

**JEWISH HERITAGE COLLECTION
COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
MSS. 1035-317**

Interviewee: Doris Lerner Baumgarten (b. March 29, 1930, Allentown, Pennsylvania)

Place of Interview: Doris Baumgarten's home in Aiken, SC

Date of Interview: December 4, 2006

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Date of Transcription: January 12, 2009

Editor: Alyssa Neely

Date of Editing: November 16, 2009

Proofreader: Alyssa Neely

Date of Proofreading: November 18, 2009 and May 27, 2011

Begin Tape

KT: Okay, here we go. This is Monday morning, December 4th. I'm talking with Doris Baumgarten in her home in Aiken, South Carolina and she is going to fill me in on some additional information about her husband, Peter [b. May 6, 1926, Berlin, Germany; d. July 16, 2000, Aiken, South Carolina]. She has an excellent scrapbook, which includes a typed memoir that Dr. Baumgarten wrote for his family. So we're going to fill in some blanks with some additional stories and talking about photographs and who was in the photographs and what the situations were. So Doris, thank you. Thank you for everything that you've done for me.

DB: You're quite welcome.

KT: And why don't we—you could sort of describe what the photograph is and tell me what I want to know.

DB: Okay. This is a picture taken in Vienna in 1935 and they're celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Julius and Rosalie Baumgarten. They were Peter's grandparents. There's a large family gathering of—I would say—about ten people. The table is decorated very festively with flowers and fancy folded napkins. The drapes in the back: you see beautiful lace on the edges of

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

them. I'm not sure what that is. On the table shows some of the gifts they got for their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and to the left is a vase about eight inches tall. It's a white vase and it looks like there's carving on the top of it. Okay, that's 1935.

KT: It was their fiftieth—his grandparents' fiftieth.

DB: Fiftieth anniversary, right. So we fast forward to, say, the 1990s when Pete and I moved to Aiken, South Carolina. We were able to visit with his family in Atlanta more frequently. His mother kept offering me any of her little souvenirs, trinkets, treasures that she had in her breakfront. The one item that I had my eye on was a small white vase with gold trimming on the top, and it looks like lace cut out on the top. She never told me anything about the vase or anything, she just said, "Oh yes, that's very pretty and I'm glad you have it." Years after that, a cousin of Peter's, who was living in Buenos Aires, went through old family photographs and mailed this photograph to us. There on the table was this vase that I inherited from my mother-in-law. So it was given in 1935, so I know that the vase is at least that old.

KT: This was her parents'—or her husband's?

DB: No, her husband's parents.

KT: So it's Peter's paternal grandparents.

DB: Right.

KT: Are his parents in this picture?

DB: His mother is, and we think—

KT: In the far right, seated.

DB: Yes—

KT: Maybe his father took the picture?

DB: That's what we think, is that the father took the picture.

KT: And who is this?

DB: That's the one who sent us the picture.

KT: Okay, a cousin.

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

DB: A cousin, and there's another cousin . . . I think it's this one—is Erica, who lived in— Her father came to Atlanta a little earlier than Pete's father came, and her father and Pete's father were brothers. Her name is Erika Prager and she now lives in Charlotte.

KT: Okay. So you have that vase and it's porcelain and in the top, it's sort of almost like a lacey cutout of porcelain, with gold—

DB: With gold. And the lacy—

KT: —gold accessories.

DB: —just the lacey part is just outlined in gold.

KT: Right, and it's very beautiful. So that vase has a history—great.

DB: This is the gentleman we're speaking of.

KT: Okay, yes, the grandfather's brother.

DB: No—

KT: No, oh—

DB: No, this is *my* husband—

. . . .

DB: New picture. This is my husband—

KT: Two attractive men—

DB: —and his brother. Yeah, right—

KT: —both wearing little golf caps.

DB: They were about eighteen months apart and, in many ways, they could have been twins.

KT: Twins, yeah.

DB: In other ways, they were very, very, very different.

KT: Right. Well, tell me now about your mother-in-law, the story about when they were packing up to leave for America and how they got sponsored and just give me the circumstance of their leaving.

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

DB: Okay, the sponsorship, nobody seems to know, but somebody from Alabama agreed to sponsor them. When you sign an affidavit that you would sponsor a family, you promise to the United States government that these people that you were bringing over would never, ever be a responsibility of the government and that you would take care of them. So you had to disclose all your financial data—I guess income tax papers and so on—to prove that you yourself were able to support this family that you were bringing over. As I understand it, they never met the person and they didn't really know who it was.

KT: So it was not a family member.

DB: It was not a family member. There were a few family members who had come over—well, I think I told you, in Alabama, there was some family members that came over during the Civil War, or before the Civil War. There were family members who left Germany in the early 1930s and went to South America. So they really did scatter. They were the foresighted ones. They left very early.

KT: So Peter's parents and he—his mother and the children were living in Vienna.

DB: They were living in Vienna.

KT: And she was getting ready—

DB: She was getting ready—

KT: What year are we in, when she was getting ready?

DB: 1939. In Pete's story, he says in May of 1939, he left. So this was probably a little bit earlier than that. There was a small period of time when those who had visas could pack up household materials—they could not take any money at all, absolutely no money—they could pack up household materials, furniture, whatever, as long as it fit into a crate. That could be shipped to wherever they were going. Oma was packing up—Oma means “grandmother”—

KT: Grandmother, yeah.

DB: —and she was in the midst of all this packing and [there was] a knock at the door and she wasn't clear as to whether they were Nazis or Germans, but they were certainly German military. [They] came into the door, looked around the room and said, “Oh Mrs. Baumgarten, that dining room set is just *beautiful*. It would look so nice in my home.” My mother-in-law was very, very smart and she said, “You know, I don't have room for that in my crate that I'm packing. Would you like to have that?” And within a split second, they picked up the table, the chairs, the breakfronts, the buffet. The truck was already outside the front door and it was all loaded on the truck and out the door it went.

Doris Baumgarten
 Mss. 1035-317

There's another story that I'd like to tell you and it's very sensitive. So in a way, I kind of hesitate to tell, but— One time I was talking to my mother-in-law—I have three daughters—and my mother-in-law said to me, “You're very, very brave.” I said, “What do you mean, ‘brave’?” She said, “You have three children. You're very brave to have three children.” I said, “Why is three any different than two?” She said, “I don't think I could have gotten three children out of Vienna.”

The story of how they got out—I've not read this, so I don't know if Pete's gone into this story—but the two boys were allowed to go on the Kindertransport. Who sponsored them, how it happened, I don't know, but there was this nine-month opportunity where they could get the children out, and they left on the trains. Before they left—by the way, Great Britain agreed to accept *ten thousand* children under the age of sixteen—they all had to have physicals, because they wanted them in good physical condition. Pete passed his physical and he was okay.

His brother was eighteen months older; they discovered he had a hernia. Well, he could have lived with nothing being done about it, but being persnickety or whatever, they said he had to have it operated on before they could send him. These were the days before penicillin. Sulfa was new, but it was very, very rare and scarce and certainly wouldn't have been available in Vienna. He developed an infection and he ended up in the hospital for a longer period of time than they anticipated. Pete left on the Kindertransport by himself with one suitcase. Then his mother's turn came up—her visa came due and they said, “You must leave within a certain period of time.” She said, “But I still have a child in the hospital. I will not leave.” They said “No, no, we will send him, we will guarantee, we will take him to the train as soon as he is able to go.” She was really on the horns of a dilemma. It's almost like Sophie's choice—

KT: Yes, yes. Right.

DB: —not that extreme, but if you think about it, to leave a fourteen-year-old, fifteen-year-old behind—

KT: They had no relatives—they *had* relatives in Vienna.

DB: They had relatives. Most of them had already left. They had gotten out in different ways. A lot of them went through Switzerland. These two boys were the youngest of all the children and the other ones were older, through school, and had gotten jobs and had worked elsewhere. So she left and she went to England also. She went to London and worked as a house maid. And God bless 'em, they did get the older brother, Hans, on the Kindertransport and he was able to go.

KT: That was the German authorities or—

DB: I don't know.

KT: I wonder if there was anyone—if there was any Jewish community left—

DB: I don't know.

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

KT: Is Hans still living?

DB: Hans is still living but he will not talk about it. He claims he has no memory of any of this. This particular story, I would not even mention to him. But other things that I've asked about, he claims he has no memory. Pete claims he has no memory. He doesn't know how these things happened. But he was thirteen—

KT: Probably a child wouldn't know how the arrangements were made.

DB: Yeah, he was thirteen. He was the kind of a child that would take the train and go into Berlin and wander around by himself. I mean, go from Vienna to Berlin on a train, go visit his father and, while his father was working, would go visit the museums and so forth.

KT: Right. But to know who arranged the sponsorship or the administrative details he might not have known.

DB: That he may not have known, right.

KT: So the brother was still in the hospital and when he was well enough—do you know how long it was before he—

DB: It wasn't very long. Maybe it was a couple of weeks, but for a mother leaving—for a mother having to leave—

Meantime, the father, during this period of time, he was trying to maintain his business and could not conduct business in Vienna because he was Jewish. He was traveling on an Austrian passport. So he was trying to maintain the business and he was in Sweden when the Anschluss occurred. You know, Vienna just handed over—"Come in Hitler, take over." So his Austrian passport was no longer any good. He could not get back to Vienna. Somehow—I don't know how—he got to Genoa, Italy, and got a ship. I don't know what kind of a visa or affidavit he had, but he came into New York and he arrived in New York, I think, about a year before they came.

Both Pete and his brother Hans went to Bournemouth, England to a youth hostel. It was a boy's school. It was called a youth hostel and they were enrolled in school. Peter was the youngest—he was thirteen—so he was accepted. That was no problem. Hans was on the borderline of approaching sixteen and was treated with a great deal of suspicion. So he wasn't really allowed to get near the coastline or near the waterline at all.

KT: Had they studied English, do you know, before they left?

DB: Yes, they knew quite a bit of English. It was the custom—because my mother-in-law went through that as *she* was growing up—it was the custom during the summer months, when there was no school, they would send the children to relatives all over the country, all over the world, to learn the languages, the culture and so forth. Partly, it was acculturation. It was just

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

learning about the world, the experience of the world, getting to know family—all the family members who had moved to different parts of the world. So his mother had learned a good deal of English. She had to learn it all over again. Her story is that she knew she was an American when she could balance her checkbook *thinking* in English and not in German, because she would have to convert the numbers into German in order to add up the numbers and so forth.

KT: You said that when she went to England, that she went to work as a house maid for somebody in London?

DB: Right, in London.

KT: Was she an educated woman?

DB: She graduated as far as she could go in high school, or whatever level it was—did not go to college. During World War I and afterwards, she worked as a nurse, so she had that kind of education. But she was well-read and there was always family discussions and talk. So, [she] was very well aware of the world and what was going on, made very wise decisions. After all, her husband—who was in business—was travelling a good deal.

KT: So she had a lot of responsibility.

DB: So she had a lot of responsibility. The family had a business and she helped out in the business, worked in the business a long time.

KT: So, she was in London and her two sons were in Bournemouth, and—

DB: Bournemouth. She had every other weekend off, so she would take the train to Bournemouth to visit them. While she visited there, she asked, “Is there any kind of a job that I can have at the school, so I can be with the boys?” I guess they didn’t want to offer her a job as a maid and she said, “Well, I’m a house maid in London, so I don’t care where I go, I don’t care what I do, but if there’s an opening of any kind in the town or at the school—” and the school hired her, again, as a maid. So she was with them for about a year until they were able to ship out. By that time, they had heard from their father—from Opa—and he arranged for their passage to the United States.

KT: That’s very interesting. What changed circumstances.

DB: It was. She also told stories—the Jewish women would get together and any trade, or any skill that they had, they would teach each other—

KT: You’re speaking of in Vienna?

DB: Back in Vienna. If somebody knew how to embroider or how to knit or how to sew, they would teach each other, because they all knew they were going to have to leave and they all

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

knew they had to get jobs. They all knew that they had to learn something. She showed me that she learned how to make kid gloves, that somebody had taught her how to do that. They thought that that would be a good skill; that they could at least be at home. It would be like a home skill that they could do that. She showed me the patterns that they had and the directions for making kid gloves.

KT: That's a real skill.

DB: Yes.

KT: So they did this in preparation because they knew that they were going to have—

DB: They all knew they were going to have to leave.

KT: And these were women who did not work in trades.

DB: Right.

KT: They were middle-class women who—

DB: They were middle-class, yes.

KT: —stayed at home.

DB: Yes. Or they helped out in the family business, if there was a family business, which she did. There was a family business and she helped out.

KT: I've heard that, in Germany, when children—say around the age that your husband was—when they were no longer admitted to schools, that the parents arranged for them to either have apprenticeships or to go into some kind of trade. They began to get their sons—I don't know about daughters—but their sons trained in the trades because they felt that there was no future for Jews in the more learned professions. Do you know anything about—

DB: I do know that there was—I think it was by the fourth grade—it was already decided who would be college material and who was not.

[Break in tape.]

KT: —just repeat my question: if you could tell me a little more about Pete's father, whatever you do know about him and his experiences during this period.

DB: I really did not know him all that well. We lived in Delaware, they lived in Atlanta, and with three children, it wasn't easy to go back and forth. But he was a businessman. He was a self-starter. He started up his own business in Atlanta—

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

KT: What kind of business did he have?

DB: They imported fancy paper-type things. Like the fancy silk paper napkins—

KT: And he had been in the paper business in Europe?

DB: Yes. He dealt in very fine stationery that you would sell to businesses. If you understand the German personality: only the finest and the best. I mean, that indicated how good your business was—you had the best paper and so forth. He also would go looking—the paper napkins were a new thing that he brought in—and he got like a stamp, like a press, not for imprinting but for actually cutting into the paper napkins themselves. I ought to give you a couple of them. I've got some here. They would make like a lace pattern into these, so this made them unique. So he would go around buying the paper napkins plain and then, with his press—and he'd have people working for him—they would put the lace patterns into it.

KT: I think I've seen some of those. They're beautiful. Going back to their life in Europe, to your knowledge, was this family very religiously observant, or minimally, or someplace in between?

DB: Minimally. Pete said he still remembers they went to the *big* synagogue in Vienna, but mostly just for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; maybe some family holidays, but—

KT: Have you and he—did you ever go back to Vienna?

DB: We went once, and we got close to where the apartment house was that his grandfather owned, but he wouldn't go on the street to look for it. He had cousins who had gone back. They even went into the apartment and took pictures and sent him pictures. That's why there's a picture of that apartment house in here. But he couldn't bring himself to do that. He took me around the Ringstrasse. We saw the Prada and all that sort of stuff. That was fine because he could remove himself from that. But he could not go the few blocks away or wherever. He would point in the direction, "That's where it was," but he just couldn't do it. On the other hand, his brother who will not talk about this at all, *has* gone back to see that apartment and where they lived.

KT: Interesting. So the grandfather owned the building?

DB: His grandfather owned the building, and I think there were six apartments and they were all members of the family.

KT: Did they sell the building or were they forced to sell it? What happened to that?

DB: I really don't know.

KT: Because the grandparents had left before?

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

DB: The grandparents on my mother-in-law's side had already died, and one member on Pete's father's side had died, and the other one went to South America and died there.

KT: Because we saw a picture in 1935 of their fiftieth wedding anniversary, so they were well along in years.

DB: Right, okay. Yes.

KT: Or at least pretty upper, middle-aged maybe.

DB: Right, right—

KT: So each—

DB: But they had died but—well, let's see. Oma's family, her parents had died somewhere in that period. One member of his father's side had died and the other one went to [rustling of paper]—

KT: South America?

DB: —went to South America.

KT: Because there were other relatives who had already gone.

DB: There was a family that left in 1932. They saw the writing on the wall. They were from Hamburg and they left early; they left very early. Okay, these are the cemeteries. I'm looking for the dates.

KT: I was really mostly curious about the building, because a lot of people have spent a great deal of effort and money trying to recoup the value of buildings that were seized.

DB: Yes. Right. I don't know if they sold it—if they did, it was like for nothing—or if it was taken from them, I really don't know.

KT: Okay.

DB: The only thing I do know is that they've not tried to get it back.

KT: So Pete or his brother—are you aware if any of them have tried for any kind of reparations? Of course he was a child, so he didn't have any financial value.

DB: Right, yeah. I'm sure if there were, Pete's brother would have looked into that. So I don't know. I'll have to find out.

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

KT: Okay, he probably would know.

DB: What happened to the building, I honestly don't know. And that may be on the tape, when he talks about where he lived. It might be on the tape.

KT: Okay, your daughter may have asked him about that.

DB: But that, I just don't know.

KT: And over the years, obviously he did talk to his family and he left this wonderful, well-organized collection of papers—

DB: Only in the last few years.

KT: Really?

DB: Yes. Selden—remember Selden Smith?

KT: Yes.

DB: Okay. He invited Pete to talk—he had workshops for schoolteachers in the summertime on the Holocaust. This was when South Carolina had the Holocaust [inaudible]. He got Pete to come and speak to them occasionally. Then he was asked by different groups, and he always turned them down. I finally persuaded him. I said, “Look—”

KT: What would his reason be for turning them down?

DB: His reason was, “I didn't go through anything. I wasn't in the camps.” He said, “I was well taken care of; nothing happened to me. My parents and my brother and I got out, so there's really no story.” I tried to convince him that, “You were forced to leave. For all you knew, when you got on that train, that could have been the last you ever saw of them.” But he was always optimistic. I guess it just didn't occur to him that way.

KT: And what do you think made him—the experience with Selden Smith, is that what made him change his mind and see himself in a historic context?

DB: No. I kept pushing because he was being asked more—well I was very involved with the historic societies. I would get him involved in my projects, like Happyville.

KT: Right.

DB: I got interested in that and I got him involved because that piqued his curiosity.

Doris Baumgarten
 Mss. 1035-317

KT: Right, so you had a historical perspective; that's an interest of yours in general.

DB: And he was being asked to speak and, in my mind, I knew. Because the Holocaust deniers were going on—I mean we're hearing this all the time. And he knew these people personally. He'd be invited to church groups to speak to the Sunday school class. I said, "Pete, they're no more than ten people there. You sit around in a little circle and you tell your story." [He said,] "No, no, nothing happened to me, nothing dramatic."

So I played Sarah Bernhardt and I got very dramatic. I said, "You're thirteen years old. You can't go to school anymore. Your mother takes you to the train with a suitcase and a ticket around your neck and puts you on the train. You're by yourself!" You know. I tried to convey that. Then finally, it occurred to me that—I rely a great deal on things I've got at hand. I said, "Look, you have all these artifacts. Let's put them in a notebook and you can hold up one page and say, 'Okay, I did this, or this happened or whatever.'" So he started making this notebook—

KT: What year, approximately, are we talking about, when he did this?

DB: Let's see, I would say maybe 1995. It was very late. It was very late. I don't know what the date is on that tape, but this project was just before Ann made the tape, so—

KT: So kind of a confluence of forces: more interest in general among educators and other people, the time and the influence of a good wife.

DB: Well you have to realize, when they came to this country, certain things were the most important thing of all. First of all, was to get the boys in school. You saw the article from Springfield, Massachusetts.

KT: Yes.

DB: Okay. So they were assigned there by some Jewish organization, I'm not sure what. It must have been the Jewish Federation because I remember, for years, Pete was always giving *lots* of money to the Jewish Federation and I kept saying, "Why?" He finally said, "Well, they sent us to camp every summer and they paid for the whole scholarship." So I think they're the ones who found a place for them to live, helped to furnish—well, they had the furnishings—but helped them find a job at some point. . . .

KT: Well, about the feelings of the family when they first came to this country, what was most important?

DB: The most important thing was to get those boys in school right away, and the next thing was to get a job. So they are more concerned now about those two things than reminiscing or dwelling on the past. Then, when his brother got a job in Atlanta—again working with the paper stationery type things—and invited them to come to Atlanta. That way, the two brothers could be together.

Doris Baumgarten
 Mss. 1035-317

KT: We're speaking of Pete's father's brother?

DB: Pete's father's brother. They moved there and, again, they're starting all over again. He worked for some other company and decided—all his life he'd worked for himself; this is Opa—and he wanted to start his own business. So Oma and Opa—my in-laws—were *constantly* working, setting up their own business. Pete talks about how he came home from school and the kitchen would be strewn with all this stuff and so on. The boys would get involved packing materials to be shipped out, ordering materials and so forth. So they didn't spend a lot of time with this.

KT: I don't think most people would.

DB: The other thing that they did participate in, in Atlanta, there was a group—I can't remember the name of it, he may refer to it in here, I'm not sure—there was a group in Atlanta of Austrian refugees and they formed a kind of a social group. And they kind of helped each other.

KT: Landsmans? Did they call it—you know that term?

DB: No. I know the term. No, that was not it. I don't remember the name but—

KT: But other Austrian refugees—

DB: Other Austrian refugees, and they would come—every Sunday afternoon they would visit one another's for coffee, coffee in the afternoon, and little pastries. Everything was done in delicate little cups. The coffee—it was almost like a Chinese tea ceremony, but not quite, but—you know, the best china was put out, little pastries and the lace tablecloths.

KT: Maintaining that European tradition.

DB: Right. And they helped each other to adjust to this life in this new country. Their whole emphasis was on that. Time went on, the boys went to school, then they graduated, they went on. Pete's older brother, as soon as he got out of high school, was drafted. They both became American citizens through the army, as soon as they got into the army. That was that same period of time you had to have, I think, five years or something.

KT: Now Pete was in the army?

DB: Pete was in the army.

KT: Starting what years was he in the army? Approximately.

DB: I think '45 to '47.

KT: Okay.

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

DB: Yeah, I think '45 to '47. Yeah, because he came to Delaware in '51, so yes, I think '45. It was right at the end of the war. His older brother went right after high school and, because he was still so fluent in German, they shipped him right back to Germany to be a translator for all the [inaudible].

KT: That was during the war?

DB: During the war.

KT: Wonder how his parents felt about that. Not good, I would imagine.

DB: He's never talked [inaudible].

KT: But you don't know that.

DB: Well, I mean, I know how *I* would have felt. I was amazed that the American government would send him back, but I'm sure they kept him under close watch. I mean this was *always* the thing, [inaudible]. But then they became American citizens immediately when they joined the army. And his parents became American citizens also.

KT: Just jumping ahead a bit on this question of when he began to talk about these matters. Were your daughters curious about their father's history?

DB: During the year— He rarely talked about it at all and I don't think they were very much aware of it till they were grown. I think it's when we moved here and started visiting with Oma in Atlanta a lot more frequently. She was up in years by that time; she would talk a little bit about it. I think that's the first time I heard about the Kindertransport.

KT: My goodness.

DB: And that was in the '80s.

KT: You, after all those years.

DB: Yeah.

KT: This is not the first time that I've heard of it. It sounds amazing to me and yet, I recognize that this is a very typical pattern. When your daughters were growing up, it was even a little bit before there was as much study in the Jewish Sunday schools of Holocaust and related matters.

DB: Well, the Sunday school that our girls attended, they wouldn't even mention it. Then we had a new assistant rabbi who was in charge of religious school, and he introduced the Holocaust.

Doris Baumgarten
Mss. 1035-317

KT: So they were in Sunday school in the '50s?

DB: No. They were in school in the '60s in Wilmington, Delaware.

KT: In like elementary and high school?

DB: Yeah. They graduated high school in—one in '74 and one in '76.

KT: Okay. That's right. I have them too far back. Sorry.

DB: That's okay. So it was really late in the game when it was introduced in our religious school, and the parents of the congregation were *up in arms*. "It's old history. I don't want my children to know about it. I don't want them to be scared about the Holocaust. Don't talk about the Holocaust." I mean, that rabbi had to fight tooth and nail. Pete, he said, "They ought to know about it." But of course, he was giving them the historical perspective, and always spoke about it from the historical perspective and not so much from the personal. We knew that the family had left and been forced to leave. We knew that he'd been in a boarding school in London. We didn't know about the Kindertransport. Somehow that came out later.

KT: Yeah. It's interesting. Yeah, it's another area of research for somebody, the whole issue of how Jewish education began to grapple with this topic.

DB: Well, parents, you know—I still remember when my kids were little, we would sugar-coat everything. "Oh it's not so bad, this is—" you know, and so forth. We were [inaudible] the post-war period; we thought, "Peace, and everything's wonderful" and all that sort of stuff. This was pre-Israeli wars, before '72, or '73; all is well with the world and we're happy and everybody's working and so forth. Enough of the old days, and that doesn't happen anymore. The world's changed a lot since then.

KT: Okay. Well, I'm going to take a good look at the scrapbook and we'll talk more about the photos and everything else, but I'm going to turn this off for now, but if we think of anything else, we can turn it back on.

DB: Okay.

KT: Thank you, Doris.

END OF TAPE