Alan Gerson Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: Rosalind Hinton interviewing Alan Gerson at his home, 4807 Coliseum, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is August 3rd, 2007. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Allen, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Alan Gerson: Yes, I do.

RH: OK, let's start with when and where you were born and give a little background, your general and your Jewish education.

AG: I was born in New Orleans in 1952. I went to Allen School, I went to McMain Junior High, I went to Fortier High School. My parents believed in public education at the time. I went to Hebrew School, I went to Sunday School.

RH: And what synagogue?

AG: Beth Israel.

RH: Beth Israel. And so tell me about when your parents and your family came to be in New Orleans.

AG: Well, my father and his mother were born in New Orleans. My father was Lester Gerson; his mother was Annie Paylett (sp?) Gerson. And her father was N.S. Paylett, and I don't know exactly when he came over, but my great-grandmother -- what was her name? Was it Bella? No, that's not right. God, what was her name? Well, I know she was born in 1872 which is the same year Calvin Coolidge was born (laughter).

RH: (laughter) And where was she born?

AG: And they came from Vilna. I guess at that time it was in Lithuania. I guess it still is. And so she wasn't born here but my grandmother was. Now, my father's father, he was a first generation and he came -- I'm not exactly sure of the exact town, but it was near Bialystok, which was I think either Poland or Ukraine depending on what the year was. And he came to New Orleans. I'm sorry to say I don't really know, you know, exactly how he got here. My mother's family -- my mother was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and her mother was from near Bialystok as well.

RH: How did she make it to New Orleans?

AG: Well, her family -- she had family that lived here. Their name was Smargonski (sp?), but when they came to the states they changed it to Smith. So she was related to the Jewish Smiths in New Orleans, Smith Records and drug store. And my grandmother's brother's son, Izzy Smith, was my father's good friend at the time. And my mother came down for Mardi Gras and that's how they met.

RH: And now your father, what was his business?

AG: My father was a retail merchant, and he specialized in large-size ladies' clothes. He had a store called The Vogue on Dryades Street. It's Oretha Castle Haley now. And he also had a uniform shop which my brother now owns, the Ell Gee Uniform shop.

RH: What was it called?

AG: Ell Gee, E-l-l G-e-e, it was my father's initials. LG, Lester Gerson. My mother was Sylvia Packler Gerson, that was her maiden name, was Packler, and her father was Jacob Packler and he's buried in Pittsburgh. He and my grandmother were separated and then my grandmother moved down here in a guess the mid to late '40s after the war. Two of her sons moved here as well, Dave Packler and Irving Packler. And my

Uncle Dave was married and had two children, Gerald and Judy, my only first cousins.

RH: Oh really?

AG: Uh-huh. My father had a brother and a sister but they didn't have children. And my mother's other two brothers didn't have children. One stayed up in Pennsylvania: he was a state trooper.

RH: So where did you live growing up?

AG: Uptown, on Jefferson Avenue -- on the corner of Jefferson and South Robertson.

RH: What was it like growing up Jewish in New Orleans? Because you grew up --

AG: It was great. I mean, I never felt -- I never had any problems. You know, it just seemed like the order of things that, you know, Catholic and Christian holidays were the national holidays and we celebrated ours when we could. Everybody knew who was Jewish, everyone knew I was Jewish. But you know, there were a lot of Jews in my high school and junior high and in all my grades growing up, so. There were a lot of Jewish people living uptown. Most of them have moved -- I guess half of them moved out to the 'burbs. But, you know, there was a sizable Jewish community then.

RH: Did you go to Beth Israel when it was down on --

AG: On Carondelet, yeah. Yeah, it didn't move out to Canal Boulevard until I was in college or right around when I started college. So I never felt at home at the Beth Israel out on Canal Boulevard. I never thought they should have left the Beth Israel on Carondelet. I guess the crime in the neighborhood got bad, but seems like there would've been some way of working it out, but they didn't. Because it was a beautiful little synagogue. It was a great place.

RH: It's a Baptist church now?

AG: Yeah, it's a black Baptist church now.

RH: Do you have any like, memories - particularly Jewish memories?

AG: Yeah, I'm sure I do. I mean, for instance?

RH: Well, that kind of encapsulate what it felt like or that you remember fondly and events that kind of --

AG: Oh, well, I used to love all the holidays. You know, when I was much younger my aunt and uncle and their kids still lived here and everybody was still alive and one year we would have, you know, Passover at their house and one year it would be at my mother's house and it would switch off. And it used to be wonderful fun, you know, those occasions when everybody was here and alive. And you know, that's all gone now for me. I have no -- my brother and sister are the only relatives I have in New Orleans, and my first cousins are in Houston and elsewhere. All my brother's children live elsewhere and my sister's son lives elsewhere. So I'm a lot more disconnected to the Jewish community than I used to be.

RH: So tell me what are the --

AG: But I used to love, you know, I used to love the old Beth Israel and although I didn't know at the time I loved it, but I often have fond memories of going to Hebrew school and the Hebrew school teachers, Mr. Sussman (sp?) and Mr. Ziffer (sp?). Mr. Sussman was a very cultured gentleman with a bald head and, you know, smoked a cigarette with a holder. We just drove him out of his mind, I mean we just tortured him endlessly. You know, he spoke with an accent and we were just little monsters. Mr. Ziffer was probably not quite as cultured but (laughter) when I look back, I mean we just really --

RH: Did you like, get picked up at school?

AG: No. I did once get -- I mean you get called a Jew, but I didn't --

RH: No, not picked on, picked up for Hebrew school.

AG: Oh, oh, I'm sorry, yeah. Yeah, we did. There was a Hebrew school bus. Mr. Higgins was the bus driver and they would come to the schools uptown and then drop us off twice a week. I think a couple years it was on Monday and Wednesday -- I don't know if it was the older or younger classes, and then Tuesday and Thursday and they would pick you up and bring you there and then pick you up and bring you home in the evening. He finally got fired because he was selling food and potato chips and stuff to kids on the bus and so they would come home not hungry for dinner, so they fired old Higgins (laughter). It was a yellow school bus that he would drive around.

RH: How many kids were there? Do you remember?

AG: I don't know, 20, 30.

RH: Wow. That's a nice --

AG: It was two classrooms, Mr. Ziffer and Mr. Sussman's.

RH: And so you said they did -- at school sometimes they called you a Jew?

AG: You know, every Jewish person's been called a Jew at one point or another, but I don't think we were particularly picked on, or at least I didn't notice it. I was very proud to be Jewish so I didn't have any of those ego problems about my Jewishness.

RH: Was there any problem with feeling like an outsider in the Reform community? Since the community over all was more Reformed?

AG: No, I didn't feel that. But you know, I thought I had the world by the tail when I was a kid. I just had a very strong sense of security somehow (laughter). So I didn't have

any of those issues. You know, I felt I was equal or superior to anybody, so.

RH: Do you know why? Can you attribute that to anything?

AG: No, I don't know why exactly. I guess maybe being the youngest and amusing to people, so you know, I was the beloved child. I just didn't have those things, you know, when I was a little kid I would introduce myself as saying I was Jewish, you know, when I was very young. And the Orthodox and Reform -- I had lots of friends who were Reform, it was just another synagogue to me when I was very young. I mean, I knew it was different. They didn't use as much Hebrew and they weren't as religious but I didn't think of them as less Jewish, and my friends never thought my Reform friends -- I mean it just really wasn't an issue for me. Now I don't know, maybe with my parents, but if it was they didn't really -- it didn't weigh on them. And Beth Israel at that time was a very big, strong congregation with lots of people in it. You know, a lot of -- there are synagogues that broke off like the Conservative, what is it now, called --

RH: Shir Chadash.

AG: -- Shir Chadash, is an offshoot from Beth Israel. There were people who broke away from the Orthodox and wanted to start a conservative congregation. By and large they were from Beth Israel, so.

RH: Did you mix with people of other religions, races?

AG: Yeah, I had friends that after school I would hang out with who weren't Jewish. Yeah.

RH: Was there much race mixing?

AG: Race mixing, no. No. I mean, there just wasn't. I mean, this was New Orleans in the '50s and the early '60s, and you know, the schools got integrated -- I was in junior

high when they integrated the schools. They originally had started it one grade at a time and then I think they lost a court battle and everything was integrated.

RH: Do you have any memories of that, Alan?

AG: Yeah, I can remember some tension but it wasn't really the Jewish kids who were getting in fights with blacks. But I do remember fights in junior high. It wasn't so bad, I mean I did leave -- I mean when I was a senior in high school me and Morris Rosenzweig (sp?) got beat up on our way into school from lunch by some black kids, I think. I was knocked out.

RH: Really?

AG: Oh yeah, it was about a month or so before we graduated.

RH: You don't know what that was about?

AG: I have no idea what it was about. The only reason I know they were black was because Morris saw them. I kind of turned my head into a punch and that was --

RH: All she wrote.

AG: That was all she wrote (laughter).

RH: What else did you like to do in New Orleans?

AG: I did get literature from the Nazi Party after that, which was kind of interesting.

RH: You did?

AG: Yeah.

RH: Wow.

AG: Yeah, both Morris and I got it. It was in the newspaper and both Morris and I got stuff from the Nazis. I wish I had saved it, but we didn't.

RH: Did you show your folks and stuff like that?

AG: Did I what?

RH: Show your parents?

AG: Oh, yeah. I mean it came to the house -- yeah, everybody knew about it.

RH: So what other things did you like to do? You know, in New Orleans, what were other --

AG: Well, when? I mean are you talking about when I was very young, when I was old, or?

RH: Yeah, from when you were young through high school, like that.

AG: Well, you know, the usual thing kids do. I was involved with all the Jewish Community Center activities, you know, on Sundays and I was in Young Judea, and so I used to go to Camp Judea in the summer which was the highlight of my year.

RH: Really?

AG: Oh, I loved camp. But even before that I went to the Gulf Coast Military Academy -- they had a camp in the summer and some Jewish kids went out there. But until we came home (laughter) singing Christian religious songs, then I went to Camp Judea. So I was very young when I went to camp because my brother and sister both went to Blue Star and so I just -- you know, that was part of the deal, was going to camp in the summer. I loved camp.

RH: What was special about it? Do you remember?

AG: Camp Judea?

RH: Mm-hmm.

AG: Well, I imagine everybody has the same feelings for their camp, you know, where they go to, made great friends. It was up in the mountains. You, you know, camped out. I don't know, I just loved camp. I liked going and I just enjoyed it. I mean, Camp Judea was a Zionist camp, you know, so there was a program of Zionist indoctrination. That sounds bad now, but you know, at the time we were the good guys. So it was Kosher, you know, and Saturday was Shabbas, Shabbat, and you know, we had services. It was a Jewish camp. I don't know, I just liked it.

RH: I guess I was just curious if it was the Jewish things you liked or was it both the combination of camping --

AG: I don't think it was particularly the Jewish things that I liked, but you know, they are warm in my memory looking back at it. But also I look back at it -- you know, there was a very strong sense of propaganda going on at the time too. But you know, this was -- the first year I went there was in 1962 to '65, and they have a senior Judea Camp in New York which I went to, which I didn't particularly like, Camp Tel Yehuda. They were much more serious. But I did like Camp Judea.

RH: Tell me about college.

AG: Well, I went to Boston University. I got a degree in philosophy. I enjoyed it my first two years and then I didn't like Boston. I stayed, but I ended up really loathing Boston. I really need to go back. I haven't been back there since 1975, but (laughter). I had a real prejudice against the city after a while. It's a city with a stick up its ass. I never really enjoyed it. I didn't mind the cold, but I did hate the grey weather after a while -- the short grey days that just go on and on and on, day after day. That was when I realized I was a Southerner really. But my sense of people in Boston and my fellow students was they

had no sense of the South at all. They were completely ignorant but completely certain of their, you know, brilliance and knowledge of a place they didn't know anything about. When I was at camp in New York, a couple of us Southerners, we had our bunkmates convinced we had slaves and indentured servants still in our employ. So they were idiots. And I'm sure they're all genius doctors now or something, but when you get right down to it they were ignorant, provincial people.

RH: Right. So did you come back then, after college?

AG: Well, a lot of my life back then was directed one way or another by girlfriends. You know, so at the time I had a girlfriend and I didn't want to leave so I went back up to Boston and then we broke up. And part of the reason I was miserable in Boston the last two years was because a girlfriend and I broke up. So, in those days that was a major factor in my life. But the girl that -- we broke up in my second year, she lives in Israel. She married a Sabra. I forgot the question.

RH: Well, I was just wondering how you came to --

AG: Oh, and then when I came back I just kind of settled in. You know, I had an apartment on Magazine Street. For a little while I sat at Jackson Square doing little sketches, and then I started taking art classes at Tulane and then got my Master's at UNO. And then I was the Visual Arts Director at the Contemporary Arts Center for five years. And then for some reason I went to law school and then practiced for about three years and then gave it up and went back to being an artist. That's my life (laughter).

RH: So tell me a little about your art and art community, and you know, why you went into art a little later.

AG: Well, I always did art, you know. And I really wasn't that old when I started taking classes at Tulane. It was right after college so I was 21, 22, something like that. So wasn't really later. I went to law school later and, you know, God knows why I did that.

But I did that later. And New Orleans is a great place to be an artist, or was. I guess it still is. You know, it used to be fairly cheap to live, which is good for an artist, and there's a lot of artists around and it's just a very conducive environment for that. I was originally a printmaker, my Master's was in printmaking, but now I do painting mostly.

RH: Why don't we talk about what happened with Katrina and you and the recovery too? So what do you generally do for Katrina, I mean for storms?

AG: Generally -- I never evacuated ever in my life, and I was disdainful of most people who did. And the Friday before the storm -- the storm was on a Monday, and the Friday before that I delivered a show -- I was having a one-person show at this college in Mobile, Summerhill?

RH: Springhill!

AG: Springhill, in Mobile. And I brought this work over there, about ten big pieces, because at that time, the hurricane -- the last we had heard was supposed to hit the Florida panhandle. So I was a little nervous about bringing it to Mobile, but then figured, you know, it was a big, nice, sturdy building and it was up in the hills so I figured it would be all right. So, you know, when I came back Friday evening we went to dinner at a friend's house and then about 11 o'clock that night one of the people that was at dinner came in and said, you know, the hurricane has turned and it's heading to New Orleans and it's a category 5 they're projecting. And that was the first any of us had heard that the hurricane was coming in our direction. I mean, we knew there was a hurricane in the Gulf but it wasn't supposed to hit us. And then, you know, so we went home and watched the news and it looked definitely like it was going to hit us. And so Saturday I kind of battened down the hatches and closed the shutters, and still wasn't totally convinced we were going to evacuate. Beth was getting -- she had a brief due on Monday that she was finishing so she was at work all day doing that. So I guess by that evening we realized we were going to leave, although we did even Saturday evening,

you know, say to each other, “Well, maybe we won’t. It’ll be all right.” But we did. We finally left Sunday morning at about 9 o’clock, and, you know, at the exact wrong moment to do it.

RH: Where did you hit?

AG: We have friends who live in Arnaudville, which is about 15, 20 miles this side of Lafayette. So we went there originally. Took us 12 hours to drive from here to there. It was bumper to bumper pretty much all the way until you crossed the River Bridge in Baton Rouge. And we stayed there for two weeks. And then another friend of ours, her parents had passed away and she had an empty house in Ponchatoula and two other couples we knew were already there, so we went and stayed four weeks there. That’s where we were for the rest of the time.

RH: Well, tell me a little bit about -- you know, I mean did you see the TV? Were you seeing what was going on?

AG: Yeah, it was horrible. I mean, well, first of all Monday and I guess up until Tuesday morning, you know, we thought we had dodged a bullet. The hurricane had shifted slightly to the east and we didn’t get the brunt of it and the Gulf Coast got hammered. So, you know, we figured we’d stay a couple more days until they let people back in, and then of course the flood happened. And you know, that’s when our troubles began I guess. It was --

RH: Do you recall what you were both thinking when you saw the TV?

AG: Oh, I was just thinking -- well, I mean you were in shock, you were in despair, you were depressed. The uncertainty I think was the worst thing. You just didn’t know. And for a week or so we couldn’t get anybody on the cell phones. We didn’t know where people were. The last I had spoken to my sister she wasn’t going to leave, but she did. But I didn’t know that. My brother and his wife happened to be in Atlanta at the time

visiting their children so they didn't have to evacuate. You know, and it was horrible. You would watch CNN and it was just over and over again, you know, the looting and all the horrors that were happening in the city, and they focused on the French Quarter and just a couple other things so you didn't get any sense of what was going on around the city. It was always, you know, it seemed like the news coverage was very narrow. And I guess part of that was that they just didn't have -- they didn't know, you know, and it was impossible to get around. You know, and I'm sure like everybody else we gradually were watching, you know, the city flood and then you thought, "Well, surely they're going to staunch the floods, surely they're going to block up," and of course they didn't. And you know, it was like watching an accident in slow motion just -- you couldn't do anything. You didn't know if your life was over, you didn't know if -- you just didn't know. I mean, it was no fun.

RH: Did you have any thoughts about how slow the rescue was?

AG: Yeah, I mean we were just amazingly aghast at how everything was handled. You know, they pretty much just let us sink into the lake. You know, Bush's flyover was just more of an insult than anything else. I'm sure every interview you've had is this exact same thing. I mean, we were completely let down by everybody, from the administrative agencies to the federal government, to the state government, to the local government. Everybody was incompetent.

RH: Incompetent is one word. Does racist come to mind?

AG: No.

RH: That doesn't for you?

AG: Well, I think if this had been a Republican city it might have been different. But I don't know, who knows? You know, everybody was suffering. It wasn't whites and blacks who were suffering, you know. Rich people, poor people, everybody was

flooded. I don't see where the water level and a breach in the levee has anything to do with race.

RH: Yeah. I guess I was thinking more of how long it took them to get into the city.

AG: I don't know if it was race or party politics or just deep, deep, deep incompetence, which is probably the most likely scenario. I do think if this had been, you know, a city on Long Island or Washington or Los Angeles, or you know, any other city basically, we -- I don't know. I don't know why it was the way it was. Maybe it was racism, but I don't think that's what it was.

RH: Were you and Beth making decisions together --

AG: Sure, about what?

RH: What was going on when you decided to go to Ponchatoula -- why did you choose that location?

AG: Well, we didn't choose it as much as people were there and after two weeks I think, you know, it was long enough with these friends of ours. You know, we wouldn't be a burden on anybody in Ponchatoula since nobody was living there except two other couples that had evacuated, were friends of ours. So that turned out to be a good decision because we were all kind of in the same boat.

RH: And how long did you stay there?

AG: Four weeks. But I started coming into New Orleans after about three weeks. Beth's law firm got passes to come get their files and they opened a satellite office up in Baton Rouge, and I came with them with my truck and helped them move files back but I kept the pass. And when we came in that was the first time I got to drive down Tulane Avenue and see my studio, because I didn't know at that point still what had happened.

And I still didn't even after that because I could only drive down very hugging the neutral ground. But that couple blocks there was still flooded so I couldn't get over and actually get in my studio. So I could see it across the water, but I could see how high the water had been.

RH: So where was your studio exactly?

AG: My studio is on South Lopez right off of Tulane Avenue. It's a building my family owned. My father, his parents -- he grew up in that neighborhood, so.

RH: And kind of tell me what your routine is. Because you go into your studio every morning to work?

AG: Every day, yeah. Well, you know, I get up and read the paper and drink my coffee and then I try to walk in the morning, although that's three or four days a week. Then I go to my studio and work there. And also my family has six rental properties, so I've managed that -- which all were flooded. And it's been a real struggle getting -- got four of them back up. Two of them -- we've run out of money, I don't know, if we get a Road Home grant we'll get one done and you know, that's up in the air right at the moment.

RH: Were you able to get in and see any of that at first?

AG: Well, when I came in most of those properties are around my studio so I could see, and they were all flooded. But we'd had a management company -- another company had been running them so I didn't know the people really who were living there. I didn't have keys; I wasn't managing the properties then. And they disappeared, the company that was managing. I don't know whatever happened to them. And it was just, you know, it was just horrible. I mean, you just didn't know how you could get out of this when you first saw it. I mean, everything was just ruined. There was nobody in town, there were no sounds, there were no people. It was very much like being in a twilight zone. The only sound when I went to look at my studio was this dog crying and wailing somewhere.

And actually while I was staying there on neutral ground, Luis Colmanares drove up, another artist, in his truck. He has a studio also that was not far from there that was flooded. So.

RH: That's kind of a coincidence.

AG: But you really couldn't drive around a lot at that point because there was still so much debris and stuff in the streets and, you know, there was a real fear of flat tires. You didn't want to get a flat tire in that kind of situation. So -- but gradually, you know, I started coming in --

RH: Did you guys make it to your house in the first trip in?

AG: Yeah. We made it to our -- but we knew our house was OK essentially because we knew it didn't flood there at that point, and we had seen the satellite photos so we knew -- oh, here's Beth. I wonder what -- my wife is coming home. Yeah, why don't you stop. (break in tape) What were we talking about?

RH: I was asking -- well, you were talking about going into your studio the first time, and I don't know how many weeks later that was.

AG: You know, I think that was about three, three and a half weeks. It wasn't too long after I initially came that I came back. The first time Beth and I tried to get in we were blocked and couldn't get in. We didn't have a pass and the Army was keeping everybody out. But we had heard from somebody that if you went up River Road that there wasn't anybody, but they had closed that off too. So we didn't get in and just drove back. But it wasn't too long after that three weeks, about three and a half weeks I guess, before I finally got to -- yeah, that's true because it was a couple days later that the water finally had gone down enough that I could get to the studio. So, yeah. And it was -- I had six and a half feet of water and it was just a terrible mess. I mean, it was just a smelly, stink- and it was hot like this every day. It was unbearable.

RH: What'd you have in your studio?

AG: My life, you know (laughter). I had lots of stuff. But fortunately a lot of my paintings were on racks that were about that high above where the water was, so I had a lot of paintings that were all right and I had a second floor storage that was OK too. So a lot of my stuff, my paintings, fortunately were all right. I did have several of them that were in the -- about 30 or 40 of them were in the water.

RH: That's a lot.

AG: All my drawings and stuff when I was a kid were in the water, so I spent months cleaning. You know, for a while you didn't have -- it really is when I look back on it, it was a very strange time. It took me a while to get the door open, but finally when I did and saw what was there, you know, it was clear what had to be done so I just started coming in. And two of the people, couple that we were staying along with and Beth and I and a cousin of hers who lived down here at the time, we made the initial sort of assault into my studio to pull stuff out and start seeing what was there. And it was hard and exhausting work. But I came in every day and just did a little more every day and that was my job for months. Took me about four months to clean it up and get it back. Fortunately the walls of my studio are old tile bricks, so once I got everything cleared out and sprayed the walls with bleach, I didn't have mold problems. It was just horrible.

RH: What was the hardest thing to lose?

AG: A lot of my photos, all my old photographs and source material, all my books, all my brushes, you know. All that kind of stuff was gone. Oddly enough my tubes of paint were fine, so I just scooped those up and put them in bleached water and soaked them and then took them out. I went through a lot of bleach. But you know, my studio -- I have a studio there, there was another little area, a studio next to it that I used for plaster, that was all flooded. And there was a storage area around the building that I used and that

was flooded. So I had three separate things to do. But gradually I got it all done with help from some people, but mostly by myself. I mean, I did have that initial thrust which was really helpful with Beth and these friends of ours, and you know, so I set up a water table outside, a bath from an old paper bath that I used to use for printmaking. Every day I would pull out more drawings and things and prints that were there and wash them in this slightly bleached solution, let them dry out in the sun, and then --

RH: Can you restore them that way?

AG: Well, some of them did fine, some of them have, you know, the Katrina patina, and some were lost. But paper is pretty strong, you know.

RH: Interesting.

AG: Yeah. You know, so I have them stored. The only things that didn't get hurt were things that were in baggies, real baggies, regular old baggies are the best thing. And now they make these big ones. So I put everything that I can in those now, and of course everything in my studio is up.

RH: Very high.

AG: Yeah, or easily able to put it up. And weighted down. Because what happened was for two weeks everything was floating around the studio so it was like somebody had been stirring, you know, all my stuff in this brackish, disgusting water for two to three weeks. So everything was everywhere and upside-down. So I have everything now weighted and bolted down, which God forbid it should happen again. Well, you know, I don't even know why I bother. If it happens again, you know, I think that'll be it. I just don't see how the city could recover from it again, at least in my lifetime.

RH: So that's an interesting statement because you're here if the city's here, is that the way you feel? Because I was wondering if you had decided maybe to try to move

somewhere else.

AG: No, it never occurred to me, and Beth never mentioned it occurring to her at all, to move anywhere. You know, there was uncertainty but it was just more of just how bad it was going to be more than if we were going to move. It never really occurred to me to move, that it would be so devastated that I wouldn't be moving back.

RH: When did you get a sense, I guess, that you could move back to the city?

AG: Well, I don't know if it was as conscious as that. I think I just sort of did it, you know, I just sort of did what I had to do to move back. And you know, I contacted the electrician I had been using over the years and found him, and things started to kind of fall into place a little bit. And you know, I just was determined to --

RH: How far is Ponchatoula from here?

AG: It's about an hour's drive if the traffic's not too bad.

RH: So it's just kind of almost a matter of just gradually spending more and more time here?

AG: Well, no. I mean, there was a limit to how long I could spend working in my studio with the heat and the noxious fumes and everything. So I would come in, you know, every morning I would stop at the gas station, get my bag of ice, my couple things of Gatorade, and drive in, smoke my cigar, and get into the city. You know, at first there was nobody else. And at first nobody could get in unless you had a pass. So you know, I was fortunate to have a pass. I mean, it was empty. Everything was grey, all the leaves were gone, everything was covered in mud. It was a very, very surreal world. The only sounds you would here was helicopters, occasionally a Humvee would go down Tulane Avenue. But it was very lonely. But I just did it, you know? I wouldn't have thought I had the fortitude to do it but I just sort of did it. Every day I came in and cleaned

up a little more. Occasionally I would, you know, have somebody that would help me. I would clean up stuff and then I would put the paper in the bath and then take the paper out of the bath and let it dry, and clean up some more, and then after it dried do another batch in the bath and drive that back to Ponchatoula. I always had something in some kind of bleach bath somewhere. One thing that I did that I think did actually help was I got a bunch of Lysol spray and jammed down the things and a couple times at the end of the day I would just leave about ten cans open, spraying in my studio with the doors shut and then come back the next day. And I think that kept mold and things down.

RH: Oh, interesting (laughter). Interesting.

AG: You know, it was all I was thinking about. I would go to sleep at night thinking about, "Well, what do I have to do? What can I clean? What do I need to buy to get clean?" You know, and then gradually I started thinking about, you know, the properties around that we had to fix. So I got this guy that has done some demolition for us to gut some of the apartments. So I started getting that done. My brother also was doing the same thing with his store, which is on Tulane Avenue, the uniform shop. He got it gutted. He was back open I think in January of 2006, and I was back -- I had electricity by then. Right at the end of December I got electricity.

RH: So did you guys move back around Christmas, or?

AG: No, we started living here in October, six weeks after. I think it was like the 12th or something. I mean, the only thing that kept us from moving back earlier was you couldn't take a shower. The water hadn't been fixed up yet. So as soon as they said you could take a bath we came. Because we had gas and electricity the whole time. We even had cable.

RH: Really?

AG: Yeah, we came back the first night, turned the TV on. You know, it just never occurred to me that we were going to have cable. But you know, Beth pushed some button and there it was. I was completely floored.

RH: What did you guys do in that first period to kind of sustain yourself?

AG: I know what I did (laughter). I don't know if I want to put it on camera.

RH: OK (laughter).

AG: Smoked a lot of cigars. In the night up on this country highway where our friends live outside of Arnaudville I would be up till about 2 o'clock in the morning sitting on a porch smoking a cigar and I would walk up and down the highway.

RH: Really?

AG: I mean, it was very uncertain, very depressing.

RH: Was Beth going into Baton Rouge to work?

AG: Finally they opened their office and she didn't really start going, I don't think, until -- they didn't get it set up until we had been in Ponchatoula, so not from Arnaudville. But they'd gotten it, which was -- Baton Rouge was terrible, just the traffic and I don't like the city to begin with, so it was depressing being there.

RH: What was some of the first signs of hope that you took?

AG: That's a good question.

RH: Or solace.

AG: You know, I don't know if there were -- well, having cable gave me hope.

RH: Having cable? (laughter)

AG: I don't know that there was anything particularly. Well, I should say -- one thing that did give us some hope was the little restaurants that finally opened up on Magazine Street -- Theo's Pizza. Even though everything was, you know, paper and plastic, it was such a luxury to have a restaurant or two open that you could go to. That seemed hopeful, and it was like living in a frontier town at the time because very few people were around and, you know, the people who were back were sort of the hearty people who were going to be here. I suppose when PJ's finally reopened in November my life was complete again.

RH: So PJ's, do you still go to PJ's and sit after you work and read a book?

AG: Every day. And when we're finished that's where I'm going to go. Yeah. That's my thing. So when that opened for a while I was -- the Rue de la Course opened first –

RH: Oh, so you changed your loyalty?

AG: Well, I didn't change my loyalty. Soon as PJ's was opened I went to PJ's. But I had no choice at the time. And you know, Eric Bouchard (sp?) I would see there and some other people I would run into. It was always nice when you would see somebody you hadn't seen since before the storm. There was a kind of camaraderie for a while, that kind of thing -- you know, people you would just sort of see at PJ's you would now talk to because everybody was so happy to see anybody. Yeah, I guess that's true -- there were those kind of hopeful feelings.

RH: Did you guys take a hit financially from all of this?

AG: Well, Gerson Properties has certainly taken a financial hit because we haven't gotten one bit of help from anybody. All the repairs that we've done is from -- our insurance companies were fair, so even though we didn't have flood except on one

house they did kind of, you know, give us the benefit of the doubt on our flood damage. So it wasn't enough to cover everything, but it was at least a little bit to help, to get started. And we had some savings. And I would say this month we are just now starting to maybe not be spending everything we're taking in.

RH: Hmm. OK.

AG: What?

RH: I'm thinking what we're talking about here is that we've been one hour already.

AG: Oh.

RH: Just kid of shocking. So we'll take a break & change the tape.

AG: Oh, alright.

END OF FILE 1

RH: Tape two with Alan Gerson for Katrina's Jewish Voices. I just wanted to move a little bit to the business of your art. And were you able to paint during any of this?

AG: No. No, I didn't do any art for about four months I guess, really, because my job was cleaning up my studio so I could do art. So, no. But I had a show that was coming up in June of 2006 so I had to get started on that. So --

RH: And where was that show?

AG: In Santa Fe.

RH: Oh, really?

AG: And so I had -- and they were very sympathetic, the Meyer-Munson Gallery in Santa Fe. They were very nice and very solicitous of what was going on.

RH: And you have a gallery here --

AG: LeMieux Gallery.

RH: Was it up and running?

AG: They got back up as soon as they could. The galleries in general and the art community in general in New Orleans really rallied to the cause, I found, and you know, were right there at the beginning trying to figure out how to get things going. I started a fund to raise money for art supplies and studios for artists, which was rolled into another fund that they were doing at the CAC. But I had done that through the Lafayette Art Council and they were very helpful and nice in allowing us to use their nonprofit status as sort of a cover for raising money. And so, you know, I was soliciting some funds from people. I didn't have all that much time to do that. But we raised about $3,000 and then I forget what the actual name of the fund was that it went into, but you know, put the money into that.

RH: And so were there a lot of artists who kind of -- they needed supplies, they needed things to get back to work?

AG: Yeah, I think there were although I didn't personally, you know, necessarily talk to a lot of people because I was in my own little tunnel of getting my life back together. But there were artists around, and there were artists' meetings. I forget exactly when they started but there was a series that galleries did for a while, artists' meetings where the community of artists would come and talk. There was one at Arthur Roger, there was one at LeMieux, and other ones too.

RH: Did you attend any of those?

AG: Oh, yeah.

RH: Yeah? So why --

AG: Well, one of the things, you wanted to have a sense of community at the time and feel that you aren't alone and that people were going to come back. You know, it was very unsettled at the time what was going to happen. That was one of the worst things about it in those early months, was that you didn't know what was going to happen. You didn't know if they were going to be able to fix the city enough to live here or to really have a life here again. So it was great seeing other artists and going to these meetings and, you know, reconnecting.

RH: Were they prioritizing things? Were they --

AG: I think they were trying, but you know, I think it was more in the end. It wasn't about any kind of concrete thing. It was more about being together, although it wasn't structured that way and I don't think people really thought of it that way at the time, but I don't recall really any serious development that happened because of these meetings.

RH: Sharing information and that kind of thing.

AG: Yeah. I mean, I think people wanted to see others were here, that people had hope for the future that, you know, it wasn't just you, so. I think that was important for some people in the arts community anyway. And artists and galleries, fortunately most of the galleries didn't get flooded. But they were right on -- you know, they came back early and people were fighting the good fight right away and I was very proud of the art community by and large. The visual arts, the music, you know -- they were in the vanguard. I mean, they were here. They weren't abandoning us like the fucking doctors and people.

RH: So all right, I'll get into that. What do you feel about people who didn't come back?

AG: Well, I feel that if you were an able-bodied person, you know, your duty was to be here and help in the reconstruction, and if you left you're a traitor.

RH: You don't take any pity on people with kids?

AG: Fuck 'em. No. What is the lesson they're teaching their kids? They're teaching their kids that when things are bad, when there's a problem, what do you do? You leave. You cut and run. You disappear. You don't solve it; you don't take responsibility. That's the lesson their kids are going to take. So I don't think they're doing their kids any benefit. There are schools here. Most of these people in Jewish community who left were wealthy enough that they would be sending their kids to private schools anyway. And I have no pity for them. I have no -- I don't think there's any excuse for what they did. Older people who left to be with their kids, you know, that's a different story. I'm much more sympathetic to that, you know. A lot of elderly people -- it is a difficult place to live and I can understand why if their kids had moved away that they would move to where their children were at this point because it is hard to stay. But people with some kind of means and a reason to be here had no business leaving.

RH: So you think people would tell you, "Alan, you know, you didn't lose your house and what if you lived on the lakefront and you're in the middle of" -- I don't know?

AG: I'm sure there is that, but then again, you know, many people who lived on a lakefront and many people who had devastating personal stories did stay. You know? And a part of the -- now in the long run, you know, if the city and state and government don't get their acts together it's going to start being, you know, different. But, you know, I think people had a duty to stay. And I'm very disappointed in the Jewish community.

RH: You are?

AG: Yeah, a third of us left.

RH: That's fewer than the majority of the city.

AG: Well, I think the majority of the city of the people who aren't here didn't leave as much as they have not been able to return, because they don't have the wherewithal to rebuild their property or to get back. But I don't think that's the case with the third of the Jewish population who left. It's mostly professionals. My doctor left, David Oelsner, a traitor. His father didn't leave. No. You know, there are degrees of devastation. You know, it would have been different if my house had been destroyed but then, you know, if I'm not working at my studio by and large, or at PJ's, I'm spending my time trying to get rental properties back up or dealing with -- was, anyway, for two years -- dealing with that. So you know -- that's not my profession. You know, I'm doing that. My brother, you know, he got his store back up. I mean, we all have our selfish reasons for doing things but I think, you know, it's part of the larger good to get back here and fix things up and not abandon things when things go bad.

RH: Do you think your sentiment about that -- does that come from any values that are Jewish values?

AG: Well, I wish it did. But you know, a third of the Jewish population left.

RH: But for you personally, does any of it come from any training from your family?

AG: Training from my family, probably, yes. But I don't know if it's a Jewish value. Not necessarily. I think it might be a family trait or something because my brother's here, my sister's still here.

RH: And can you kind of put your --

AG: We're stubborn.

RH: You're stubborn (laughter), OK.

AG: We're not weak-minded anyway. I really have very little sympathy. I get very mad at people who left and didn't come back who should've. You know, I know people whose houses were completely destroyed and they're rebuilding. You know, with the triple insurance rates, with the likely higher taxes, with everything they're here. So why not these others? What's so special about them?

RH: What's the hardest part of being here for you now?

AG: What is the hardest part about being here? Well, I'm really so grateful to be here, you know, because for a while -- those first few weeks, you know, my sweet, little life I thought was over. So I'm grateful just to be here. And I'll be grateful when the hurricane season is over because really I don't think New Orleans can take much more.

RH: It's limping.

AG: It is. It's like it had a stroke, you know? And it's got some of its movement back and it can talk a little and it's getting stronger, you know, but somebody pushes it out the bed again (laughter), I don't know what'll happen.

RH: What do you love about the city, that you're kind of staying with the stroke victim? What's important for you to see come back?

AG: Well, you know, it's such a deep thing that I'm not even sure I can articulate it in this kind of thing. You know, it's in my veins. I'm not sure I ever thought much about it in the past, but you know, I'm here for the duration and I just can't even imagine living anywhere else. My friend Julie Schwam (sp?), she says one of the reasons she's figured out that she's not leaving is because every street has a memory for her. Every place she turns, you know. And I like the fact that, you know, when I'm at PJ's or anywhere basically in New Orleans I run into people I know, people I know from now, people I know from in my past, you know, and the streets do have memories. You know, you get in your own little routine and you're doing things and you don't take time to really think

about it but, you know, those long drives in from Ponchatoula when I wasn't thinking about bleach, you know, I was thinking about missing New Orleans.

RH: Has this been a good place for your career?

AG: Well, I don't know. You know, that's a tricky question because New Orleans is an easy place to be an artist. It's not an easy place to necessarily be successful. It's not an easy place to get a national reputation if that's what you're looking for. But there's a lot of artists and good artists who live here. It's very congenial to the artist type. It's a beautiful city; it's an interesting city. You know, it's got lots of nooks and crannies.

RH: Is a national reputation at this point in your life something you're trying to establish?

AG: You know, less than it used to be.

RH: Less?

AG: Yeah. I used to obsess over it, but I just do my work. And things have been working out pretty well for me. I don't know that I have a national reputation, but I do show in a few galleries outside of New Orleans.

RH: Could you tell me what galleries you show in now?

AG: I show at the Meyer-Munson Gallery in Santa Fe. I show at the Menden Hall, Sobieski -- S-o-b-i-e-s-k-i. I guess it's still Sobieski although he's quit the business, in Pasadena, California. Show at Steve Martin Gallery in Miami and the Bishop Gallery in Phoenix -- no, not Phoenix. In Arizona.

RH: Could you talk a little about your art? Like that Santa Fe show --

AG: It didn't have anything to do with Katrina.

RH: It didn't?

AG: Uh-uh.

RH: Was it already conceptualized in your head?

AG: Yeah, well, and plus it was what we had discussed I was going to do, which was more of the legal kind of satire that I do, but larger acrylic paintings rather than watercolors. You know, it's funny because it has not come out exactly. I've done one or two paintings that were more specific to Katrina, but it is not -- you know, I haven't done a Katrina show and I don't think my next show here will be a Katrina show. I guess it's permeated my psyche but I'm not sure how it manifests itself in my art.

RH: How in the past have you gotten your inspiration for your art? Because you --

AG: Sitting around thinking.

RH: Sitting around thinking? (laughter) Are there artists that move you more than other artists that you --

AG: I respond to lots of artists, you know, from Rembrandt to Mondrian to, you know, Picasso, to Duchamp to Joseph Beuys. I mean, I like a variety of things and they don't necessarily directly relate to my style or the way I paint, but --

RH: Is there a way you can talk about your style?

AG: Well, it's been called "magic realism" because I do sort of do things that have a veneer of reality to them but, you know, aren't -- especially with my floral and, you know, more organic plant kind of paintings. But I go in a couple different directions.

RH: Some of them, like with your children series, are almost sinister.

AG: A little bit. In fact, that's what I'm working on for my show at Steve Martin's in Miami in October. It's called "Wild Child," and it's basically either scenes of on the beach or

scenes in an Everglades kind of setting, jungle setting. And it's that child's play thing with an edge of evil and danger in it.

RH: So you kind of had that before you faced a storm?

AG: I've always had that, I mean ever since I was a little kid. I liked monsters and grotesqueries and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, I was into dinosaurs years and years ago.

RH: Does it reflect in any way also your sense of human beings?

AG: Yeah, I'm sure it does. But I'm not the best person to discuss that, I don't think, all the time. It's hard to dissect from the artwork, you know, a text that explains it, for me anyway. You know, I think I do -- well, I think, you know, broad philosophical strokes, you know, life is sad, we're all going to die, we live on the precipice, everybody you know is going to die, you know, your choice is old age or death. You know, life is sad but it's sweet. And I think that permeates everything. And I think my work has a kind of sense of irony in it, and a dark sense of humor.

RH: And a sweetness.

AG: I guess so. You know, there is that to a degree. But I don't -- you know, I don't do children from the point of view that they're all innocents and spice and, you know. They are wonderful to watch but they're not innocent. Or at least, you know, children can be very cruel. I guess they're innocent in a way but they're not -- what's the word? They're not necessarily without danger (laughter).

RH: Do you connect any more with --

AG: And I do -- let me just say this also -- my general view of nature is very dark.

RH: How so?

AG: Well, I think nature is just, you know, a big, violent cauldron of fire and teeth. And we live on just a very thin veneer of a world that we can inhabit. You know, and there are forces out there that are so wild and violent that they're incomprehensible to us. And I think nature is red with blood on tooth and claw. You know, it's all we've got but it's not -- we have to fight to stay alive in front of nature. You know, given a moment's lapse you're dead. One little -- you know, there's always a bug or something out there ready to eat you. That's what I think (laughter). I mean, look at the hurricane, you know? Didn't care. It was just another -- and that's not even as bad as it can get, you know? It didn't hit us directly, Katrina. So, you know, California sooner or later's going to have a horrible earthquake and St. Louis is going to have a horrible earthquake. One of the largest earthquakes we ever had was in Charleston, South Carolina, years and years ago. You know, I think whether or not there's global warming sooner or later the climate will change one way or another, whether we help it or not. I do believe in fighting against global warming and all the good stuff. But in the long run, I mean, we're doomed.

RH: You think your art in some ways is trying to get at the hubris of human beings?

AG: I think very much so. Yeah, I think all my art is memento mori, to remember that we're mortal, to think that you might be wrong. What was that quote from Cromwell? "From the bowels of Christ think that you might be wrong." I forgot who he was saying that to, but I always thought that was --

RH: So has your worldview since Katrina changed in any way?

AG: Well, it was pretty dark to begin with. I think I've found that I'm stronger than I thought I was.

RH: Is that right?

AG: Yeah, I never would have thought that I could've done what I did in the last couple years, fixing up all these properties and cleaning up my studio and doing all that stuff.

You know, I don't think my worldview has changed but I think my, I think, connection to New Orleans has deepened, and to my friends and people who stayed. You know, we are now kind of a more -- in our way everybody is, you know, a product of Katrina in this area. I mean, everybody -- even if you came through scott free and were very lucky, you know, everybody you know wasn't. So it was a life event.

RH: Do you think there might be a way that it's an easier place to live in because more people see their vulnerabilities more?

AG: Well, I think that's true and I think also people have, to a degree -- I mean right now I think people are exhausted and numb in some ways, after two years. And it does feel like we're treading water right now. Something has to get off the dime. I mean.

RH: Has your view of the government at all levels, has it changed any?

AG: Well, I guess I never realized just how incompetent and terrible the federal government was. I suppose I still had some vestige that, you know, FEMA or these government agencies for emergencies, and the Army, you know, they would've reacted better. I never had too much faith in local government, or state government because they're all a bunch of idiot yahoos and I don't think that's going to change too much in the near future. Unfortunately, you know, that's the hand we've been dealt. I mean, who -- Jindal, I guess he's not corrupt and I guess he's smart but you know, he's very, very right-wing on social issues as well as fiscal issues. And I guess he'll be the governor; that's the way it looks. He can't be worse than Blanco, our blubberer-in-chief. She is a complete failure and so is Nagin. You know, I don't know what to do, to be honest, as far as the political stuff goes. It just feels like, you know -- I don't see anybody who could pick up the reins and straighten this stuff out, and certainly until the long, dark night of Bush is over there's nothing going to come from the federal government. And by the time he's out, you know, they're going to have completely lost interest in New Orleans. So I don't know, it's just going to probably have to come from people working on their own.

You know, sooner or later I guess the Road Home money will get to people, some of it has, and that'll make a difference. But that's in spite of itself, you know. They would have been better off if they had just come with those bales of money that they sent to Iraq and just pushed them out of helicopters onto New Orleans. It would have been more effective than what they did. But you know, the government is really -- you know, you see all the horrors in Baghdad, and I don't want to compare us to Baghdad, but you can kind of see from our little point of view just how incompetent these giant forces of government are. They --

RH: Hey, I'm beginning to see your next show. It's taking shape in my mind (laughter).

AG: (laughter) Yeah, huh? Well, I don't know. But -- I don't know. I guess sooner or later the people will get their money and things will straighten out.

RH: Have you received help from other people? Have you gone to the Jewish community for your $750 and?

AG: The Jewish community had $750? No, I didn't --

RH: Yeah, for you, Alan.

AG: No, I didn't know that. I didn't get that. I did get the Red Cross $600 and I did get the emergency money that they sent from FEMA in the beginning.

RH: They have some small business loans too you might want to look at.

AG: Well, those are much more trouble than they're worth.

RH: No, no, I mean Jewish community.

AG: Oh really? Oh, maybe so.

RH: You might should head to the Federation website.

AG: Well, I don't think I'll be doing that for personal reasons.

RH: And do you want to talk about that?

AG: No.

RH: No? OK. Are you affiliated at all with a synagogue?

AG: No.

RH: Can you kind of talk to me a little about your understanding of God and your values?

AG: Jeeze.

RH: Hey, these are my standard questions.

AG: Well, I'm agnostic.

RH: OK. Can you talk a little about your journey there?

AG: Well, you know, when I was a child I thought God was like the god in the golden Bible, you know, the golden book of Bible stories, you know, a big guy that looked like Santa Claus with white, flowing robes and on the clouds, you know, aware of things we did. Now I wonder. I don't know. I don't know what my conception of --

RH: Do you have a conception of the holy?

AG: You know, I don't have that mystical talent. And it's not that I just, you know, want to hold it or touch it, but I've never seen anything. I've never personally felt anything. There's lots of reasonable explanations for things that happen. You know, I don't think God cares who wins a football game. I don't think those kids that didn't go down in the river on that bus didn't go down because of a miracle. And yet I'm afraid to say there's no God. But I do think about it, but I don't come up with anything.

RH: Do you have concepts -- oh, go ahead. I'm sorry.

AG: I was going to say that if there is a God, He seems fairly indifferent to things that go on here. He likes beetles - Alfred Lord Wallace said, some naturalism. What do you think about God? And he says, "Well, he must have a very strong like of beetles," (laughter). I don't know. I'm not trying to be evasive, it's just I don't have any --

RH: Oh, you're not being evasive. You're answering the question.

AG: Yeah.

RH: Do you have a sense of tzedakah or tikkun olam? Do those concepts --

AG: Charity? In what way? I mean --

RH: Well, what is --

AG: Charity for all and malice toward none?

RH: No, I didn't mean pithy sayings. I think I meant a way that you think is the best way to help others.

AG: Well, I think helping others is the way things should be. People should help others. I don't know. God, you know, people have such a capacity for good and evil. You look around the world now, and you think you got troubles. We don't even have any sense -- I mean with all my complaining and kvetching about the government, I mean, we don't live in Darfur (laughter). You know, we don't live in Baghdad. You know, what is it like? I mean, a majority of the people in the world don't even have potable water. So there's billions of people out there who never get touched by the kindness of strangers. I don't know. It's a pretty sad place. It almost seems like good things happen in spite of everything.

RH: What kind of vision would you like to see for New Orleans?

AG: I'd like to see the streetcars work. Well, I'd like to see everything rebuilt but I don't think that's going to happen. I'd like, you know, people to come back but I don't -- I don't know how much that's going to happen. And it seems like -- I don't mean to get depressing about this, but I think things will reach a level. I don't think we'll have the population we used to have and I think we're just going to have to be used to being a second-tier city from now on. You know. We're not going to ever get bigger than Birmingham or, you know, cities that we used to sort of look down on as small cities. But you know, they took their development forward and we didn't. We've never been served very well by our leaders. They either -- you know, the ones who are progressive tore down the cultural icons and things that made New Orleans what it is, but they were progressive at least. You know, or they're completely corrupt and don't do anything. Or they're like Nagin who's completely incompetent but maybe not corrupt. But I don't know. I don't have a vision.

RH: Do you personally have to kind of hustle more with your galleries out of the city because it's just less dependable here?

AG: I think a little bit, although the galleries aren't doing too poorly here for some reason. They're doing all right. But I think I have consciously made more of an effort to strengthen my connections out of galleries outside of the city. I think the art scene will return, to some degree. You know, it never really has left. But I think the financial part of it will redevelop. I think the city will redevelop the tourist industry because, you know, New Orleans is still New Orleans. If you were a tourist you could come to the city and go to most of the tourist things that you would have done before and not really noticed any difference, except for the streetcar on St. Charles and you know, maybe the restaurants in the West End Boulevard or something. But other than that most of the things people do when they come to visit New Orleans you can still do. I think the music industry

seems to have reinvigorated itself a little bit. Seems like they're doing the right kinds of things. But, you know, in the end it's going to really turn on people coming back -- both visitors and residents.

RH: Do you have any awareness or thoughts of the Jewish community, some of its plans to reignite the Jewish community?

AG: I'm not really connected much anymore with it. They seem to be floundering like everybody else. I don't see any great movement one way or the other. I mean, the only movement I have seen that's really visible is there are fewer of us. You know, people -

RH: Fewer artists?

AG: Jews.

RH: Oh, fewer Jewish people, OK.

AG: Yeah. I don't know that -- you know, I don't know that any synagogues will close, except for maybe Beth Israel. I don't know how long they're going to survive. They do have money available but I don't know what they're doing, and I'm not involved in that anymore.

RH: Have you ever thought about how the Jewish community has interacted with the larger city?

AG: Well, we've been very beneficial to New Orleans.

RH: Yeah?

AG: Yeah. You know, culturally and every which way. You know, Jews have contributed to this city -- you know, the museum, the symphony, the art scene. You know, take any –

RH: Do you think it's going to continue to do that?

AG: Probably. Probably the people who are here will be just as involved. Yeah. Jews are always involved in the community. Yeah, I think that'll stay the same. I don't know, you know, what vastly wealthy people, Jews, have left. I don't think probably too many of the really rich people have left.

RH: Have you and Beth -- have you noticed yourself a kind of way decisions fall on one gender or another gender, or is it happening in any way in your own marriage? You know, about the decisions to move forward, the decisions to come back.

AG: No.

RH: Do you notice any coping skills that are happening better with one gender or another gender?

AG: No. No, I mean our personalities are different and I guess we cope differently but I'm not sure it has anything -- no, I haven't noticed that really.

RH: Has there been any strains, you know, and tensions?

AG: You mean in our relationship?

RH: Yeah, because of this whole kind of --

AG: Not really. No. When I look back on it, no, I think -- no, not really. You know --

RH: I mean all the change in itself can put a lot of pressure.

AG: Yeah. No, I don't think we really have. Just sort of go about our business. I don't think there has been any extra strain particularly. You know, we were lucky in that financially we didn't take much of a hit really, personally. So. And Beth's law firm, I suppose, you know, they came back and they're pretty much going strong, so that was

very good.

RH: Are any of your priorities different since the storm?

AG: Now when you say priorities, you mean like -- no, my first priority aside from, you know, loving my wife and all that kind of thing, is do art, rebuild the properties. That pretty much is full time.

RH: Any new directions, any new interests?

AG: Not really, no. No, I don't think so. I think in fact probably I more and more just want things to stay -- stop changing (laughter). But I think that's probably a function of age as well.

RH: What does home mean to you?

AG: Do we have a lot more of these kinds of questions? (laughter)

RH: Not too many more.

AG: What does home mean to me? God, I don't know. I don't know how to answer that exactly. I don't know.

RH: OK.

AG: I don't really know what home means to me.

RH: Tell me about -- we can wrap it up now, but I'm just wondering if there is one memory, one event, one happening, even an absurdity, a funny thing, in Katrina that you kind of --

AG: There is one particular thing. I think this might have been the first or second time I came back, and I was driving down St. Charles Avenue and there was, you know,

nobody else on the street anywhere. I mean, the city was pretty empty and I was driving down St. Charles and at 4th Street all of a sudden this beautiful beach ball just started floating and bouncing across St. Charles up 4th Street, across St. Charles and then out, down 4th Street. And it just out of nowhere -- it just disappeared. There was nobody behind it. It was not dirty, this beach ball just floating and bouncing along. I'll never forget that. It was very strange. I think about that every so often. There was nobody chasing the ball, there was nobody around. There it was, it was just a beautiful beach ball just -- you know, the classic striped beach ball.

RH: Mm-hmm, like you don't know how it began and you don't know where it ended.

AG: Don't know where it was going.

RH: (laughter) Wow, in an empty city.

AG: In an empty city, yeah. That was emblematic of something but I'm not sure what.

RH: That's a good place to end.

AG: OK (laughter).

RH: If you have any other things you want to say --

AG: Mm-mm. No.

RH: Thank you, Alan.

AG: Oh, you're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]