

Interviewee: Lucy Graubard

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Interview Location: Lucy Graubard's home

Interviewer: Miranda Ruzinsky

Transcriber: Suzanne Mascola

ABSTRACT

Dr. Lucy Graubard discusses her life as a person of both Latinx and Sephardic/Ashkenazi Jewish descent in the Mexico City community of her childhood and the city of Houston in her youth and later years. Before the age of 13, she attended both public and private educational institutions in Mexico City. Within her familial and public spheres, she participated in Jewish and Mexican customs and traditions. Her family decided to immigrate to Houston, and at the age of 13, Lucy settled into the United States. She relates her experiences within the Houston Jewish community and how her family integrated into their new lifestyle. She joined Jewish youth groups, attended synagogue, went to a Jewish school, and connected with fellow Latinx Jews within the Hebraica organization. She married a Colombian Jewish immigrant, who she met through social and religious connections. She speaks about her decision to continue the Jewish observance in her own nuclear family and teach her kids Spanish. Food remains a common theme throughout her life in which she chooses to express and connect to her Jewish and Latinx roots. She speaks about her fluid identity among both the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities within Mexico City and Houston.

MR: It is March 25th at 10 a.m. This is Miranda Ruzinsky and Carla Peterson interviewing Dr. Lucy Graubard in her home for the Sephardic Latinx oral history project at the University of Houston and Holocaust Museum of Houston. So, thank you for being with us today, Dr. So, first, we'd like to get a little bit of information about your childhood in Mexico City, so, if you could discuss how your family came to Mexico City, where they are from, and the origin stories of your family.

LG: Okay, so, my grandparents, my parental grandparents, my grandma came from Greece, my grandpa came from Turkey. On my maternal side, my grandma came from Vienna and my grandfather came from Lithuania. And, for different reasons, they ended up in Mexico City. They all met there, they got married, and so, both my parents were born in Mexico City, and so were we, my siblings and I. We moved here to Houston when I was 13.

MR: So, you spent 13 years in Mexico City. That's a lot of years of development as well. So, did you have any formal or informal education, including language or Jewish studies?

LG: I mean, in our family, we are really more traditional – we didn't follow the Kosher rules or any of that – and I did not start my Jewish education, really, until I was in, like, 3rd grade. That's when we started actually going to synagogue and participating in Mahasi Ketorah (phonetic) which was, like, the Hebrew school or Jewish to prepare for Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs, and so, I did not know any... Much of my Jewish... I didn't know any Hebrew or any formal Jewish education until then, until 3rd grade. I was in a bilingual school, English/Spanish, through 4th grade, and in 5th grade, I started going to a Jewish school in Mexico City. So, 5th and 6th grade, I was at a Sephardic school, and then, 7th grade and the beginning of 8th grade, I was in an Ashkenazi school. And then, we moved here.

MR: Okay, so, kind of expanding more on the general Jewish community of Mexico City, can you tell us a little bit about, just, the Jewish community in which you were involved in, where you went to school because it seemed like you really grew up within this community?

LG: So, once I started going to Mahasi Ketorah (phonetic), we would go to classes, I think it was every Tuesday and Thursday night at the synagogue – yes, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday nights at the synagogue – so, we would stay at Shabbat services Friday night, every Friday. It was a pretty close-knit community. I think everybody knew everybody. I sometimes kind of felt out of the loop because I didn't start going there until I was in 5th grade for school, but everybody already, like, knew each other and grew up together, so they were a very tight-knit community. Then, when I started going to the Jewish school, I started participating also in the youth organization, the Dor Hadash, which is kind of, like, the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization here, BBYO, and that was fun, that was a lot of fun spending the weekends in activities with the other kids in my school.

MR: What kind of activities did you do within this youth organization?

LG: I mean, a lot of times, we would have treasure hunts, we would go all over Mexico City in busses and things like that to go to different malls all across the city, but, a lot of times, they were service projects, like, we would go paint a mural or paint something like... And, a lot of times, it was all at the school where we would do, like, cleanup, every sort of thing. We would go to movies or to a park and play rally games. It was all very, just...

MR: That sounds very fun, very engaging. Was there any form of diversification within the levels of observances of Judaism in the Jewish community within Mexico City?

LG: Yes. Actually, when I was in the Sephardic school, Colegio Hebreo Sephardi, I saw a lot more diversity. A lot of the kids... I mean, we had a lot of the activities on Saturdays and stuff which would happen... When I went to the Ashkenazi school, La Yavne (phonetic), that was a very Orthodox kind of school. Most of the kids were observant there. And so,

most of the activities, like, when I changed to Bnei Akiva, the other youth organization, that was really, really, just... We had services before school, we had services on Saturday before we started our activities, and the activities on Saturday were totally different because that was, you couldn't write, you couldn't paint, you couldn't drive, so it was everything in the... If we had to go from one place to another, we would walk all together from one place to another.

MR: So, actually, you know, we have read, in our personal education and this class this semester, that the Ashkenazi and Sephardi relationships within Mexico varied during this time. So, it seems like you've had personal experience kind of interacting in these two different communities or maybe how they came together within one place, so, what was it like in Mexico in a broader sense between these two different sects of Judaism and within your own experience?

LG: So, I am kind of half Ashkenazi and half Sephardic because my dad's parents came from Greece and Turkey, my mom's came from Europe, and so, I was kind of both, but there was a really big, like, if you talked to the Sephardic kids, they would put the Ashkenazi down, if you talked to the Ashkenazi, they would put the Sephardic down. There was a lot of rivalry, I think. But now, like, on social media, and I see all my friends from the different schools, they are all, like, together. Like, people that I had friendships with at one school are now really good friends with the others but I didn't even know that they would know each other. So, it is kind of interesting.

MR: That is interesting. Do you think it is a difference in time or do you think it is a difference in age, or do you see the adults within Mexico City when you lived there as a child, the Ashkenazi and Sephardic, would they interact more peacefully together than the children?

LG: I think there was a lot of separation. I really did feel that there was a lot of separation in the adults as well.

MR: What kind of things do you feel, maybe physically, mentally, or spiritually, separated these two groups?

LG: I mean, language-wise, like, the grandparents, like, in the Sephardic, they would speak Ladino; in the Ashkenazi, they would speak Yiddish, so, just that. A lot of my friends spoke Yiddish in their homes with their parents and grandparents. I had no clue about Yiddish. I mean, I started learning it when I went to 7th grade, I started learning Yiddish, but, you know, my classmates spoke it fluently, so, that was pretty different. So, I think just a lot of the different traditions and things were a little bit different from the Ladino and the Sephardic versus the Ashkenazi.

MR: I am quite interested since you said that you did not have any Yiddish education until 7th grade. Were you a speaker of Ladino?

LG: Just, like, the Ladino songs that my grandparents used to sing but not much. My parents actually were in charge of the Sephardic cafeteria in the synagogue, so they hosted their, like, the senior citizens social activities, so they would come and they would play cards of they would play dominoes or something a couple of times a week, and they would be speaking Ladino with each other there. So, we would learn words here and there. They would try to talk to us in Ladino when we were trying to serve their food but, you know, sometimes we could understand, sometimes we couldn't. We were, like, what did they say?

MR: That is when you smile and wave.

LG: Yes.

MR: So, you feel like this, I guess... You talked about there was some separation, but it seems like you flowed, it was more of a fluid identity between these two Ashkenazi and Sephardic groups within Mexico City in your childhood, how do you think this affected your Jewish experience or experience as a Jew in Mexico at this time?

LG: I don't think the Sephardic/Ashkenazi had as much impact as actually going from a non-Jewish school to a Jewish school. I think that was much more impactful.

MR: Can you tell me about this impact?

LG: So, I was in, like, a bilingual school. In the whole school, until 3rd grade, there were three Jewish kids in the school – my sister, my brother, and I. My last year, there was one other kid that came from our synagogue actually that started going there, so there was one additional Jewish kid, but the whole time I was there, it was not fun. There was a lot of antisemitism against me. They would write swastikas all over my books, they would hide my stuff in the boy's bathroom, but it was a school that was across the street from my home, it was a very good school, so my parents never understood how I was so unhappy there. But it was very... They would tell me I was a murderer because I killed Jesus Christ because I was Jewish. But, that, you know, I didn't belong there and then, once I went to a Jewish school, it was, like, ah, so, I am not alone. There is a whole community. So, to me, being Jewish became much more important and learning more about the Jewish religion, the language, the customs, traditions and stuff.

MR: Is there anything else you would like to say about these instances of antisemitism or discrimination, because we have read that these were prevalent in Latin American society at the time. You talked about how it impacted you, your experience about your identity –

did it have any long-lasting consequences or effects or about how you came to see yourself?

LG: Well, I mean, I think that once I realized, you know, why I was different than the other kids and I started to fit in with my community, I think it just cemented it even more strongly. So, I wanted to have more Jewish... To do more and be more part of the Jewish community and participate more than I did before.

MR: Well, you certainly did that. It sounded like you had a wonderful time. So, you grew up in Mexico City, so, we were wondering what Mexican practices did you and your family adopt, right, because you talk about one side of your family came from Lithuania and Europe and the other side came from Turkey and Greece, so how did these Jewish customs or traditions blend in with the Mexican traditions?

LG: Well, I think it adds, for sure, to our recipe book. I mean, we have a lot of awesome Mexican foods and stuff that we enjoy cooking, but we mixed in some of the European and the Turkish, the Middle Eastern kind of thing. So, we have a very, very diverse diet.

MR: Do you have any family recipes that were passed down that you still make today?

LG: Yes. Tons.

MR: Like, what is your favorite?

LG: There is a nut cake, it is called Sacher torte (phonetic) kind of thing from Vienna. There is the borekas from my grandparents from Turkey. There is Marillenknödel, which are, like, these potato dumplings filled with apricots that are so delicious. So, there are a lot of different things that we still kind of do today.

MR: That's wonderful. That sounds super delicious, honestly. So, we talked about your childhood, you went to school, so, at what age did you leave to come to America?

LG: I was 13.

MR: 13? And why did your family or you decide to immigrate from Mexico City to Houston and why Houston?

LG: Actually, it was because of school opportunities. My brother was having some issues with being hyperactive and being kicked out of multiple schools, and they found that there was this Vanguard program here in the States that was actually probably ideal for him to not get bored at school or get into trouble. And then, Mexico nationalized the banks right around the time we were trying to figure out where we were coming, and my parents were a little bit concerned that Mexico was going to become Communist or Socialist, and they decided we don't want to stay here. So, that was part of the reason it was America that we moved to, like, away from Mexico.

MR: So, can you tell me a little bit about your journey, maybe like when you left, how you came to Houston and, like, maybe the first time you touched down in another country?

LG: Well, we drove here. My parents got a big, humongous... Well, it wasn't humongous, it was a Volkswagen Kombi kind of thing that had a roof with an up thing, so there were beds and sinks and a toilet in this truck thing or bus, and, of course, the first time he tried to park it, he forgot it was so high that he broke the top, so we never slept in that thing that we were supposed to come... But we drove it because we left October 27th or something, and we would stop some of the way. We got here October 29th to the States and then, to Houston, we arrived on November 2nd, so it was a long, eventful ride here with a few car breakdowns and illnesses along the way, but we made it. When we got to Houston and we started going to school, we started going to the Hebrew Academy in Houston. And, you know, I told you that we went to a bilingual from 1st grade to 4th grade, so we thought we knew a lot of English, and then, when we walked into the school, we had no clue. I mean, I could understand nothing. They talked to me and I was, like, "Huh?" I couldn't understand them, they couldn't understand me, and the classes were teeny-tiny. I mean, in Mexico, there were two grades per class usually and there were, like, 30 kids in each class. When I got here, my class had 14 people, I think, and my sister's had 9, so, they were very, very small classes. And I could not understand any English. There was a girl in the grade below me that was from Chile, so she said, "I speak Spanish. I can help you." So, everything that they tried to tell me, I would ask her, "What did she say?" So, she would translate until she got tired of me asking her and she said, "I don't want to speak Spanish anymore." But we had to learn, so it was, like, a sink-or-swim kind of thing. At night, I remember having to memorize everything for the test by heart. I mean, like, I had no idea what I was saying but I would recite the paragraphs of the history. Like, they would tell me about the railroads and things, so I would learn that paragraph about the railroad and so, when the test came, I would just write it down word for word. I had no idea what I was writing but I would write it. We would start looking up different words just to have an idea. So, the big words, we would actually write down and translate to know at least a few words. And eventually, we started having to translate less and less words until we could actually understand, but it was tough at the beginning.

MR: Yes, that is a process. Wow! So, what year did you arrive in Houston?

LG: 1982.

MR: 1982? And then, you went to the Hebrew Academy.

LG: Hebrew Academy.

MR: Okay, so, what was it like arriving in the United States? Like, I mean, kind of what was your general sense of it? How maybe was your first reaction? How did you come to get accustomed to the community, to the society?

LG: So, it was a little bit of a culture shock, to say the least. In Mexico, like I told you, the schools, when I was at the Jewish schools, all the kids were bussed to school. I mean, no matter where you lived, if you lived one block away from school, you had to be picked up from a bus, by the school bus, and everybody was bussed into the school. And then, everybody got dropped off by the bus at the school. So, whenever anybody went into the bus, they would go across everybody. I mean, it was from kindergarten all the way to 12th grade, and they would go and kiss everybody, "Hello, good morning"... We were all in the bus and then, they would go and sit down. Here, everybody was a little bit more, like, they kept their space a little bit. So, it was kind of like, oh, you don't do this here? So, that was a little bit different. There were a lot of adjustments as far as culture. Here, if you had a party, they told you a time to come and a time to leave. I mean, they said, "The party is from 2 to 4." In Mexico, they would say, "The party is at 2," and people would show up at 4. And so, you know, they would go on forever, and whenever it was over, it was over. But here, they tell you 2 to 4 and if you are not picked up by 4, you were, like, "Where are you?" So, people were a lot more punctual here than in Mexico, and my parents were not used to that either, so we would always be late to school. Actually, that was a thing I hated, being so late to school every time, that I made a point for my kids, never to bring them late to school. I was pretty good.

MR: That's what you do – you learn from your parents the things you don't want to do with your kids. So, speaking about, you said your parents maybe had a little bit of a difficult time adjusting, how else, maybe, was it a bit difficult for them to maybe, you know, still take responsibility of having a family and moving to a new place? Like, how did they kind of settle into this new area?

LG: I mean, I think that they did this for us, for the most part, but, of course, they had a little bit more of a hard time with this, with the language and with the... But they... I remember going to HCC at night, it was, like ESL, English as a second language with them, and they were learning English, and they adapted. I mean, they definitely did this to help us get a better education, better life, so, they never looked back.

MR: Did anything about the American culture, like, anything else surprise you or something that, like, you know... I mean, you talked about the time difference. Is there anything else that was a little more of a culture shock?

LG: I think that the time, the difference in parties, the difference in... That was the biggest... The language was the biggest, biggest adjustment, but the social interactions were different but eventually, I kind of became one of them.

- MR: Would you say that you smoothly transitioned into the Houston Jewish community?
- LG: Yes, I think so.
- MR: Okay. And how did this Jewish community maybe differ from the one that you were involved in, in Mexico City?
- LG: You know, I came when I was 13, so, I had just had my Bat Mitzvah the year before... I mean, I started going to the NCSY here which was the youth organization from United Orthodox. Their activities were very different. They were not as, like, every weekend, we would have something, or every... So, that was different. But, eventually, we kind of just... We went to the Hebrew Academy from, let's see, 8th, 9th, and 10th, and then, I went to Bellaire High School for the last 2 years of high school. So, when I started going to Bellaire High School, I started going to BBYO, and that was a little bit more like my youth organizations in Mexico where we had activities and it was a lot more fun.
- MR: Yes, for sure. That still exists today, BBYO, which is wonderful. So, within this Jewish community, we talked about the youth part of it – did your family join a temple? How did your parents kind of settle in to the Houston Jewish community or your siblings as well?
- LG: So, we initially started going to the Hebrew Academy and most of the kids there went to UOS (United Orthodox Synagogues), so, we kind of started going to UOS, but we never really joined, we never did a lot of the activities there. We did not really go to synagogue except for the holidays, high holidays, and then, when we went to Bellaire, we didn't really belong to any synagogue. And when I got married, I wanted to belong. So, we started at Emanu El because the rabbi there married us, and then, we went over to Brith Shalom, which is more Conservative and a little bit more of what I am used to. In Mexico, the synagogues were very orthodox, but we did not particularly like the separation of men and women, we liked it more inclusive, so I think we fit more into the Conservative than the Orthodox and so, we joined Brith Shalom that is here.
- MR: Yes, one of the wonderful things about Houston is the options, the varied options of levels of observance in the synagogues as well. Talking about Ashkenazi and Sephardic, you, yourself, married an Ashkenazi, you, yourself are, you know, a product of these two beautiful different cultures – did you witness any separation between the two communities within Houston?
- LG: Not really. Actually, they don't even talk about the separations here as much. I mean, there is a Sephardic synagogue but that started, like, way after we moved here. So, here, I never heard any separation between Ashkenazi and Sephardic or ever.

- MR: So, did this, in some way, maybe changed how you identified as a Jew coming into, without this kind of separation between Sephardic and Ashkenazi?
- LG: I think that I kind of had already accepted it since I had been in both, so, to me, it just became the normal thing. I am part of both, so, when it is all-inclusive, it is all the better.
- MR: Yes. So, kind of coming into you are, maybe a product of three things: Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and you come from a Latin heritage, right, growing up in Mexico City. You have the food as a beautiful example of this. For you, was your Latino and Sephardic heritage important to maintain for yourself, you know, moving and then growing up in a different society?
- LG: Yes. I mean, I think that having the Latino background, I wanted my kids to learn Spanish, I wanted for them to know the traditions from both the Jewish and the Latin, so, you know, I wanted them to have every opportunity from both cultures.
- MR: What Jewish customs did you maintain?
- LG: Well, we celebrate, like the holidays – the Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, so the big holidays, we always participate in.
- MR: Are there any personal family traditions that you have maintained within your household?
- LG: Well, again, like, the different foods that we eat and the different holidays are specific foods that my grandparents brought from... Actually, I went to Greece a couple of summers ago, and there is this pan that has these holes, like, it is a round pan that has these wells that are specific for making buñuelos, which, are, like, little dessert things for Passover, like fried, in each little well, you fry a little dumpling kind of thing. It is like a pancake that you eat for Passover. And so, my mom had one and my dad always wanted to have the buñuelos, so that is one thing that we always have to have on Passover.
- MR: Yes, that is a wonderful example. Yes. As well, what Latino customs have you maintained, like, from maybe when you were 13 to, you know, passing them on to your children? Well, you talked about Spanish as a wonderful example.
- LG: Yes, so, we have always wanted to keep the Spanish going. I mean, there are no real holidays or anything that we do, but, you know, like, there are holidays here that are supposed to be Latino that we never even heard of in Mexico, like Cinco de Mayo. But, yes, there is the food, the language. Like, I will make mole or enchiladas and the kids like to... Well, my son is a little bit picky but my daughter will eat some of the stuff that I make.

MR: It seems like food has been such an important part of expressing both these two types of your identities as well.

LG: Well, growing up, we had restaurants. My parents had a Mexican restaurant in Mexico. When we moved here... And also, they had that concession at the cafeteria in the synagogue before the restaurant. And when we moved here, we had an old Europe tea room.

MR: Oh, wow!

LG: And so, we were always part of the restaurants. It was, like, a family thing. So, we were either, like, the servers or the waitresses or the cooks... We were always helping in the restaurant. So, we grew up with that.

MR: Your family coming settling here, transitioning into the Jewish community, did your family introduce any of these foods or customs into the Houston Jewish community through food?

LG: Yes. My mom also catered for different weddings here and events. So, she would make borekas which they hadn't had. And they would also make, like, yaprakes or dolmas or whatever... They would make a lot of the foods from... I mean, Mexican foods as well. We had a group of friends that we would have Sunday brunch with every Sunday and we would rotate different houses. So, when they came to our house, they knew it was going to be something Mexican or... Yes, so, it was good.

MR: Did you get to maybe try some different foods from other households since you were able to maybe go to brunch at their places?

LG: Yes.

MR: What did you discover about the Houston Jewish community through their food?

LG: Yes, there is a lot of lox, bagels. Bagels and lox, which we love, I mean, I love, but that was, like, the brunch food.

MR: Yes, that is very true, for sure. So, what is your current level of Jewish observance right now?

LG: So, we celebrate the holidays, we go to synagogue for high holidays. Sometimes, we go on Friday nights or Saturday mornings. My kids went through the whole training for Bar Mitzvah, Bat Mitzvah and stuff. They had their Bar Mitzvahs, they had their celebrations, their baby namings and the first time they get the siddurs and the first times they get... They went through the whole Jewish education. Oh, I learned to read Torah, which I had never done. When I did my Bat Mitzvah in Mexico, the girls did a totally different thing than they do here. Here, girls do just as the boys do – they read the Torah,

the Haftorah, they lead the whole service. When I did my Bat Mitzvah in Mexico, it was all the girls for the year learning customs and traditions and different things. And then, we had a day where they would test us on our knowledge and what we'd learned, and then, on a Friday night, we would all celebrate in the synagogue and we would have a dance. So, it was very, very different for a girl than for a boy. So, here, that is one big difference. Here, the girls and the boys did exactly the same. They went to the same Jewish education, the same learning the Torah, learning the Haftorah. So, when my daughter was going to be Bat Mitzvah'd, I also learned to read the Torah so that I was able to read one of the passages at the synagogue, which was very nice. And then, I did that again for my son and for other friends.

MR: What did that mean... It seems like, you know, these gender differences made an impact or you definitely noticed them as a major difference between the two Jewish communities and these two different countries. What did it mean to you to be able to learn to read Torah for your daughter? Is she your only daughter?

LG: I have one daughter and one son, yes.

MR: So, what did it mean to you in that moment? What was it like?

LG: It was awesome! It felt like a great accomplishment and a great thing to be able to participate in.

MR: Did you feel like you were able to be an example for your daughter as well in that moment?

LG: I think so. I mean, I think that she could see that I could learn something at my age or something, but, yes, it was, that she can do it, too. She can do whatever she wants.

MR: You talk about the inclusivity, you know, that's one of the reasons why you wanted to join the synagogue that you are a part of now, and something that maybe was lacking within Mexico City between the two genders as well as the separation between Ashkenazi and Sephardism, and how has, maybe, the inclusivity of the Houston Jewish community impacted you as a Jew, as a young person, growing up, and then, having your own family and choosing to pass on the Jewish customs?

LG: Yes, I think it is important because when you are all-inclusive, you are part of the community, I think a lot stronger. I think that you have more say. Like, in Mexico, if you had any kind of service or celebration, you had to have 10 men. Here, it doesn't matter – it is just 10 adults, 10 people that have had Bat Mitzvah. So, it would be a female or a male, it doesn't matter, just 10 adults. And that's just awesome. Everybody counts.

MR: Yes, for sure. Do you feel like, maybe from when you were... I mean, you talked about how you are more Conservative now than Orthodox... Can you tell me a little bit about, from age 13, how your level of Jewish observance evolved as you kind of moved geographically and had to settle in a new place?

LG: So, like I told you before, I only started participating in the Jewish, starting, like, when I was maybe 10, 9 or 10. And then, as I moved here, I was a lot more aware. The last school that I was in, in Mexico, it was very Orthodox. So, coming here, I kind of told my parents, "Well, when we move, we are going to be much more observant, we are going to keep the Sabbath," and, of course, we were, like, gung-ho, until the first time that we had to go somewhere on a Saturday morning and we had to drive, and my dad said, "We have to go. Sorry." And we had to get in the car and go. So, I think that there was a good balance of being able to keep the holidays, keep the traditions, keep everything but, you know, not have the extreme where you can't do the activities of everyday life on a regular basis.

MR: And how did this, I guess, level of observance or your own personal way of being Jewish coincide with marrying your husband and being able to raise your children together?

LG: So, my husband is from Colombia and where he grew up, he grew up in a non-Jewish school all through high school. He told me that when he had his Bar Mitzvah, I mean, to his parents, it was important to have Bar Mitzvah and they also were very traditional as far as the holidays and they actually had some Shabbat dinners probably more so than we did, but where he grew up, he had absolutely no Jewish education. For his Bar Mitzvah, he said he had this rabbi teach him everything and he just memorized everything by heart. He had no idea what he was doing or reading. And, to this day, he doesn't feel as comfortable. He started going to learn Hebrew at the United Orthodox, to learn how to read and how to write because he thought it was important as well. But he is definitely much more secular than I am, I think. But he goes along with whatever the education was.

MR: Okay, so, do you kind of feel like you are leading more of the path, like, navigating the Jewish path of your family and he is coming along for the journey?

LG: Yes, exactly.

MR: That's awesome! What have you enjoyed being able to show him about your Sephardic identity?

LG: I think the food!

MR: I am loving the food!

LG: Yes. I think that's the most Sephardic thing that... The most, I guess, difference between one and the other is the different foods. I mean, he does the schnitzel.

MR: What is his favorite Sephardic food that you have introduced him to?

LG: I think the borekas is one of them. I think that he absolutely likes those. He likes the cakes and things. He likes the Middle Eastern-type foods. He loves Middle Eastern-type food, so, anything with eggplant, he will go for.

MR: So, your husband is Colombian?

LG: Yes.

MR: He is Latino as well.

LG: Yes.

MR: Did his similarities of having these two identities as well – Latino and Jewish – help you guys kind of form a bond and create a family together?

LG: Oh, yes, definitely.

MR: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

LG: I think that our traditions, like, the culture is a little bit more similar as far as the way we interact. I don't know... Just the language was... Being able to know the different... Because he came here when he was, like, 18, so he came here before I came, so he also had, like, a culture shock. So, I think that once you meet somebody that has the same kind of customs and the same... It just makes a stronger bond. I can't pinpoint exactly what those things are.

MR: Of course. If you could tell me a little bit about how you met and maybe if you discussed your decision on how to raise your children within this Latin and Sephardic or Jewish identity because he is Ashkenazi, so, Jewish and Latin identity.

LG: We never really discussed it but my sister-in-law, her twin sister and I used to play volleyball at the JCC together and she introduced us. I told her that I came from a very traditional, old-fashioned mindset, and she said, "Oh, you should meet my brother." So, that's basically how we met and we got along just fine from the beginning. I think we met October 12th and we got married October 10th of the next year.

MR: Almost exactly one year.

LG: Yes.

MR: Can you tell me about, maybe, did you have a traditional Jewish marriage or did you go through any of the normal Jewish customs to get married?

LG: Well, we got married at Emanu El, not at Emanu El but by a rabbi from Emanu El that had married my sister's grandparents-in-law, my sister's parents in-law, and then, my sister, so, it was, like, a three generation... So, he was very, very nice and we really liked him. My husband actually built our Chuppah for the wedding, since it was at a hotel, so we had to have a Chuppah. He built it. And my grandma sewed the cloth that went on top with the tassels, and my husband made, like, a Star of David that he suspended from the Chuppah, so, there was this, like, Star of David. I mean, it was pretty cool.

MR: That was very cool. How did the two families get along together – his family and your family? How did it go?

LG: It went very well. They just got together. They invited my family for brunch one time and my sister-in-law was already... This is, like, a few months after we met... And my sister-in-law was already crying that he was going to leave because I was in medical school and I was in Galveston. She said, "He's going to have to move to Galveston." And my parents were, like, "What's going on? We are just meeting." But they got along fine from the get-go.

MR: That's wonderful. So, what year did you guys get married?

LG: 1992.

MR: Oh, exactly 30 years ago. Congratulations!

LG: Thank you.

MR: That's awesome. So, kind of coming back to the communities as well, we were wondering... You said you had a smooth transition into the Jewish community here and there was really no, kind of, pinpoint on whether it was Sephardic or Ashkenazi, it was just the Houston Jewish community... How do you feel you were received, and if you could describe a little bit more about how they received you?

LG: I mean, I think I didn't feel... I think there was more of a pushback because of the language barrier at the beginning, but not because you are not American. I think it was just the inability to communicate at the beginning that made it a little bit hard, but, overall, it seemed pretty... I mean, once I was able to communicate and talk, I didn't feel any real pushback or any discrimination because I was Latin or Mexican. Soon after I moved here, they started Hebraica, like, a Latin/Jewish group, and I met a lot of Jewish people from Latin America – from Chile, from Mexico as well, Argentina, lots of people from Argentina – so, I started meeting a lot of Latin/Jewish people here.

MR: What did it feel like to meet fellow Latin Jews?

LG: Well, it was great because they spoke Spanish and I could communicate. That was soon after we moved here, so it was so nice.

MR: That is, yes.

LG: We used to babysit. My sister and I used to babysit, so we had, all these people come and say, "Do you want to babysit our kids?" So, it was very nice to have that group of Latins.

MR: How did you interact or how did you get involved in Hebraica? What did you do, who did you meet, did you develop any personal relationships and bonds that meant a lot to you?

LG: Yes, actually, one of them is Dr. Goldberg that I work with now, so that's one of the families that we met. And they actually used to come to our restaurant. So, Dr. Goldberg, Mark Goldberg, was an itty-bitty boy, coming to our restaurant when we met them.

MR: Can you tell me maybe a bit more about what you did with Hebraica?

LG: A lot of times, we would go to parks and picnics and it was just social interactions, just all fun and games.

MR: Wonderful! It seems like, you know, the Jewish community in both places was quite social and, within the Latin community here in Houston, it is very large and definitely a lot of people of Mexican origin, so, how did separating from that Jewish identity, did you feel that you were received and welcomed within the Latin identity or was it one and the same?

LG: I didn't get that, I'm sorry.

MR: So, like, within the Latin community here in Houston, how do you feel like they received you as well?

LG: I think it was just and the same. I think it was part of the community. I don't think there was a difference between being Latin or from Mexico versus a different Latin American country – it was all together.

MR: Okay. So, did you identifying as Sephardic have any impact on the Houston Jewish community?

LG: Like, being Sephardic versus Ashkenazi?

MR: Yes.

LG: I mean, I think just the language, being able to speak Spanish with the other Sephardic Jews, there are some different traditions that change, like, in Passover, Sephardic Jews eat rice and Ashkenazis do not. So, going to a Seder or a Passover Seder with people that are Sephardic, you have to kind of be careful of what you bring versus going to the Ashkenazi people, because there are some subtle differences. Also, like, for Rosh Hashanah, we have a whole Seder, almost like a Passover Seder but it is very small. There are different foods that we eat and we say different prayers for different things, and the Ashkenazis don't do that at all. So, when we had our Rosh Hashanah service, we would invite my Ashkenazi friends and they would learn from it, and they would do it. Then, they enjoyed it.

MR: Did you end up doing the same thing, like, would they invite you to their Ashkenazi Seders?

LG: Yes.

MR: How did that go with you?

LG: You know, they are inviting us, so we are doing whatever they do. There are some songs in Passover at the end of the Seder that we would always sing and some of them have a few Ladino words in it, and so, one of the group of friends that we used to have Seders with would say, "Well, would you want to do your song on, whatever." And so, at the end of their Seder, we would all sing the one song that we used to do in Mexico. So, they started learning those and we learned theirs.

MR: That's awesome! Very, very cool! So, coming back to identity, you said there wasn't much of a Sephardi community that was distinct within Houston, right, at the time when you first moved here?

LG: Right.

MR: But was there any evidence that your identifying as Sephardi or, let me put it this way, you being Latin, right, because there are Sephardic Jews from Turkey that came here, did you being Latin affect how you were viewed within the Sephardic community here?

LG: I don't know. I mean, like I said, I didn't feel that connection or that distinction.

MR: And, just in general today, have you ever felt like you've had to introduce yourself as Jewish or Latino, one or the other?

LG: Have I had to introduce myself as Jewish...

MR: Or Latino? One or the other?

LG: As opposed to just being a Jewish Latino?

MR: Yes.

LG: I mean, at work, they always ask me, “Where are you from?” and when I start speaking Spanish to my patients, they do ask me, “Where are you from?” So, I have to tell them I am from Mexico. But as far as because of being Latino or being Jewish, I don’t think it is, like, a point of discussion too much, anyway.

MR: So, how would you say these two identities kind of co-exist within your life together?

LG: I think they are just part of me, I mean, just who I am and what I do.

MR: And how do you think that is viewed... How do you think being a Jewish Latino is received by the Houston community?

LG: I think that there is not a whole lot of... I mean, it is not something that, “Oh my gosh, you are a Latino Jew,” I think it is, I mean, I am Jew. In the Jewish community, I am Jew. I don’t think that they say, “Oh, but you are Latino.” I don’t think that it is even discussed or looked upon. I don’t know. I don’t feel that there is discrimination of any kind, at least not in my community, which I like.

MR: That is wonderful. I mean, you talk about the inclusivity that you really feel brings you closer to the Jewish community and that is obviously important to you. Unfortunately, Texas does have different forms of discrimination. I mean, the most recent one being the Dallas hostage situation in the synagogue so, being Jewish, being a woman, being Sephardic, that is three minorities within other minorities, so, we are quite interested in how you feel about how has being a minority in the US, specifically Jewish and Latino, differed from being that of a minority in Mexico?

LG: So, I think being in Mexico, it was much more obvious to me. When I was at that school I told you, there were only three Jewish kids – I felt isolated a lot in that school. It was definitely much more obvious. Once you move into the Jewish community, it is more like they are all kind of together but as a whole in Mexico, you do feel the set back or the pushback from the non-Jewish people. Here, I don't think that I felt that much of an issue although, I mean, walking in the synagogue to my car from one of the holidays, there are cars that go by and they scream, “God damn Jewish,” I mean, but that happened a couple of times when I was walking from synagogue to my car, that cars would drive by and they would scream profanities out the window, but that’s not something that I encounter every day.

MR: And would you say that still happens today? Is that recent?

LG: That happened in the last couple of years, yes.

MR: And have there been moments like that, where you didn't feel maybe fully welcomed within America?

LG: You know, I actually took that more as a bigot person screaming out the window as opposed to somebody, like, America, so, I would not say America is that.

MR: Wonderful! I am glad to hear that. So, concerning your family, you talked about the way that you chose to raise your kids Jewish, you wanted them to learn Spanish – did your children end up going to a Jewish school? Did they go to religious school? How did you decide to educate them on being Jewish?

LG: They went through preschool that was a Jewish preschool, but then, they went to public school. And so, we made sure that they were going to Hebrew school, that they were learning the traditions, we tried to follow... So, we tried to raise them as much Jewish as we could and they did their Bar Mitzvah, they did every milestone or something that needed to happen. Sometimes, that keeps them grounded in the Jewish religion but, you know, we have no idea what they will decide on their own. Like, what they want to do when they have their own family and that's going to be, unfortunately, their decision.

MR: How old are your children now?

LG: My daughter is 27 and my son just turned 24.

MR: So, how have your children, as of now, as of most recently, how are they continuing to be observant of the Jewish faith?

LG: Very little. I mean, my daughter, unfortunately, doesn't care one way or the other, and my son follows with us. I mean, he will go to the dinners and the stuff with us. He is very easygoing as far as if it is happening, it is happening, but he is not going to go out of his way to do it as of now. I mean, down the line, hopefully he will, but, you know, that's his...

MR: I guess, how do you feel about this?

LG: I mean, I think that it is important to continue Jewish because, you know, when you make a family, it is kind of hard enough when you have differences. I mean, marriage is hard enough on its own and if you have different traditions, different beliefs, I think it just adds more kindle to the fire. But if you have the same traditions, the same holidays, the same things, it kind of makes it easier to pave the way for a smoother transition, but, I don't know, that's what I think. That's what I think.

MR: Well, it is very important to us what you think, that's why we want to ask. So, I am quite interested... You did not grow up Kosher, correct, you said?

LG: Correct.

MR: Your husband is Ashkenazi – did he grow up Kosher?

LG: No.

MR: Okay, so, Kosher is not followed in this house?

LG: No.

MR: Did you have any experience with Kosher households being in Houston?

LG: Oh, yes.

MR: What was that like?

LG: Well, like I told you, my parents actually catered a lot of Kosher weddings and Kosher things for the synagogue, and there is a big range of kashrut there of Kosher here, so, there are people that they just don't mix meat and meat together, there are people that, if it is not a specific rabbi that supervises it, it doesn't count or it is not Kosher even though it says Kosher, but if it is not the one that they follow, then it is not Kosher enough, so, we did learn a lot of differences with the Kosher.

MR: I was asking because, you know, Kosher is varied here, so I didn't know if you had decided to raise your children Kosher, but I see that you do have experience with it.

LG: Yes.

MR: So, going places, it won't surprise you, whatever it is.

LG: Yes. Right. Correct.

MR: And your children – do you feel you have kind of given them enough experience within the Jewish community to be ready for anything, to be able to do what they want to do with their life, whether they choose to practice Judaism or not?

LG: I think that we've done what we can and now, it is up to them to decide what they want to follow or not follow. You know, the thing about Judaism is that there are all levels of observance still, so, you know, there is Reform, there is super Orthodox, and you can see what is meaningful to you and do what you feel is meaningful.

MR: Do you feel that it is important to you that your children have Jewish partners?

LG: I think that, most importantly, they need to be happy and they need to be treated well and with respect, and whatever, I think that is the most important.

MR: And we have talked about raising your kids Jewish. Can you talk a little bit about passing on these Latin traditions, especially, you know, you talked about the Spanish

language, but this Latin identity as well? How have you educated your children growing up being Latin, how have you wanted them to embrace this identity, because both you and your husband, again, are Latin?

LG: I think that in the Latin community, family is very, very important. I think that is just one thing. So, that is the biggest thing that I want them to carry on – that family is important and to be together. I hope that, down the line, that they do take that with them, that family comes first.

MR: Are their maternal and paternal grandparents still alive?

LG: There is one paternal grandma and then, both my parents are still alive.

MR: How have they been included into this education on both identities for your children?

LG: Actually, my grandma, so, great-grandma, was alive until Harvey. And so, she helped us take care of the kids when they were little. So, she would come babysit for us while we were at work. She was definitely very, very involved in their upbringing. And then, my parents also. So, my mom made a cookbook for each of my kids this big with Cooking with Abby. So, that has all of the different holiday foods that we eat, it has all the Mexican food, it has some of the European food, so, everything is in this big binder for each of the kids with pictures of each thing. It is pretty cool. And then, my husband's mom, she was involved until... She is 97. She is now living in Spring. She is not really verbal or anything. Now, she is not, but she was always involved. I mean, she always was part of their Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs, and she was very much into the holidays, and especially Passover was her big holiday.

MR: What was it about Passover that... Did you spend it with her?

LG: Yes, I mean, we would always spend Passover with her and then, one thing that she always did at Passover, she would put a plate for her husband with a rose so that he was always included, even though he was no longer with us.

MR: Wow, that is really special.

LG: Yes.

MR: So, I know we've talked about you want your children... You know, it would be nice if they did continue the Jewish and Latin traditions. How important is it to you that they pass on these things to their children?

LG: I mean, ideally, I think that I would love for my kids and grandkids... I mean, I would love to go to grandkids' Bar Mitzvahs. I think it is important. I mean, having the bris and the Bar Mitzvahs and weddings under the Chuppah and things like that, I think that would be important.

MR: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your Jewish or Latino experience throughout your life that you feel like is very important in your history?

LG: I think you've covered it all.

MR: Wonderful. I did want to ask about your personal education. You are a doctor.

LG: Yes.

MR: Throughout your educational experience here in Houston, did being Latino or Jewish impact that in any way as well? You went through a lot of schooling here.

LG: Yes. I think, actually, being Latino or speaking Spanish was a big asset in Houston. It still is. I mean, I have probably 50% of my patients if not more are Spanish-speaking, so that is definitely very, very helpful. So, being Jewish, I think is just part of who I am and what I do but, you know, I don't know that it has impacted my career, my work.

MR: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Graubard for telling us about your life, letting us record this history, and that will be the end of our recording.