

Interviewee: Jacques Rodriguez

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Interview Location: Jacques Rodriguez's home

Interviewer: Skylar Stevenson

Transcriber: Suzanne Mascola

ABSTRACT

Jacques Rodriguez is a Latino Jewish architect, who helped establish Hebraica Houston with the intention of providing Latin American Jewish immigrants a communal foundation in Houston. Rodríguez was born in Istanbul, Turkey, and because of economic instability, he and his family decided to immigrate to Santiago, Chile. After he received his college education in Chile, Rodriguez immigrated to Houston to earn his master's degree at Rice University in Architecture, with a focus on Urban Design. Rodriguez explains how when he arrived to Houston, he met other Jewish Chileans and connected with Jews from various Latin American countries, including Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. After helping develop Hebraica, there was less of a need for the organization in the 1990s because of the decline of Latinx Jewish immigrants. Rodriguez maintains hope that the Latinx Jewish community will continue to thrive, congregate, and share resources.

SS: This is Friday, April 1, 2022. This is Skylar Stevenson interviewing Jacques Rodriguez at his home for the Sephardic Latinx Oral History Project at the University of Houston and the Holocaust Museum of Houston. So, can you please tell me about your childhood living in Istanbul, Turkey?

JR: Well, I did not live there very long. I mean, I was almost 5 when I left with my parents. So, I did not even learn Turkish because my parents spoke to me in Ladino, which is the old Spanish, or French. So, I cannot tell you many things about my childhood in Turkey, in Istanbul.

SS: Do you remember why your parents decided to migrate from Istanbul to Chile?

JR: Well, they decided because the economic situation was very good in Turkey after the war and my father had a brother, his youngest brother, who immigrated to Chile in South America when he was very, very young - maybe in his early 20s - and he did very well there and so was always encouraging my father to go. So finally, my father went in 1949, which was way after the war. That was, I think, the main reason because, then another sister also moved to Chile with her family who was hiding in France when the Nazis came, and she was able to go through the war and hide herself and her family throughout France, and then went to Chile as well.

SS: I see. And then, when you did end up immigrating to Chile, tell me about your childhood there?

JR: In Chile? It was okay. I was considered a very strange person because, you know, nobody could believe that I had a Spanish last name and being from Turkey, you know? Plus, I didn't have any problems with the language because I already knew quite a bit of Spanish, not like Spanish Spanish, you know, but the old Spanish, which had a different accent and a lot of words are pronounced different, but it is very similar. So, in that respect, I went to a French school, a small school, and then, I got transferred to the Alliance Francaise, alliance you call it in English. There is a French alliance that they used to have at schools and even in Turkey and many countries in the world. And, of course, at that time, French was more important than English. All the diplomacy and everything was pretty much done in French. And then, of course, English took over. I went to a French school and they used to call me Maha (phonetic) which was an expression for - I don't know, I never understood why - but I wasn't considered a Turkish guy. But I got along with all my classmates and everybody, I didn't have any problems, and I was successful in going through my studies. I got prizes and awards, and I graduated from the French school. And actually, I finished my high school when I was really just 17. So, I entered the university when I was 17 years old, pretty much. My first year. I went to architecture.

SS: So, can you also tell me about the Jewish community there in Chile?

JR: In Chile? Yes, there was a pretty good community. There were not a lot, not like in Argentina, but we had a good population of Jewish people. But it was different than here. Here, the congregations are based on if you are a Reform Jew, middle of the road, Conservative, and very, very conservative. But then, like, three groups. Over there, no, it was really done by the origin; like, all the people that came from Spanish countries or that spoke Ladino, they had their own congregation. And then, the people from Poland and Germany and those countries, you know, they were in a different congregation. We didn't have Reform Jews there.

SS: And did you, being a Sephardic Jew, play any role in that division, too, as well?

JR: Well, in my congregation? Yes, they had an organization and they had a paper as well as the others. And the temple or synagogue was pretty close from where we were living, but we were not in a new Jewish neighborhood because it wasn't like here. Here, it is more, like, there are some areas that are with more population of Jewish. There, it was more, I would say, liberal, maybe, but that's the way it worked. I mean, we couldn't... I don't know what you could have done differently. It was not easy to do that. And the groups were very, very close. I mean, they didn't like to mix - very little mixing, okay?

SS: Okay, I see. And then, can I also ask you, in the 1970s, Chile was under military rule for approximately 20 years. Was your decision to immigrate to Houston influenced by the military dictatorship back then and, if not, why did your family decide to migrate from Santiago, Chile?

JR: Well, my family stayed in Santiago, Chile. I am the one that left because the situation in Chile was not that good as far as the job situation. I mean, especially architects - there were lots of architects, and it was very hard to get a good job. And also, I wanted to specialize in an area of urbanism, urban design, so I was trying to get a scholarship or a fellowship, and I applied to a lot of places. Especially, I wanted to go to either France or Spain or Belgium - some country that I could relate better than going to, like, I don't know - Germany, because I didn't speak German - plus I didn't look at Germany as my favorite place at that time. So, I applied and I got a fellowship and a scholarship to Rice University and that made me come to Houston, Texas. And I have been here since 1969.

SS: All right. So, when you did settle here, what was it like arriving in the United States at that time?

JR: It was kind of a shock a little bit because, first, I wasn't used to the heat! It was so hot and I thought I am not going to be able to live here. But I got used to it and now, I'd rather live in a hot place than having snow, you know? But we first went to Miami, we landed in Miami and stayed a few days there. And this was in August of 1969 because school was going to start in August, so, after a few days in Miami, we went around and met some people that we were recommended by some friends in Chile. And then, we came to Houston, and it was fairly easy in the beginning because Rice had the family that was going to take us for two weeks to kind of help us out with all the things you had to do, where things are, and they used to live not too far from here. And they were Jewish, too. Proler (phonetic), he was a doctor at the Medical Center. Anyway, we stayed there a couple of weeks, and they helped us find a place to rent and all that. And then, we moved to a garage apartment. So, we lived at least one year or maybe more in that garage apartment on West Main and Shepherd, near Shepherd and West Main, yes. And then, we moved to another apartment not too far from there. And then, my daughter was born. And I was working, I got a good job. Right after I graduated, I got a good job with an engineering firm. So, I was making a lot more money than I was getting as a stipend from Rice. But because of the fact that I went to Rice, it opened a lot of doors for me as far as getting loans, financing my car. So, after two months that we were here, I got a brand new Volkswagen 1970. No air-conditioning though! So, that's how we started. And there were Chileans here which we met, even some that I knew from Chile and from Santiago, so it was pretty easy. We had friends from all parts of the world, and we realized how easy it was to get along with people.

- SS: Okay, so, I see that you are saying that you had, like, Chilean people that you could identify with, but also a part of the Jewish community.
- JR: Plus the Jewish community and we had a lot of people from different countries in South America, from Argentina, from Brazil, and then, from Central America, from Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador. So, we had a good mix.
- SS: And that kind of, like, makes me want to ask about... When I read your bio, I read how you created Hebraica.
- JR: Hebraica. Well, that was an organization that a friend of mine, Henry Kuperman, had an idea... Why don't we help each other since we are... Because there were quite a number of Jewish immigrants from these Latin American countries. I mean, from everywhere. There were people that left their countries because mainly the situation. I mean, I left before the dictatorship came. I had no idea we were going to have a dictator for 20 years. And then, even then, I tried to go back, but I realized that I didn't want to live there. That was very, very different and I could not accept a dictatorship. So, Hebraica was a good organization because we helped people, and we had a lot of activities. We used to meet at least once a week. We organized all kinds of events like going to functions, concerts, ballet. We did a lot of things. We had parties. And it was for everyone. I mean, we were able to get this group together for a while. Then, people just settled down and kind of some moved to another city. So, finally, there was no need to help people and to have... Each member, kind of, was absorbed by their congregation, by wherever they were going to - Beth Yeshurun or Beth Israel or whatever, whatever congregation. United Orthodox. So, the Hebraica finally disappeared. So, we were not more than maybe 10 years, 12 years, pretty active.
- SS: Can you tell me that moment or that event that inspired you to create it? Like, what was that moment when you were, like, I need to go and do this?
- JR: Well, I felt like, you know, it was so easy for me to land in a different country because I had a profession, I had a connection with the university, and it was easy to get there, I mean, but some of these people that came, there were a lot of professionals, don't get me wrong, there were doctors and there were all kinds of professionals, but there were some people that were struggling, and we could tell that they were not very happy. So, that is what I think inspired Enrique, Henry Kuperman, and myself, as well as others – Sara Esquenazi and the parents of Mark, Rachel and - what's his name? I am forgetting now. And Jacob Goldberg... Got involved. And then, the same thing... The fact that they wanted to have a little of Latin flavor but mainly, being Jewish, we tried to help each other. But then, things evolved, everybody got rich... No, everybody accommodate himself and got other friends and other things, like I said, or they got out of town, so the purpose of the organization kind of... And there were not that many people coming

immigrating like we had then. I think in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we had a lot of people that immigrated from these countries, even from Mexico, because Goldberg is from Mexico.

SS: So, were you involved in the Sephardic community in Houston and to what degree?

JR: Well, involved in what degree? What do you mean by that?

SS: Specifically with the Sephardic community here.

JR: Well, there is a Sephardic community here, but it is not that big, per se. And there are Sephardic Jews even from Israel here. So, I wouldn't call it a Sephardic organization. Hebraica wasn't Sephardic. We had from all places.

SS: And did you identifying as Sephardic impact your experience in any way within the Houston Jewish community?

JR: Not really, no. We are a minority. You know, minorities always are behind.

SS: And so, how has being a minority in the United States differed from that of Chile?

JR: I wouldn't say that much different. Maybe here it is a little bit more liberal. Over there, it was more segregated and, for that reason, there was antisemitism, like there is always, but here, I found it, when I first came, it was okay. Things got a little bit worse and lately, and then, with the terrorists and all that, it got kind of scary even. But, I don't know - I cannot make that much difference between Chile and the United States, I mean. Plus, this is such a big country that... You know, Chile is the size of Texas, which is a pretty good size for a country, but it is long and narrow. It is the comparison between a big country like the United States that is with 50 states and Chile which, I think now has 18 million people, 19 million people, which is a little...

SS: Right. And then, have you ever felt like you had to introduce yourself as Jewish or Latino or one or the other or both?

JR: Well, it depends where I am and who I am with. You know, if there is an organization that I know is Jewish, yes, I will tell them I am Sephardic, you know, before I tell them I am from Chile. But, you know, I haven't lost my roots nor my development in Chile, but I have been in this country more than anyplace else. I mean, I have been here... Imagine, since 1969, so, it is almost 50 years. I have always introduced myself... If they ask me, I tell them I graduated from Rice, I got a master's degree, and I am an architect.

SS: And then, when you did immigrate here, was your Latino and Sephardic heritage important to maintain for you?

JR: I am sorry?

SS: Was your Latino and Sephardic heritage important to maintain?

JR: Yes, definitely.

SS: And then, what Jewish or Latino customs did you maintain in your family?

JR: Well, we maintained speaking Spanish with friends that speak Spanish; of course, with my wife. She was born in Chile. Again, can you repeat the question? I lost it.

SS: So what Jewish and/or Latino customs did you maintain?

JR: Well, we maintain... Although my wife never converted to Judaism. All the holidays, we celebrate all the Jewish holidays and, as well, we celebrated Hannukah as well as Christmas because she likes to have a little tree there! And we didn't choose to grow our children in one religion or the other. So, right now, I have a daughter who is Jewish because she converted when she got married, and two sons that are nothing. They haven't chosen a religion. But, like I said, I had all my holidays, went to the synagogue always for Rosh Hashanah, for Yom Kippur. We had a lot of weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, you know, that we went to for friends and what have you.

SS: What about Jewish food in your family?

JR: Jewish food in my family? Yes, we have some Jewish traditions and food. We make latkes. And for Hanukkah, do you know what latkes are? Made out of potatoes. They are like small potatoes, smashed or cut and you fry them and they are very good. I never was Kosher. I don't plan to be Kosher. But, you know, I have Kosher friends and it is okay. We have no problem with that. But we have been trying to be kind of open-minded. We are not very trying to stay with certain ways of doing things because we are pretty liberal. I am pretty liberal even in my politics and whatever. So, religion is important, but I don't like to blow it up, you know?

SS: Yes, I see what you are saying. And then, so, Houston has large Latino and Jewish communities for generations; as you said, like, it wasn't really new, has been there for a while. And so, the Sephardic community, however, is really small... In what way did you feel you were received in the Latino and Jewish communities?

JR: How did I receive?

SS: How did you feel you were received? Like, when you came...

JR: Oh, very well, very well. No problem. But, like I said, there are people from everywhere in the Sephardic here, and the congregation is not that big like the others, so it is a more limited number of people.

SS: And then, what do you desire from the Latino Jewish community today?

JR: What do I desire?

SS: Yes.

JR: Well, I want it to be alive and active, and they are, to a certain degree. They built the new congregation there on Fondren here. And there are people that have money, and they contributed to do these things because a community like that, it has to be maintained and the congregants have to keep maintaining the... It is like any other religion, you know, like, the church - they always ask for money. But you need that to keep the community alive. Otherwise, it will disappear. But I have been very happy with the community. The Sephardic, you call it Sephardic. Nobody, I think, calls it a Sephardic community. But it is there, it is there, and there are activities. And it is good to know that it is happening, you know? So, I am pleased with that.

SS: And is there anything else, like, that you thought of that you want to share or anything like that? Are there any stories or any things that you thought of that you would like to share or just maybe...

JR: I don't know what I could share with you. The only thing I can think of, but this is kind of from Hebraica... We had, you remember, what's his name... What was it called? I don't know if he was Mickey [Leland], Mickey, he was a politician, a black guy, Mickey. I can't remember his name. He went to Cuba and there were a couple of brothers that were Jewish and really wanted to get out of Cuba and they couldn't. So, he helped, because I think he had a good relationship with the Cuban government to get these kids over here. And they came. And they came to Hebraica and were so happy. And finally, one of them went to medical school, and he became a doctor, and then married the daughter of a friend of ours. And they lived on this same street here, which was very rewarding. It was rewarding for him that was able to leave Cuba and become a doctor and very successful now. He lives in Miami. So, that's what I can share with you.

JR: Okay.

[End of Interview]