INTERVIEW WITH MARGO BLOOM

MARCH 6, 1998
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INT: It’s March 6, 1998. My name is Sally Benson Alsher and I’m here with Margo Bloom, who is the director of the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Margo, for the record, have you agreed to do this interview?

MARGO: Yes, I have.

INT: Do you want to tell me where you were born and when?

MARGO: I was born in 1953 in New York.

INT: Where in New York?

MARGO: I was born in Queens.

INT: What do you remember, if anything, about your grandparents or what can you tell me about them?

MARGO: Maternal, paternal, both?

INT: Start with paternal.

MARGO: When I was growing up my father’s parents lived in Boro Park, where my father actually grew up. Their names were Minnie and Phil Bloom. They lived at 1466 53rd Street in Boro Park, in a wonderful building. They owned the building. They lived on the bottom floor and they rented out the top two floors. Both of them were very involved Jewishly. My grandmother taught Hebrew school and she’d been a teacher for many, many years. Both my grandparents were strong Zionists. They had spent time in Palestine. My grandfather was in the Jewish Legion, he served in the Jewish Legion in 1919 in Palestine. I think that was the highpoint of his life. They were very active as Labor Zionists. What else would you like to know about them?

INT: Where did they initially come from?

MARGO: Well, they came here when they were quite young. They both came here quite young. They were both brought here as children from Poland.

INT: And then they went to Israel?

MARGO: No, no. They lived in this country. My grandfather served in the Jewish Legion in Palestine.
INT: That’s interesting. They lived there the rest of their life?

MARGO: Yes.

INT: What languages did they speak? Hebrew?

MARGO: My grandmother spoke Hebrew very well. My grandfather also spoke Hebrew. They spoke Yiddish but not as well. They did speak Yiddish but they spoke Hebrew. She taught Hebrew so she spoke Hebrew very well. And their English was both excellent. Both of them had excellent English since they came here as children.

INT: Were they orthodox, conservative?

MARGO: They kept a kosher home. They went to synagogue on holidays but no, they were not orthodox and living in Boro Park, that was certainly sometimes an issue. I remember that my grandmother wouldn’t like to make...she did cook on Shabbat but she wouldn’t like to make coffee on Shabbat because the neighbors would smell it, so they were certainly not as observant as the other people who lived in that community.

INT: It was a very religious community.

MARGO: Boro Park is. It’s a Chassidic community. There are Chassidic communities in Boro Park so they were certainly not part of that community. They belonged to a conservative synagogue in Boro Park, and despite the fact that they kept a kosher home and went to synagogue on the holidays, I would say that they were more secular Jews than religious Jews.

INT: Tell me about your mother’s parents.

MARGO: My mother’s parents came here when they were a bit older. They both came from a town in Russia called Ostrog. My grandmother was not clear exactly how old she was when she came here, so either she didn’t really know what her age was or she lied about it. She was probably in her late twenties when she came here. I think she came here in 1924. She married my grandfather I believe a couple of years thereafter because my mother was born in 1927. She spoke Russian, although not as well as she spoke Yiddish. Yiddish was my mother’s first language. That was the language that they spoke at home. My grandfather died when I was fairly young. I was, I think, five when my grandfather died so I don’t have too many memories of him, although I do remember him, but my grandmother lived until I was thirty so I remember her very clearly. My other grandparents lived until I was almost forty so people in my family lived for a long time. They were absolutely secular Jews. They did not keep a kosher home. They were not particularly observant Jewishly but they were culturally certainly very Jewish. They sent my mother to a folkeschule and as I said spoke Yiddish in the home.

INT: What else do you remember about your grandmother?
MARGO: She lived with us for a while. She lived with us—there was a period of time where she lived with us four or five months a year and then there was a period of time where she actually...although my mother grew up in the Bronx and she lived in the Bronx. When I was very little she moved to Boro Park, after my grandfather died, so she spent a fair amount of time at the home that I grew up in after we moved from New York. We lived in Swarthmore, a suburb of Philadelphia. So she was fairly involved with us when we were children and I certainly remember her cooking. She cooked wonderful Jewish foods and she cooked them both in her home in New York and also in our home. She had a bit of a temper and I remember that, although she adored us. My mother was an only child so me and my two brothers were her only grandchildren.

INT: What else do you remember about her? What kind of temper? Why do you remember that?

MARGO: Oh, I think we gave her a hard time as kids, so I think whatever temper she had we probably deserved.

INT: Tell me about your father.

MARGO: My father is a very important influence in my life. My father, until he retired, was president and CEO of the Franklin Institute Science Museum and I’m sure that my interest in museums has a lot to do with him, and he’s someone who in addition to my respect for him, he’s someone who was very well respected and looked up to in the field. One of the things that people speak about him—one of the things that people really admire about him is that he served as a mentor for many people in the field and particularly for women, and there are a number of very prominent women in the museum field who look to my father as a mentor, so as a daughter that’s a nice thing not only to know about your father but also to have yourself. He’s certainly been a mentor to me.

INT: What are some of your earliest memories of him growing up?

MARGO: He told wonderful stories. He also, in addition to telling stories, he read to us and read very well. A lot of the stories he told us we always though he made up but they really came from books. He used to tell us science fiction stories that were quite terrific and very scary. He was not only very engaged with his job, he had a lot of fun with his job. I remember that when I was a teenager he brought moon rocks home for us to look at, which no museum professional should do but we certainly appreciated it. All my friends told me that they were really gravel from the driveway but I know they were really moon rocks. He was a pretty involved Dad.

INT: How did he meet your Mom?

MARGO: They were both active in Habonim, which is a socialist Zionist movement, and they were both, at that point, planning to go live in Israel. That was how they met, and in fact they did live in Israel for a couple of years after they were married.
INT: How religious was he, your Dad?

MARGO: He grew up in a home where his parents kept kosher. He went to Yeshiva. He went to Yeshiva Eitz Chaim in Boro Park. I think both of my parents, my mother having grown up in a secular Jewish home and my father having grown up in a more observant home, our home was more of a secular Jewish home. We lit candles on Friday night and certainly went to synagogue on the High Holidays and that sort of thing, but it was much more a culturally Jewish home than a religiously Jewish home. We didn’t keep a kosher house. We didn’t go to synagogue on all the holidays. We didn’t go to synagogue on Shabbat. We went to Hebrew school. We didn’t go to Day School. We belonged to a conservative congregation, so the emphasis was certainly on Israel, very, very strongly on Israel, very strongly on social justice and Jewish social causes, certainly Soviet Jewry and that sort of thing but not particularly a religious Jewish home.

INT: What education did your Dad have?

MARGO: Jewishly?

INT: Jewish and secular.

MARGO: Jewishly, as I said, he went to a Day School. He got his Bachelor’s degree at Brooklyn Polytech in chemical engineering and he got his graduate degree at Columbia in industrial engineering, his Masters in Columbia in industrial engineering. He went to Israel in between those two things for two years with my mother.

INT: So how did he get from industrial engineering to the museum?

MARGO: Well, the Franklin Institute used to be a several part institution that had, in addition to having the museum had labs associated with it, and he worked in Franklin Institute and he did a range of contracts. He used to do stuff for the Department of Defense and Department of Highways and he did something related to science education and at that point moved over to the museum arm of the institution.

INT: Tell me about your Mom.

MARGO: My Mom grew up in the Bronx. As I said, she grew up in a secular Jewish home, Yiddish as a first language. She went to Hunter College. She and my Dad got married fairly young. She was twenty and my Dad was twenty-two and they went to Israel shortly after they got married. During my youngest years, my mother did not work but when I was, I guess, after my littlest brother was born when I was about eight she went back to school and then started to teach Hebrew school and she taught Hebrew school for a number of years and then after that she started actually teaching Day School. She taught at Akiba. She taught Rabbinics and Bible at Akiba and continued going to school. She got a second Bachelor’s degree. She got a Bachelor’s in Hebrew literature and has continued to study and to teach both professionally and as a
volunteer ever since.

INT: How difficult was that for you growing up to have a mother working?

MARGO: She didn’t work very many hours. She taught Hebrew school and I was in Hebrew school exactly the same hours she was teaching Hebrew school, so it wasn’t a big issue.

INT: What was she like or what is she like?

MARGO: She’s very dedicated to the Jewish community and very dedicated to education. I only had her as a teacher once and it sort of wasn’t a particularly comfortable situation having your mother for a Hebrew school teacher so I wouldn’t be able to judge her as a teacher but I constantly run into people in the community who tell me oh, I had your Mom as a teacher. She was my favorite teacher. People say my kid had your Mom as a teacher. She was their favorite teacher. So I know that she is a wonderful teacher, and that doesn’t usually come without real strong dedication to what you do and caring about what you do.

INT: What kind of influence has she had on your life?

MARGO: It’s almost as if what I do professionally is a combination of both of my parents’ interests. My Dad is a museum director and my mother is a Jewish educator. I’m a museum director but I’m a director of a Jewish museum, and obviously one of the most important things that museums do is to educate people, so they obviously both had a very strong influence on my life. Professionally I do a combination of their two careers.

INT: What about your siblings?

MARGO: I have one brother who’s two years younger than me, Ron, and another brother who’s eight years younger than me, Dan. Growing up I certainly knew Ron a while lot better because eight years is a lot when you’re a kid. And they’re both very successful in their fields. My older younger brother has gone from being a labor organizer to an investment banker back to working in the labor movement. My youngest brother has expertise in welfare reform. He works for an organization that consults with the states on welfare. They both have graduate degrees from Harvard and they’re both pretty impressive guys.

INT: Where do they live?

MARGO: My youngest brother lives in Park Slope in Brooklyn and my other brother lives in Pittsburgh. He works for the steelworkers.

INT: What was it like for you growing up? What was your house like, family life?

MARGO: It was pretty comfortable suburban house. Very much a Fifties upbringing. We had
dinner every night at six thirty all together as a family. My father left the house at ten after eight every morning and came home at ten after six every night. Sat down, had a drink, we had dinner twenty minutes later. There was usually serious conversation of one kind or another at the dinner table. My father usually did some work after dinner when we were doing our homework and it was a very nice, suburban upbringing.

INT: What was the talk about?

MARGO: Politics, what we were doing in school, stuff that was going on at the museum. That kind of thing.

INT: Were your brothers bar mitzvahed?

MARGO: Yes. Both my brothers were bar mitzvahed and I was bat mitzvahed.

INT: Where?

MARGO: We belonged to a conservative synagogue in Nether Providence. It started out in Chester and then moved to Nether Providence, Ohev Shalom.

INT: That was close to your home?

MARGO: It was two miles from Swarthmore, so yeah, very close.

INT: What part did religion play in your life growing up?

MARGO: Well, as I said, it was more of a secular Jewish home than a religious Jewish home. I went to Hebrew school three days a week. I went to junior congregation every Saturday so I learned my way around a Siddur. But it was not a religious home. There was an understanding that there were certain observances that were sacrosanct. We did not go to school on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. We did not go to school on Pesach. And there was absolutely no question about that. But my parents didn’t fast on Yom Kippur. I started fasting after I was bat mitzvahed but they didn’t fast on Yom Kippur. The house was not kosher l’Pesach. It was not a particularly observant home. We had treif in the house certainly.

INT: What were your holidays like, Passover and Yom Kippur?

MARGO: Passover, when I was very little we went to my father’s parents in Boro Park and it was a big family Seder and when my mother started doing the Seder, it continued to be a big Seder but in addition to family, since both my parents came from small families, my mother being an only child and my father has one brother and his brother lives in Israel with their kids, so certainly the immediate family was very small, but my parents had an number of friends who they had grown up with in Habonim who were almost like family to us, people that we went on
vacation with, and they would also be people that we’d celebrate holidays with. We’d have Thanksgiving with them. We’d have Pesach with them. So my memories of Pesach—it was certainly my favorite holiday growing up. The Seder was a very big deal. There was a lot of singing, both Hebrew songs and socialist songs and Israeli songs and Habonim songs, and the people who would do Pesach with us were people who—as I said, my parents had grown up within Habonim and then their kids were our age and they were in Habonim and we were in Habonim so it was a very nice feeling.

INT: Are those people you’re still friendly with, the children?

MARGO: Not so much. My parents are still friendly with the adults but no, we’re not friendly with the kids.

INT: What friends did you have?

MARGO: Swarthmore is not a Jewish town, to say the least. It’s interesting that my parents chose to live there because it’s really not a Jewish town. There were never more than 2 other Jewish kids in my grade.

INT: What made them do that?

MARGO: Well, there was someone who my father grew up with in Brooklyn who he’d been best friends with and their fathers had been best friends, so my grandfather and this guy’s father had been best friends, and he lived in Swarthmore. He actually—did he work at the Franklin Institute? I think he might have actually worked at the Franklin Institute then, so when my father got the job in Philadelphia they just moved to the same place or nearby. So I guess they weren’t thinking about the issue of Jewish neighborhoods. I never really asked them. It did seem sort of strange to me because it’s certainly something I would think about in choosing a place to live. But no, there were no Jews in Swarthmore to speak of.

INT: What was it like to be young, living in a community like that?

MARGO: I didn’t know anything different. I was five when they moved to Swarthmore. I was born in Queens and my parents moved to Brooklyn when I was three, I’m sure that was a very Jewish area but I sort of wasn’t aware of it at age five and I lived in Swarthmore from the time I was five until I graduated high school so I wasn’t aware of the possibility of something different. I never thought about it in terms of what would it be like to live in a neighborhood where there were lots of Jews. So I just kind of accepted it and it certainly seemed to me, although I wouldn’t have articulated this, that this was a reflection of what American life was like. Most of America is not Jewish. Most of Swarthmore was not Jewish. So America celebrates Christmas. Swarthmore celebrated Christmas. It didn’t seem that off. In fact, the other might have seemed more different than most of American life. So I was just one of the very few Jewish kids.
INT: But how did that make you feel? Did you ever feel sort of singled out or have any anti-Semitism?

MARGO: No, because again, it wasn’t anything that...I didn’t expect anything different. This was just the American experience and this was how I experienced it in Swarthmore. No, I don’t remember any particular...certainly I felt different. I knew that we didn’t celebrate the holidays that other people celebrated. I remember there were parents who really didn’t like me because I told their kids that there wasn’t any such thing as Santa Claus and I remember that my brother used to put Jewish stars on the chimney so Santa Claus would know not to come down, but I don’t remember it as a difficult or painful experience in any way. I used to sing Christmas carols but not say Jesus. Stuff like that that kids do.

INT: But you never hid your Jewishness.

MARGO: Not at all.

INT: It was okay to be that and still be in an environment that-

MARGO: As I say, it wasn’t an issue one way or another. It wasn’t something I would have thought of. I never wished I wasn’t Jewish. It wasn’t an issue.

INT: Not like living in two worlds, one Jewish and one sort of not?

MARGO: No. Really not. First of all, even though we weren’t terribly active in synagogue I did go to Hebrew school three times a week and to junior congregation so that’s going to synagogue four times a week and there obviously everybody was Jewish and there were a lot of other kids who I became friendly with. They weren’t my primary friends versus other friends but I did have other Jewish friends who I was meeting elsewhere. By the time I was a teenager and became active in Habonim I had friends all over the city who were Jewish. But no, I don’t remember feeling particularly uncomfortable or singled out. I saw Christmas trees at my friends’ houses and they saw a Chanukah menorah at my house. No, it wasn’t uncomfortable. It was the Jewish Leave it to Beaver.

INT: Tell me about your schooling. Tell me about your education. How did that go?

MARGO: Swarthmore had an excellent school system. It was considered to be a very, very good school. I went to public school in Swarthmore until I was in tenth grade, at which point I started going to a public school in Philadelphia called the Parkway Program, which had just started at that point. I was one of the first classes, and they had...it was primarily a school for city kids but they had a lottery for suburban kids, so some suburban kids went to that school as well. At the time, I was not particularly happy in school. I wasn’t doing all that well, so my parents felt that a change might be a good thing. And certainly it was interesting to go to school in the city and to be part of this new educational experiment with lots of freedom. I don’t think the education was
all that good frankly, but I don’t know how much it mattered. It was only a year and a half of my schooling so I don’t know how much it mattered.

INT: Where did you go from there?

MARGO: I went to Hampshire College, also experimental education, which is in Amherst, Massachusetts. At that time it was a new school as well. I started in 1971 and that was the second class that went to the school. The school was founded in 1970, so it was a very new school. It was founded by the University of Massachusetts, Smith, Mt. Holyoke and Amherst, and it was a school with no grades, just evaluations, and no “curriculum” so kind of on the cutting edge of experimental college education at that time.

INT: What were your aspirations growing up?

MARGO: I didn’t really have aspirations growing up.

INT: Goals?

MARGO: No. I actually think that’s true for a lot of women who grew up in the Fifties. I had no idea what I wanted to be. In college I kind of just assumed I would be an academic because it seemed like a continuation of what I was already doing but no, I didn’t have any goals or aspirations.

INT: Personally?

MARGO: No.

INT: And none professionally?

MARGO: No.

INT: Just moving along.

MARGO: Exactly.

INT: What were some memorable events you can think of growing up in your life?

MARGO: Going to Israel was a very memorable event. I went to Israel when I was thirteen. I spent the summer in Israel as a bat mitzvah present from my parents. I had mentioned before that my father’s brother lives in Israel and my two first cousins, one of whom is almost exactly my age and one of whom is two years younger, so I went to spend the summer with them. I was there for probably two and a half months. We went to camp together and we traveled around the country together and it was really, I think, a wonderful, wonderful experience for a thirteen year
old to have. And it was also a wonderful time to be in Israel and to see Israel. This was pre ’67 so it was a very different era.

INT: How did that change the way you looked at being Jewish?

MARGO: I don’t know that I would have been conscious of it in that way at that time. There’s no question but that it made my relationship to Israel stronger. It had to. I had more of an understanding of what the country was like and what it meant to have a relationship to Israel.

INT: Any other memorable events you can think of growing up?

MARGO: Going to Zionist summer camp was very memorable and a very, very important part of my upbringing and my Jewish identity. I went to Camp Galil in Ottsville and some of my closest friendships were formed there, people that I’m still friendly with and it’s certainly something that I would definitely want to send my daughter to Habonim camp. My brothers both went. My parents had been to camp. And although at that time the goal of socialist Zionist camp was that you should make aliyah to Israel, I think that the formative impact that it has in terms of Jewish identity is more important than whether or not you end up living in Israel.

INT: What was it about the camp that impressed you so much?

MARGO: Certainly the issue of social justice and having a social conscience and having that be part of your Jewish identity was very, very clear and going to that camp in the Sixties, it was probably even clearer than it might have been at other times. Strengthening your relationship to Israel. Strengthening knowledge of Hebrew. Strengthening relationships with a Jewish community. These people became my Jewish community to a certain extent.

INT: Who are some of these people today?

MARGO: One of my best friends at the time who is still a close friend of mine lives in Jerusalem. Her name is now Paula Weiman Kelman. She’s been living in Jerusalem probably for almost twenty years. She’s someone who I’ve stayed very close with. I didn’t stay close with everyone but I know where a lot of the people are. Irene Eintracht who is—I know she’s very active in the Jewish community in Cherry Hill where she lives. I think her husband is Israeli and I think he’s a Hebrew school principal, so a lot of people have remained very active.

INT: How about the idea of living in Israel?

MARGO: I certainly thought about living in Israel. I lived there while I was in college. I lived there for two years from 1973 to 1975.

INT: That’s when you left Hampshire?
MARGO: I left Hampshire. I intended to be leaving for a year and I ended up leaving for two years. It's certainly something I absolutely thought about and considered at the point at which I left Israel in '75. I went back to graduate college. I thought I would go back to live in Israel but it just kind of never happened. But yeah, it was absolutely something I considered very, very seriously and I was very happy in Israel.

INT: What made you not?

MARGO: You get caught up in your life. After college I moved to New York. Well actually, I moved to New York while I was still in college because when I was writing my Senior Thesis I needed some collections in libraries in New York. I loved living in New York. It was really exciting and life just sort of takes a different direction.

INT: You spoke about some events but who would you say were your role models and mentors-You spoke about your father-that inspired you to become such an active participant in the Jewish community. Was there anyone else?

MARGO: I never really thought of my career as a Jewish career, at least until very recently. I was much more interested in the museum part of my career and interested in public history and interested in public education and interested in terra culture. So it’s people in the museum field who have been important to me and who I consider to be role models. Some of them are actually in the Jewish museum field. Joan Rosenbaum, who is director of the Jewish Museum in New York is someone who I admire enormously and I think has done a wonderful, wonderful job as director of a museum. Some other museum people who I admire a lot-Hope Alswang was the director of the Shelburne Museum. Rick Beard is director of Atlanta History Center. In terms of the Jewish community, there are certainly people who I find to be extremely charismatic and inspirational but I wouldn’t necessarily call them role models or mentors. That’s a kind of a different question.

INT: It’s mostly your Dad and your Mom.

MARGO: Yeah, but again, as I said before and I do think this is true in a lot of women who grew up the Fifites and maybe even the Sixties, I didn’t have particular career aspirations or ideas of what I wanted to be, so it’s not something I was necessarily looking for. If I didn’t know what I wanted to do professionally then I wouldn’t be looking for mentors.

INT: Tell me more about your past. You got a Masters in history.

MARGO: I got a Masters in history at Columbia, although I did that while I was working so I did that part time. It was known as a terminal Masters. Probably one of the more important things that I did in terms of my career path was actually something I did while I was still at Hampshire. There were a group of students who put together a course on the Holocaust at Hampshire, which I think had an enormous impact on me. It was a very, very intensive course. It was completely
planned by students. It was a full year course. It met twice a week and included, in addition to the two sessions a week of five hundred pages of reading a week, it included film programs and lectures that were available to the entire college campus in the evenings. The course also included a six week trip to Eastern and Western Europe and meeting the people in the Jewish community and visited the various concentration camps. This was really quite early to be doing this sort of stuff. This was the early Seventies so it was one of the earliest courses being taught on the Holocaust and certainly one of the earlier trips that people took to the camps. In fact, Hampshire just did a conference a couple of weeks ago, last week, commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of putting this course together. So this is during, I’d say, about eighteen months of my college career. This is what I did mostly, read and think about the Holocaust. So that was something that had an enormous impact on me, both in terms of the subject matter and thinking about Jewish identity, and also just in terms of the kind of work that was involved in putting it together. It was a combination of research and reading and thinking and a lot of administrative work. I think in some ways it prepared me for a lot of what I was going to do next, so it was an extremely important experience and obviously visiting Europe and seeing the camps and meeting the people in the community had a tremendous impact on a nineteen year old.

INT: Was there anyone there who sort of impacted you to help do this? How did you get encouragement to do this?

MARGO: There were three of us as students who did this course. There was one student in particular who was kind of the leader of the course. His name is Arthur Samuelson and he’s now publisher of Schocken Books but there were another two of us who worked with him, and we really went to the faculty at Hampshire and said this is something that we want to do. Will you give us money? Will you help us do it? And there was a vice president at Hampshire who really took this on as something that he was interested in. His name was Bob Birney and he was extremely helpful, both in terms of the college itself and also stuff like when we went to Eastern Europe he was the person who contacted the Polish Consulate and all of that sort of thing to help us out with making arrangements for the trip. And then there was a rabbi at Smith College named Yechiel Lander who kind of was initially faculty advisor to the course. And then there was a professor at Hampshire who actually started, I believe I think he started Hampshire after we’d already started working on the course, and he was actually an anthropologist but he took enormous interest in what we were doing and ended up kind of switching fields and teaching European Jewish history, being very involved with the course. He’s now very involved with the National Yiddish Book Center. One of the students who took the course is the director and president of the National Yiddish Book Center, Aaron Lansky. These were some of the people who were important to the course.

INT: So it really started a whole-

MARGO: This really was a student-led thing. This was not the professors doing it. The people who we invited, guest lecturers, and because the field was so very different, at that point really pretty much anyone who was important in the field came and lectured to the course. Raul
Hillberg spoke several times. Isaiah Trunk spoke. David Wyman, who was at U-Mass spoke. David Roskies spoke. Henry Feingold spoke. So it was quite a list of people and their willingness to be involved with the course at that time I think came partly from the fact that there were so few college students who had expressed any interest in the Holocaust. Hilberg used to take a bus down from Burlington, Vermont and stay in this really disgusting student housing and he did that more than once because, I think...and I remember him saying to us-(end of tape 1, side 1)

TAP 1, SIDE 2 blank

INT: I’m here with Margo Bloom. It is March 6, 1998. This is tape 2. Margo, you were talking about the course in Hampshire College that you were involved in. It had to do with the Holocaust and people coming down. Are you still doing work related to the Holocaust?

MARGO: No, I’m not. It’s actually something I’m thinking about a lot lately because I just keynoted the conference at Hampshire College commemorating the anniversary of this course. And I think that in studying the Holocaust that intensively for that period of time, particularly as an adolescent, it’s very difficult. It’s difficult emotionally. It’s difficult intellectually. And I think after doing something like that you do need to kind of get away from it. That’s exactly when I went to Israel. I went to Israel for two years and did not study the Holocaust in Israel. I studied Jewish history in Israel but I did not study the Holocaust. I think my feeling after that, particularly as the Holocaust...in a bad point, the Holocaust was not particularly a part of the American Jewish landscape. It was not something that people were talking about or thinking about, but it became increasingly important to American Jewish identity through the Seventies and into the Eighties. I think at a certain point as the Holocaust became central to American Jewish identity, I started to feel as though the Holocaust is something that we should, at this point, put behind us, that victimhood should not be a central part of how American Jews think of themselves and it’s time for us develop a real content to our identity that’s not related to the Holocaust or Israel, which has kind of unfortunately become a flip side of the Holocaust. Holocaust and redemption, victims and heroes. But I would have to say that now I feel a little bit differently about that. I think it is extremely important to study the Holocaust and make it a part of our story, but it can’t be a central focus for our identity as American Jews.

INT: How has being a woman helped or hindered your participation in the Jewish community?

MARGO: I don’t know that I can...participation in the Jewish community-I don’t know what that really means. I’m director of the Jewish Museum but I don’t know what that necessarily has to do with the Jewish community. There are a lot of directors of Jewish museums who are women. It’s not that unusual to be a woman and be a director of a Jewish museum. It’s not as if I’ve come up against great odds and there have been all these men waiting in the wings to take this job that I have. So I don’t feel that to be particularly an issue in terms of my career path. It’s an issue to a certain extent in dealing with lay people, I think. In any non-profit, Jewish or non-Jewish, I think that the expectation is that it’s okay for women to have non-profit jobs because there are probably men who support them so they don’t really need to make a lot of money
whereas when men have non-profit jobs the feeling is sometimes they must not be good enough to make it in the private sector because otherwise they’d be working in the private sector. And I think that is reflected to a certain extent in terms of how lay people treat women versus men in positions in non-profit.

INT: So you’ve never come across any kind of gender discrimination?

MARGO: Oh G-d, yes, but I don’t think that necessarily has anything to do with the Jewish community. Sure. There’s always times in any women’s career where you feel like you’re just being treated like a nice little girl and patted on the knee and not taken particularly seriously. But I don’t know that I see that as a Jewish versus a non-Jewish issue. I think that’s an American issue. It’s expressed in the Jewish community. It’s expressed in the general community.

INT: What have you done in those particular times, outside of it being Jewish or non-Jewish?

MARGO: It depends on the situation. If I’m dealing with a lay person in their sixties or seventies who calls me babe or hon or sweetheart, I suppose I should say something but I usually don’t because I figure they’re in their sixties or seventies. It means something completely different to them and I’m not going to make an issue of it. If someone in their forties said that to me, I’d make a very big issue of it but that’s frankly never happened to me. So it completely depends. This kind of avuncular way that older Jewish men sometimes treat Jewish women who— and I’m not going to say younger because I’m not younger but younger than them—it’s not intended in any offensive sort of way and you just pick your battles. You just pick your battles.

INT: So let’s get back to the path again. I also know from your resume there were seminars that you attended from 1990-92.

MARGO: Yeah, but that was at Columbia. There’s like ten years in between that. Go back. My first job in New York was at the New York State Office of Court Administration, which was a pretty boring administrative job related to court administration in New York. But I did that very briefly. And then I worked for the Jewish Association for College Youth for a couple of years, which is an organization that’s similar to Hillel and worked on campuses in New York and that’s actually where I met my husband. I went from there to the Jewish Museum, where I ran public programs for five years, which was a wonderful, wonderful experience. It was a position that I created. There wasn’t a position to do public programs at the Jewish Museum at the time that I got there so I wrote a grant to raise some money for some particular programs and then the position was institutionalized and at this point it’s a fairly significant position at the museum. The public programs are important there. But that was a long time ago. And then I went from there-I took a bit of a diversion in my career path. I ran a theater program that works with psychiatric patients and I did that for three years. It had nothing to do with museums. It had nothing to do with anything Jewish but it was wonderful administrative and management fundraising experience. It was a small organization but I was running it and I raised the money for it. It was the first time that I worked with board people on a regular basis, so it was good,
non-profit management experience.

INT: Is that why you did it?

MARGO: Yeah. I mean I knew it would be good experience in that regard and also the program was intriguing. I do like theater. I am interested in theater. I like theater people. It was interesting. It didn’t engage me intellectually the way that history does or Jewish stuff does but it certainly was...the content of it wasn’t boring. And then I actually went back to the Jewish museum. Oh no-in between that I did some consulting for a while. I worked at the Museum of the City of New York for about six months on a program on multi-cultural outreach for them, which was a very, very nice opportunity. It was nice to be in a different museum setting. I loved the collections in the Museum of the City of New York. I met some wonderful people and had an opportunity to do some really interesting networking. And then I went back to the Jewish Museum where I ran their broadcast archives. They have a collection of theater and television materials and I ran that archive for two years and then I came here.

INT: So what made you come here-the job?

MARGO: Absolutely. It was an opportunity to run my own shop. It was a fabulous opportunity.

INT: Tell me about meeting your husband.

MARGO: Well, we were both working in the same place, as I said.

INT: What’s his name?

MARGO: His name is Mark Seal. In some ways our backgrounds are quite similar. In some way they’re very different. He also grew up in Habonim. He also spent time in Israel. He spent actually longer in Israel than I did. He lived on Kibbutz Gezer for four years. So we’d actually probably met over the years, although not-we didn’t have a lot to do with each other. And in other ways his background is very different. He grew up in Montreal. He grew up in a working class family. In Montreal, in many ways, the generations are very different than they are in America, even though the pattern of immigration is pretty much the same. It’s kind of a generation behind in terms of the Jewish community in many ways, a generation that would be my parents’ generation is still more of a working class generation in Montreal, so in that way our backgrounds are different. As I say, the relationship to Israel, the relationship to Habonim was very similar, so we’ve been together for a pretty long time. We’ve been married for fifteen years. We were together for four years before that.

INT: In New York?

MARGO: Yes.
INT: So you came here. Do you have any children?

MARGO: Yes. We have a daughter Molly who’s going to be four in a couple of weeks.

INT: Tell me about Molly.

MARGO: Well, besides the usual, she’s brilliant, charming and all that. She’s a very social child. She’s extremely gregarious. She loves people. I’m sure one day she’s going to run away with someone because she’s perfectly happy to say hello to anybody. She never had stranger anxiety for a minute. She is very lively. She’s usually very sweet natured, although, you know, she certainly has her cranky moments and her tantrums. She adores my parents, which is wonderful. It’s very nice for me to see. She’s very close to my parents and spends a fair amount of time with them and likes to talk to them on the telephone. She’s a great kid.

INT: Is she in day care?

MARGO: She goes to a pre-school at the Jewish Center at Princeton, which is a large synagogue in Princeton and that’s a program I’m very pleased with. She’s really learning a lot of Jewish stuff and we have a babysitter at home as well.

INT: So what is it like being a working Mom with a four year old?

MARGO: It’s a little nuts. It’s very, very hard to balance it all. There’s no question. I’ve been traveling a fair amount and working a lot of weekends and I don’t work a lot of evenings. I usually work like one or two evenings a week but it’s still time away that she really notices, particularly since I only see her for two or three hours a day anyway. And it’s a particularly difficult balance—it sounds like something straight out of a ladies magazine but you never do get any time for yourself and if I’m exhausted after a twelve hour day at work or I’ve been on a trip or whatever, as much as I miss her I really don’t want to hang out with her right then but I really do. Of course I have to because she’s missed me and I’ve been away. So it’s hard. It’s challenging. But I wouldn’t have it any other way. I wouldn’t do it any differently. I obviously have to work but I wouldn’t want to work part time. This is the kind of job I want to have. It’s the kind of career I want to have and the satisfactions that I get from it are worth it. So that’s modern life.

INT: Who were some of the colleagues along the way? I know I asked you about a mentor but other people.

MARGO: I really mentioned colleagues since I was talking about the career path. I didn’t really have mentors. I think I really talked about them. Some of my board members, and this is not because...this isn’t oral history that people might read and might tell it to my board members. There really are some of my board members who’ve had an impact on me, an influence on me. Lynn Ross, who was president of the museum for seven years, is someone who I’ve learned a
great deal from. She is one of the best people people I’ve ever met. She is warm. She is gracious. She knows how to make people feel comfortable and feel good in a very, very special way. She has a real Jewish heart and the Jewish community is very important to her and she’s a hard worker and she really cares and she’s very dedicated. But mostly she’s wonderful. Ed Rosen is someone who I’ve enjoyed working with a great deal. He’s charismatic and funny and very, very smart, and again, cares a great deal about the community. Walter Cohen, who’s my current board president, is an amazing politician. I’ve never seen anyone run a meeting or conduct a meeting or work with people in the way that he does and I’m learning a tremendous amount from him and feel very fortunate to work with him. One of the nice things about working in non-profit is that you do have the opportunity to work with such a diverse range of people. I just talked about someone who ran a family business, someone who’s active in the arts community and someone who is president of a medical college. To be able to work closely with that kind of range of people in addition to museum people and historians that you expect, it’s really a gift because it’s an opportunity to learn from lots of different kinds of people.

INT: How about any rivals or enemies that you’ve made?

MARGO: I don’t know about anybody who really hates me. I could think of people who I don’t like. I’m sure people who I’ve fired really hate me and I can’t say I necessarily blame them. If somebody fired me I’m sure I’d hate them for the rest of their lives.

INT: But there must be some competitiveness because these jobs are not-

MARGO: I’ve never felt it. I’ve never felt there was anybody out there who wanted my job. In terms of the people that I hire, because the staff is relatively small it’s actually unlikely that I would hire someone who would want my job. If I hire a curator it’s someone who wants to spend a lot of time doing research.

INT: Very specific stuff.

MARGO: It’s more specific stuff. If the staff were bigger and I had a number two person then there might be some sort of rivalry but we only have sixteen people on staff so that hasn’t happened yet. I could see it happening at some point in the future. The thing that I like most about my job is the extraordinary diversity of it. I can be thinking about program ideas and exhibition ideas in the morning and in the afternoon I could be talking to a funder about giving us money. So that’s what I like about it but I think the kinds of people I hire actually probably wouldn’t like that, so I haven’t particularly experienced that. Maybe I’m not aware of it. I love my job and it’s a great job but it’s not like...let’s face it. We have an annual budget of a million three. I have a staff of sixteen people. It’s not like a really big job. So it’s not as if...there are bigger Jewish jobs, there are bigger museum jobs so it’s not as if the job is a job that someone would target and say oh my G-d, that’s a job I have to have.

INT: What are some of the challenges that you face today?
MARGO: The challenge of both maintaining my own vision for the institution and making sure that there is a process of engaging other stakeholders and that’s something that’s important just because it’s something I believe in institutionally, but it’s also something important because frankly you can’t raise any money if you do it any other way. That is a real challenge, particularly we have a very large board. We have more than fifty people on our board, so there are different visions on the board. Building consensus is a challenge and I think that particularly in an ethnic museum there’s a feeling on the part of lay people that they have real expertise in terms of what should be in the galleries. They’re American Jews so they know what you should be saying about American Jews, and that’s not necessarily the case. American Jewish history is a field, just like art history is a field and I know there are collectors involved in any art museum but I don’t think there’s the same sense of ownership and same sense of feeling of expertise that’s both a weakness and a strength. The weakness is that the fact is they don’t all know what should be in the galleries. The strength is that sense of ownership is something that is enormously valuable in terms of getting behind the mission of institution, raising money for it, donating money to it, selling it, being an advocate in the community. It expresses itself in very small ways but I think this is indicative. I remember once after some public program that I introduced, a woman came up to me afterwards and said darling, that was lovely but you really talk too fast. On the one hand it’s totally insulting but on the other hand it’s really very sweet because it’s a sense of feeling of family, feeling that they can say that to me and it’s not because I particularly project an air of informality. I’m not stuffy but it’s not because of my air of informality. It’s because I’m the director of this institution and they feel a sense of ownership of this institution, which I think is important.

INT: What’s your vision? You said you have a vision.

MARGO: This is an institution that’s at an extraordinary crossroads right now. Philadelphians know that there’s a tremendous amount that’s about to happen to the whole Independence National Historic Park area. There is going to be a new visitor’s center that is a major, fifty thousand square feet visitor center that’s going to be built directly across the street from this institution. The educational arm of Independence National Historic Park, the Independence Institute is going to be directly right next to it. The entire block across from us is going to be landscaped. There’s going to be a cafe right across from our museum. So suddenly, although we always say that our location on Independence Mall, a stone’s throw from where the freedoms were created that enabled Jews to flourish in this county is wonderful, it is wonderful but the fact is that we’re set back from the street and nobody can see us, and the quadrangle across from us is empty, but that’s going to change. So suddenly, the only museum of American Jewish history in this country is going to become very, very visible to millions of tourists and visitors to this area. So we have an opportunity to become a very prominent institution nationally, and as the only museum of the American Jewish experience in this county I would like us to have the space to be able to tell the story of the American Jewish experience to both Jews and non-Jews who visit Philadelphia. I’d like the perspective from which that story is told to be a social history perspective. I’d like that perspective to be more the story of everyday lives than celebrations of rich and famous people. I’d like people who come into this museum to be able to find themselves
in the museum and to feel that they're part of history. I think that we're seeing more and more that the most effective museums are the museums that use stories as part of their narrative. If you visit the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York you see that the reason it is so effective in telling the story of the Holocaust is that it tells it from individuals perspectives that everywhere possible, every artifact, has a photograph of the person who gave the artifact or who owned the artifact. And that kind of getting into the story is what makes people feel close to the story and I'd like this museum to tell the story of American Jewish history in that way. I also think it's important for this institution to be part of the Mall, that part of what we need to do is to tell the early American and colonial Jewish story. It makes sense, given where we're located. Whether or not a Constitution Center is built, and it's not clear whether it will be built, there are many, many stories that we can tell in terms of Jews and the constitution. I don't mean the writing of the constitution but I mean Jews and constitutional issues, everything from Brown vs. Board of Ed to a range of issues that Jews have been in the forefront with or have affected Jews, school prayer and those kinds of issues. So there are lots of things that I see this institution growing into in the future.

INT: It's a big opportunity.

MARGO: It's an enormous opportunity and responsibility.

INT: I know this is going to sound strange, but tell me what your daily routine is kind of like. You live in Princeton and you commute-

MARGO: I live outside of Princeton so a big part of my daily routine is driving. My daily routine is I get up in the morning and I exercise and although I'm not religious Jewishly I am religious about exercise. I exercise every day. Some mornings I see my daughter and some I don't because we put her to bed very late, so some mornings she wakes up before I leave and sometimes she doesn't. I usually do spend a few minutes with her. And then I drive for an hour and ten minutes and then I'm at work. My day is usually made up of a combination of memos and supervision and talking to board members and lunch meetings and program meetings and fundraising-

INT: And travel. You do that.

MARGO: As I said, I have a certain number of evening meetings but not that many. I try to go to a certain number of things in the cultural community, and that includes things in the Jewish community when I can. I usually don't leave particularly late. Most evenings I leave at five thirty and I go home and get dinner on the table and hang out with my daughter. She goes to bed at ten o'clock.

INT: What's home life like? What's your religious home life like?

MARGO: We're not particularly observant in the home. We light candles Friday night. We
made kiddush. We’re very clear with my daughter...she knows the blessings and she sings them with us and all of that sort of thing, and we certainly celebrate the High Holidays and Chanukah and Pesach and Purim but we don’t go to shul every week or anything like that. There’s a synagogue service for pre-schoolers at the Jewish Center where my daughter goes to pre-school and we take her there, but that’s only once a month. She does go to that. And there’s certainly a fair amount of discussion of things Jewish in the home, both as a family, the stuff she’s doing at school has a lot of Jewish involvement. Now she’s doing stuff for Purim. They make graggers with M & M’s in them and she’ll certainly go to the Purim carnival and I’ll take her to megillah reading next week. So to that extent it’s a Jewish home but I think more of her awareness of it being a Jewish home will be the sorts of issues that are discussed at home, and certainly...my husband works in the Jewish community. He’s very, very knowledgeable about Jewish issues and things Jewish so a lot of what we would discuss around the table, although she’s certainly not participating in conversations at this point, are about Jewish issues and certainly when we socialize with friends part of the conversation is about Israel, is about things that are going on in the community, so it is a very Jewish home but we don’t keep a kosher home. We don’t have treif in the house but we don’t keep a kosher home. So it’s really Shabbat and the major holidays.

INT: I know you might have answered this but just to think of something else. What have you enjoyed most about your involvement in the Jewish community? You have a background with it but what have you really enjoyed most?

MARGO: I’m professionally involved with the Jewish community. I’m not involved as a volunteer. I obviously believe very strongly that a Jewish museum can have a real impact on people’s sense of Jewishness and engaging them in things Jewish, engaging them in Jewish life, engaging them in thinking about Jewish history. Most probably what I enjoy is being able to be part of that, being able to be part of making that happen.

INT: What do you feel you’ve had to overcome or sacrifice? Anything at all?

MARGO: You know, everything in life is a trade off. If I’m going to be here I can’t be with my daughter and if I’m going to be with my daughter I can’t be here. In that way, everything in life is a trade off. I don’t feel that it’s a sacrifice. These are things...I want to do both of these things.

INT: Is there anything else that you would have done differently?

MARGO: I find commuting’s a really big sacrifice. But again, that’s modern life. My husband works in New York, I work in Philadelphia, so I commute. But I don’t know. I suppose he’s really the one making the sacrifices. We moved for my job.

INT: What have you discovered about yourself in doing some of this?

MARGO: Doing some of what?
INT: In your involvement with the Jewish community and what you do.

MARGO: What’s interesting is a conclusion that I’ve come to probably in the last year—had said for a long time that I was a museum professional. I was a Jewish museum professional and I was a Jewish professional and I certainly hope my next job will be out of the Jewish community, and I was actually offered another job this year as director of a history museum in New York. For many, many reasons I turned the job down. It was not the right job for me and it was not the right time for us to move to the city, but in thinking about the job, which certainly intellectually provided some very interesting opportunities, I realized that I cared a lot more about what I’m doing here than I could at an urban history museum, and that was kind of an epiphany for me after having said very glibly for so many years that this is not the job I’m doing because it’s Jewish. It’s because it’s a museum job, it’s because it’s history, it’s because it’s public history but it’s not because it’s Jewish, and in fact to find out that what it most meaningful to me about it is that it is a Jewish museum and that is really why I care about it and what engages me and what I’m impassioned about. I could certainly be intellectually engaged with any kind of history but I don’t think that I could care about it or be committed to it in the same way that I am here.

INT: What other organizations are you closely involved in? Tell me about some of your other...I know you were involved in NEH.

MARGO: I’ve been really scaling back on that stuff just because we’re starting a capital campaign and I don’t have time right now and so I’ve been doing more one-shot things. I was on the board of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance for six years and that’s actually something...my term is just up and that was an involvement that was important to me. I’m very concerned about the cultural community in Philadelphia. It was also an opportunity for this institution, for me, to kind of network with other professionals in the community and have an idea of what is going on globally in the community, to be involved in initiatives for regional funding, that sort of thing. So that was a very important involvement for me and it’s one I’m very glad that I did. I was on the executive committee there. I’ve served as a panelist for the National Endowment for Humanities and also for the Pennsylvania Historical Museums Commission and before that for the State Council on the Arts in New York. It’s a lot of fun. It’s very interesting. Certainly if you’re at all a voyeur, it’s a great way to find out how other institutions operate, but it’s also a wonderful way to see some of the stellar projects that are going on in the community and to really learn from them. So that’s something I love to do. That’s more of a one-shot sort of thing. It’s an enormous amount of work and time. I served as a reviewer for Institute of Museum Services once and everyone is asked to do it again every year and I have not been able to do it again, just because it’s like fifty or sixty hours of work and it’s just hard to find the time. I’m on the board of the Feinstein Center for Jewish History but that group doesn’t meet very often so I haven’t put in much time with that, and as I say, I am trying to cut back a bit. I co-chaired the Council of American Jewish Museums conference this year. It was the second time I had done that. The Council of American Jewish Museums is an umbrella organization for about sixty Jewish museums around the country and this year’s conference was in New York to celebrate the opening of the Museum of Jewish Heritage and it was a wonderful opportunity and a lot of fun.
and a very good conference, and again, a chance to work with colleagues in a way that I don’t really get to as a director of a museum. To work side by side with someone instead of to be supervising someone was a nice opportunity. I had mentioned I just keynoted a conference at Hampshire College in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the Holocaust course, but those are, as I said, more one-shot kinds of things and I think certainly as our capital campaign continues, that’s the way my involvement is going to have to remain. I just don’t have time for active board involvement in that kind of thing at this point.

INT: What do you like to do in your leisure time, if you have any leisure time?

MARGO: My favorite thing is entertaining friends. Both my husband and I like to cook a lot and I think for both of us, one of the things we enjoy the most is just having people over and just hanging out. We don’t go out much just the two of us, just because our daughter is with babysitters so much that we get a babysitter literally maybe twice a year, so most of what we do socially is just getting together with friends. I enjoy that a great deal. I love outdoor stuff, although I don’t do much of it. I love bike riding and taking walks in the country and that sort of thing, but I don’t do a whole lot of it right now. I love to read fiction and I read as much as I can, which again is not as much as I would like to. I used to really like going to museums and I almost never do that anymore except when there’s an exhibition that I really have to see, which is unfortunate. I used to go to museums all the time and I used to also really love going to the theater, but I haven’t done that in years.

INT: What about your involvement in the community? Do you have any involvement where you live?

MARGO: I don’t have much involvement where I live. We just don’t spend all that much time there.

INT: Why Princeton? Because it was sort of the halfway point?

MARGO: It’s in between Philadelphia and New York and it’s an awful commute for both of us. There’s really not much time to be very involved. (End of tape 2, side 1)

TAPE 2, SIDE 2 blank.

INT: This is tape 3 with Margo Bloom. You were talking about juggling family, community, friends.

MARGO: I was just saying I’m not that involved in the community. It’s very difficult. On the very few occasions where I take my daughter to school in the morning, usually her babysitter takes her, I see that there’s certainly a group of women who are there every day but it’s not a community that I can be part of. I just don’t have time. There are certainly neighbors who I see and hang out with. There’s a group of woman that I have dinner with once a month but no, it’s
not a community that I'm particularly plugged into and I doubt that I ever would be because there's just not the time.

**INT:** So it's not a predominantly Jewish or non-Jewish-

**MARGO:** Well, there are a lot of Jews there. That's for sure. There's a lot of Jews in the Princeton area and there are a number of synagogues and there's a fairly active Jewish community, but again, it's just not something that I can really plug into.

**INT:** Are you still involved with Israel because of your uncle?

**MARGO:** My uncle still lives in Israel. I haven't been to Israel in many, many years. My husband goes every year but I haven't been in a long time. It's certainly the issue in the news that I pay the most attention to and care the most about but it's not something where I have any particular involvement right now. In the past I've been active in a range of organizations. I was on the board of Breira in the Seventies. I was involved with founding Americans for Peace Now and I spoke of my involvement with Habonim earlier but it's just, again, not something I could have time for now.

**INT:** How religious are you would you say?

**MARGO:** I don't believe in G-d so that's a big part of the question. I would very, very much like to find a Jewish community where I feel comfortable and if I did I would go to synagogue fairly frequently. I would love to go to synagogue very Saturday morning and I'd love to engage my daughter in something like that, but living where we are we haven't found anything particularly comfortable, and if we lived in either New York or Philadelphia I'm sure we would. But it wouldn't be about G-d for me. It would be about community. It would be about something spiritual but I wouldn't define that something spiritual as related to G-d.

**INT:** How do you see your spirituality?

**MARGO:** I see it more as...I mean to say with something like Shabbat. I would very much like to observe Shabbat in a much more meaningful way, not just light the candles but really have Shabbat be a day apart and to not only go to synagogue but also to not go shopping and not spend money and do stuff like that. Given where I live, I couldn't possibly give up driving but to really make it a day apart and to be more observant about it and to feel that this was a day where it's an opportunity to be more contemplative and to think about the week before and to think about the week coming up and I think that many Jewish traditions provide an opportunity for people to really be better people and that's what I think that Shabbat and some of the holidays really do do. So if I found a community of people that I was comfortable with and more an institution that I was comfortable with, then I think it would be more part of my life.

**INT:** What kind of components would it have to have to have you feel that way?
MARGO: The Jewish center where we send our daughter is kind of your standard suburban synagogue. That’s not really fair. It’s a community of people that are significantly more knowledgeable than many synagogues around the country, certainly the synagogue where I grew up. But I don’t find the rabbi to be particularly inspirational. In fact, I really don’t like him at all. I don’t find the people to be particularly engaged either intellectually or spiritually with things Jewish. It seems kind of more by rote. So it’s just not something that I find inspiring.

INT: Did you though at one point? There were communities-

MARGO: There have been communities that I was in and out of in New York in the early days of B’nai Jeshurun when Marshall Meyer just started there. That was a place that I liked to go. Some of the various communities around Anshei Chesed on the Upper West Side. I liked the various minyanim there were around Anshei Chesed. I liked and felt comfortable in. I’m sure there would be plenty of places in Philadelphia where I would feel comfortable and most probably something in Germantown and possibly other places. So it’s a question of how large the concentration of Jews are and how big the community is. There’s just more of it in an urban setting than there is in a suburban setting. It’s just more available.

INT: I think you’ve answered a lot of questions. I just have a few specific...What special talents or qualities do you feel you bring to your participation in the Jewish community?

MARGO: Again, it’s what I do professionally, so some of it just has to do with kind of professional skills. I’m a good administrator. I know how to get things done. I don’t give up. But those are professional skills. I suppose the most important thing is that I believe in what I’m doing and I believe it’s important and I believe it can have an impact on the community.

INT: How do you see yourself in the future and where?

MARGO: Well, I’d certainly like to see a capital campaign completed here. I’d like to see a bigger building. I’d like to see the opportunity to do more in terms of the American Jewish experience at this institution in Philadelphia. Some of what I see for myself in the future is really just personal. I would like to be able to have a more integrated life, which would mean spending less time in my car. At this point it’s kind of like we live in three places. My husband works in New York, I work here and then we live in an entirely different place and it’s not as if...suburban Princeton is not like it’s a commuting suburb of Philadelphia, so if you’re in a commuting suburb of Philadelphia with other people who are part of the same community...so what I would most like in my life is to be able to be more part of something. Philadelphia is a wonderful city and I’d love to live in it and be much more a part of the community than I can be simply by not living here. So that’s a very personal answer but it’s a big part of what I want in my life.

INT: Is there any chance that he might find a job here?

MARGO: Oh no.
INT: So this is like a real Nineties situation.

MARGO: Yes and no. I know people...one of my best friends for years lived in Princeton. Her husband taught at Rutgers and she taught at Binghamton and she went there three nights a week. We know other people in Princeton—he teaches at the University of Miami and she works in Princeton. At least we spend most nights in the same bed.

INT: As women’s role have evolved and continued to be identified and changed, what is your hope for the future of women’s involvement in the Jewish community?

MARGO: I would certainly want to see...I want to see the continuum that’s started to continue. The majority of boards are not fifty percent women. G-d knows. The majority of Federations are still led by men. The majority of Jewish communal organizations are still led by men, and this is both in a lay and a professional sense. So I’d certainly like to see that changing. I’m interested to see some of what’s happening in the orthodox community in terms of women’s role. I’d like to see more of that. Again, I don’t think...there’s never going to be the kind of change that we’ve seen in the reform or even the conservative movements, but I’d like to see all of that move further. The issue with lay leadership is an interesting one because money is power and usually it’s these days, women who are married to power as opposed to women who have it themselves. So that’s an even deeper question. It’s not just related to women. I would love to see a way where lay leadership could reflect skills and other sorts of attributes in addition to money. As someone who runs a non-profit, I obviously know how important money is and why money is important as an attribute for a trustee. On the other hand, it rules a lot of people out in terms of leadership positions and I think that is particularly true for women. And I think leadership means something different for women than it does for men in lay positions in the community so I’d certainly like to see that change.

INT: How do you see yourself in this picture?

MARGO: I don’t think I’m going to have any big volunteer involvements if I continue to have the kind of professional life that I have so volunteer involvements is not going to be part of my life until I retire, if I ever do. I don’t know. One of the things...it’s interesting. On my board there was a period of time where I would hear over and over again that our board was known as a ladies’ board, which was not a particularly complimentary thing to say. It was not thought of as a power board. It was not thought of as an important board in the city. And that’s a particularly derogatory kind of thing to say. I know what people mean though. It’s a board where people don’t think they could network and make the kinds of connections that they want to make and make things happen. One of the things that’s happened in my board, which I think is important, is that we’ve in fact added some more women but women who have professional positions, and I’d like to see more of that happening on my board. So it’s kind of a nice balance of people who volunteer, which I think is extremely important, a very important part of the community, as well as men who are active professionally and who are retired and women who are active professionally.
INT: What advice or warning would you offer to your daughter or successors if they become involved in the Jewish community?

MARGO: More for my daughter, I suppose, and it’s really at this point a question of what I would want to give her as Jew because she’s only four and I probably wouldn’t think of giving her advice. This is particularly true for my daughter because she’s adopted. I want her...in the same way that you were asking questions of me in terms of my childhood and growing up and not too many Jews around and stuff like that and how did I think living in two worlds and stuff like that, I don’t want her to have a sense that she lives in two worlds. I want her Jewishness to be such an integral and organic part of who she is that it would never be that sense of living in two worlds. It’s a synthesis, being American and being Jewish is always a synthesis and how you create that synthesis and what part of it is American and what part of it is Jewish is a very personal sort of choice, but I would want that Jewishness to be completely organic for her. And I would want whatever communal involvements she has, I would want them to be motivated by a commitment to social change and to seeing that in a Jewish context.

INT: What kinds of changes?

MARGO: The usual stuff. When you talk about social change, everything from American social change to Jewish social change. American social change, concerns with poverty, concerns with racism. Jewish social change certainly concerns the role of women in the community, certainly concerns with the role of how institutions like synagogues are engaged with the broader community and engaged with social issues. Those kinds of things.

INT: There are people who say that being Jewish is not just secular. It is your religiosity and your spirituality and actually going to the synagogue and doing all of that. Are those things that you-

MARGO: Of course I think they’re important but you either have it in yourself or you don’t. As I say, I would love to find a synagogue community that I could feel engaged in and I think that I would want to be an active part of such a community, but in terms of religion or spirituality or however that’s defined, well, religion particularly, it’s kind of either you believe in G-d or you don’t, and if you don’t, a lot of that stuff is tough. With my daughter, I’m certainly not telling her there is no G-d. She talks about G-d already and I’m certainly willing to talk to her about G-d. If she ever asks I’ll tell her I don’t believe in G-d. I’d rather that she believed in G-d than not because I think it’s a nice thing to have, but if you don’t, you don’t.

INT: Did you ever have any conflicts with orthodox Jewry in terms of the museum or what you do?

MARGO: No.

INT: So it’s not a...
MARGO: No.

INT: Maybe this is redundant, but tell me what does it mean to you to be Jewish and female in the twentieth century, going into the twenty-first century.

MARGO: I can’t answer that question without thinking about it in an American context. It’s very much a part of being American. Being Jewish to me means being part of a community, both large and small, and being Jewish to me certainly means Jewish values. Those would be the most important things.

INT: What are some of those values for you and the way you live your life?

MARGO: I remember growing up I used to have arguments with my father about socialism and he used to say, as he was growing more conservative as he aged, he said that socialism means giving somebody a seat on the bus and I used to find that incredibly annoying as a teenager. But basically he was right. I think that’s a pretty nice way to frame it.

INT: Margo, is there any message that you would like to end with here?

MARGO: Oh, I wouldn’t be that presumptuous.

INT: Not a message. Is there anything else though that we haven’t talked about or that you want to say or contribute?

MARGO: No. I think this pretty well covers it.

INT: Would you be agreeable to me coming back in the future if we need to at some point?

MARGO: Sure.

INT: Thank you very, very much.

MARGO: You’re most welcome. (End of interview)