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University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Interviewer: Victor Romero

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Ira Perry, director of marketing and public auctions for the Holocaust Museum Houston discusses many aspects of the museum, beginning with Holocaust survivor Siegi Izakson's idea to create the facility. Built entirely with private funding, the museum was designed by architect Ralph Applebaum incorporated elements into the design to symbolize the tightening control over the lives of European Jews throughout the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the deaths of over six million people. Perry talks about the permanent exhibits, which include *Bearing Witness: A Community Remembers*, the Eric Alexander Garden of Hope, the railcar like those used to carry Jews to the concentration camps, and a Danish boat like those used to ferry Jews from Denmark to safety in Sweden. With an emphasis on education, the museum also employs special exhibits, school tours, the trunk program, and teacher training to help for children understand the museum's message to never let something like the Holocaust happen again. Perry also mentions some of the survivor stories that are featured at the museum and survivors themselves who volunteer and give tours at the museum. Perry explains that by putting a human face on what happened to the Jews, it makes it more difficult to ignore the reality of what happened and hopefully encourages people to stand up against tyranny.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Ira Perry

Interviewed by: **Victor Romero**
Date: **March 20, 2013**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Holocaust Museum, Houston, Texas**

VR: I'm Victor Romero with Mr. Ira Perry at the Holocaust Museum. Can you give me your full name?

IP: It's Ira Perry. I-r-a P-e-r-r-y. I'm the director of marketing and public relations.

VR: Can you tell me when you were born?

IP: October 1956.

VR: And what kind of education do you have?

IP: I've got a BA in journalism from Texas Tech.

VR: Texas Tech. Can you tell me some of your background and how you came to be here?

IP: I started in newspapers, in a newspaper career. I was a reporter at the *Daily Oklahoma*, the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, the *Houston Post*. I spent about twenty years in newspapers and then went to the non-profit world for a while and led an organization called the Society for Professional Journalists, and then came back to Houston because I didn't like Indiana, and got into the magazine world, and then into the communications business, and then wound up here. I spent several years as vice president of communications for the Greater Houston Partnership and just got tired of working seven days a week twenty-four hours a day so I wound up here running my own show.

VR: So are you at the top here at the museum?

IR: I'm one of the directors. There is an executive director, but I'm one of the staff directors, yes.

VR: Okay and can you name some hobbies that you have or some stuff you like to do?

IR: Movies. Anything that does not require me to read because that's all I do all day long.

VR: Okay so…

IR: Movies and my dog.

VR: Can you tell me about how the idea of the Holocaust came to be? Who started it?

IR: The museum?

VR: Yes.

IR: The museum actually arose as a vision from our founders. A group of survivors who had made their way to Houston after World War II settled into Houston because Galveston was the port of entry for the Holocaust survivors, so it was natural that there would be a base of people here already. And one of them took a trip to Israel, and while he was in Israel he thought, "This just has to be preserved." He came back; his name was Siegi Izakson. And he was in the book, and Siegi came back and started talking to the other survivors and said, "What happens when we're gone? Who is going to tell our story? How will people remember what happened to us and learn not to do it again?" So he started a group and they got together and over the years developed momentum enough to actually get a museum born and to get the funding for it and to get it started and to get it opened. It first opened in a little office building out on Fountainview. And then in 1996 this building actually was formally opened and dedicated as the museum. So we are now seventeen years old roughly.

VR: Seventeen.

IR: As of a few days ago.

VR: Where did the museum acquire the money to build the museum?

IR: It was a massive capital campaign. We organized a committee of community leaders that was headed by Ben Love, who at that time was one of Houston's most influential bankers. One of the heads of one of the largest law firms in Houston was a co-chair of that committee. And they went around and raised the money to help organize the building to fund the development of the exhibits and to get us off and running. And all private funding. None of this is government funded.

VR: Did the community support it as well?

IR: Incredibly so. All of the dollars came from the community from the private, from private citizens themselves, from foundations, corporations, and the community that were willing to sponsor and support it. But we are very proud that we were not government funded. It is a privately funded museum. It is something that Houston had in its heart and thought it needed.

VR: The building itself is very unique because it looks like no other museum out there. Can you talk about why it was designed this way?

IR: Well the original building, the part that we are in now, was a doctor's office originally. So when we bought the property, they had to figure out how to turn a fairly bland box office into a museum that would attract attention. What the survivors wanted was a building that people couldn't ignore. They wanted a building that told the story even if you never went inside. And so they hired an architect named Ralph Applebaum out of New York City to come up with the concept. As you see as you are walking up the side walk you see the cylinder, which is not a crematory, but it is intended to remind you of what went on in the crematoriums. You see the fencing around the distorted slope, and it's not really a barbed wire fence, but it gives you that impression. You feel like before you ever get here that this is an experience, that you are going

to encounter an experience, that you are not going to just going to come in and see a few things and leave. The building is intended to say, "We are going to change you, we have a story to tell and you need to hear." So that's kind of the purpose of the architecture on the outside. Then as you get in the door, if you notice when you went in and I can show you some of this later, as you get in the door it's wide, it's airy, it's lit, it's open, it's inviting. But the farther you get into the Holocaust and get into the story, it starts getting tighter, it's gets narrower, and the walls get lower and they start coming down, and it gets darker and more gloomy and depressing. As you see what's actually happening, the building is built to let you see what happens from going from freedom into captivity and eventually what happened. The whole building is built that way. You know as you walk down the halls you see, and I could show you this, you will see what appear to be railroad tracks coming down the hall, and again they start off very wide and very open and its daylight, and they get narrower and narrower and narrower as they take you down toward the rail car. Three million people died by rail.

VR: Is that the whole concept of the steel beams and what appears to be vents?

IP: The vents are reminiscent of the vents that were in Auschwitz that were in the gas chambers as to how the gas was put into the building. The steel is intending to remind you of the railway stations because trains were a very big part of the Holocaust. Six million Jews died and millions of other innocent people also died, and of the six million Jews three million of them were moved by rail car to the concentration camps. So railroads were a very big part of the Holocaust. And you get that feeling outside with the concrete floors, the steel beams of the train station. So the building itself is intended to be as much of an exhibit as the exhibits are.

VR: Why was this location chosen?

IP: We wanted…originally the founders (I've been here seven years), the founders when they first were trying to decide where to put the museum, where to have it, there was discussion about that it should be in the Jewish community, which would have been more Bellaire or Meyerland and out in that area at that time. They said, "No we want it in the heart of Houston. We want all of Houston to have access to it and to see it and to learn the story." So they put it right in the middle of the museum district intentionally.

VR: And can you tell me about what was done to get the material and the information that is exhibited around the museum?

IP: We hired a consultant named Michael Barenbaum, who is a Holocaust scholar from up north and is very recognized in his field, and he actually helped us design the permanent exhibit and to determine what parts of the story to tell, what were the most historically significant, what parts would be the most meaningful. And from there we actually took it a step further. It wasn't just about telling the story of the Holocaust. Because our original founders, and it was a group of ten or twelve survivors, knew that if you just saw a photo on a wall, after a while it wouldn't mean anything to you anymore. It's, "Okay there's a war." But if you saw a picture of your neighbor and you saw your neighbor's story that you would remember. It would have some impact. So as you go through our permanent exhibit, you'll see a lot of things that will tell you about the Holocaust through the eyes and the stories of survivors of the Holocaust who moved to Houston. I'll show you some of that, and I'll give you a quick walk through and I'll show you some of that. You've learned, for example, Chaja Verveer is one of our survivors. You will see her picture on the wall and you will see the names of all of her family that didn't survive, and then as you go around the corner you see her mother had to give her up. You learn that her mother had to give her up when she was just two, she was an infant, to put her into hiding so that

she would be saved. Her father was murdered. She lost her mother when she was two. You go around the corner and you see the baby dress that Chaja's mother saved for her when she gave her up. She kept the baby dress to remember her by. After the war Chaja actually went back and found her mother still alive, and she still had the baby dress. So you see that part of the war in very human eyes and that's how we tell the story of the Holocaust is through the eyes of real people with real stories and real evidence to back it up. So it means more than saying, "Okay, six million people died." Because who knows what six million people look like? But when I see that lady and I actually see her standing over here by the bookcase by the counter, talking to people. Now it's real.

VR: Right.

IP: So that's how we try to tell the story and how we try to shape the exhibits is to make them personal so that that message is very clear and it's touching, it's moving, and you learn something from it. We end our permanent exhibit with a movie called, *Voices*. There's two of them, *Voices 1* and *Voices 2*, and both thirty minute movies and all those are stories from Houston area survivors of the Holocaust. You know people you might see at HEB. People you might see at church. People who are ordinary people just like you and me, but they went through the Holocaust and somehow made it out alive. And they tell their stories and so again, we end the last part we show you are real people that you may know talking about what they went through and what you should learn from them.

VR: Is it hard to get people to talk about such an experience?

IP: Early on it was very difficult. A lot of people did not want to talk when they first came over. Either they just could not bear to talk about it, or they weren't ready to, they didn't, they had not processed what they had been through, or they were afraid they would be stigmatized.

They would… over here people just wouldn't ever understand, and they would be cast off and shunned and so they just didn't say anything. Over time a lot more of them have come forward. There are still some who won't talk about their story. I mean today, they will not talk about it. There are others, though, who have said, "We have to talk about it." You know, "What happened to us was horrible but we have an obligation to talk about it or it will happen again." So some of them do. We have survivors who talk to thousands of kids every year, schools all over town. It just depends on their experience and how they've have come to, come to deal with it. You know there are some who say, "Yes it happened. I talked about it. That part of my life is over." And there are some who say, "Yes, I experienced it. That is my life and I have to keep talking about it." So it just depends on each individual.

VR: And you said they talk to kids at school. Is that part of a program that they do or is it them individually?

IP: Our survivors have a speaker's bureau. The ones who are still capable will go to schools and talk. They don't do too many one-on-one meetings anymore, but they'll go to a class or they will talk to a thousand people in an auditorium and they will tell their story and talk about not just what happened back then but why it's important today. That's the message that most of our survivors want to talk about, it's not just what happened to them sixty-five years ago. It's how that same kind of thing continues to happen today. You know the Holocaust was one particular event in history that relates to the persecution of six million Jews from 1939 to 1945, but we've had other genocides since then. We didn't stop. You know in 1945 everybody said, "Never again. This can never happen again." Well it has happened again several times. And that is their message is this has to stop. You know we cannot wipe out entire classes of people without the world being affected.

VR: Is that part of the concept of the triangle I keep seeing, where it is bystanders also have a responsibility?

IP: Very much so. The triangle was a message that we created here at this museum as a way to teach younger kids about their role in society. Because particularly with the younger kids, they don't necessarily understand genocide and those kinds of things but they understand if I'm being beaten up on, I'm a victim. They understand that the guy who is beating me is a bully, and they understand if you are standing there and looking at it and not doing anything you are a bystander. And they understand that the bystander has that responsibility to stand up and say, "Wait a minute, stop it." And that's kind of the role that the survivors talk about is that we can't be bystanders. If the theory, if you look at the numbers of the earth's population at all during the Holocaust and this comes from this, 80% of the world's population did nothing. Now you could say, "What could they have done?" Well, there's a lot of things they could have done. We have a newspaper clipping from the *Houston Chronicle* from 1944 that shows very clearly that America knew what was happening in Germany. It's a newspaper story. It talks about people being killed in concentration camps. You can't say we didn't know.

VR: Right.

IP: Yeah you did! And so that's kind of that role of the triangle is the lesson. Which one are you going to be? You can only be four things. If you're not going to be a victim, you're either an upstander (a rescuer), or you are a bystander, or you are a perpetrator. That's your choices. You've got to pick one. And kids can understand that. So that's how we teach that term and that's a lot of the lessons that the survivors go out to say is to say that now you have to be an upstander. You can't just say, "That's over there. That's 'those people'" because sooner or later

it's going to be you. You know maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not ten years from now, but sooner or later if it can happen to them, it can happen to you.

VR: How young are the kids, what's the youngest that you talk to?

IP: We don't recommend it for anyone less than sixth grade.

VR: Okay.

IP: So ten to twelve years old is about the youngest that we talk to. And we don't recommend the exhibits for anyone less than ten. They are just not ready to deal with that subject matter until you are at least ten and up.

VR: Right. Can you talk about some of the permanent exhibits? Some of the more well-known?

IP: Well our permanent exhibit this year all the time is called *Bearing Witness: A Community Remembers*. And it starts, as we talked about, it tells you the story of the Holocaust through the eyes of Houston area survivors. So as you go in you will learn a lesson about anti-Semitism. You know the Holocaust didn't just happen in 1939. It started 2,000 years earlier. There was a history of persecution of the Jews that lead up to the Holocaust and allowed the Holocaust to take place. So we talk about that. We talk about those Jewish families that were annihilated and what happened to them and where they came from and how they were ordinary people. We go through the rise of Hitler's power. We go through what led up to Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, where the pogroms really began and the Jews started to be really seriously be persecuted, and then take you through the war and the consecration camps, and through the deportation and the displaced person camps and all the way through liberation, and even through the war crimes trials. What happened to these people afterwards? You know, who paid and who didn't? Who got away? So the permanent exhibit walks you all the way through the history of

the Holocaust. We have some very special exhibits. They are here all the time. We have a 1942-era Holocaust railcar. It is the same kind that was used to carry those three million Jews to their death. It's called a Treblinka car because it has the round roof like the railroad cars you saw at Treblinka.

VR: Did you get it from, was it actually used there or was it modeled after?

IP: We found it in Germany. It is the same kind… it's impossible to say it was used because the Germans tracked the trains and they tracked people but they didn't necessarily track the car. So the car could have been moved around who knows where. Now there are some museums will tell you their car was used. It's impossible to know that.

VR: Okay.

IP: There are books that say, "This train went here to here to here to here." But it doesn't tell you which car was on the train.

VR: Right, right.

IP: And there are books that say, "These people were on this train to Auschwitz," but it doesn't tell you what car they were in. There are some indicators, though, that you can look at that would say that our car has a pretty high probability of being used. One of those is our car has a round roof, and I'll take you back and I'll show you the car; it has a round roof. Most of the cars had flat roofs. There were millions of those made with flat roofs, just regular old box cars. The rounded roofs were kind of unique. There were only a million of those ever produced anywhere. You say a million, well yeah, but with the volume of railcars all over the world, a million is a very small number and you see them all over in pictures of Treblinka throughout the war. They were the cars that were used at Treblinka. So that's a pretty good indicator. And then again our car was built based on the model of a cattle car. But why does it have round hoods?

Cattle cars didn't have round hoods, and it has steps on the side. Cows don't climb stairs. So what did you need steps for? Its hydraulic system also had been changed so that it would move faster. Well it's a cattle car, why does it need to move faster? Because you need to move more people quicker. You need to get them out and get them in camp and get on with business. So there are some indications that it may have been used. The other one is even more critical is…are you familiar with the Watson conference?

VR: No.

IP: The Wannsee Conference was a, basically a weekend retreat that Hitler had where this higher-level Nazi officials, and that's where they came up with the plan of how they were going to deal with what they called the Final Solution. How are we going to take care of the Jewish problem? So at the Wannsee Conference they decided we are going to use railcars, and we are going to ship them to camps outside Germany and kill them. That's where the plan to use railcars to move millions of people across country, where they wouldn't be seen, and exterminate them came into play. This car was built three months after that conference. They needed railcars. So was it used? We can't say absolutely. Are there indications that it probably was and that it was used for that purpose? Yes. They weren't building railcars for anything else. They were in the middle of a war. They needed troop stuff. They didn't need cattle cars.

VR: What about the boat that it outside?

IP: The boat is also from 1942, and it's from Denmark. A lot of people don't know the story of Denmark and what happened. It's a very different picture of the railcar. The railcar is a journey to death. Whereas the boat is a picture of hope and what people…when people do the right thing what can happen. The boat came from a little town called Gilleleje in Denmark; it's the very top of Denmark right across from Sweden. I got to go to go over and get it. It was a lot

of fun. I got to go over and get both of them, actually it was fun. But the story of Denmark is that when the Germans invaded Denmark, Denmark didn't have an army. They were just a little bitty island. They were overpowered. They were…what are we going to do? So they basically negotiated their way out of it. The Danes said, "Alright fine, you win. You have an army. You're going to take us over. You win, but we're going to run the country. We're going to take care of our own. You just go do your war, do your thing and we'll just take care of our own stuff and send you money, whatever." And the Germans said, "Okay, sounds like a deal." Two years later the Germans came back and said, "We want the Jews." And the Danes said, "No. You can't have them." So the Germans began to build camps and forts inside Denmark with the plan to take the Danish Jews to execution with the rest of the Jews. So in three weeks in October of 1943 the Danish shipping fleet, that was like those boats out there, organized and they secretly took 7,200 Jews, all of the entire Danish Jewish population, across the sea to Sweden to safety by hiding them under the deck hulls so the Germans couldn't see them. So if the German patrol boats came by and you've got a fishing boat out in the water, "Oh we're just fishing." The Germans were not sailors, they didn't know better. So they would be under that boat hull, there would be six to eight people laying down underneath the deck in secret compartments being taken to Sweden one at a time. And by doing that the Danes saved their entire Jewish population. And the odd part is that they didn't do it because these people were Jewish. When I went back to Denmark, for example, and you would talk to them about it, they would be very offended that you thought they saved Jews. We didn't save Jews, we saved Danes. We saved my neighbor, my banker, my broker, my butcher. It had nothing to do with being Jews. It was the fact that it was the right thing to do. And that's what they are proud of, is that we did… it didn't matter who you were, you were my neighbor. So it's the story of what happens when good

people do the right thing and what happens when things go horribly bad, when good people let things go horribly bad. And that's kind of the story that we talk to about kids is that you have two options here. Which one's the right one? Which on are you going to choose? Which, again, goes back to the lesson of the triangle.

VR: Speaking about the kids, can you talk about the Eric Alexander Garden of Hope?

IP: Eric Alexander Garden of Hope is named after the son of one of our major donors here who was one of the original founders of the museum, and he was not a victim of the Holocaust. He died in a car accident. But they wanted a place to remember him and that would make a difference that people would see, and so they founded the garden. And there is a child's quote, "_____" (23.16) which is one of the concentration camps where children were sent on the monument. It is a memorial to the children and particularly a memorial to their son.

VR: Can you talk about what it means to put the stone on the monument?

IP: Sure. In the Jewish tradition they typically don't send flowers to funerals. It's just tradition. And it goes way back in history. Flowers just weren't available. You know, it wasn't a custom. You know, when you were in the Middle East or whatever roses were not going to be readily handled and are not going to be available. And so in the Jewish tradition the custom is to leave a stone to bear witness that you were here and that you remembered. So what we ask our visitors to do in the garden is that if you were moved by it to leave a stone to say that you were here and that you were here and you will remember and you will bear witness to what happened. So that's the purpose of leaving the stone is to say, "I was here and will not going to forget."

VR: And there's also a lot of art. Can you talk about the difference between this art and let's say some of the art you will find at the Fine Art's Museum?

IP: A lot of the art that we have here, it varies. We have two changing exhibit galleries and those galleries change every four to six months, there will be something new in those. A lot of times it's photographs, sometimes its actual artwork or paintings or drawings sometimes it's sculpture. It can be textiles. It can be a variety of things. It can be multimedia experience. It can be contemporary. It can be very gloomy, dark, depressing Holocaust stuff. Or it can be the two exhibits we have now, for example, one is an art exhibit, and one is more of a crafts and textiles exhibit, but they are both done by members of the second generation, that is children of Holocaust survivors. And it's their idea of what… in both of those exhibits what they are talking about is the concept of memory. How we learn and how we remember what we remember and why it means something to us. So they as children are looking back through their artwork and remembering what their parents went through and what their parents told them and trying to deal with that. For example, in one of them there is what looks to be a tornado with the bird caught inside it. And the artist says that as a child that's what she remembers her father telling her the Holocaust was like. It was just like a tornado that never stopped. So that's her memory of her concept as a child of the Holocaust was that it was a tornado that just never ended. It was constantly in a swirl of not knowing whether you were going to live or die. So that's kind of what she is saying in that exhibit is talking about that whole idea of how do we remember or how do we inherit you know our family's legacy and how we interpret it forty years later. She wasn't there how does she know what the Holocaust felt like? She knows it felt like a tornado. And so that's the kind of thing you will see here. We've had other things. We've had an exhibit like one of our favorites, we call it *Ships in a Bottle* but it actually is, if you've seen the nautical ships build inside bottles…

VR: Yes, yes.

IP: There's an artist here in town who is very famous he has works in the Smithsonian Institution, the National Maritime Museum or whatever, and he does ships in a bottle. And he did a diorama of the Holocaust using the ships in a bottle concept. So he built a replica of Auschwitz in a glass case, and he built a replica of the Danish boat in the glass case and that kind of thing. We had kids come out of the woodwork wanting to see how he was doing that. So we had him over for a day and we had him actually building some of that stuff when they could watch him. It was one of the most popular exhibits we ever had. Not what you would typically think about at a Holocaust Museum. But he worked through it. They were sitting on the floor and watched him how he did it and how he created the ship inside the bottle and the whole thing. But they learned from it.

VR: Right.

IP: Because while he was building the ship he was telling them the story of the boat. So that is just another way to impart the message that you can get it across. You don't have to see the gory grizzly photos to know what hate is about. And you don't have to see the concentration camps and all the dead bodies to know what the Holocaust was about. There are other ways that you can tell that story at an age appropriate level, and that's what we try to do. And the artwork does some of that. We have an exhibit coming up this fall for an example that's about Curious George the cartoon character.

Do you know that?

VR: Yeah, the monkey?

IP: The monkey. His parents were part of the Holocaust, and they created that cartoon series. And that cartoon series if you followed it through talks about hate and tolerance and prejudice and that kind of thing. So we have an exhibit coming on Curious George and that whole legacy

of the message that they were trying to impart that they pulled off in that cartoon series. A lot of us probably watched it and never knew that was there.

VR: Right, yeah.

IP: Never knew it was there but it was. It is just like Dr. Seuss. We had an exhibit on Dr. Seuss but if you remember that *The Cat and the Hat* and all that. We had an exhibit on him and his cartoons because not only was he a cartoonist that did children's books he was a political commentator.

VR: Right.

IP: He did cartoons that ran in newspapers that were all about World War II and all about what the Nazi's were doing and how we were treating each other and nobody knows that side of him. But the whole exhibit was about Dr. Seuss. You wouldn't expect to see that at a Holocaust museum. It's one more way to tell a story that will get you to come over without thinking, "Oh my God I can't look at those pictures!"

VR: How do you let people know about these different type of exhibits?"

IP: I'm pretty much our marketing guy. So we do have an advertising budget. We rely on the media a lot to cover the free editorials on stories and magazine articles (like this one) to learn what we are doing. We try to, we have a very good relationship with the media. We try to make sure that they are here that they know what is going on, and the harder part for us is to tell them why it's important that they keep coming back. What we can't have is for somebody to say, "I went to the Holocaust Museum, okay been there done that." That's not what we are here for. This is not like Disneyland, I went once, I'm done. The lesson has not been learned or we wouldn't still be fighting in Sudan. There still wouldn't be genocide in Cambodia and Guatemala if the lesson had been learned. You wouldn't see people getting killed and drugged

down the street by a rope in Jasper, Texas, if the lesson had been learned. So what we try to do is to engage people that this is a place if you notice our marketing material says, "Stop hate starting here." This is a starting point not an ending point. And we talk to our audiences in that vein. If you take a docent tour here and our tour takes about an hour and a half to go through a tour here. Docents, they are trained over seven weeks so they know what they are talking about, their facts are correct. They are not trying to sell a message. They are trying to tell the truth. But the whole point is that this is a starting point. When you leave the museum it isn't a "been there done that." When you leave the museum, "okay now what are you going to do?" is the message that we try to leave people with. Which path are you going to take? Are you going to follow the Danish boat path or are you going to be the railcar path or are you going to be a bystander and let it happen again? So that's our message. We try to make sure that the media understands that we are relevant to today. Like one of the things we are doing right now that you wouldn't expect a Holocaust Museum that might get some media attention that we try to be out in the community and say, "This isn't something that happened sixty-five years ago folks. We still got people saying people ought to be locked up in concentration camps today." America did it to the Japanese. It wasn't something Germany did by themselves. We did it here. Americans did some of the same macabre, gory medical experiments here in this country that the Germans did. The exact same stuff. You know we were the first country that started sterilizing people in the 1930s. Germany wasn't the first. We did it. In this country. People don't realize that.

AR: Do you talk about how America did it at the museum?

IP: We had a whole exhibit on medical ethics in the Holocaust that we put on it ran for six months, seventeen lectures, three Nobel Prize winners came and spoke. But the whole exhibit was about how modern medicine had evolved since the Holocaust. Because the Holocaust was so

gory, everybody said, "Oh you can't do that to kids." Well we did. You know and everybody said, "You can't just lock up people because you think they are mentally deficient." Well, we did. Everybody said, "You can't experiment on twins" like Dr. Mengele did. We did. It happened. It's a place called…it's called eugenics. It's a fake science since but they called it a science and it happened in the 1930s at a place in New Jersey. The guy who did it was well respected and everybody though it was the right thing to do. So you know it's one of those things you can't, the whole thing about the Holocaust and those issues is that you can't put them in the bubble and say, "It was Hitler's fault." Because he wasn't the only one who doing it. Did that answer your question?

VR: Yes it did. And you said it's four to six months to not permanent exhibit, so do you change them with the other museum's [exhibits] or how does that work?

IP: We do a couple of things. There's a really good exhibit that's going around the country, around the world or whatever, and we have access to it and we want that exhibit, we bring that in. Then there are times that we will do our own exhibits. You know we'll work with an artist or a curator or someone who has a book or who has a collection to develop that exhibit ourselves. Like the next exhibit that we are going to have here opens in April is called, *Uprooted*. It's about two families who later made their way to Houston, but most of their families died in the Holocaust. We had a collection of all of their items. And so *Uprooted* is about what it means to be yanked out of Germany, taken away from your family, losing everything you have and thrown in another country. And their experience with that as to what it meant to be second generation from them stuck in a land they never knew with people they never intended to know and no way to support themselves. They are just here because they had nowhere else to go. But that's items from our own collection that has been donated to the museum over the years that tells the story

of those two families. So we do it both ways, we do it both ways. We had an exhibit here of photographs by a photographer for the *Rolling Stone* who happens to be a Houston native and he now shoots for *Rolling Stone* and *GQ* and *Vanity Fair* and all of those or whatever. He did a series of portraits of Holocaust victims, Holocaust survivors like the guys who own Three Brothers Bakery. Do you know Three Brothers Bakery?

VR: No I don't.

IP: They are Holocaust survivors, very well known in town. And theirs is one of the pictures in the book. And so we did a photo display of his works here. It got covered all over the world because he was a photographer of *Rolling Stone,* and why is he shooting Holocaust victims? But they were really amazing photos. We did the book, things like this. This is more of our survivors. But I mean just some really amazing work that you got to see in that exhibit where he told their stories. These are the Jucker brothers who later came to Houston and opened Three Brothers Bakery. So we look for different ways to tell the story. The exhibits could be anything. It could be anything, like I said, it could be anything from Curious George, which is the cartoon series, to something very serious. We've had them here to one we called *The Book of Fire*, which was really what you would expect a Holocaust exhibit to be. It was artist renditions of the flames of the crematoriums and the burning bodies and the camps and all of the gory stuff that you don't want to think about. But it was in your face kind of artwork. So it goes both ways. We've done them both.

VR: Can you talk about the people that work here? The people that give tours and how they acquire the knowledge?

IP: Sure. Our staff is a staff of twenty-one and oddly enough most of our staff is not Jewish. In fact I think we only have one Jewish person on staff right now. That varies depending on the

staff. But most of us are not Jewish. And we do the administrative part of things. We do the professional work. The people who actually give the tour are all volunteers. Our docents they go through an interview process. You know we recruit them. They are selected. You know just because you volunteer doesn't mean you get to do it. You know we are looking for that right type of person who believes in the message and can tell a story, and stick to the truth. Don't embellish it. Don't go off of what you heard. If you can't prove it, don't say it, and keep your religion out of it. You know what we are about is telling the story, the facts. Let people make up their own mind. The facts are good enough. It's often said that the Holocaust was the most well documented crime in history. There is more evidence and more artifacts and more photos and all than any other crime that ever happened. It speaks for itself, you don't need to embellish. So they go through seven weeks of training, two nights a week for seven weeks. It's pretty intense to make sure that they can answer most of the questions that they can get and that they know how to respond to most of the questions and that they are good on their feet and handling a crowd whether that crowd is ten-year-old kids or sixty-year-old senior citizens. And based on what do you know or what do you not know. They can handle that. Most of them should be able to handle whatever they are thrown at. They are very well trained and they commit to giving at least one tour a week. Some of them give two or three. Some of them are here every week. We have a set that is here every Saturday afternoon. If you come on a Saturday afternoon there are the same people here 2:30 here to 5:00 every Saturday; they are that dedicated. Actually we are looking for our next class of docents now. We are looking for our next class that would actually start next fall going through.

VR: You said you are recruiting them, so where do you look at?

IP: We go to places like volunteer match and volunteer Houston, the Junior League. Organizations that have the volunteer aspect to them, that to be a part of that organization you have to do some kind of community service, the JCs, the Rotary Club, you know Toast Masters (people who like to give speeches). History groups, history clubs, certainly the Jewish community but you don't have to be Jewish to be a docent. Then we advertise it to the general public. It's on our Facebook page that you can go if you want to learn to be a docent. But not everybody who applies gets to be one. Like for this coming fall session, we are only looking for twelve people. We may get a hundred applications. But it will be the twelve people that we think can best tell that story and keep the crowd engaged. Like I said whether that crowd happens to be ten-year-olds or sixty-five-year-olds, whether they happen to be people who know nothing about the Holocaust or a group of scholars who is visiting from out of town. And they do a really good job at it. I think the toughest one that I ever saw was we had some kids here from Kazakhstan who Congresswoman Shelia Jackson Lee's office brought over here from Kazakhstan and they were touring the United States to learn what the U.S. life was like. We were told they were older and they spoke English. And when they got here, it turned out they were like six and seven years old and they didn't speak English. They had an interpreter with them but they didn't speak English. So this is a pretty heavy subject for six years olds from Kazakhstan that don't speak English. So what do you do at that point? You can't send them home. So our docent at that point (bless her heart) got them in the gallery and sat them on the floor and she talked to them in a way they can understand. She talked to about the situation that was going on in their country with the Shiites and the Sunnis and what discrimination and hate was about, and the translator was able to have that conversation not about the Holocaust but about hating each other and what people do to each other and that triangle lesson. What can you do about it? And

she was able to do that sitting on the floor with six and seven year olds who didn't speak English. And that's probably the hardest tour I've ever seen. The hardest one I've watched anybody give. I mean what do you do; six year olds who don't speak English – and had never been to this country before. This was like a totally, they had no idea before they were here.

VR: They had no idea about the Holocaust?

IP: Nothing.

VR: Of course not they were six. I'm sorry.

IP: So we kept them here about an hour and then took them to The Children's Museum and let them play.

VR: How would you say would be the reaction to the first time visitor here and would it make a difference if they had no knowledge about the Holocaust or if they just knew a little about it?

IP: I don't think it matters if you know a lot about the Holocaust when you come here because there is so much about the Holocaust that nobody can know it all. And the story is always, I'm not changing but we are always learning something new about it. For example just last week, there was an article out where a study had been done that discovered that there weren't just a few thousand camps. Remember when you said there were concentration camps everyone things there were five or six? We've known for a while now there were actually thousands of camps. Whether they were death camps, labor camps, concentration camps, displaced person camps, there were thousands of them. Well as it turns out, last week a new study says that there were probably closer to 48,000 camps and for a while their history said the camps were all kept out of Germany. They were in Poland, Czechoslovakia and all, so the Germans could say, "We didn't do it."

VR: Right.

IP: Well they set the camp up and ran it but the point was they wanted to say they didn't do it. Well there actually were death camps in Germany and that documentation just came up last week literally. So whatever you know about the Holocaust you're always going to learn something new. And you may learn it from a different perspective. You get some people who will come here and they will say, "I don't need to come here, I'm Jewish. I've learned everything I need to learn about the Holocaust in school." Well, no you didn't. If we had learned everything there was to know, why is that stuff still going on in Sudan and Guatemala and Columbia and Congo? It's still going on. Obviously we didn't learn everything. So anybody who comes can come and what I would say to anybody who thinks they know it all, is what they probably don't understand is that a large part of the message of the Holocaust is inspirational. If you come on that Saturday afternoon like I talked about one of the guys that you would see on a Saturday afternoon is a survivor of the Holocaust. He stands at the front door every Saturday afternoon and greets people as they come in and he talks about his story and why it's important that they know his story. And when you hear what he went through and this guy who is close to eighty years old takes his Saturday afternoon to come and tell you why it's important, about how we treat other people. You can't leave here being the same person. I mean he holds them captive. I mean they are spellbound listening to him and what he has to say. You can't hear that and walk out the door and go, "Oh well. Yeah I don't need to think about that." Because you hear what happened to him. When you hear Stefi Altman talk about having to watch her sister get murdered in front of her eyes as a kid. How do you put that out of your head at night? If you are the bully do you just beat up somebody at school and you hear that story? Maybe tomorrow you don't want to be such a butt after all are you? It's a place of inspiration. You can learn a lot around here. We have one survivor who unfortunately just passed away. But to give you an idea

of that inspiration that I'm talking about. Is…when he was captured, he was put on a work detail and they made him make glass medicine bottles for the soldiers. So he made little glass medicine bottles while he was in the camps that was his job. So every day all day long he made little glass medicine bottles. And they taught him how to do it. Now you would think when he got out of the camp the last thing he would ever want to do would be to touch another glass bottle.

VR: Right.

IP: He became a master glass blower, went to Chicago and started making glass furniture that is in museums around the world now. The *Chronicle* has written stories about him. The *New York Times* has written stories about him. But he makes incredibly beautiful glass art work. And he learned to do that making little glass bottles in the Holocaust. I don't know about you, but if you made me do that for twenty years I wouldn't ever want to touch glass again just to spite you. You know I'd be drinking out of plastic the rest of my life. But he turned it into his artwork. It's just incredible, beautiful; and to make furniture out of it? That's museum quality furniture. And then he goes and when he does his story, he likes to tell his story at the glass factory. So he lets people come over in small groups and, well, before he passed away, we would take them out in small groups and we might have twenty or thirty people there. He would tell his story while he made something, and you got to watch him make a butterfly or watch him create whatever it was he was making that day out of spun glass. He learned it and all of this. So there is a lot, that inspirational story is this guy could come through that and turn his life around. And you know, I go home and I complain because the dog is acting up.

VR: Right. So the first time I came here was on a high school trip, right. We were learning about World War II and the Holocaust. Would you say it's important for people, for high school

kids that are learning about World War II and the Holocaust to come visit the museum so they can get a deeper sense?

IP: Absolutely, because you can't learn it from a book. You can learn the facts. I love the facts. As every day goes by but the knowledge gets better, and there's more proof, as I said. But what you can't get from the book is the feeling that you're going to get when you hear somebody talk about their experience. What you can't get from the book is what you will get from the film at the end of the exhibit where you hear someone who might live right down the street from you saying, "It happened to me. If it happened to me, it can happen to you, and your neighbor and your brother or your son or you daughter." And you don't get that from a book. You don't get the enormity of it from a book. And that's what I think the museum brings to the Holocaust that you just can't learn in a class and that's why schools send children here every day. Usually there's busloads of kids coming in and out of here. I don't know what the lobby is like today. But this is a fairly busy time of the year for us. In April and May is when typically they are teaching the Holocaust, and we are in busses all day long coming in and out because you can't learn that from the book. And there just aren't enough survivors left, you know, to send one to every school.

VR: What are some of the reactions from… do you have anything that's, I guess, deny or can't accept it?

IP: It varies not too many people that leave the comments deny it. Now we do get people who will go on Facebook, who will go on the website and try to deny it. You know who will try and say it never happened, who will say it was a lie, that it was made up. And you know but most, we don't have trouble with people who come here because once you go in and you see the exhibits and you see that there are real proof, like if it was fake, why did the *Houston Chronicle*

have a page one story about it in 1944? Did we fake that? Where did Chaja's dress come from? Did we fake that? We have a letter from Albert Einstein himself in the permanent exhibit thanking a Houston businessman for helping to rescue Jews. Was that fake? It's Albert Einstein's signature. He faked it? No. No. Like I said the Holocaust is the most well documented crime in history. You know there is more than enough proof for anybody who wants to come with an open mind and take a look. And that's, and I'm out of the community and you run into those kind of people and they say, "Well it never happened or it's not relevant today. I'm not Jewish it doesn't mean anything to me." That's exactly what I tell them. Take an hour. You've got an hour you sit on the couch and watch TV take that hour and come over to the Museum and let's see if it's relevant to you or not. See if you believe it then. Just get off the couch for one hour and we'll change your mind. Go stand in the railcar. And think of what it would be like to be in the railcar with 250 other people in the middle of winter, no clothes, no water, no food, and no idea where you are going. Half of you sick or dying. Just stand in the railcar and think of what that would feel like for a minute. You can't learn that in a book.

VR: Do you have any kids that are usually like the tough guys change their reactions?

IP: Sure you see them when they line up outside. When they are getting ready to come in, you can tell who the leaders of the pack are. Just because they are kids this is the way they act and who is in charge and who is not. Who is following and who is leading and who is trying to act like a big man. And by the time they start going to the permanent exhibit they are quiet. They are respectful. They are paying attention. And they know that this is not a place where they are going to monkey around too much. But usually the time that the docents start talking, they get engaged and they are listening. Now little bitty kids we don't recommend it for anyway. They will have a harder time holding on to the thought process. But school age kids, they come

in and they get quiet, and they are paying attention. The docents try to engage them. They try to make it a two-way conversation so that they have a chance to ask questions and to challenge things, and they have an opportunity to say, "Well so and so said, that wasn't true." Well let's talk about that. And it's a two-way conversation so it keeps them engaged. But you see in the comment books (you know we ask people to leave a comment when they come through) and you read some of those and you'll see the changes that people walk out of here with. You know, sometimes it's not necessarily the change you would hope for, but you know you touched them in some way. You will get some wayward comments like, "Okay I hear that I touched you and that wasn't really the message." You know like we had one where a kid wrote and he said, "He was glad that God had found a place for the Jews." Well his heart was in the right place but that really wasn't the message. You know we're really not a place for the Jews. It's a Holocaust museum, yes; and I know what he meant. And we had obviously touched him in some way but that wasn't really the point of the visit. And then you will have others who express it just eloquently. It varies; it's not just kids. We have adults who come here and don't get it. And that's one of those reasons why we encourage people to come back. It's a lot to take in one hour or even two hours. The docent tour if you take the guided tour that's free. They are offered every weekend. Or you can schedule one if you have a group of ten or more, you can schedule one during the week, they will arrange for that. But on the weekends we have them every hour on the weekend. And we just come in and follow around the tour and that takes usually around an hour and a half on Saturday to do the full tour. It starts on one side of the museum. You've still got two changing exhibits, the Memorial room, and the railcar, and the Danish boat so it really is an afternoon affair or a half day affair if you want to come and see everything; and that's a lot to take in, in one setting. So it really, the best experience is to come and then to come

back again maybe when maybe the exhibit changes and get a different look, a different perspective on what you saw. Bring a different group of people with you next time.

VR: Sure, and what kind of support is given by the community?

IP: In terms of finances or just generally?

VR: Just general people or companies or businesses?

IP: We have a variety of donors. I mean our annual fundraiser brings in about a million and a half donors and that's from individuals, it's from companies, it's from foundations. You know it's from all across the board. Some of the, if you know Shelby Hodge is one of the cultural or social writers that talks about that the movers and shakers if you want to know where they are, they are at our dinner. You know we have got some of the most important people in town who support us, both financially and actually are on our board of directors. They provide guidance and help and assistance. You know hopefully in our future there will be a new building, and they will be actively involved in that, in terms of expanding our message because right now we can easily fill this building without trying real hard. You know we desperately need more space, more classroom space. Because we do, not only do we do the museum, but we also have outreach programs that provide the community as well and schools come here. Like we do a lot with teacher training. We touch, there are 30,000 school kids a year that come here on tours. That's organized school tours, their schools send them here, 30,000 kids a year, and then on top of that we train teachers. We have two, two-week-long seminars every year, spring and fall, where we bring in teachers from all over the country and teach them how to teach the Holocaust back in their own schools and give them that material and then we _____. (54.22) And then we also have a trunk program to where any teacher anywhere in the country can ask for a trunk of materials to teach their class for thirty days. And we'll send her literally a trunk full of

books and DVDs and comic books and posters, whatever, to teach a class of thirty kids for thirty days about the Holocaust and other genocides. No cost, we pay for it. We pay the shipping and everything. That's touched millions of kids all over the United States. I mean literally millions of kids because that trunk goes out it comes back, it goes back out again, it goes back out again, it goes back out again. That teacher is not only teaching that thirty kids this time, now she's teaching that every year to two sets of students every year. Every semester she's got a whole new batch of people, and she's taught, she's prepared, and she's got her materials. So our outreach like that is just constantly growing. Right now we are turning that into an iPad-based program because kids are all about the toys these days. So instead of sending the trunk load of work, we are going to send you thirty iPads that are already loaded up with what you need to know about the Holocaust for an age appropriate fashion. So if you are in a middle school you can set your iPad to the middle school program and each kid gets and iPad to learn for thirty days. So we are trying to stay on top of things to make sure that our message keeps getting told, keeps getting out there in new ways, and we are constantly doing that. One really neat thing that we are looking at is hopefully this fall if we work all the details out (it's not final yet), but there's a group in town called Houston A+ Works which is an innovative educational program that kind of approaches education from a different viewpoint. They don't believe in the traditional classroom setting. They don't believe that necessarily that you learn best by learning how to take a test. They believe that you learn best by being out in the world and out in the community. Well they are talking to us now by having their mobile school based out of one of our classrooms. So two days a week this fall those kids will start their day here at the museum in our classroom and that learning about the Holocaust and genocide in hate and other social issues and then going from here maybe over to the Museum of Fine Arts or the Children's Museum or the Health Museum

or the Jung Center or Rice or whatever, but this would be their base. So we would basically have a school running out of our classroom. That's pretty novel. That's pretty neat. And I said, that hopefully will start this fall. We are still in negotiations now but what does that cost and what is the liability of taking on a class of thirty kids for a year and can we give up that amount of space. But it's looking pretty promising. We are always looking for one more way to get out in the community and talk. It's not just a museum that you go visit and, okay did that.

VR: What kind of recognitions has the museum received?

IP: A ton. Do you want me to print a list? I mean literally! We are well thought of. We are not the biggest in terms of space. But if you go to our website…and look under About Us,, Museum, and Honors, there you go.

VR: Wow!

IP: We were just named in the top ten of Houston museums by the *Houston Press*. Now you say, "Okay, top ten, big deal." But there are 140 museums in Houston. We are only one of four in all of Houston that is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, which is the biggest honor that you can get in the United States as a museum. It's a process that you go through where you submit tons of paperwork and they actually send people down to critique what you do and they spend a week here. They go look at….they will do things like, "Okay you said you had a Nazi flag from 1941 given to you by Joe Blow go get it." Can you find it? Where is it? What condition is it in? They actually test that. And how are you storing that? This is cotton do you know what to do with cotton so that cotton doesn't fall apart? I mean they test you to that level. They look at the signage and go, "Your signage is not ADA compliant. How is somebody who has bad eyes supposed to read this?" They go to that level of detail. We are one of four in Houston.

VR: In Houston?

IP: Yeah. Only 7% in the entire country are accredited. Only four in Houston and we are one of the four, so that's pretty good.

VR: That is good.

IP: For a little museum. But you know take a look at that. It's tons of stuff. We like to say that we may not be the second biggest but we are the second most influential in the United States. There are thirteen actual Holocaust Museums in the United States. Now there are other educational centers, but they are not full-fledged museums. There are fourteen actual museums and we say that we are the second most influential because when you add up all of the students that we touch with those trunks or the teachers that we've trained or the people that we have gone out and we've sent to schools, we've touched more people than anybody else but the U.S. museum over the course of the year.

VR: So does every museum have their own programs and their own set up?

IP: They are all independent; they are all separate.

VR: Okay and you said that some of the stuff that you kind of do in the future do you have any more plans of where you want to take the museum in the future?

IP: Well clearly what we would like to do is we really want to make some firm steps into getting the message across that our mission is relevant today. That we really want to do some things media wise and some advertising campaigns and getting our visibility up so that people understand that this is not something you do once, that it is a message that is relevant to today. You know some of the same stuff that we saw happening in 1943 and 1944 is still happening today. And we can do something about it and stop hate starting here. There is a role to be done. There's a role to play, so we really want to work on that quite a bit in the next role. We really

want to work on technology in terms of bringing that more into play to tell the story of the Holocaust. For example, our destroyed community slab when you walked in and you saw the big slab coming up.

VR: Yeah.

IP: All of those are names of communities where the Jewish community was completely obliterated; there's nothing left. Town may still exist, like Warsaw is one, the plaque's out there. Warsaw still exists but the Jewish community is gone. No synagogues, no butchers, no schools, no nothing. They were all completely killed, wiped out. What we'd like to do is turn that into an interactive component where when you come into the building, you touch the stone on Warsaw, you get to hear from a survivor who came from Warsaw.

VR: Okay.

IP: And you get to see their story and you get to see pictures of what Warsaw was like before and what Warsaw is like now, and you get to hear that survivor tell you what was lost.

VR: Right.

IP And what could have been if you think about. And that's the big message of the Holocaust you know it's sad that six million people died, but think about how much sadder it is…what if one of those people might have had the cure for cancer? What if one of those people may have been the next Louis Pasteur or the next Albert Einstein and could have saved millions of lives? All you needed was one. What did we lose? We'll never know. So technology if we could bring that into the building and to let that story get told out through the eyes of the people who were there, who saw it and what they lost and what they think the world lost through what happened, then we can move that forward. Things like the iPad trunk and the mobile school, you know, that kind of thing that we're working on. And then hopefully in our future there's a new

building because we desperately need more space. You know with our lectures, we do evening lectures, we do all kinds of different events at night. Our theatre only holds 120 people and I can fill 120 people really easy. So you know if we are going to have a really big event we have to have it somewhere else. We don't want to do that. So we own the lot next door where the little bank is in the parking out there. We own that lot. So hopefully at some point in the future we were planning on it, the economy went bad so hopefully at some point in the future we will start looking at what we can do with that lot to maybe bring in more classroom space, a theatre that kind of thing.

VR: And the mission of the museum is "Remembrance, Education, and Hope"?

IP: Yes.

VR: Can you talk about how those three things are so important for the museum?

IP: Well really we remember the six million Jews who lost their lives, and we honor the survivor's legacy, and we teach the dangers of hatred and apathy. That's our prime goal and you know they go hand in hand because you can't get to hope if you don't remember the past and you're not educated enough about it to know how to change the future. And that's what it's all about. You know as I said this is not a "check it off we did that." This is an educational experience where we want you to leave with an action item on your plate. What are you going to do when you walk out the door? Which one of the rows on that triangle are you going to play? So the hope is that it doesn't happen again, that we can by educating people about what happened and remembering what happened and never letting that story go away, that the hope is that we can actually do something about today, not forty years from now but today. And it's as simple as it is. We want people to leave with a different frame of reference, a different state of mind. It's easy to develop attitudes in this day and time where you can go and that's them or

that's just how they behave. Well who's they? Who defines "they"? You know you hear people today talking about a Jewish race. There's no such thing. There is no Jewish race. Judaism is a religion and a culture. You could just as easily be Jewish as I could. I'm not but it's not a race. Hitler says it was. But biologists say it's not. People with just that kind of mentality creeps in and the next thing you know it's okay for you to be different from me so I don't have to like you because you are different. And if I don't like you, I don't necessarily have to put up with you. And I don't necessarily have to put up with you, does that mean I can mistreat you or ignore you or run over you? It's connect the dots, and where does it go? Does that answer your question?

VR: Yes. And is there anything that we didn't touch on that you would like to talk about?

IP: We covered a lot of it.

VR: We got it?

IP: A lot of it. You know we feel like we are one of the most important institutions in Houston because of the numbers of children that we touch every single day and because we are not an entity where you go and just learn okay how a thunderstorm develops or you go and you play with butterflies. Or you go in and you climb a jungle gym and have a fun afternoon. What we want you to come here is to come here and leave a different person. You know maybe we can all be different people. Even if you don't have a mindset of hate or discrimination or prejudice, we can all do a better job. You know that's what we all hopefully will do. We can do and there aren't too many other groups in town to do that. You know seven days a week 360 days a year free of charge.

VR: That's it.

IP: Thank you is that what you needed?

VR: Yes that was perfect.

End of interview