7:00 to Los Angeles." I said, "Los Angeles? What?" [laughs]

**Marcos:** He says, "Don't worry. They'll take good care of you over there." Now, I didn't want to go to Los Angeles, I want to stay in Miami. The only relative I had at the time was an aunt with two young children. The suitcases did not arrive. So, I tried to use that as an excuse for them not to send me, because if I were to stay at least one or two nights, I could find a local home. They said, "Don't worry about it. When the suitcases arrive, we'll call your aunt. She knows the size difference, the size and clothes. We'll send it to you. You'll be fine." So, I went there and I was not a very happy camper while I was in L.A.

Looking in retrospect, it was the best thing that happened because it forced me to learn English. [laughs]

So, that's the... As they say in Spanish, "No hay mal, que por bien no venga," right? You heard that expression? [laughs]

**Interviewer:** So, how many years did you spend in Los Angeles?

**Marcos:** Well, I was there from May of '61 until June of '62. Until after school ended in June. Then, my uncles had already arrived in April of that year, of '62, and then they claimed me. Then, my parents arrived in October, on the next-to-the-last flight before the missile crisis, '62. Then, we settled my brother, who already arrived too, so we all moved to Atlanta.

**Interviewer:** Atlanta?

**Marcos:** To Atlanta, yes. That's where I finished high school, that's where I got my undergraduate degree in accounting, and my master's degree in international business at Georgia State University.

**Interviewer:** So, your family did not settle in Miami, then?

**Marcos:** No, we did not. Most of the family did but part of our family went to different places. Some went to the Connecticut area, and we wound up in Atlanta.

**Interviewer:** That's interesting. They had a reason to go to Atlanta, or?

**Marcos:** Well, my brother went to Atlanta first and he was well received, he was helped. So, then they invited the family to come along too. So, that's why.

**Interviewer:** I see, okay. So, when did you move to Miami?

**Marcos:** Well, right after I finished my graduate degree I was hired at a bank, that no longer exists, it was part of Bank of America. At the time, it was a very well-known bank, an international business here called Pan American Bank. I was hired as a trainee and I came bank to Miami. My parents already had moved back to Miami in '66. So, it was just a return to the original destination.

**Interviewer:** Did you live on Miami Beach?

**Marcos:** Yes. When I moved back, my parents had rented an apartment right on 80<sup>th</sup> Street and Hawthorne. Which, I sort of remember, it's interesting how prices have changed. They paid \$90 a month for one bedroom furnished apartments. Then, after I got married in 1970, I lived also on 81 and Crespi Boulevard, which is the other corner in Miami Beach.

**Interviewer:** So, Miami Beach became your home in the early '70s?

**Marcos:** Right. Until we build a house in '74. Then, we moved to North Miami, to San Souci.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Marcos:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** All right. So, tell us about the formation of the Cuban Hebrew Congregation.

**Marcos:** Okay. It's interesting that, as a matter of fact, this September 22nd, just in two days, the congregation will be celebrating its 55th anniversary. A group of four Cuban Jews, Enrique Kalusin, who became the first president, Felix Reyler, who became a very well international banker in Miami, Bernardo Benes, who was pretty well known here also in the community, and Oscar White. Oscar was the only practicing attorney in Miami, of the group. Benes and Reyler were attorneys but they were in Cuba, not here. Kalusin was an entrepreneur. They formed the congregation.



The reason for forming it, was for them to... They wanted to maintain the Cuban-Jewish group together. They did not know at the time, how long they were going to be in Miami. Most people did not expect that we were going to be here so many years. The interesting from a religious point of a view, they wanted the- they thought this is in the articles of incorporation, that, even there was somewhat of a religious organization, the members would go to the temple closest to their homes or where the kids were going to school. So, it was more a social, educational, philanthropic – so more of a get-together, to make sure that we maintained ourselves within the group.

So, almost three generations have been born here already, since we arrived. Now, we are part of the mainstream community. So, the congregation's still there, it's got a beautiful location, very centrally located in Miami Beach, a block away from the famous Lincoln road. The temple is still open, we have a Montessori school – a Jewish Montessori, they got things there. Unfortunately, most of the founding members, which at one time was probably 1,000 families, are now in the better world. The younger generation has moved in and it's interesting that the culture said, "You know, you got to do better than your parents from generation to generation, and improve."

That many of our members today are very well recognized professionals in this community, and businessmen. Who've seen all phases of life, education also, universities, but they're also very active in the communities and in many of the organizations they belong to, you'll probably see them on the board of directors. So, they have taken their parents' advice. In many cases, their parents, or grandparents, came to Cuba basically without an education. Many of them did not even have finished elementary school, but they wanted their children to be better than they were.

**Interviewer:** So, all of the Jews, or most of the Jews in Cuba, were immigrants?

**Marcos:** Yes. Well, the first group apparently came with Columbus, okay? So, some of the individuals who were on that ship, has said there were conversions [inaudible][14:24].

**Interviewer:** There's some thought that Columbus himself was Jewish.

**Marcos:** That's correct.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Marcos:** Not much is documented of that period, as far as I'm aware. Most of the Jewish community, interesting enough, starts right during the Spanish American war, with the Americans. So, the Americans, there were a part of the U.S. troops, like the— [chuckle]

**Marcos:** So, they decided to come back.

**Interviewer:** Very interesting

**Marcos:** Right. So, the first temple was the American temple, as we call it. The cemetery, which was unused, was founded by the Americans.

**Interviewer:** Very interesting. Now, the Cuban Hebrew Congregation, do you feel that it accomplished its mission in keeping people together as a community?

**Marcos:** I think we have, yes. I think we have accomplished because at every funeral we go to, even though those children grew here and they are part of American mainstream, they always remember their Cuban Jewish connections. Whether it's through food, through celebrations, or whatever it is but it's very... Many of the younger generation want to go to Cuba, and they wanted to go with their great grandparents or parents, but unfortunately they're not alive in many cases.

**Interviewer:** Perhaps to visit the graves of their ancestors? It doesn't go back that far though

**Marcos:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Marcos:** Well, I mean there are – for example, my grandfather on my maternal side, is buried there. He was the second one to arrive. My uncle, who was the first one to arrive in Cuba, he's also buried there. So, I haven't been able to go back to visit their graves.

**Interviewer:** What were some of the activities that kept the community together? What were some of the things that they did typically?

**Marcos:** Well, after a year and a half, approximately, we were found, I September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1961. There were always get together. We did not become a congregation, a temple, until about a year later. What happened, with the exception of only one rabbi, Rabbi Meyer Abramowitz, who fortunately is still with us, most of the other communities were not very welcoming of the—

**Interviewer:** Most of the other Jewish communities?

**Marcos:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Why was that?

**Marcos:** Well, because they didn't have any money and they didn't know, first of all, if they could contribute. Every Jewish organization needs funds, so there will be a taxing on their budgets. They didn't understand, in many cases, how can be Cuban, you can be Jewish. Be surprised the things that you find. Therefore, they decided, that it was then to change the name from its original, which was Cuban Hebrew Social Circle, to Cuban Hebrew Congregation.

**Interviewer:** It became a formal...?



- Marcos:** Then what happened was, a rabbi who had been a holocaust survivor, who had been in Cuba, he had moved to Tampa, Rabbi Dow Rozencwaig, may he rest in peace, he was brought from Tampa to be the family rabbi of the congregation in about 1963.
- Interviewer:** That must've made a big difference.
- Marcos:** Yeah. So, all these older people, many of whom, Yiddish was their primary language, they kind of, you know, bond together.
- Interviewer:** So, the other Jewish congregations in town, the language was not a barrier then if Yiddish was a common language?
- Marcos:** Remember, by now the Americans were speaking a lot less Yiddish. Among themselves, they spoke both Spanish and Yiddish, they didn't have much knowledge of English. The children were acquiring it quite quickly. It took them longer. I mean, I remember my wife's grandmother, she was going to school to learn English. So, it was a process of adaptation. It wasn't easy, they worked very hard, I saw them, but they succeeded.
- Interviewer:** By then, they had decided that they had to assimilate, presumably?
- Marcos:** Yes. As they started moving, going to different schools, and the newer generation were born. English is the one that's – many of the kids who already got to learn more Spanish and Yiddish, Yiddish kind of was the emphasized, but Spanish was still – if they don't speak it fluently, they understand it.
- Interviewer:** So, what we've seen in Miami is a lot of sort of, "I'm not an immigrant, I'm an exile." Which is changing. So, I'm wondering if you saw or noticed a shift in the congregation to, "Well, perhaps we're never going back," from, "We're just biding time until we go back."
- Marcos:** Well, after the missile crisis, I guess, helped get me to realize, there's no turning back. So, they decided to, like they did in every other country they arrived, throw the roots in and move forward.
- Interviewer:** That's interesting. So, you think that perhaps the fact that, they'd already been immigrants once, I know Bernardo Benes has written about this, that in some way—
- Marcos:** Bernardo's parents were immigrants. He was born in Cuba.
- Interviewer:** His parents also came from Russia, correct?
- Marcos:** I think, yeah. Eastern Europe, I don't remember exactly what country. I mean, I knew his mother very well, because she and my wife's grandmother were very close friends and indirectly related.
- Interviewer:** So, perhaps that experience of being already immigrants, in some ways, helped people here leave behind that and assimilate? Like, you said, they'd done it before.



**Marcos:** Right. For them, it was already a second – you know, this group, you would say they had two exoduses in their lifetime. It's interesting, those that decided, instead of coming to the states, we're going to Venezuela, because a language was a factor and Venezuela was doing well, they've had three exodus in their lifetime.

**Interviewer:** So, for you, was it a big adjustment?

**Marcos:** The first year was, because here I am in foster homes, people I did not know.

**Interviewer:** In Los Angeles?

**Marcos:** That's right. I wasn't very well treated, I was in one non-religious home, then in an area that was changing. The social worker, that I had handling my case, she decided she'll be in another area with younger children, my age group. So, she transferred me with my knowledge and my consent. She introduced me to this group of parents – parents that had two children, the older was a few younger than me, and a nine-year-old child. I was there, it was very orthodox home. At the time, I thought that my mother was orthodox, until I went to that house and I realized my mother – my grandmother wasn't, you know.

As a matter of fact, I was just in Minneapolis now, and I just had dinner with my foster brother, after all these years. He had moved from Los Angeles to Minneapolis.

**Interviewer:** When was the last time you had seen him?

**Marcos:** Prior time had been about eight years ago.

**Interviewer:** So, you've kept in touch, more or less?

**Marcos:** Yes. His parents have died. I have not kept in touch, I just spoke to him, to his younger brother, who happens to be a professor in Amherst, in the north east. So, maybe next time I'll go up there in the Boston area, I'll be in touch with him.

**Interviewer:** So, you lived with them how long?

**Marcos:** Well, I was in one home from May to September. Then just before the Jewish holidays, I was transferred over to the home. I was there through December. Then, the social worker realized I needed more time with her, and it was a lot of driving for her. So, she transferred me on the campus of an institution called Vista Del Mar Child Care, which still in existence. It was started originally as a Jewish orphanage back in 1909, but today it's a—

**Interviewer:** This is where?

**Marcos:** This is in the Los Angeles area.

**Interviewer:** In the Los Angeles area?





- Marcos:** Yeah. So, right next to Culver City.
- Interviewer:** Wow.
- Marcos:** So, it was interesting because it's right on a street called Motor Avenue and they had 20th Century Fox on one end of the street, and they had Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer on the other side of the street.
- Interviewer:** Were you familiar with those names from the movies?
- Marcos:** Of course. Yes, of course.
- Interviewer:** So, you must've thought you'd landed in Hollywood.
- Marcos:** Some people tell me, "Enjoy Hollywood." The first house was right, it was Hollywood. So, I could walk over to Hollywood & Vine, and all that in that area, yes. As a matter of fact, I rode the bike through that whole area. That's what really kept me going, was riding the bicycle. That's where I lost weight and started growing up, you know. [laughs]
- Interviewer:** So, it wasn't an altogether negative experience for you?
- Marcos:** No. Looking back, it was kind of a mixed. On one hand, I didn't know – my parents thought things were getting better in Cuba, but we knew from the news here, that things were getting worse. Because they didn't have access to the information we had, and then I started to realize, "Oh my God, there may be a serious confrontation here with the USSR." So, I kind of pushed them, to a certain degree, to leave. So, finally they asked for permission to leave and it was granted within 38 days, which was kind of a... I mean, they were pretty well known and respected in the town. Of course, they had some problem to leave.
- Interviewer:** There are a lot of Pedro Pan people in town, who had very traumatic experience. I'm sure you're aware of that.
- Marcos:** Yes.
- Interviewer:** Did the Cuban Hebrew Congregation have any kind of programs, to help – we didn't call it post-traumatic stress syndrome in those days, but it was a traumatic experience.
- Marcos:** Well, those cases of pro- were handled with the Jewish Federation, on their institutions. I mean, it's pretty large. As a matter of fact, the Cuban Jewish community, call it community at large. We provide an important percentage of the budget, yearly budget of the federation for the help of everyone. Yeah, one figure I heard at one time was that, even though we're about two percent of the Jewish population of Miami-Dade County, the community donates about ten percent of the budget.
- Interviewer:** Wow.

**Marcos:** Yeah. That's a figure that I haven't – you know, all this, I've heard a couple times. I don't know if it's still to this day, that's not...

**Interviewer:** So, what about the younger generation in the congregation? You said that some of them want to go to Cuba, they want to see what it was about or is about it.

**Marcos:** Yeah. Some have gone already.

**Interviewer:** They've come back and shared their experiences?

**Marcos:** Yes, with their family members, with friends. Yes.

**Interviewer:** I know every experience is different, but is there anything in common?

**Marcos:** Well, the thing that they liked to have done, is to see the roots of their family. Where they lived, where they went to school, even though they could not go into the school, you cannot go into those particular places. The congregation's open. All three main synagogues in Havana are still open.

**Interviewer:** Do they have—

**Marcos:** They have services. The oldest one is Adath Israel, which is in downtown Havana, this where I did my bar mitzvah in 1959. The Patronato [El Patronato], which as we call it, which is also known the Beth Shalom, they're open. Then, they have the Sefardi Temple [Centro Sefardi]. The way I understand the structure there, is that the Patronato, as we know it, they take care of the relationships with the government, and with all other Jewish communities outside of community. The Adath Israel, which is a more orthodox one, they handle the Kashrut, kosher meals that they can get, and also the cemetery. I'm in touch with them.

So, I mean, I try to have very good relationship with them, to the best of our ability.

**Interviewer:** Tell us about your bar mitzvah in Havana.

**Marcos:** Okay. It's interesting to hear. My bar mitzvah was using the Ashkenazi tone. It was several months of preparation. Even though I had gone to a Jewish school, where I had learned Yiddish and I'd learned Spanish – it was a very good school that gave us the background for us to really integrate ourselves, into the main educational curriculum in the United States within months. I remember there was an older fellow, a rabbi who came in once or twice a week to give me lessons. Of course, because I could not get it recorded the day of the bar mitzvah.

I remember going to a studio not too far from the synagogue, where I had actually done a record with a, I think, it was 78 revolution record of my bar mitzvah. Of course, it doesn't have the same emotion of the day that you actually do it, but it's there. That record could not come out of Cuba.

**Interviewer:** It could not leave Cuba?



**Marcos:** For 20 years.

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Marcos:** Everybody thought it was going to be taken away at the airport.

**Interviewer:** Why did they think that?

**Marcos:** I don't know. This is, you know.

**Interviewer:** Because it had something to do with religion?

**Marcos:** Really, the Cuban government has never been anti-Jewish. I mean, they took a head-on confrontation with the Catholic religion, because the Catholic religion did get involved, you know, trying to... The Jewish people who was in Cuba said, "You know what? Always take a low-profile with regard to politics." It doesn't matter which government was in power. Always be pro-community, but don't get involved in politics. There's always exception to all the rules. It was kept at the home of one of my parents' employees, by the mother.

There were, I think, nine brothers and sisters. He was the only one that left Cuba. We're still in touch with him here. In one of the trips to Cuba, he was able to bring it.

**Interviewer:** Oh my goodness. So, you have it now?

**Marcos:** Now, you see technology. He was very afraid it was going to break. So, I had to convert it to cassettes, to CD, and now I have it streamed. So, I can play it on my phone. [laughs]

**Marcos:** I still have to ask a rabbi which was my exact portion of the Torah that I read, but I have it. [laughs]

**Interviewer:** You could make that your ring tone. [laughter]

**Marcos:** So, as my voice was changing. It's interesting, it was kept by a black woman all those years.

**Interviewer:** Amazing, that is amazing. Very touching. So, it seems like you still feel some roots there.

**Marcos:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. So, if you were to go back, where would you go?

**Marcos:** Well, I only got to know part of the islands. So, of course I would go... One of the things I have in mind is to follow. My group spent five hours a day in a bus, to get a Jewish education.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Marcos:** Who would do that today in Miami? Four trips of one and a quarter hours, because there was no lunch facilities. So, we would be picked up at a quarter to 7:00, to be in school by 8:00. School will close at 11:00, come back home, be home around 12:15, have lunch, get showered, put my gym clothes on, be picked up about quarter to 1:00 to be back in school at 2:00, to finish at 5:00, come back to home at 6:15. I had time for everything. To ride the bike, to study, to see friends. I don't even have time today... [laughs]

**Interviewer:** You spend an hour and a half in traffic here and...

**Marcos:** That's right. So, this is the type of life, I said, "Who would do that today?" Yet, we acquire excellent education. The director of the school, of the Spanish program who was not Jewish, he had a pride. Since we had to pass a high school test to enter high school, it was a three-day test, he says, "I'll tell you this, my pride is that student I take with the school to take the exam, is not going to fail. Here's why, if I see you're going to fail, you're not coming with me. You're going to go on your own." He was very hard but he was motivator type. As a matter of fact, I still remember, I think some of the techniques that I use today in teaching, I think I got it from him.

**Interviewer:** Wow. That's quite a legacy he has. Education in Cuba, then... Well, what I was going to ask is, you didn't go to school at Miami Beach High, you were in Los Angeles?

**Marcos:** When I came back? My starting on my senior year, I was at Beach High until my parents arrived. Then, I moved to Atlanta. So, I finished in Atlanta.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Marcos:** I was only here for a few weeks.

**Interviewer:** Okay. You did experience Miami Beach High then?

**Marcos:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** For a year?

**Marcos:** No. For about six weeks.

**Interviewer:** Six weeks? [laughs]

**Marcos:** Yes. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you this, before my parents arrived I was living with an uncle who had three children. He lost everything, so we're starting again. One day, on that dinner table, I joked around and I said, "Tell me, when do you think we're going to have some steaks here?" He said, "You want steak? You see we're eating three-day old bread? Go to work." So, I went downtown Miami, I started going up and down Flagler, I went down Northeast first. There was a town restaurant, I can remember



those days, next door there was a steak place called Black Angus. So, I went in and asked for a job, and they gave me a job to be the salad man.

So, now I was having two steaks a day. The problem came was that, as I was still having a problem with English and it took me a long time to study and absorb, I was going to Beach High from 7:15 in the morning, 7:30 I think it started, to about 2:30, and I was working from 4:00 to 11:00. So, the only time I had to study was on the bus back and forth. On weekends, I had to double shift. So, I had to do lunch and I had to do dinner. So, I didn't have much time at all. I realized that if I continue with that, at that pace, I was going to make it. I was only doing extremely well in, I think it was typing and book keeping and Phys Ed.

The rest was, you know, try to do the best I can but I was going to have the grades that I needed. So, the move to Atlanta was great, because there I was able then to get a job after school, only Friday nights. I had a work all day Saturday but then, a whole Sunday to study and I had the nights during the week. So, immediately my grades picked up, I was able to do well and get accepted into Georgia State.

**Interviewer:** Wow. So, you, to have that steak, you—

**Marcos:** It was a pricey steak.

**Interviewer:** They were of high price. [laughs]

**Marcos:** In terms of time and study, yes.

**Interviewer:** So, if you were to kind of, sum up the legacy of the Cuban Hebrew Congregation, what would you like to have said about it?

**Marcos:** Well, it's basically the Jewish life. From generation to generation, each generation has to live better than the prior one. The famous word [inaudible][36:21]. You keep building and you teach your children and grandchildren, "You got to be better, you got to move on." I mean, that's a lot pressure as we made it pretty high standards. So, here you go a case from a – especially my mother used to tell me, "Your mother never made it passed third grade. Not because I didn't want to go to school, because I couldn't." There were sick children and my grandfather and my oldest aunt, she was the number two, went to Cuba to work seven years, bring the whole family in.

So, she had to take care, help the kids, while my grandmother was sewing, in order to make a living, and to have a grandson that went to Harvard.

**Interviewer:** That's an amazing story. That would be your cousin?

**Marcos:** No. It's my son.

**Interviewer:** Your son?

**Marcos:** Her grandson.

**Interviewer:** So, your son went to Harvard?

**Marcos:** That's correct. Then he went to Penn Law School.

**Interviewer:** You must be very proud of him.

**Marcos:** Yeah. One of the interesting things, as we went on that trip to take him to Harvard, one of the stops we made was at Georgia State University. I had developed a very good personal relationship with the president of the university at the time, who unfortunately has passed on, Dr. Noah Langdale from there from 1957 to about 1990. '91 he was retiring when we met, so I call him, he was still on campus. I told him I'd like him to stop by and he could meet my son and everything else, because I know he was a Harvard Law School graduate. He was from Valdosta, Georgia.

So, he invites us for lunch. He was quite a heavy... He was a tall man, broad. I think he would have been a football player, and a tremendous orator. He had taken downtown Atlanta, which was dilapidated and turned into a major university. As we sat for lunch, he took with him the vice president, who had been my dean of admissions. So, we were at lunch for four hours. He asked my son, "What are you going to study at Harvard?" He said, "I'm going to study political science." "Then what?" Said, "Well, I'll probably go to law school." So, he looked at him and says, "Let me give you some advice. Don't study political science."

Since I was coming from a business school, I thought it was all more or less the same, just a different angle of the same... He said, "What's the difference?" He says, "Study history." Said, "Why?" He says, "Because with political science, you're not going to learn history. With history, you're going to learn political science." If we don't learn from history, we'll keep repeating the same mistakes that we're doing. Now, let me tell you, I just took, as part of my vacation a couple of weeks ago, I originally decided I wanted to go on the Mississippi river, take the cruise ship. As I finally made the decision, it was a little late for that week, the boat was full.

Then, it was plausible, so surprising. Just like going to Cuba today. So, I said, "You know what? Let me look at my AAA maps." I see that their high was boarding, ride the Mississippi. You know, every time you cross the bridges, you're getting into another state. So, I said, "Okay, let me look at the maps." Then, I realized that there were four presidential museums and libraries along the way. So, we visited the one for Herbert Hoover, who was the president during the Depression. We went to see Abe Lincoln's museum, we went to see Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, plus Mark Twain.

As I walked through those museums, the words that Langdale said, we are not learning from history. Because some of the issues that are happening right now, are in the museum.

**Interviewer:** That was a very wise piece of advice.



**Marcos:** So, he did that.

**Interviewer:** He's glad he did?

**Marcos:** I think so, yes. [laughter] He's one of the assistant county attorneys.

**Interviewer:** Carl, do you have any questions you would like to—

**Carl:** Yes. Specifically, the congregation, the reaction, what happen during Mariel, and the influx since then, whether it's raptures. Has your community reached out to them? What has been the changes over time, within the community?

**Marcos:** Well, during the Mariel, several Cuban Jewish families came. These were handled by the families, some of them became members of the congregation. They are already part of mainstream. This was 1980, so they're already close to 30 years.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned your birthplace near Havana. Could you spell that for me?

**Marcos:** Yeah. It's G-U-A-N-A-B-A-C-O-A. So, to put in perspective, Guanabacoa is to Havana, what Hialeah is to Miami. It was in an industrial city.

**Interviewer:** What did your parents do?

**Marcos:** They were in the retail business right in downtown. [silence][43:00-3:11]

**Interviewer:** Were there any people associated with Miami Beach, that were important in your life or in the congregation's life? You mentioned Bernardo Benes as being one of the founders.

**Marcos:** Yes. Felix Reyler, who became a very well-known international banker, who was the founding president of the Florida International Bankers Association.

**Interviewer:** His last name is...

**Marcos:** Is R-E-Y-L-E-R. He started as my boss, then became my mentor, professional father, and then later on became a father in law.

**Interviewer:** My goodness. The political figures at the time, on the beach, the mayors, the commissioners, were they helpful in any way to the formation of the congregation?

**Marcos:** Well, they attended events. As a matter of fact, I was given a medallion when Mayor Gilbert – for international leadership. They all have come to the congregation over the years, they've all issued proclamations. I mean, whenever we had an issue, we tried to be supportive. Of course, any decision as to actual during the candidacy, you know, each member decides who to vote for, we don't get involved in that particular thing. Now, let me give you a recent example, during the issue of trying to open



up an office- the Cuban consulate here in Miami, which, you know, the city of Miami basically voted no.

The county also voted no, but then it was rather be offered by the city of Miami Beach. Well, we got phone calls on both sides, to say, you know, no. So, we basically took the following position, we are religious, we are a social institute, and it's written about law since 1992. This is a political issue and we do not take sides on politics, whether it happens to be United States, Israel, or Cuba. It's up to each individual member to go to that particular hearing and make their vote count, but this is a personal decision not a congregational decision.

**Interviewer:** That's been maintained throughout?

**Marcos:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Carl:** I'm curious. When we first arrived in Miami and the beach, as they used to say, was "God's waiting room." Many of them from New York speaking Yiddish, the Jewish community. Was there a connection that your congregation had with those, I guess, recent arrivals?

**Marcos:** Well, because of Yiddish, because that's one of the way they communicated, and some of these individuals became members of the congregation. As far as I remember, one of the first donations we received was from a woman who came to the temple, she wasn't even Cuban. She liked the rabbi and she would come. She left some money when she died. So, there was a larger connection at the time, because that generation was dwindling. When they found somebody else that spoke Yiddish, it was their... Now, but then the other things also happened. For example, some of them used to meet up at Flamingo Park.

Many of them were very liberal, leftist type. There used to be some real confrontations, heated conversations in Flamingo Park because their views were more socialistic than the ones that had just left out of Cuba. So, it was a confrontation in Yiddish, I guess, about this... [laughs]

**Interviewer:** You've heard about these?

**Marcos:** I've heard about it. [laughter]

**Interviewer:** Oh, that's interesting. Rabbi Abramowitz.

**Marcos:** Right.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us a bit about him? He was quite a figure.

**Marcos:** Oh yes, still is. Unfortunately, he's not in good health and as active as he used to be, but he was in a congregation twice. As a matter of fact, I was president during his second time. Because of his knowledge and experience, because having been in the DP camps during the world war



two and more than that. I mean, he was very dedicated and he opened the doors wide open to the congregation. What happened was that, those that had already all their children, became members of the Cuban Hebrew Congregation. The younger ones, they had little children, a school, they needed preparation for bar mitzvah and all that.

Those who are the individuals that went with Rabbi Abramowitz. To this day, Temple Menorah, if you look at it, substantial number of the members are of Cuban Jewish descent. I mean, the community has always been extremely to him and always be indebted for what he did. Rabbi Pearlson has continued the same path, but people remember Abramowitz because he built it.

**Interviewer:** The Montessori school, that was interesting that they—

**Marcos:** Yeah. It's a Judaic Montessori.

**Interviewer:** It's still...?

**Marcos:** It's still there, yes. So, it's been 14 years.