

Interviewee: Jacob Varon

Interview Date: April 1, 2022

Interview Location: Holocaust Museum Houston

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## ABSTRACT

Jacob Varon describes his childhood growing up in Mexico City, under the guidance of Sephardic and Ashkenazi parents. His upbringing in a unified and diverse Jewish community shaped his identity as a proud Jewish Latino. He immigrated to Houston to pursue his medical studies in hopes to one day return to Mexico City and develop his medical career. After his surgery training, he decided to stay in Houston. He felt welcomed in this new American context yet noticed a lack of community among Jewish Latin Americans in Houston. He speaks about his activism in Mexico City and Houston, and he helped build Hebraica Houston, which brought together Jewish immigrants from across Latin America. He further details the desire for a new Hebraica to unite the Jewish Latinx community in the United States.

AA: It is April 1, 2022. This is Alena Aguilar interviewing Jacob Varon at the Holocaust Museum for the Sephardic Latinx Oral History Project at the University of Houston and the Holocaust Museum Houston. Thank you for letting me interview you today, Dr. Varon. Let's start at the beginning by, can you tell me how it was living in Mexico City and how it was to grow up there for your family?

JV: Of course. First, I want to thank you guys for interviewing me today and then, second, it was an amazing thing. I mean, as I was mentioning just before we started talking, I was born in Mexico City and then, I lived all my life there and, just as I mentioned, I went to medical school in Mexico. Then, I came to Houston and I went to Baylor for general surgery and plastic surgery and, since then, I stayed. My family originally was not from Mexico City. My mother actually was born in Mexico City, but her parents were Ashkenazi Jews also. My grandfather was born in Kyiv, which is now Ukraine, and my grandmother was born in Prague, in Czechoslovakia. And when they got married, they moved to Mexico - I mean, it was obviously before my time - and my mother was already born in Mexico City. On my father's side, that is where the Sephardic traditional roots are coming. My grandfather was born in Karakace (phonetic) in Turkey and my grandmother in Izmir, also in Turkey. And they lived there for a significant amount of time and then, they moved to Israel now, before Palestine. And my father was born in Jerusalem. So, they moved to Mexico City when he was 2 years old. And then,

obviously they lived in Mexico City and, as I said, my mother was born in Mexico, so they got to know each other and they married, I don't remember the exact year, but it was sometime around 1946 or something like that. I am the oldest one of two. I have a brother also, he is 9 years younger than I am, and he still is in Mexico City. He loves it there and he is going to stay there. My father passed away, unfortunately, many, many years ago. I was 25 years old when he passed away. And then, my mother just passed away about 5 years ago. Essentially, the only family that I have on my side is my brother. My wife's family is still there, and her mother still lives in Mexico City, too.

So, living in Mexico, it was an amazing experience because, at that time, the city was beautiful and it was relatively - not a small city because it has always been a huge city... As a matter of fact, it has to be on a couple of occasions the largest city in the world, but it was nice, it was quiet, no issues with guns, no issues with crime, no issues with anything. I mean, you were able to go out in the street and do whatever you wanted. And I remember perfectly fine going to school and coming back and my mother forced me to do my homework and then go out to play. And, literally just leaving the house and going with my friends and don't come back until the evening when they had to say, "Okay, 7:30 or 7:00, you have to come back." And it was super safe. Unfortunately, the situation in Mexico City was different and it has been getting worse and worse and worse and worse. But it was an amazing place to live, not only as a Mexican because, being myself born in Mexico, I am Mexican, but also, just as a Jew, because there was no antisemitism, really, to speak of, and everything was pretty open and you could go to all the synagogues, and you still do that now but, in the whole world, the antisemitism has changed a lot. And, at that time, essentially, there was no issue whatsoever, so we integrated into the different communities very, very well.

I mean, there are so many things to talk about, I think, because, in Mexico City, the Jews, what we call here Sephardic Jews in the United States are usually anybody that is not Ashkenazi. In Mexico, it is sort of different. In Mexico, the Sephardic Jews, which is the way that it is supposed to be or the way that it should be, the Sephardic Jews are the ones that came from Sepharad, which is Spain, or from Turkey, and those are the only ones that are Sephardic Jews and they have what we had and we still do - our own synagogue and our own school and everything, which is a Jewish school. Now, the people that are non-Sephardic, they are called Arab Jews. They were the people that came from Syria in different locations and the only thing about it is, within that group, they have two different groups or subdivisions: 1) the ones that came from Aleppo, that they are called the Halebis; and 2) the other one that came from Damascus that are called Shamis. And, again, they have their own synagogue, their own traditions, they have their own everything and also, now, they have another different school, another Jewish school. So, when I came here to the United States, it was, like, a shock. I mean, "Wait a minute, I am the Sephardic Jew, but he is from Syria, and is he a Sephardic Jew also?" They said,

“Oh, yeah.” And I said, “Well, no, I mean, that is a different situation.” It doesn’t really matter because we are all the same but the differences there were very, very clear, which are not here.

AA: So, growing up in Mexico City, were you really involved in the Jewish community? Like, was your family very involved in the community?

JV: Yes, I mean, my father was on the board of the synagogue for a long time, and my mother was actually involved very heavily with the Sephardic school, which is where I went from kindergarten, elementary, high school, and middle school, and everything. And she was very, very heavily involved. I mean, she was, at one time, in charge of the PTO and some other ones. She was the president of the mother’s committee. So, she was involved in a lot of things and, we, as the two children, we were also really, really involved in everything. I like very much everything that is social life and things like that and the leadership in some way. So when I was growing up, I became part of the macabi, which was a group of, like, the Jewish scouts, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and I was involved in that. And then, because of that, I started getting a little bit more with the Jewish Community Center, and I actually became the president of the youth committee for the Jewish Community Center. I don’t know if you ever heard about the Jewish Community Center in Mexico, but it is not like the one in Houston. It is a huge facility. I mean, it is probably - I am not exaggerating - probably 20 times as big as the Jewish Community Center here, if not more. And they have everything - Olympic pools, softball, soccer, gymnasiums indoors and outdoors, pools. They had a lot of activities going on, so it was very common for all the Jewish people, the young Jewish people in Mexico, to go and take soccer classes or Judo classes or tennis classes there, so we actually lived a significant portion of our lives in the JCC, because there was everything. I mean, you could do everything you wanted. And then, when I was the president of the Jewish committee, the youth committee, we started developing more and more activities for the younger guys, for people that were, like, 13, 14 until about 18 or something like that. And we organized a lot of activities, we organized concerts. At that time, we opened a little club for Saturday afternoons, so, instead of going to the street, you could come over here. And we had great music. They didn’t serve alcoholic drinks, but they served everything else. So, it was a beautiful facility. And still, I mean, if you go to Mexico, it is one of the highlights - even if you are not Jewish.

AA: So, it sounds like the Jewish community there was really thriving, but we’ve read about how, between the two sects... So, you said there were, like, many sects... Was there a lot of interaction between Ashkenazi or the Arab Jews, the Sephardic Jews? Did they interact a lot? They had their own places but...

JV: Yes, yes, there was always a great relation... Most of my friends when I went to school, they were Arab Jews more than Sephardic, even when I had plenty Sephardic, so, we all

got along very well. But my parents tell me all the time that when they got married, being one Sephardic and one Ashkenazi, it was kind of a revolution because it was not the normal. They weren't the very first ones that did it, but it was not the norm. But now, it is completely normal that everybody mixes with everybody, and everything is done together. In that sense, it has been a lot more closed in, let's say... The communities have been a little bit closer in now than when they were before. But in the time of my parents' marriage, as I said before, it was, like, whoa, I mean, "She married a Sephardic," or, "He is marrying an Ashkenazi."

AA: So, you said that there weren't a lot of instances of antisemitism growing up. Can you tell me more about that? Like, you said it felt very safe. You also went to college in Mexico City. Did you not feel anything there?

JV: No, as I said, in my time, it was highly unusual. It was very, very, very unusual that there would be somebody doing something antisemitic at that time or, I don't know, painting swastikas on the walls or saying anything that was against the Jews. I mean, I am sure that there were some groups that were kind of under the water or undercover that were antisemitic, but there was really not a significant movement that you can say, well, I feel threatened when I go to college. I went to the National University of Mexico which is like the Mexican university. It is not a private university. And, at that time, as far as I know, it is now one of the best medical schools in Mexico City. It is a huge, huge university. I think it has a little bit over 100,000 students or something like that. So, you were going to any of the schools - medical school or psychology or engineering or whatever it was, and you were perfectly fine. Nobody would ever bother you. And since we had such incredibly good relations with everybody that was non-Jewish, when I mentioned that I used to come from school and then just go out, my neighbors were 99% non-Jewish, and we got along amazing. And I was playing with them all the time. So, it was a very, very nice life at that time. Still for the people that live there because my brother tells me all the time it is still a very, very nice life in that sense, even when the antisemitic movements have changed a little bit more, and what has changed tremendously is the crime, the pollution, the traffic. The city is gorgeous, a beautiful, beautiful city, but now, it will take you probably one hour to go 5 miles because it is just such a crowded city. But everything is pretty, and it is a very cosmopolitan... I don't know if you have been in Mexico City, but it is very, very cosmopolitan, so it is, like, New York. They have all kinds of theaters, all kinds of movies, restaurants everywhere, sections in town in which you can actually just walk and there are probably 4, 5 square blocks that there are 50 restaurants or something, so, it is very, very nice. It is a beautiful, beautiful city. And that continues being as of now if you are willing to spend 30 minutes in the car for your 5 miles. But otherwise, it is really a nice place. I miss it a lot in that sense, and when I go and visit my mother-in-law or my brother, it is just fun to go out. It is just a beautiful city. As a matter of fact, when I came to Houston, which has

already been 30 something years ago, I said, oh my God, I mean, Houston was a one million people city, so I said, this is like a little ranch. I mean, what am I going to do in this city? You didn't have a lot of movies - you had some but not a lot of them. There was obviously nothing like symphonies, ballet, operas - nothing like that. And maybe theater occasionally when the companies were coming. And the Galleria was, like, the place to go at that time when they opened it. Now, Houston has become an unbelievable city and we have everything that you can even dream of is in Houston.

- AA: Shifting gears a little bit, so, growing up, I am sure you felt really in touch with your Latino, your Mexican identity. Did you practice lots of Mexican traditions along with your Jewish ones?
- JV: Yes, I mean, the traditions 100% because you feel obviously 100% Mexican when you are there, and Judaism is your religion. So, religion-wise, we were practicing all the Judaism and all the religion things that you normally practice as a Jew, but the traditions of Mexico, we also celebrated every one of them. Again, it was a lot of fun because you felt that you belonged to Mexico City being a Mexican but, at the same time, that you conserve your Judaism and your culture and all that because you didn't feel threatened.
- AA: Do you have any examples of something where you maybe blended the two identities into a tradition that is, like, a little bit of both?
- JV: Yes, I mean, on many occasions, my friends invited me, let's say, to a Christmas dinner and I was delighted to go and I went with not a problem, as many times as I invited them for Passover at my house or to any of the holidays that we had. And it was totally normal for us to be in one or in the other one, depending on what side we were at, too.
- AA: Switching gears a little bit, let's begin to start talking about your immigration to the United States; more specifically, Houston. Let's start with why did you immigrate from Mexico and then, why to Houston?
- JV: The answer to the first question is because of the fact that I wanted to continue my studies in the United States. At that time in Mexico, I mean, I don't know how good or how valuable it was, but if you were board certified or if you were trained in the United States and you went back to Mexico, you were almost assured that you would be a very successful doctor because you had exceptional training. So, that was my goal. I said, I eventually want to do it, and my plan was 100% to come back to Mexico. So, I said, well this is what I am going to do - I am going to go and do my 5 or 7 years of training and then, I will just come back and then, that's it, and I am done - I will be doing really well. Then, I chose Houston because, as I was growing up, my parents used to come here to the old Diagnostic Clinic of Houston that is still in existence for checkups. It was very common that a lot of the Mexican people would come once a year or once every 5 years or whatever, occasionally, to just check and make sure that medically, you were fine.

And they used to come to either this clinic or the Kelsey-Seybold Clinic. So, my parents were coming and then, I got a little bit of exposure to what the American clinics were and the American hospitals and things like that. Unfortunately, my dad then had prostate cancer and that's the reason for which he passed away, but he had his surgery done here and all that, so I was again exposed to the big hospitals here. And that kind of connected me with the reality that Houston was the capital in the world for medicine. And now, it is confirmed that we are the biggest medical center in the entire world. And I just started getting more and more exposed and I said, well, like, if I ever can get a position here, this is where I would like to come. I was lucky enough that I passed the examinations, and I was accepted at Baylor, and then, I didn't even look in other places. When I was applying to plastic surgery, I was not completely sure because it was a very competitive program that I was going to be able to get into the plastic surgery program, so I looked at Galveston also. But, essentially, yes, St. Joseph's Hospital which had, at that time, a plastic surgery program. Again, I mean, I was lucky enough and blessed that Baylor accepted me into the plastic surgery program also, so, I just stayed there. But I never looked in another city or anything like that.

AA: Were there any challenges you faced coming to Houston during your immigration? You said you had those tests but beyond that, the process itself, is there anything that you found challenging coming here?

JV: Well, first of all is the language, I mean. I used to speak a little bit of English because I learned it at school and obviously, the trips that I was mentioning that we came with my parents, so we spoke in English, but that was a big to-do because I remember vividly being a resident in general surgery at that time in the first few weeks that I came in and all the American residents, the history and physical examinations, they just picked up the phone and started dictating, and that was it. It was done in 3 minutes. And I couldn't do it because I didn't dominate the language so well that I could do the same. So, it was a lot of work because I had to write it down first and then read it on the phone because they didn't let you have it just written. So, that was one of them and also, I mean, the communication about certain diseases and certain things that obviously in English is a totally different thing than what was the name, at least, or the syndrome in Mexico, so, I needed to learn all these new things. But, in general, I have wonderful memories of my training in both - general and plastics - and all the time that I spent in the hospitals here and everything. So, those were essentially the challenges - just to get adjusted to really a community and a hospital that was totally different and run totally different than the ones that I was in when I was in medical school in Mexico. But everybody was super accommodating, the chief of the department and everybody else, were amazing, let's say, mentors and they were very, very nice with all of us - I mean, the Americans and the non-Americans - with everybody. So, it was, I don't want to say a very easy transition but, at the same time, it was an easy transition.

AA: So, you settled in Houston. Where did you settle in Houston, and why did you settle in Houston, like, specifically the area?

JV: When I came, as I said, it was because of everything that I just mentioned but then, we didn't know anything about Houston or what was around Houston except the 4 blocks of the Medical Center where I used to go with my parents. So, we had a couple of friends that were actually already in residency training here, and there were two especially that they were here and they were friends of mine before in Mexico, their brothers and sisters were friends of mine in Mexico, so when we came in, they were the ones that recommended me something. There was one actually that is kind of a silly story, but it is true. They told me that in the United States, it was super important to have credit, that that was the most important thing, so, he said, "I mean, if you come over here, you can bring cash or you can do whatever you want, but if you don't have credit, you are going to have a problem buying a car or buying whatever you want to buy because it is going to be hard." So, he recommended me to get a Sears credit card. And that was actually my first credit card that I ever had, my Sears store credit card, which he was correct.. I mean, it opened up all the other ones. After they approved my Sears credit card, then I had Visa and I got anything I wanted. It was relatively easy to get because I was paying my bills perfectly on time. So, that was a funny story, and he was very instrumental in all the things about financials. Then, we had another friend that actually was more friends of Haya, my wife, than myself, and she was a teacher, and the husband, if I remember correctly, was a photographer... They also said, "You need to try to look for a job here and you need to try to live in this section of town." And we kind of followed the advice. And then, the couple that are our very best friends, almost my brother and my sister now, which are Mark [Goldberg]'s parents, they were also instrumental, and they said, "Well, the Jewish community lives pretty much in this area, and they are relatively central, so we would recommend that you be there. So, the kids will go to school and everything in that area." And that is when we rented the first apartment which was a one-bedroom apartment on the corner of Fondren and South Braeswood. And we lived there for a while and then, as I started getting more into the program and my salary got a little bit better, then I was able to buy a very, very small house. It had two bedrooms only. And it was relatively in the same area. It was in Fondren Southwest, which is just a little bit in the back. We lived there also for a significant amount of time. And then, I had my children. I have a wonderful son and a wonderful daughter. And then, at that time, the house was tightening and it was tight, so we moved in the same location in Fondren Southwest, to another area. I think it was called Lakes of Fondren. And pretty much I was there all the time. During my entire residency training and all my training, I lived in those places. And the same thing... I mean, it was an incredible place to live because it was not only the Jewish community that lived around, but also the rest of the community that was so nice. And it was so nice to live there. You had the shopping center. And you had, at that time, Sharpstown, that was amazing. It was just a very nice place. So, now, I

thank them for their recommendation because it was great. And life is, in some ways, ironic, because after that time, we started getting closer and closer with this couple, the Goldbergs, and now, as I said, we are inseparable. I mean, we are together all the time, and we go everywhere together and everything. So, it has been a great run.

AA: You mentioned before that when you arrived here, the divisions or the different sects were different from how you knew them in Mexico City between, like, Ashkenazi and Sephardic. Can you talk a bit more on how your experience with this new Jewish community was like?

JV: It was, I don't want to say a shocking thing because it was not shocking in any way, but it was different because I kind of learned that in the United States, or at least in Houston, everybody that was not Ashkenazi was considered a Sephardic, which, again, since I had such a great relation with all the three different groups of Sephardics in Mexico, it didn't make any difference. And then, I learned that the division here was more not Sephardic and Ashkenazi, but it was if you were a Reform Jew, a Conservative Jew, or an Orthodox Jew. And that was a significant difference. So, that was a learning curve because, in Mexico, what they consider here Orthodox, not the Lubavitch, which are the ones with the payos and the beard and things like that which is a different situation, a different sect, but the Orthodox is pretty much what it was in Mexico. So, I mean, going to a Conservative shul or even a Reform shul was, like, a synagogue, it was, like, wait a minute - this is different, this is totally different than what it was there. I remember the first time there is a synagogue here called Emanu El, which is a Reform synagogue, and I went one time, and the men did not have the kippahs, the little thing that you put when you go to the synagogue. And I said, well, what's going on here, because I had never seen in my life, in all those years, anybody that was sitting in the synagogue being a Jew and praying without the kippah. So, that was a surprise. And then, I learned that that is just part of the Reform Judaism. And, as the time passes by, you realize that it really doesn't matter if you are Orthodox, Conservative or Reform - the important thing is that you keep your values and that you pass it on through your children.

AA: So, raising your own kids, you have been passing on those values to your children as well, and how do you navigate the Ashkenazi/Sephardic relationship between you and your wife, and then how you pass those values down on to your kids?

JV: The traditions are basically the same, obviously, and all the holidays are the same, and what you do on one holiday or the other one is 100% the same. It is just... I don't know... The fact that you are coming from one part of the world or coming from the other one... Now, I joke with my kids and my wife all the time about the Sephardics being better and she says, "No, the Ashkenazis are better." I say, "Well, here, there is no better or worse. I mean, we all are the same." So, the holidays are the same. The main thing is that the Ashkenazi Jews, they have a lot of the prayers in Yiddish or with a



Yiddish accent and the Sephardic, we normally do it with a Hebrew accent. And that is another thing that I joke about all the time. I say, "Well, when you go to Israel, you don't see anybody speaking in Yiddish unless it is an older person because Hebrew is the language, not Yiddish." And we always joke about it. But the kids, really, they grew up learning a little bit about everything and obviously when they were with my wife's parents, they heard something, and when they were with mine, they heard something a little different. Unfortunately, since my father passed away so young, when he was 57 years old, my son was 1 year old at that time, so he didn't have a lot of relation with my father, but definitely and fortunately with my mother. And the same thing with my daughter. So, it was essentially the same thing. And we kind of mixed the things. Obviously, my wife knows a lot more how to cook all the Ashkenazi things than the Sephardic, so we eat a lot of that, which is pretty much the standard here. I mean, it is hard to find a Sephardic restaurant, but there, all the delis are Ashkenazi foods. But it is amazing, since everything from the beginning is the same, and everything is coming from the same tree or from the same root, at the end of the day, there is really no difference. But the kids grew up more like Conservative Jews, and I don't think that they see the difference between the Ashkenazi traditions or the Sephardic traditions, only or just because of the things that we tell them. Yes, but in the old days, I remember... I went to a Hebrew Sephardic school and my grandfather always told me, because he was Ashkenazi, he said, "I don't understand how in school they teach you Hebrew and they don't teach you Yiddish because that is the way it should be." And I said, "Well, I don't know but I don't speak Yiddish, but I speak Hebrew." And with the kids obviously it was different because in the American schools, it is just different. They teach you more religion and also Hebrew but not Ashkenazi/Sephardic/Arab nothing. I mean, everything is either Conservative, Orthodox or Reform.

AA: So, as we started to talk about, can you talk a bit more about how you feel, your, like, rearing of your children is different from your parents in the relationship of raising them Jewish? Can you talk a bit more about that?

JV: Yes. As I mentioned in the other section previously, in Mexico, it is a little different because it was a very clear division, as I said, even with their own schools. I mean, the Ashkenazis had the Ashkenazi school, the Sephardic had the other one, so we were all mixed and everybody was together but there was a very clear delineation of which one was which and what was happening. Now, socially, it didn't matter - everybody was together, and everything was fine, and actually, there were in the Sephardic schools a lot of Ashkenazis, and in the Arab school, a lot of the Sephardics and they were mixed. Here, I think the difference has been more than anything because we see that or I see that as something of the past that I kind of inherited from my parents because they moved from another country to Mexico and that is what they saw, and they probably felt that, on my mother's side, they were Ashkenazi and they were in here, and on my father's side,

that they were the Sephardic, that they were here. When I got to the United States, I didn't have that. In fact, I was shocked, as I think I mentioned, that that was not happening. I said, "Well, where is the Ashkenazi synagogue? Where is the Sephardic synagogue?" And, at that time, there was not even a Sephardic synagogue. It was only the Ashkenazis. And that's because it was not considered Ashkenazi, Sephardic, etc., but it was the Conservative or the Reform. So, in that sense, when we came in, it was relatively easy to adopt because, I said, well, there's no Sephardic, there's no Arab, there's no Ashkenazi - now, I am going to be a Conservative Jew. I am going to be a Reform Jew. And since we came from that Orthodox background, then we said, well, maybe Orthodox is a little bit too much but we can definitely be in the Conservative, and we had been, let's say, growing up as a Conservative Jew all the time and my kids essentially did the same thing. I mean, we obviously celebrate all the holidays with them and they have learned everything about it and now, they are passing it on to our grandkids, which is really, really nice to see and, once again, with no division of one or the other one. Now, they are completely aware, my son and my daughter, completely aware that I am Sephardic and that Haya is an Ashkenazi Jew, because, again, we joke about it all the time, even with kind of silly things, like, "No, I am smarter than you just because I am Sephardic," or "All the Jews in the world come from Sephardic, so this thing of Ashkenazi doesn't mean anything." So, it is like that all the time. But it is a different thing. I mean, it has been good, I think, for everybody because even when we never had any issue with Sephardic or the Ashkenazis in Mexico in my time; then, for my kids, that doesn't exist. I mean, it is, like, it didn't happen.

Now, the food is different. The food is totally different. The Ashkenazi Jews are obviously the more European-type of food and, I mean, things that normally you don't eat in other parts of the world, like, I don't know - herring, which is a special fish that is very salty - Sephardic Jews don't usually eat that. Probably the Matzo ball soup that you see in the delis now which is really a ball, it is a Matzo ball soup ball; now, in the Sephardic tradition, that doesn't exist. They are little pieces of the Matzo, which is a bread for Passover, and in a different kind of a base. It is not like a broth, it is kind of a different thing. So, you start kind of dissecting a little bit of the different foods and there, it is a totally different thing. And some of them are very similar but with different names. And both of them are delicious, they are great... I mean, the Ashkenazi Jews eat a lot of salmon and lox because it comes from the Nordic countries, and my grandparents in Turkey or in other places, probably they didn't even know what lox was because we didn't have the access to that or that was not the norm to eat lox there. But there are plenty dishes in the Sephardic tradition and also, I am sure, that there are very many in the Ashkenazi. Being also a 50/50 myself, it was kind of funny because I remember the Passover dinners, which is called Seder, the Passover Seder, with my grandfather on my mother's side, it was a totally different story than the other one because the food was a little bit different. My grandmother used to cook different things. The reading was more

in Yiddish because he obviously didn't speak Hebrew, he spoke Yiddish. Then, the following day or whatever it was, we went to my grandparents on my father's side, and it was totally different - totally different food and totally different reading and everything from the same book, the same Haggadah, but it was different tunes and different ways to sing them. And the same thing with all of them, with all the other holidays. I don't know, it was mainly that doesn't probably have anything to do with being Ashkenazi or Jews, but we remember spending the Yom Kippur which is the Atonement Day with my father and his parents, and the New Year, which was Rosh Hashanah one week before, usually one day and one day or both days with my mother's parents. So, it was a little division but more than anything, because you wanted to be with both, not because of the tradition of Sephardics and Jews.

AA: So, you spoke before how, in Mexico City, there weren't lots of instances of antisemitism or discrimination but here in Texas, in this new context, did you feel that change? Was it different being a minority here for you?

JV: Yes, in some ways, and no. I mean, yes, in the sense that I was not used to... I mean, I knew about antisemitism because I was involved in all these organizations and I knew exactly what was going on, and it is something that you are reading in the newspapers pretty much every week or if not, every month. But, at that time, in Mexico, as I said, it was not the norm. You never saw that I remember articles in the local newspaper, even if it was the main newspaper in Mexico, saying something about an antisemitic movement or an antisemitic event, so, I didn't have that. And then, when I came over here, it was a little bit more, maybe more open. Maybe it was that in Mexico, they were keeping it quiet and here, it was a totally different situation because the press is more free. So, that was probably there. And then, obviously, with the internet and all these changes that we have been having all these years since I came to the United States, it has been growing more and more and more because now, you hear what happens in Germany and what happens in Australia and what happens and Canada, and those things happen every day. But that is what I think is the main reason... Maybe there were some antisemitic things in Mexico but very few and very rare and the ones that were there, we probably didn't know about it because it was not exposed. But now, here, you hear it all the time and it is concerning, especially in the universities. As you know, there are a lot of antisemitic movements in different universities and the Jewish community in the United States specifically has been trying to form groups of Jewish people in the universities that are students that will kind of start comingling or mixing with the rest and telling them that there is really no reason to be an antisemitic because, I mean, it shouldn't be, nor discriminate anybody else. Not only a Jewish person but nobody else. Nobody should be discriminated in any way.

AA: In the same vein, have you ever felt like you had to introduce yourself as more Jewish or more Latino in any instance? Like, you had to display one over the other at all?

JV: I feel very proud of both. I mean, I feel very proud of being Latino, so I try to talk about it and say I am Latino, I am from Mexico City, with everything - with my patients, with the places that I go, in all the organizations that I have involved with - so, I openly say it because I am very proud to be Latino. Very, very proud. And, at the same time, I am very proud to be Jewish. So, when it is in the context of some Jewish event or in a Jewish group or whatever, or even in a non-Jewish group, I don't hesitate at all to say, "I am originally from Mexico City. I have been in the United States for so long, so I am now an American citizen, but I am still Mexican and Jewish in the sense that I've got it in my roots."

AA: Circling back, you have said that you know of, like, community groups - you, yourself, have been involved in lots of groups, support groups - I would like to talk a little specifically about Hebraica Houston. I have read that you were a founding member of it. Can you describe what Hebraica Houston was and what its goals were?

JV: Initially, what happened is that we Jewish people didn't know very much except the small group that you had around, but then, we found out that there were obviously a lot of Jewish people in Houston but they were Americans and obviously you got together with them and you became friends and everything was great, but that also there was a very large group of Latin American people that live in the United States and were Jewish and we didn't know. And we said, well, just to say a number... I mean, we know 10 families that are Latin American Jews in Houston, but the reality is that there are probably 200 or 150 families. So, another guy and myself, we sat down and we said, "Well, we should find a way to try to bring these people together not only so we will be together but to have more friends and to have a nice group of people that get together." So, that is the way that it started. And it was a group initially talking with Henry Kuperman, which was his name, and then, a couple of other people that got involved. And then, we had a very small group initially and we started doing very small activities in the home or in the clubhouse or the neighborhood pool and things like that. And then, we realized that there were a lot more people than what we were expecting. I mean, it was crazy the amount of people that were saying, "Well, I am a Latin American Jew. When is the next activity? What are you going to do?" And before we noticed it, we had over 100 families. And obviously, we were doing a lot of important activities and we brought... There is a Hasidic Festival that actually goes all over the world with some singers and dancers, and we brought it to Houston to Congregation Beth Yeshurun, and we had activities all the time... So, that Hebraica Houston, we all were very, very surprised because we said, God, I mean, we have 100 families already enrolled and maybe a little bit more than that, but we probably are 200 in Houston or even more. So, we started doing more and more activities and became, in my opinion, a very strong kind of group or people, and we were really infiltrating into the Jewish community non-Latin in the United States a lot because, since we were having all these activities and they were participating and we were

participating in them, and then, I mean, obviously we were considered like another group in here... I was the president for, I think probably 3 years or something like that, and we had our significant group of people that spent a lot of time trying to make it grow and make it better, and it was a beautiful thing. One of the nicest things about it is that when we found out that there were people from Chile and from Salvador and from Argentina, and everybody had, just, like the Jews that we were talking about - the Sephardic and the Ashkenazis - everybody had a different tradition. And what they ate in Argentina was totally different than what we ate here or what we ate in Mexico. So, because of that, one time or more than one time, we had just, like, dinners in which everybody brought a plate that was traditional from those countries and, I mean, we knew what it was but then, it was like, you asked what it is and the names... you'd say, wait a minute... The Venezuelans call choclo, the corn, which we call elote, and it is, like, "This is a choclo salad," and it is, like, "What? We don't have choclo salad." And then, when you look at it, you say, well, this is just corn, I mean, it is elote - it is not a big deal. And like that, there were a lot of things, even fruits with different names. So, it was very interesting to see, going back to traditions, what other people were doing and what other people were eating, and it turned out to be, as I said before, a very, very nice group. We were very coherent, and they were very nice. And, obviously, all of a sudden, you knew, I don't know, 100 families or 300 people more than you knew before through the children and the kids. So, it was very good. Unfortunately, with the passing of time, it started kind of changing. I don't know if you remember... I don't know exactly what year it was, but there was a certain time in which a lot of Latin Americans, not only Jews, were, in general, started going back to their countries, and then, we lost a few members that the family just moved. Some of the ones, the children got married and went to another city, so the parents went with them... And a lot of us were still living here and we talk about it all the time, but nobody has rekindled the group at all. It was a great thing.

AA: Do you think the Latino Jewish community could benefit from another community group like this now?

JV: I do believe so because, first of all, you had a representation among the rest of the communities of Jews, regardless of if you were Conservative, Orthodox - everything that we have talked about. So, that was a good thing. Second, because you started disintegrating and the same thing happens... I mean, I find out all the time that there are either doctors or people that I knew from Mexico, that I knew their parents from Mexico, and now, they come to do some training and I don't know that they are here, and we don't know that they are here, and they tell you, "Hey," you know, "So and so is"... "No, I never heard about him. I used to know his brother or his parents or whatever in Mexico, but where are they?" And they say, "Oh, they are here. They have been here 7 years or 10 years doing the training." And it is, like, "What? We never heard about them." So, I think that especially for that group of younger and newer immigrants to the United States,

it will be very nice to have it again and bring them in because I can guarantee you that there are probably 40, 50 families of younger people or even older people that move to Houston, and they are Latin American Jews, and we don't know that they are here. They live in The Woodlands, they live in Sugar Land, they live in other places, or they go to different synagogues, and we don't know about them.

AA: Well, we are coming to the end of our interview. Is there anything you don't want to be left unsaid? Any last comments?

JV: Yes, I mean, the first one will be that, again, you have to be very proud of being what you are - Latin American, Jewish, and American, obviously - and, on the other hand, I would love to find a way that the younger generations... Because that happens all the time... As you start getting older, more and more people get older, and the younger people don't get involved that much because there are so many things to get involved these days that you get involved in other things. It is not that they are not getting involved in anything - they are getting involved maybe in more things that we do - but it would be very nice to bring them back again together and say, okay, we were the Latin American families that moved from Mexico, Argentina, Chile and all these places, but now, maybe you need to put together these newer groups. So, I would love to hear that and to have somebody that would say, "Okay, I want to take the lead and I want going to do it." The problem that I see now is that some of our kids now live in different cities, so it is going to be impossible for somebody that is in Austin or in San Francisco or New York to try to put a group together unless they do it nationally. I would assume that now with the Internet and the computers and all the programs that we have now, it is probably relatively easy to put together a group and then just send it to Facebook or whatever and then just make it happen. But it would be really nice to get the new generations involved. And second, the ones that are already here, it would be nice for them and for us to know that they are here and to try to bring them in because they will feel better knowing the rest of us instead of just living in the different parts of the city.

AA: Thank you for your time today, Dr. Varon.

JV: It was my pleasure. It was a great thing. It is good to be here.

AA: This has been Alena Aguilar interviewing Dr. Varon.

[Following the formal closing of interview, the interviewee had more to say, so the interviewers restarted the videorecording.]

JV: I mean, I am not talking about 40 years that there was nothing around. We still had some information, and we had some computers and things like that but it was much harder. Now, I mean, you send an email to 1,000 people and it is just click and that's it. At that time, we had to actually either make phone calls and say, "Hey, Joe Smith or Joe Perez, we know that you are here, and we are going to form a group," blah, blah, blah, "And we are going to get together on June 5." So, you had to do everything like that. Mailings were hard because we didn't know the addresses of a lot of people, so mainly it was just like, you told me, Jorge Guttin is in this place and Rosie Goldberger is in the other one, and then, we just took the phone numbers and the group that initiated Hebraica started just calling and getting together.

AA: In preparing for all of these interviews, we have listened to an interview from Kuperman, and I think he mentioned how you would open the Yellow Pages and go through and contact people that way.

JV: Correct. Did you interview Kuperman? Not you, but, I mean, for this project?

AA: Not for this project. It was 2019, I believe. It was a while ago. I think Professor Goldberg was the one that did the interview. And so, yes, we heard a little bit about Hebraica then as well.

JV: It was great. I mean, it was really fun. And, as I said, now, we have very close friends that came from the Hebraica that we just didn't know... I swear that we got, I don't know, four people that were maybe in the same neighborhood or that we just went to the JCC together or that we went to synagogue that you knew, but that was your group of people... I mean, your group of Latin American Jewish people. We had plenty of American Jews that were friends, and non-Jews also. But when this was created, it was really nice because, all of a sudden, you knew a lot of these people that you don't know and now, 25 years later, then you say, gosh, so and so is a very close friend of mine, and he came from Hebraica. And the other one is one of my very best friends, and he came from Hebraica. And the relations have been established and now, we socialize with them. Unfortunately, you are for the good things and for the bad things also. But it was a good group. I mean, it is a shame... I kind of left my period of the presidency and I just passed... I am involved in so many crazy things that I just kind of move away and I said, well, I am going to let this person do it and the other person do it, which were the next presidents, and I am sure that they did a wonderful job, but what happened is that just slowly, slowly the group kind of disintegrated. Part of it because of the migration from here to other countries, because we had a lot of people from Argentina that went back or people that were, I don't know, from Chile or from Venezuela, but they decided to go to Miami or to California. In San Diego, this is an interesting thing - obviously it doesn't matter for the interview, but all of a sudden, the situation in Mexico City in regards to security became very, very problematic, about maybe 15 years ago with crime and things

like that. Nothing to do with antisemitic or Jewish or non-Jewish, just in general. So, a lot of the people that were a little bit better to-do or whatever, they started fearing that something would happen and then, there were two or three families that said, you know, I don't want to take a chance that they will get my family or my kids or whatever, so I am going to move out, and they went to San Diego. And then, San Diego is a beautiful city, obviously... So, what happened is that then, everybody else said, well, if they went to San Diego and they are doing okay, I will go to San Diego. And they started finding a way to come to the United States and move to San Diego. And now, 15 or 20 years later, which I don't know how many it has been, it is a community of its own. And the thing that I criticize then, and I tell them all the time because I have a lot of friends is, they have their own school, just for this group of Jewish Latin American people from Mexico. They have their own school, they have their own mini JCC, and all the events and everything are done amongst themselves, and I told one of the leaders the other day that I saw them in a party, I said, "You know, I think that is super wrong. Because, it is true, you have a beautiful group of people, you have a beautiful JCC, etc., etc. ... but you are not comingling with the Americans, you are not comingling with the people that live in San Diego. You are a group here," and pretty much everybody lives in the same area. "So I think that is a huge mistake. "I'm very happy that you did that, it's like a Hebraica type of thing, but you need to get together with the Jewish and the non-Jewish people in San Diego, not to live isolated." And now they have their own rabbi, they have their own synagogue ... it's crazy.

AA: I'm pretty sure Hebraica was to help integrate into this American context.

JV: Yes, I'm very much into the interreligious things. I would love to be involved even more and more. We were heavily involved with the interfaith ministers, with a couple of synagogues, and with a couple of churches, trying to get involved with the people. One time, I don't remember exactly, probably towards the end, we invited some churches, members of the church, to come over for services to the synagogue, and obviously they invited us to there. And it was amazing, it was an incredible thing. I believe we need to continue doing that and find a way to, at the end of the day, we all are the same.

[End of Interview]