

Interviewee: Ana Eigler

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Interview Location: Ana Eigler's home

Interviewer: Lynnex Rougeaux

Transcriber: Suzanne Mascola

ABSTRACT:

Ana Eigler, a first-generation social worker and educator, discusses her experiences immigrating to the United States, adapting to a new culture, and channeling her Venezuelan/Jewish roots. Eigler describes her transition to American customs as a slight shock compared to what she was used to in her hometown of Caracas, Venezuela. She had an established career in Venezuela. Furthering her education and finding a place in the Jewish community where she felt comfortable were struggles upon arrival. Eigler discusses gender roles, marriage and family, antisemitism and anti-Latinx racism, and being Jewish and Latina in Houston. She overcame many obstacles in her life back in Venezuela and in the United States that have shaped her into the person she is now.

LR: It is April 7, 2022. This is Lynnex [Rougeaux], Julie [Cotlar] and Nayelli Vigil interviewing Ms. Ana Eigler at her home for the Sephardic Latinx Oral History Project at the University of Houston and Holocaust Museum in Houston. How are you doing today?

AE: I am doing fine, thank you.

LR: Awesome, awesome. All right, so would you be able to tell me a little bit about your childhood living in Caracas?

AE: It was very nice. I mean, of course, that was almost 70 years ago, because I am going to be 70 years old this year. And it was really nice. It was in a time where everything... There was almost no crime, and we could play outside, and we could be in the streets and disappear the whole day and come back home later in the evening. And it was very innocent. We kept being children for a long, long time. The only difficult thing for me in my childhood was that, because I am Jewish and Venezuela is a 98% Catholic country, and I went to private Catholic school all the way from kindergarten to graduation from high school. And I was always the only one, so I received a lot of messages that being Jewish was not a good thing.

LR: Wow! So, what was the Jewish community like in Caracas? Was there not much of one?

AE: No, it was big. It was 40,000 people. It was pretty big. But there was kind of a clear division between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, and they were not mixing too much because the Ashkenazi Jews came from Europe, and they were usually... They went into professions or they had professions before, like, university-based professions. And the Sephardic Jews were the commerce people, so they had stores and selling stuff, so they were seeing us less than, but that kind of changed with the situation in Venezuela because they ended up making more money, were the ones that were in commerce rather than the professional ones.

LR: Oh, wow! So, like, you've mentioned and like we've read as well in our class that the Ashkenazi and Sephardic relationship within Latin America varied. So, what was it like for you living in Caracas, having roots from both?

AE: Well, yes, I have very little of the Ashkenazi Jew and, at that time, I didn't know I had any because my parents told us that we were Sephardic and the funny thing is that Ashkenazi "husbands" were supposed to be better for Sephardic women because they were more participatory and more egalitarian. You could be, like, a partner in the marriage. With a Sephardic husband, is, like, the way I grew up and the way that I saw my mom do things, like the husband comes first. My mother served everybody, and she wouldn't sit down until everybody had everything they needed. And she did kind of all of the work. So, the husband expected the wife to do everything and also not to go to work, not to have a profession. So, I grew up under that, but my father kind of gave us the message for the two of you because I have a sister that is older than me and a brother, and he said for us to try to marry Ashkenazi and for my brother to try to marry Sephardic because he can mold the wife to whatever he wants. So, I grew up with a lot of very clearly gender stereotypes that I used to believe.

LR: Wow! I never would have really...

AE: Yes, what women could do and what guys could do. I mean, it was, like, really very explicit.

LR: Was it like that in temple as well? Like, when you would go?

AE: In temple, it was even worse because we didn't go too frequently. We were what they used to call twice-a-year Jews, that we went to synagogue only on Yom Kippur and the real high holidays. So, only on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, but God forbid if there was a service for somebody that died in the family. So, but the synagogues there were only Orthodox. They didn't have Conservative, and they didn't have Reform. It wasn't until I had ended high school that there was a chapter of what is called Hillel that now is in the universities as well that was kind of Reform, but they didn't have a temple or anything. It was in the B'nai B'rith building. We used to meet to socialize.

LR: Thank you for that. We have read about instances of antisemitism and discrimination, and how did this impact your Jewish identity and your experience?

AE: That is part of what I was referring that it wasn't a good thing for me to say that I was Jewish, but everybody knew because my maiden name from my father's side is Cohen, which is so typically a Jewish last name, so people realized that you are different, you are not from here and why are you a Jew... Because it was a private Catholic school and, at that time, in the Catholic religion, they believed that the Jews killed Christ. That was the message that I kept on getting even from the teachers. And there was a service that we all had to attend, but they excused me from Catechism classes, but then, I was outside in the patio for like an hour and a half while they were having classes, just sitting there without doing anything. But they didn't excuse me from services in the chapel which was once a week. But my parents told us we couldn't kneel down because we were Jewish, and we cannot kneel down. And when everybody was kneeling down in the chapel, everybody turned around to see that I was standing up and even the teachers, very angrily, because it was, like... And I used to come home and say to my mom, "Mom, is it true that the Jews killed Christ? Is it true that Jews have a tail between their legs? Is it true"... the different things that were told to us by the other kids. And, of course, they heard it from their parents, of course. And my parents always kept saying, "No, it is not true. Don't worry about that. People are mistaken. It is just that they are jealous." And the message they gave me was really bad, too, because they said, both my parents, my father and my mother said, "Don't worry. We are better than the other people because we have had to survive in whatever land we are in. We are better than and that is jealousy on their part." And I understand them now. Of course, that happened a long time ago that I came to terms with, wow, that message was really bad because it is, like, one group has to be better than the other, not just equal but different? I think they were trying to protect our self-esteem but this is a really bad message to convey because that is not the way of doing it. And I know that it is because of lack of a religious background for both of them because my mother had more, but my father didn't know too much. He knew about the principles of Judaism but nothing about religion. So, they didn't have a strong background to say, you know, what is good in the Jewish people per se, it was just saying, "We are better than." So, it is not the right message. But I used to try not to say to anybody that I was Jewish except, you know, the people in my school knew but outside of that, with kids in the neighborhood and everything, I tried not to say it. And it wasn't until we moved to the United States that I realized it wasn't about saying, and we could accept both in their American community and in the Jewish community and in the Latin community, even if we were Jewish.

LR: Wow! You actually kind of answered one of our questions here. So, in Venezuela, what practices did you and your family adopt and if you adopted any, how did you blend those to fit in with your Jewish customs?

AE: We pretty much adapted to everything. I mean, we lived like Venezuelans except that my father very strictly said, “You cannot get a boyfriend that is not Jewish, and you can never marry a non-Jew.” I mean, and my father was really strict in everything, so I was actually afraid. So, it was hard for me because every time... The school was only girls until that would be sophomore school of high school. It was just girls and then, in the sophomore year... There were 5 years of high school instead of 4... So, in the sophomore year, it was still girls and then, the last 3 years were with boys. And I remember if I started liking a boy, I became kind of mean, so to repel the person so it wouldn't be, like, they will get close to me and then, I will have to make a decision. And, in fact, I have a big story later if you want to know more about my sister, what happened to her.

LR: Yes, absolutely.

AE: But I was too goody-goody. I was very afraid of my dad.

LR: I am not even going to deal with the temptation, right?

AE: Yes.

LR: So, when did you immigrate to Houston?

AE: In 1978.

LR: Was it with your family?

AE: Yes, with my husband and my oldest daughter, and the second one was born here. But before that, when we got married in 1973, and one year after we were married, my husband came with me to the United States to Cornell University to do his master's. So, we lived there for two years since 1973 to 1975 and then, went back to Venezuela, and he couldn't get used to the way of life in Venezuela anymore, so we applied and we got our green cards and we came in 1978 to live.

LR: Oh, wow! So, what made you decide to choose Houston, of all places?

AE: Warm weather!

LR: Warm weather?

AE: People say, “Are you crazy?” But it was because in upstate New York, the winters get really long and really cold, and I was miserable because Venezuela is tropical weather all year round, so, I said, okay, we will go to the United States and it will have to be California, Florida, or Texas, and he was already working in the oil industry there, so it was easy to find a job here in Texas. And we came during spring. It was before the internet. We never checked what the weather was year round. I didn't know... We were not savvy about that. We didn't know anybody in Houston. And we came during rodeo

time, and we were living downtown in a hotel for a week and I saw everybody with the belt buckles and the little things and the horses in the street. But, of course, it was the parade but then, we didn't realize it was the parade. And the boots. And I was, like, oh this is like the John Wayne movies we watch, I mean. But the weather was fantastic, and we fell in love with Houston. Then, the summer, it was, like, oh my God! But we love Houston.

LR: I am glad. So, you said that you moved into downtown when you first got here?

AE: Only for that week that we were looking for a house and meeting the people he was going to be working with. And then, we moved to Fondren Southwest, which was a new neighborhood.

LR: Was that area, like, predominantly Jewish? What made you decide to choose there?

AE: No. That is a very interesting question because we didn't have any idea where to live, but I said to my husband, since we have a daughter and another one coming, it would be nice... In Venezuela, all of the Latin American countries also have, like, a Jewish Community Center, which is the center of activities and everything... I said, "I would like to be kind of close to the Jewish Community Center because probably that's the first people that I would meet that would be open to us. And to send our daughter, too." And so, we got the Jewish realtor, and we asked her where should we be living? I mean, we cannot afford exactly near the Jewish Community Center but tell us, and she showed us Fondren Southwest. So, it wasn't Jewish, but then, a lot of Jewish people started moving there as well.

LR: So, was this the proximity to...

AE: Yeah.

LR: So, so can you tell me a little bit about some of your experiences in the United States after immigrating? What was it like here in the United States at that time? And what year did you guys immigrate?

AE: The only difficult thing for me was that I already had a degree in Venezuela, a college degree, and when I came here, when I got established, I said to my husband, "Ariane is already going to early childhood preschool," and I said, "I would like to do a master's because here, without a master's, you really cannot get too far." And I went to the University of Houston because it was close by. I think I went and checked Houston Baptist University, but they didn't offer anything that I wanted and St. Thomas, I kind of discarded because I saw, no, I came from Catholic education, and I am going to go and face the same thing all over again. So, I tried also U of H and they said, "Sorry, you cannot do a master's here because your university" - even though I had everything

notarized, they said, “Your university is not recognized as a university. You have to do everything all over again.” And I was very frustrated because I used to even teach in the university there, early childhood education, which was my first career. And I tried to dissuade them, and they said, “No, just study computer science for two years before studying early childhood education, and that university is recognized, so we can give you thirty credits. That’s all we can give you, of the basic science and math.” So, at the beginning, for, like, 4 days or 5 days, I was just crying at home thinking, in Venezuela, I was somebody, I was already teaching at the university, I had a good life, and here, I have to start again? But then, I realized, at that time... How old was I? Like, 30 something, yes, 30 - I think I was 30 - I said, I still have a life to live and either I cry for what I used to be or I just do it again. And I tried to see the positive. I can learn American history, which I don’t know anything, I can get better with my English, I can learn political science, which I don’t know anything, so, I went back as a commuter student at the beginning putting the youngest one in mother’s day out one day a week and I was doing classes one day a week. And then, I was able to do 2 days a week, and I did all of that while they were going first to mother’s day out and to preschool.

LR: Your degree, the one you got from University of Houston, is in sociology?

AE: No, the first one was human development and family studies, which used to be under the home economics department or something, that they used to have that.

LR: Okay. So, why did you decide to go into that specifically?

AE: Because I didn’t want to do preschool again education because I knew it, so it was going to be too boring for me. So, I said, I like the life and now that I know about children, I want to learn about the whole lifespan. But then, when I graduated, I realized I couldn't probably get a job with just that degree, so, at the beginning, I worked for a year, and I kept asking the question, “When could I make more money?” And they said, “Well, in 7 years, you can get to this level, or you can do a master’s and as soon as you finish your master’s, you can be at this level.” So, that is what I decided to do.

LR: Was there a particular part in your life that made you decide to go into that field?

AE: Into social work?

LR: Yes.

AE: Yes. When I did my undergraduate, I took a lot of sociology classes and psychology classes and that is when I learned about racism here. And it is not that there was not in Venezuela but, at that time, I didn't know how to recognize it. I thought that it was based on social class mostly, and that it was based on being from a different country, because we used to kind of criticize people from other countries in Latin America. And so, it was,

like, I was learning all of that and how bad people were treated, especially people that were brown and black. And I also went through an identity crisis similar to the one that you have when you are a teenager trying to figure out where do you fit and who are you, and it was, okay, do I align myself just with the Jewish community and focus on that or do I align myself with the Latino community since I feel very much that I am Latino? And I didn't know what to choose, thinking that I needed to choose one or the other. And then, I realized after all of my studies and doing essays and, you know, everything that you do at the university, that it was an advantage; that I had the advantage of knowing different cultures and a different language and that I could be all of those things at the same time and also be an American. So, I had decided to focus on that but the more I focused into the sociology area, the more I realized all of the injustice, and I always felt bad about the underdog, so that's the main reason why I went for social work.

LR: Thank you. I have been wondering about that. When you arrived in Houston, did you feel a sense of culture shock?

AE: Yes, definitely. Definitely. More the first time around when I went to upstate New York because, of course, I knew a little bit of English, what they teach you in school - you know, ceiling, door, table - things that are not very useful, but I went through English as a Second Language but with my best friends... One was Japanese and the other one was French, and because neither one could speak to each other's language, we spoke in English among ourselves, so, can you imagine? I mean, we struggled, but I started learning a lot about other things. But I saw that all Americans were the stereotype we have in Venezuela, that it was Anglo-Saxon, White Protestant, and I realized, no, this is not it. So, that was part of culture shock, and also seeing how Latinos and African Americans were considered inferior. And then, Native Americans, learning about that, too.

LR: When you were living, especially in Latin America, and with your Jewish customs, were there any, like, foods that you didn't eat? Like, did you keep kosher?

AE: No, we didn't keep kosher, but we ate a lot of Sephardic food and my grandparents, they used to keep kosher before and when they were in Venezuela, they weren't able to, but they kept kosher for the holidays, but they never mixed meat and cheese. But, in my house, because my father didn't believe in any of that, yes, there was ham and pork. But I promised that when I came to the United States, I promised myself that that was the one thing I was going to do - not to eat pork anymore.

LR: And you have kept to that?

AE: And I kept it. Sometimes I smell the bacon, and I am, like, "Ah!" But I don't do it. And I keep the customs, yes.

LR: There has been sufficient evidence in American history of some separation between Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities living in the same cities. Did you witness this in Houston, and how did that affect your Latino and Jewish experience?

AE: It did affect it mostly because, since I didn't go to the Jewish day school, that affected more because the other kids didn't know me. I didn't start getting to meet, besides my family members that went to Jewish day school, they invited us to our parties, but I felt like alien, also, in there because it was, like, they didn't know me and they didn't mix with me because they didn't know me even if my cousins tried to introduce me. So, it was very difficult because, you know, you are at that age that you want to have a boyfriend and all of that, and it was, like, okay, the Jewish boys are not coming to me, and I cannot get close to any non-Jewish boyfriend, so all that part of adolescence, I feel like I skipped it, like, I didn't have it, so, that part was hard. The part of the separation between Ashkenazi and Sephardic, I didn't see it as much because I wasn't mixing with them and all of my family was Sephardic, but I saw it on my father's part because my father had the stores and clothing stores, and he tried to bridge that separation in Venezuela and even though he didn't know anything about religion, he became the president of the synagogue in Venezuela, but he appointed a president that would do the religious part, and he would do only the administration part. And he got together with the leaders of the Ashkenazi community and started doing things together and trying to bridge all of the differences. He won their respect, and they won his respect. So, it worked well.

LR: Did you notice that in Houston as well, that there was a lot of separation here as well?

AE: No, except that I also feel a little different because I finally ended up doing a B'nai mitzvah as an adult because I never did it over there. I learned Hebrew, enough to read, not to talk. And I learned more about that, but I didn't feel it in the synagogue that we belonged to. And I didn't feel it as much as that they pronounced differently the Hebrew and the prayers because they have more the Yiddish language. I felt that my husband is Ashkenazi, so I felt it in that also in the way that he was never perceived as Latino here because his first language was German. His parents were from Austria, so his first language, even in Venezuela, was German, before he started mixing with other people. And so, he doesn't have the accent I have, and he is tall and white-skinned, and he got completely different treatment here than I did - both inside and outside the Jewish community.

LR: So, you said that he is Ashkenazi, correct?

AE: Yes.

LR: Were there any customs that you had to adapt? Like, is there anything about your relationship or your customs that you had to adapt to each other?

AE: A little bit because his parents were kind of upset that I didn't want to learn German. It was too difficult for me. And he doesn't like Sephardic food, so I have to cook differently for him. So, I don't cook much of the Sephardic ones because that means making two different meals. He was also raised more, like, they didn't touch and hug as much, and in my family, it was all hugs and kisses and things like that. So, there were things that we had to navigate. And he was raised much more liberal than I was because even when he was a boy, he was sent to the United States for summer camp and things like that.

LR: That's interesting.

AE: Yes, it was very different. And still, to this day, people ask me in front of him does he speak Spanish because they are surprised when they hear him talking in Spanish.

LR: Does he sound like a native speaker?

AE: No. Not at all.

LR: He has a little bit of a German accent in there, I guess.

AE: Yes. He doesn't have as strong an accent as I do.

LR: With your father not approving of you having any non-Jewish boyfriends, was it okay for you to be friends with non-Jewish boys and men?

AE: No.

LR: No?

AE: No.

LR: No kind of relationship?

AE: No, because he thought that a boy and a girl could not be friends. They have to be... There is something else in there. I imagine he was pretty bad when he was young, I mean, in the sense of having a lot of girlfriends or whatever, because he was really the jealous type and everything. And even when my sister started going out, it had to be with a chaperone - either with my brother with her or me with her.

LR: I understand.

AE: Yes. And he told me that the first guy that holds my hand, I have to marry, and that's what happened. That's strict. Yes, that was it.

LR: Was your Latino and your Sephardic heritage important for you to maintain?

AE: Yes, both of them, and still, to this day.

LR: What customs are really important to you to maintain, and did you lose any of your Jewish customs along the way?

AE: No, I think I gained instead of losing because what happened is that when we came to Houston, there were other Latinos from other parts of Latin America and Central America that also migrated for reasons of studying or finding a job or whatever, so all of these couples, there was a Jewish community, but there was not a Hebraica Houston type of community, which, in Latin America, we have something called also Hebraica Houston. So, we didn't feel as accepted in the general Jewish community because people didn't know what to make of us. You know, it was, like, you have to prove yourself. So, we started getting together, so, the ones that came with parents, the parents wouldn't feel so lonely because they didn't learn English, only Spanish. So, we created kind of a group together that we met in a certain place, and they played dominoes and they played cards, and we got to meet each other, and the kids got to meet each other. But the kids didn't want to speak in Spanish. They just wanted to continue in English. And we became like a family and still, to this day, those friends, including Mark [Goldberg]'s parents, I mean, for 40+ years, we have been friends. We all have been the same amount of time, so we became each other's families, and we do all of the Jewish celebrations together, all of the bad things that happen in life and the good things that happen in life, we share on them. So, that is our family by choice here because none of our families moved to the States, our nuclear families.

LR: So, you just created, like, a family together?

AE: Yes. And, to this day, Passover is in a week, and my charoset is famous... Charoset is what you use to put in the matzah. I cannot tolerate the Ashkenazi charoset. To me, it tastes awful, and a lot of people don't even want to try mine because they say it looks like mud, and they don't want it. But it's delicious. That is the only thing that is Sephardic that my husband eats.

LR: Really?

AE: Yes. But I do keep my mom's custom. And here, I gained because I went through that process. I used to blame my parents. "Oh, my parents didn't know about Judaism and that's why I don't know Hebrew and that's why I don't know anything." And then, one day, I figured out, hey, I am grown up. I mean, one thing is what my parents did or didn't do, but if I really do want to learn Hebrew, I can learn Hebrew. And if I want to know more about religion, I can do that. So, I went through that process, too, and I did it.

LR: So, our camera woman, awesome camera woman, Julie, had a question and she wanted to know about gender roles, specifically within your family and how your father would have

reacted to dating, which we talked a little bit about, working, like, roles around the house, things like that.

AE: My father was, like, he worked all day long and when he came, he had dinner and then went out to meetings of the Jewish community, you know, to try to... Because, for him, it was pretty important to have a name, oh, because he wasn't born in Venezuela, he was born in England.

LR: Oh, okay!

AE: In Manchester, yes. And he wasn't born there but, for him, it was pretty important to have a good name and to be well known in the community. Not only to make money but to be well known and respected. So, he was very, very strict. My mother was the one... She wasn't allowed to work. She finished high school, but she wasn't allowed to go to college. And many of her older siblings didn't even finish high school. And my father, when we were growing up, told my sister and me that we could learn some typing or secretarial skills in case we needed to help our husbands, but no university. And thank God my sister fought the fight for me because my brother was expected to go to the university but to follow in my father's tradition of going back and working in the business with him. But it was so strong that even though both my sister and I are intelligent, my father always believed in work, in the work ethic, and we had to work during the summertime even if it was at the beginning at 11 years old making ribbons for the presents in Christmas, you know, that they sell in the stores. Then, I was a cashier in the business. And then, I was helping him almost secretarial style. And he told me one time and I never forgot that, he said, "It is such a pity that you are a girl because if you were a boy, you would be taking care of the business, in charge of the business." You know, like, saying, you know, it is impossible for you to do this.

LR: Wow! You actually mentioned Christmas and you did mention earlier that you guys went to temple on the high holy days and things like that. Did you celebrate Christmas at all living in Latin America?

AE: I mean, I don't consider it Christmas. I remember we were mad with my mom because, of course, all of our friends got a lot of presents and had a lot of beautiful traditions, and in Venezuela, Christmas is a little different than here, than in the United States, because they focus more on the birth of Jesus Christ than on Santa Claus. That was something that came later and is more commercial. But it is mostly nativity scenes and the Christmas tree and going to midnight mass on the 24th and it is very different than here. And we were very jealous because my parents didn't celebrate Hanukkah, so, of course, we were, like, "Hey, how come everybody is getting presents and we are not getting presents?" So, my mother felt bad and put one of those plastic Christmas trees, so it was kind of like a family secret because we weren't allowed to tell other people that we had a

Christmas tree. But it wasn't even decorated. I mean, she put the little cotton from the little cotton balls on top of it. It didn't have any ornaments. No, nothing. So, it was half done but really badly done. And, to this day, whenever I have friends that are decorating their Christmas tree, they call me to help them decorate because I love putting the little ornaments and the whole thing that goes with Christmas. And we did get presents, maybe one or two, under the Christmas tree, and we woke up my parents on the 25th in the morning and we did it. It was kind of like a family secret. And, at the beginning, I didn't tell anybody here of my Jewish friends that we did that. Later on, I did.

LR: Did you pass that on to your children as well?

AE: No, we did Hanukkah, which, Jewish parents tend to overcompensate with Hanukkah because it is 8 nights, so kids get, like, 8 presents for each night of Hanukkah. Yes, so we didn't want them to feel deprived. We talked about Christmas and we took them around to see the Christmas lights and the decorations everywhere, but we celebrated Hanukkah. So, they didn't have that confusion that we had that, okay, why don't we get presents?

LR: So, you were involved within the Sephardic community within Houston, correct?

AE: In Houston?

LR: Yes, in Houston?

AE: No, never, because of Robbie. He wouldn't feel comfortable. There are Sephardic synagogues here, but they tend to be orthodox and very traditional. And in Orthodox, women and men sit separately, and we wanted to sit together. That's why we joined a Conservative. Reform was, like, too much for us of a change, but Conservative was okay because we could be together.

LR: So, were you involved in that community then more within the Conservative?

AE: Yes.

LR: To what degree were you involved in that? What were some of the activities or roles that you played?

AE: Well, in the synagogue, I did participate in a lot of programming, mostly social justice programming, because I wasn't too comfortable in Judaic content type of activity and also, we have a chapter of ORT, which is Organization for the Rehabilitation and Research, which is very traditional in every country and that is to educate children, both in Israel and overseas, and in B'nai B'rith women because they did a National Council of Jewish women as well as the Jewish Federation, so I did all of that as a volunteer while I was still going to the university and raising the kids. Even when I was working, I did a lot of that.

LR: Wow, you were really busy!

AE: Yes.

LR: And then, did identifying as Latina, did that impact your experience within the Houston Jewish community at all?

AE: I think it does, but nobody has even asked me of my Jewish Latina friends how I view my identity as Latina. They know I am the only one of the whole group that is so focused on issues of racism, I mean, because that has been my life work and what I have always done except the first few years at United Way. So, I don't think they see themselves as a person of color or as a Latina - they think they are white. Even though I tell them, "You know, just the fact that you are Latina and you speak the way that you are, you are considered a person of color," but they don't identify themselves like that. And it is because many of them also are Ashkenazi. But even the Sephardics, they only see themselves as Jewish, I think. And as the country of origin - from Chile or from Argentina or from Brazil - but the Mexican ones, because they have such a very different background in Judaism, they see themselves as Mexicans but not as Mexican Latina, but as Jewish Mexican.

LR: And I think you did mention this earlier, but this was back in Venezuela that we kind of talked about this briefly - have you ever felt like you have had to introduce yourself as Jewish or Latina, like, one or the other?

AE: Now?

LR: Either/or, in Venezuela or here?

AE: Well, in Venezuela, I am Venezuelan, but, of course, I wasn't identified... That is interesting. That is a good question, because it is not only how you see yourself but how others see you and that sometimes defines your identity. So, in Venezuela, even though I believed myself to be totally Venezuelan, I mean, and all of the customs and everything, I was seen as Jewish within my school... I mean, if other people didn't know I was waiting for the car ride or the bus or whatever, nobody knows and I feel very comfortable in Venezuela. When I came here, many of my Jewish friends, even though they are Latina, they see me more as Jewish and, you know, a few of the Latin customs that we still have the same. But in other fields, I feel like I can be both things, and when I was doing my work on diversity, that was a plus because I could mention all of my different backgrounds and people were, like, "Oh, wow, you fit all of the boxes." Yes, and many times, I got boards here in the United States for the fact of being both Latina and Jewish social worker. I mean, it was like I fit three boxes for boards. They even told me my faith. I mean, you fit three boxes.

LR: Oh, wow! So, Texas has different forms of discrimination and different ways that people in Texas have discriminated against different groups of people, especially minorities. How has being a minority in the United States differed from being a minority within Venezuela?

AE: I think, over there, it wasn't as visible because if nobody asked me my last name, I mean, it wasn't visible. Here, it is very visible for me because of my accent and that is what makes me empathize a lot more, especially I started empathizing really early on with African Americans because I tried to change my accent when I was in graduate school. We were supposed to do a project in which you do a clinical intervention on a client or on yourself. But I didn't have clients because I didn't do clinical social work - I did what is called community practice or planning and evaluation. So, I said, "Well, I don't have clients." So, they said, "Well, do it on yourself on something that you want to do, like, lose weight or stop smoking." I said, I don't smoke, and I don't need to lose weight. So, then I started thinking, I said, well, I do want to change my accent because I like teaching and training. So, I went through a foreign accent retraining course for 8 months and documenting whether or not it was changing, and, at the same time, I was doing an internship at the mayor's office downtown. So, I asked to be assigned to answering the phones, you know, because I used to be asked, "I don't speak Spanish but somebody who speaks English," or, "I don't want to talk to you. I don't understand what you are saying." I used to receive a lot of those, and they kept on going down and down, but I didn't really improve my accent very much except when I have some cork pieces that they gave me to put in between my teeth and I could pronounce more like an American. But I said to the lady, to the occupational therapist, "Listen, I cannot just, whenever people are going to talk to me, to get out of my pocket my cork and put it in my mouth." And she said something that really, to this day, I remember... She said, "We have done everything with you. You are showing differences in your pronunciation, but you still have that strong accent because it must be that you don't want to let go of it. That is part of your identity, and you don't want to let go of that one." And my professor, the one that was supervising my research study, he said, "Well, this is one of those instances where there are significant differences in paper but not in reality." And I tried to change it. So, that make me really aware, like, when you have dark colored skin like African Americans and you cannot change it, you are automatically, whether you perceive yourself that way or not, you are automatically perceived as black, I mean, without forgetting the other identities, and the same happened for me with my language. I cannot tell you how many times I have been told, "Go back to where you came from." Like, when I am protesting for something, they say, "You don't have any right to protest. You don't even pay taxes." They assume always, even people like me, Latinas, that I remember in the house that we moved in Fondren Southwest, some people started having housekeepers or maids, and I remember when I went to get the mail, there was always a lady that worked in the house across from us getting the mail. And then, one day, she

crossed the street and she asked me, “What day do they let you out?” And I didn’t understand the question. I was, like, “What?” And she said, “What day do they let you out?” And I said, “Let me out where?” “Go out. What is your day free?” And I just realized at that moment that she thought I was the housekeeper of whoever was living there. And I said, “Well, whenever I want because I sleep with the owner.” So, she was, like, “Ah!” Totally shocked. And I realized if I am badly dressed, that people absolutely thought that I was low income, illegal immigrant. And I have been talked to very slowly, you know, like, the bathroom is there, and I am, like, why are you talking to me that way? I have a master’s degree. Usually, I have overdressed normally when I was in other situations, overstated my credentials... Not overstated, I mean, I never exaggerated, but many times, other people don’t have to say I have all of this, I graduated summa cum laude, I did this, I did that, I mean, so it is, like, to see if I get some respect but, you know, you are seen by others the way they want to see you, and you have no control over that.

LR: With their own prejudice.

AE: Yes.

LR: That was really intense. Sorry. No, I mean, thank you for sharing that.

AE: You are welcome.

LR: My two lovely friends here, they have some questions for you actually. One of them wanted to know why didn’t you guys celebrate Hanukkah in Venezuela? Why didn’t your parents...

AE: I guess it was the lack of Jewish background. They didn’t think it was a religious holiday. I mean, they knew about Yom Kippur that you are supposed to fast the whole day and ask for forgiveness, but Hannukah, they saw it like, what is the miracle of the Maccabees. I mean, they didn’t see anything important on that holiday, so they didn’t celebrate. And none of my aunts and uncles either. And very few people celebrated at that time Hanukkah. And the girls didn’t do Bat Mitzvahs either. It was only the boy Bar Mitzvahs.

LR: Oh, wow! We actually did hear about that from one of the other interviewees. She had spoken about how, like, when she had immigrated here, she learned the Torah with, I think it was her daughter, and she had learned the Torah with her to be able to do at her Bat Mitzvah because she wasn’t able to do that. And I don’t remember if she said that she had one or not, but I just thought that was really interesting and really sweet.

AE: I had one, but it was not me alone, it was like a group with other people, it is called B’nai Mitzvah when you do it with a lot of people, but as an adult. And my father came... You

know, my husband invited him and my mom from Venezuela and I said, “Don’t invite them. My father doesn’t believe in a woman being on the bimah, the bimah is where the people do the prayers. It is more elevated, and it is close to the Torah and reading from the Torah is not allowed for women in Orthodoxy. And even though my friends are not religious, you know, they were kind of into the Orthodoxy. And my father was totally shocked and shocked negatively to see me reading from the Torah and doing some of the prayers there. And then, my husband asked him, “Weren’t you proud of Anita that she did that?” And he said, “Well, I guess it is like being a virgin, that it hurts but then, you like it.” And I was, like, “What?” And it was like it really bothered him that, but then I guess he got proud that I was able to do it. That was my father, yeah.

LR: Were there any Venezuelan customs or food that had nothing to do with being Sephardic that you brought to Houston and that you have continued to use?

AE: Yes, definitely. I cook a lot of Venezuelan food, and we do arepas very frequently, and both our daughters do it and our grandchildren also like it a lot.

LR: So, what is it that you do?

AE: Arepas. It is, like, the Venezuelan bread that people eat every day. You know that every culture has a form where there is pan or bread or tortillas or pupusas for El Salvador, but arepas is, like, made of corn flour especially and then, you make them and you can fill it with cheese or with meat and plantains. We love red plantains.

LR: I think I have had arepas before. They are good.

AE: Yes. We eat a lot of Latin American food.

LR: So, I think you did already mention that there were some that you did bring with you that were Sephardic. Is there a reason your husband doesn’t really like Sephardic food? Is it the spices?

AE: I guess he has never gotten used to it. Probably it has to do with spices, too, because my grandparents both on my mother’s side were from Israel, and it was very much like Arabic food and Moroccan food, that type of flavor, and he is not that adventurous about food, so he didn’t like it as much.

LR: Thank you. And then, you had mentioned earlier about your sister’s story that you were going to say later.

AE: Oh, yes. Well, it is because my sister did defy my father and when she was in the university, she also, during high school, during school, never got together with any boy that was not Jewish, but then, when she was in the university, she fell in a love with a guy non-Jewish, and also, my sister was defiant in the sense that my father wanted us to be

home by 6 o'clock in the afternoon, and she was studying biology at the university and, many times, they have labs and if they were not finished with the experiment, so she would come home later and he was furious and there were always fights. But then, when he found out - I don't remember if it was somebody told my brother - my brother, being the male, wanted to be, like, the same as my father and told him. And my father kicked her out of the house for about 7 years of her life and of my parents' life, he didn't see her, he didn't talk to her, she had to live in someone else's house that she rented the bedroom, because, of course, she didn't have money. She was going to the university, just very little money, and I was the person, the go-in-between, because he forbade my mother from talking to her, too. So, it was really serious. And when we moved to the United States, my parents did Aliyah and moved to Israel because they wanted my brother to grow up... I mean, he was already a lot older than us but he wasn't really getting in charge of the business and he was a mama's boy, and my father said, "He has to grow up, and let's go to Israel," because he was very much in favor of Israel even though he didn't know anything about religion. And one time in Israel, they saw a rabbi that had been on assignment in Venezuela many times and the rabbi started asking, "How are your children?" And he talked about my brother and about me. And the rabbi said, "But I remember you have a daughter, that the name of your stores are the name of your daughter." And he said, "Oh, she doesn't exist for us anymore." The rabbi scolded him and said, "You never disown a child. I mean, you never. They continue to be your children no matter what they do." So then, he started getting more calm about that and then, he accepted to see my sister. Then, she ended up being the one taking care of them because they moved into the same building, and she ended up to be the only one in Venezuela. My brother got married and went to the wife's side of the family and wasn't too available, but my sister was the one that moved there. And we were here.

LR: Right. Wow!

AE: Yes, it was that serious.

LR: I really couldn't imagine...

AE: I cannot imagine either.

LR: Wow! So, you do have some documents that you made copies for us of?

AE: Yes.

LR: We can take a look at those if you would like.

AE: Oh, I think I gave it to you, yes. Yes, because if you look at the last page, I mean, it comes up to, like, 8 generations, I mean, and it is really very valuable to my ancestors because in all generations, it was Cyprus and also Spanish and Portuguese, Egyptian,

Levantine, which includes Iran and Syria, and Italian. I have Italian as well. And Ashkenazi Jew that was my grandfather's mother, so that was 4 generations ago. And North African, which is Morocco and Algeria. So, I remember when I did this and my brother did it, and his turned out to be the same.

LR: Oh wow!

AE: And I told my sister. My sister said, "Oh, there are countries in there that I don't want to be a part of!" And I said, I guess all of that is in our background. So, the thing is that we don't know who moved where when, but through the story of my mother's side of the family, I know that is from 1518 and even 1513, that the family comes up, and even have Greek and Sardinia. And the last name of my grandparents apparently came from Greek in one and Sardinia, and Italy and African. And my grandparents on my father's side were from Egypt.

LR: Oh, wow! Really?

AE: Yes. And that is why my father ended up being born in England because my grandfather on my father's side was doing import and export - getting textiles out of Egypt and selling them in Europe back and forth, he kept traveling.

LR: So then, how did your dad end up in Venezuela?

AE: Because he also came from a large family, and when he became 16, his brothers had already come to America because in America, there was more work, and one brother was in Curacao and they told him, "Come and work with me and live here. You cannot go to the university." My father didn't go to the university either, because you have to work, we have to maintain our mother and our sisters. So, he went and he didn't get along that great, so he went to the other brother that was in Colombia and also didn't do so well with him and ended up in Venezuela just being door-to-door consignment salesman. He got things borrowed and went door-to-door. He was a really good salesperson and did that for many years until he was able to have his own store and start growing. And, in my mother's side, they were both from Israel, but my grandmother's side of the family, they were all rabbis, which I am surprised that I come from a family of a lot of rabbis but nothing filtered down. And my grandma was very white and freckled and very prestigious family from a region of Israel called Safad, and my grandfather's side was from Tiberia where people are darker because they toiled the soil and it is a lot of desert type of environment. And his parents didn't want her to marry him because he was darker and also because he was too adventurous, and they were afraid he would take her to America, and he did, actually, after, like, a year that they were married, he said, "In America, I have a brother and you can make a better living," so they ended up in Venezuela, but in Maracaibo.

- LR: That is really interesting, like, just how everything kind of just came together.
- AE: Yes.
- LR: Did your parents have any customs that they did that you really, really enjoy, or, like, traditions that they had that you enjoyed that you may not employ today? Is there anything you can think of?
- AE: Well, yes, the family, we still keep that focus on and our girls, you know, because they grew up here in the United States, they were, like, “Why do we have to have dinner together and all of the meals together?” And I said, “That’s the way that it is done. Who, does anything different?” “Oh, all of my friends,” because I kept always... Both of my daughters are vegetarians, and I kept asking them when they were in high school, like, “Are you coming for dinner? Are you coming for dinner,” because they were both in the newspaper and the social club and these other things, and they’d say, “Why do you always ask?” And I said, “Because I have to prepare a different dinner for you all than for us. I want to know. I don’t want the food to spoil.” “Why do we always have to have dinner together? You don’t need to know if I am coming or not. I mean, when I come here, I will see what is there.” And I am, like, “What do other people do?” And she said, “They just open the refrigerator or other people just open the refrigerator and get whatever there is in the refrigerator and that’s it.” And I am, like... because they used to tell us that because they knew we didn’t grow up in the United States... They used to play that game with us. I mean, not play; I mean, they were manipulating us. They were, like, saying, “That’s not the way things are done in the United States,” because they knew that we wanted to adapt and acculturate that we will do that, that we will believe everything that they told us... That they could go to parties without being supervised and all of those things.
- LR: Never in my life! I like that tradition of being able to eat with your family... I have always done that.
- AE: You have always done that, too?
- LR: Yes, my mom and I - we have always eaten dinner together. When my brother lived in the house, we did that, too.
- AE: We did that a lot and Sundays together. I mean, always the whole day, and even Friday nights together. But Robbie didn’t grow up like that and I think that is one of the reasons why we ended up moving into the United States is because he felt like my family was too possessive and that we were going to just be there all the time, and he wanted kind of to have his nation, have his nuclear family, because he came from a very small family.
- LR: How many siblings do you have? It is your brother and your sister and that’s it?

AE: That's it. But lots of cousins and uncles and aunts.

LR: Did any of your family come and visit you guys since you've been here?

AE: Yes. Mostly my parents but only for, like, 4 days a year because my father said that people are like fish and that they start smelling after 3 days, so they came, and they left. So, it was sad that my children didn't have the advantage of growing up with uncles or aunts or any of that.

LR: Did they ever talk to you about the culture shock that they experienced coming?

AE: To the United States?

LR: Yes. Well, even just for the visits.

AE: I think it was both culture shock and generational shock because the things are a lot more advanced here. Remember, my father, when he arrived into the house that we had moved in to, we had an alarm system and he saw me doing the buttons before entering the house and he was, like, "What's that?" And I explained. And he said, "I was born too long ago. I am not into that." And also, when we had our first baby, it was in upstate New York, and I called him, they let me call... We told my mother because the baby came, like, 11 days early, so we called in the morning and we said to my mom that we are going to the hospital and the baby is going to be born, so she took the flight the same day. But she had not arrived, of course, and my father, we called him to tell him that Ariane was born from the delivery room. And my father was... "You are talking?" because you know how over there it is... You have a baby, like, you are separated and you stay in the hospital for, like, a whole week. It was like a big deal and nobody bothers you. And I am, like, "Yeah." And he was, like, "You are talking? And I hope you didn't scream." He was, like, totally shocked that I was able and that Robbie was in the delivery room with me.

LR: Were there any other stories or any other things you would like to tell us before we conclude?

AE: Well, one thing was that I didn't want to come to the United States.

LR: Oh, really? Okay.

AE: Yes, because I was very attached to my family, and I was the first one that got married and we had already Ariane that was born. We returned to Venezuela when she was, like, 2½, 3 months old. And I had really a good life there because you can have housekeepers there, and I was working at the university, so I had my life really working out well, but my husband said he wanted to come, he wanted to come, and I thought, well, either I get a divorce or I go and try. And I decided to come and try but always in the back of my

mind that, you know, like, if I don't like it, we are going back. But, I mean, my daughters, to this day, say, "Thanks God that you all stayed and that you made that decision."

LR: I am glad you stayed, too. It is an honor to meet you and be able to hear your story.

AE: No, I am glad I stayed, but I understand the sacrifices, and I see it also in almost all Jewish families - they have had to leave a place where they live to go to another place where they can have a better life, and the sacrifice, I always knew I would get the phone call that would say, your dad died or your mom died, and I wouldn't be there. And when they get sick... I mean, they were sick in different stages for a long time, and I had to run there, I mean, very frequently, every 3 weeks, and keep on doing that because, you know, if they... And you feel guilty because it's only one of your siblings taking care of them but you are here. So, it is like you feel like divided, I mean, that part.

LR: Right. I can understand that. My grandmother, I am very close to her. She lives in Massachusetts, and she gets very sick as well, so, I can definitely understand not completely but I can relate and understand how stressful that could be.

AE: So, yeah, there are sacrifices. I mean, we definitely have a better life than we would have had there but it was with sacrifices, and with the children not growing up the way we grew up... I mean, with cousins and uncles and a lot of freedom in that sense.

LR: Right. We are good. Was there anything else you'd like to say?

AE: No, that's it.

[End of Interview]