

Interview with Estelle R. Rubenstein

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Foreign Service Spouse Series

ESTELLE R. RUBENSTEIN

Interviewed by: Morris Weiss

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Q: On behalf of the Foreign Service Spouse Oral History Program, while I'm here in Florida interviewing Irwin Rubenstein, Mrs. Estelle Rubenstein has agreed to be interviewed also. We're sitting in her new home in Plantation, Florida on Thursday, February 24, 1994.

Mrs. Rubenstein, would you identify yourself as yourself rather than as the wife of a Foreign Service Officer and in regard to your ten-year experience as [the wife of a labor attach#].

RUBENSTEIN: My name is Estelle R. Rubenstein. I grew up in Durham, North Carolina where my father was a furniture merchant and my mother did a lot of volunteer work and was a homemaker. I got a degree from the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, graduated in 1949, and taught for three years in Raleigh, North Carolina — shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. After three years there I went to Washington, DC where I worked as a legal secretary for the Steptoe & Johnson for eight years.

Q: That's a famous law firm that did a whole lot of labor work. Did you do a whole lot of labor work?

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RUBENSTEIN: No. I worked the first two years for a tax lawyer, Louis A. Boxleitner, who left the firm, and I worked six years as a secretary to the lawyer who was the administrative head, William E. Miller — he ran the law office. The head of the firm was Louis A. Johnson, a former Secretary of Defense under Truman. During that time, in 1958, I met Irwin. We dated off and on and then in early 1960 he was sent to Ecuador on temporary assignment.

Q: For the Foreign Service?

RUBENSTEIN: For AID. He was supposed to look into the labor situation there for three or four months and write a situation report. Before he left Washington he indicated to me that if he felt the same way when he came back, he would like us to talk about getting married. So, I thought to myself, “Okay, when he comes back, I won't take any courses at George Washington University — I was in the middle of getting my Master's in Education — I thought, since he doesn't like it when I have homework at night and wants me to be free to go out.” And lo and behold, while he was still in Ecuador, they offered him this position as a permanent position.

Q: The AID labor position, not attach# position?

RUBENSTEIN: Not attach#. I think he was called AID labor advisor. So from Ecuador he proposed by letter, and I had to make a very sudden decision about whether I was going to get married, because he wasn't coming back to spend any time, we were not going to have “more time” for what I had in mind of getting to know him better.

So I said “yes.” He knew he was coming back for two weeks but the government wouldn't tell him which two weeks. So my poor mother had to plan a wedding not knowing the date for it. She was in Durham, NC where I was going to be married, so she lined up the rabbi and the caterer and the orchestra leader and just said, “Stand by, Estelle is getting married.” And truly we didn't know until the last of June when he was returning to the

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States. The wedding invitations went out on the July 4 weekend and we were married July 17.

Q: Good preparation for the Foreign Service!

RUBENSTEIN: Oh yes. And just to make things even more interesting, on the weekend of July 4, I went home to Durham for a shower in my honor. I had combined all this with a visit to a gynecologist for a pre-marital exam, and he found that I needed to have an ovary removed. He wanted me to check into the hospital immediately, that hour — it was about 10 a.m. — and I said, “But there are about 100 women who are giving a luncheon for me. Is it okay if I attend?” He hesitated and then said, “Okay; right after the luncheon check into the hospital.”

So that's what I did. They operated on Tuesday. I left the hospital the next Tuesday barely able to walk and we were married the following Sunday; I was barely able to walk down the aisle. We had a one-night honeymoon in Durham, then had to fly to Washington. A couple of days later, I remember, I went into Woodward & Lothrop because overseas I wouldn't have a chance to shop for anything, I needed a lot of kitchen things. I walked in, the saleswoman said, “May I help you?” and I said, “Yes, [she laughs] “do you have a chair where I can sit down? Then we can talk about what I want to buy.”

So two weeks after we were married under those circumstances I arrived in Guayaquil, Ecuador. I was a person who had never, never wanted to travel before — if you had given me a million dollars, travel was the last thing I would have done. There were only two places in the world I had thought I would like to see — Israel and Switzerland. And here I was: in Guayaquil, Ecuador. And I loved it.

Q: What about the strangeness?

RUBENSTEIN: It didn't seem strange, everybody was so friendly, the people I met in the consulate, and the Ecuadorians — everybody was very warm and friendly; and the climate

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was warm, which I enjoyed. Guayaquil was at sea level, it's on the Guayas River. Many people think of this city as a hell hole. I loved it, I really did; it was fascinating. I took lots of home movies just wandering around all by myself.

Q: Did you know Spanish at all?

RUBENSTEIN: Well, that's a good question. When I was in college when I was 18, I had two years of Spanish. I got married when I was 32, never having used Spanish at all. But I had had a wonderful teacher at Duke University, Mrs. Dillingham, so I had a great basis for grammar and vocabulary. My freshman year was at Duke, then I transferred to the Woman's College (in Greensboro) and had a second year of Spanish there. My first year's Spanish was really an accelerated course, two years in one. I had very good grammatical background and vocabulary; I won't go into her teaching method but it was the most marvelous way of teaching a language. Unfortunately, even with all her wonderful teaching I didn't speak the language fluently, I just knew a lot of words, and knew the grammar.

So when I arrived in Ecuador it was hard for me to understand Spanish although I could speak it, and could do so correctly. I got a tutor right away and he marveled at how much I remembered since I was 18 — all the exceptions to the rules, things like that. But even to this day I'm not as efficient at hearing Spanish as I'd like it be. I can get my ideas across, at sort of a Three level, and I enjoyed the language very much.

But getting back to Guayaquil, I really did love the city. And I must say that even though I had never wanted to travel, I enjoyed every post that we ever lived in. I was always happy while I was there and I was sorry to leave each time.

Q: How much was this liking Guayaquil related to the fact that in many of these interviews we see that people have an affection for the first post they're exposed to and some people find it very difficult. Some people have a special feeling for their first post.

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RUBENSTEIN: I've heard that but I don't think it applies to me. I really feel that I liked all the posts equally. Although most of them were in Latin America, they were all very different. Our circumstances changed too, and we started having children and things like that; so each place was different.

Q: At this point, did you have regrets about having a career while overseas?

RUBENSTEIN: None whatsoever. From the time I was a little girl I wanted to have children, so although I enjoyed my three years of teaching and my eight years as legal secretary, I wanted to have children, I wanted to be a wife and mother. And that was very important to me. It never entered my mind that I was in second position. I was wife and hostess and mother. We had our first child at the end of our tour in Guayaquil

Q: What sort of jobs did you have other than parent and wife? Did the children like Foreign Service life?

RUBENSTEIN: In Uruguay I wrote a newsletter for the American Womens' Group; in Israel and Mexico I edited cookbooks for the Embassy Womens' Group.

Well, I have to skip ahead many years and tell you that when we were in Tel Aviv a very good friend of mine said to our firstborn, who was then a teenage girl, "Ellen, tell me about the problems you had growing up overseas." My daughter looked at her and said, "What problems?" And, really, I think that was the attitude of all our kids. They loved it. I still remember, when we were living in Washington for three years and it was our children's really first experience of living in the States — they were all in elementary school, they got used to Washington and TV programs, which they never had overseas — Irwin came home at the end of those three years — my mother was visiting, I remember that so clearly — he came home and said, "We're going to live in Managua, Nicaragua" and my children said, "WHOOPEE!" and I was so embarrassed because my mother could see (laughing) that my kids were very happy to be leaving the United States. You know, my mother looked

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at Foreign Service as something like, “when are they going to let you come back to the States?” that as though coming to the U.S. was a goal of ours.

Q: What were the ages of your children at the time they expressed themselves in that way?

RUBENSTEIN: Michael was by then nine, Lisa was 12 and Ellen was 14.

Q: So they were leaving all their friends at school, because junior high is a time when you make friends and nevertheless they had remembered so much of their earlier experience in the Foreign Service that they ...

RUBENSTEIN: They loved overseas life, they felt it was easier to make friends because there were a lot of other kids who were in the same boat. Coming back to the States was difficult for them. They didn't come back very often. That one time was for three years, then we only came back, as far as public school was concerned, one time in 1978 from January until June, when we were studying Hebrew right before we went to Israel. Then two of our girls graduated from The American School while we were in Israel. From Israel we went to Mexico City where our son graduated from high school. So they didn't have very much time in the States except for home leave; their schooling was mostly overseas.

Q: We can get into the question of their education and various other things that happened in their early life after we continue with you. You were a Foreign Service wife doing a lot of entertaining. Did the subject matter of Irwin's work interest you at all, or ... ?

RUBENSTEIN: The fact that he wanted to help laborers interested me in general. I never got involved with the nitty gritty of his work but we did a lot of entertaining not because he was in labor but because he was Irwin Rubenstein and he's a “people person” and he just likes to have a lot of people around all the time and entertain. As a matter of fact, when we got to Ecuador and I was house-hunting, the thing uppermost in his mind was, “let's get in a house so we can have a housewarming party.” By then, since he had been in

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Ecuador four months before I got down there, he knew hundreds and hundreds of people and he wanted [laughing] to have them all over to the house. The first party I ever gave was for about 200 people. It was a nightmare for me but [laughing even more] it was a very successful party. I prepared all the food. I had a maid but I didn't have enough sense to know about caterers!

Q: Or expense accounts for entertainment.

RUBENSTEIN: I must say that even when I learned about caterers, I always felt I needed to do it myself.

Q: On this question of the attitude towards your husband being a labor attaché, you knew, of course his interest before you were married. Was your family background one with anti-labor attitude, or pro-labor, or neutral, or ...

RUBENSTEIN: Definitely pro-labor.

Q: Your father was a liberal businessman?

RUBENSTEIN: Yes. I remember consulting with him when I was in college because something had come up about a certain labor leader and I wanted to get my father's viewpoint to sort of give me a starting point on how I should view John L. Lewis in relation to what other people were saying. And my parents always supported the labor government in Israel, for example.

Q: What was his business. Was it in any way — was it organized? Probably not ...

RUBENSTEIN: It was very small. He had a bookkeeper and his brother. He had a furniture store; there were just a few people in it.

Q: So you didn't have to change your general economic or political outlook for your husband ...

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RUBENSTEIN: Not at all. And he knew also the background of my mother's mother, who got arrested in the early 1900s in Russia under the Czar, as a girl of 18, for distributing pamphlets trying to organize workingmen. She was put in prison for several months and lost teeth because of malnutrition and was in bad shape. There was an amnesty declared and she was freed, along with her then boy friend, and they fled Russia, got as far as London, then eventually to the United States. My mother came to this country when she was nine months old.

Q: Well, then, your years working for Steptoe & Johnson and some of their labor attorneys working for their very famous employer-oriented businesses, that didn't rub off on you?

RUBENSTEIN: No.

Q: It's a very good firm, by the way. I knew many of the people ...

RUBENSTEIN: Guy Farmer was head of the National Labor Relations Board.

Q: He was one of the "fair" employers who felt pro-Labor. Later on they had some employer representatives of assistance orientation but Guy Farmer, whom I knew well, was known as an anti-Labor person.

RUBENSTEIN: Did you know William B. Devaney also?

Q: No.

RUBENSTEIN: He was with Steptoe & Johnson.

Q: Well, I get an idea how your background influenced your wonderful early years in the Foreign Service. You've had many fewer problems than some of the people I've interviewed which you dealt with successfully. Any special things that you'd like to mention? The thing I didn't bring with me was a list, which I'll show you another time, of things which you should mention — special difficulties with children, special difficulties

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with entertaining, special difficulties, if you had them, with the wives of your husband's superiors. The situation that we found, even back then, was the disposition of some of the wives of younger officers to accept, much more than they do now, the idea that the wife of my husband's boss has something to say about ...

RUBENSTEIN: Our first husband-wife deal was not in the capital, so we did not have to deal with the ambassador and his wife and they didn't have to bother with us either. Our consul general was Ward C. Allen and his wife "Mid", who were wonderful, wonderful people, we loved them dearly. I still correspond with Mid and this is from 1960 to 1994. Ward, unfortunately, died a few years ago but we're still very good friends with Mid. So that was a lovely post, I mean, there was...

Q: It was, though, a small post.

RUBENSTEIN: Okay, there are smaller posts, but this was small to me.

Q: But she was a Foreign Service wife, in the diplomatic corps, whereas Irwin was in the AID Mission.

RUBENSTEIN: Yes, but still Ward Allen was his boss, there's no question about that, but Ward Allen was the kind of person who, if he was driving along toward home, if he saw a pothole in the street he would get out and push some rocks into the hole, to make things better for the next person. We had one experience when the Ambassador's wife was coming down to Guayaquil for a tea and everybody in the consulate was up in arms — "What are you going to wear? Are you going to wear stockings?" (laughing) We didn't wear stockings in Guayaquil, it was a tropical city. And a hat, and gloves and all the rest of it, and we talked about it.

Finally the day came. We got there early and somebody went to put the centerpiece on the dining room table and some of the water spilled out and they had to take everything off and iron the tablecloth real fast — it was very hectic, very chaotic. Then we all sat

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around for the tea and it got to be five-thirty and we knew that we couldn't leave until the ambassador's wife left. And some of the women had little children, and families to feed and so forth, and we couldn't leave and we couldn't leave. Well, finally, I guess it was about six o'clock, some of the women did start sneaking out, and since I didn't have any children at the time and I figured Irwin knew where I was, I stayed till the bitter end. I later learned that the ambassador's wife felt that she was sort of hostessing this thing and didn't feel she had to leave! (laughing heartily)

Anyway, later we got to Lima, Peru and the ambassador's wife was very laid back, there was practically nothing ordered from the top down. If it was time for the embassy to collect for the Red Cross, for example, for the country of Peru, she would get together the wives of the department heads, have a little meeting with them and they would do whatever they did and the rest of us never really were involved. As a matter of fact, a very good friend of mine whose husband was with AID and saw that there was no organization of embassy wives and she had just come from Turkey where there was a big AID contingency, started an AID organization and it became very active but it wasn't embassy, it was...

Q: American women?

RUBENSTEIN: Yes, sort of like that. And then, I don't remember any untoward pressure from above. Our next post was Uruguay and the Ambassador's wife there was, I think, unsure of herself and there may have been some personality problems. But we all rolled with the punches, and it was during that time that the edict came down that wives are not part of their husband's work ...

Q: That was the early 70s.

RUBENSTEIN: That's when we were just about leaving Uruguay, '71 or '72.

Q: Was Irwin in the Foreign Service then?

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RUBENSTEIN: Yes. The chronology is that he was with AID for two years, then we went back to Washington for about a year on loan to the Labor Department, and then we went in laterally to the State Department, so our first three years were not State Department but after that, yes.

Q: Any particular change in your attitude or your experiences between when he was what might be appropriate to say a "second-class diplomatic service" until he was actually in the Foreign Service? Any differences you had to deal with because of that shift from AID.

RUBENSTEIN: No, none whatsoever. It certainly didn't affect me in any way, I don't remember any ...

Q: You still hadn't resumed teaching at all because of the youth of your children, at any of these posts, is that right?

RUBENSTEIN: No, I didn't teach after I got married. I did a lot of volunteer work but didn't teach again; just during the three years before I worked for Steptoe & Johnson. A lot of volunteer work and a lot of entertaining.

Q: You're now in Peru ...

RUBENSTEIN: And in Peru I arrived pregnant with our second child and by the time our tour ended, three and a half years later, we had a third child, whom I carried in my arms as we were leaving Peru. So I didn't have a lot of spare time there.

Q: All three of your children were born abroad.

RUBENSTEIN: Right. The first in Ecuador and two in Peru. So I was a little busy in Peru, I didn't do an awful lot of volunteer work then. In Uruguay the children were still small and I was busy with their school activities. Oh, and in the last nine months of our three and a half years in Uruguay was the era of the Tupamaro Terrorism, so our life changed

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drastically because of that. One night a Tupamaro group came to our house with the intention of kidnaping Irwin. There was a knock on the door and I didn't open it, A man asked for "Ingeniero Rubenstein." Well, Irwin is not an engineer, so I didn't open the door, I said, "He doesn't live here." Our house was long and narrow, so the man must have thought it was two apartments or two houses. He went around to the kitchen door and asked again for "Ingeniero Rubenstein." I repeated that he didn't live there and the man left. Irwin had looked out our bedroom window and had seen him coming up the driveway with, it looked like, a briefcase and something else rolled up under his arm — I'm not sure now of all these details — but after this man left we got inquiries from both of our neighbors, one of whom we had never talked to, and he reported that this man had been lurking around and his dog had been barking.

Q: This was not an American?

RUBENSTEIN: No, an Uruguayan. And the woman on the other side came over to ask if we were all right because she said a man had been asking a lot of questions about us. So there was something going on. Irwin reported this to the embassy and from that night on everybody in the embassy had 24-hour guards, Uruguayan security people — sometimes they stayed in the house, sometimes they were up on the roof, or lived in the house; they became like members of the family. In the morning when Embassy officers left their houses to go to the Embassy, the guards would come in a convoy — three cars full of guns; the Americans rode, I think, I'm not sure, in the middle car, maybe there were guns in front and back. The guard would accompany the officer to the car, then another guard who stayed in our house would accompany our children to the school bus, which stopped in front of the house. It was very difficult.

Q: What impact did that have on the kids and you?

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RUBENSTEIN: None. (she laughs heartily)The kids played with the guards, and I went about my business, because the feeling was that the Tupamaros would not harm wives and children. So if I had to go to the supermarket, I went, and so forth.

Q: So in Uruguay you had your first experience with those security people, which didn't affect your work adversely.

RUBENSTEIN: No, didn't affect my family. The men were, well, there was a lot of tension at the beginning, and we became much more aware of our surroundings. One night we went down to the embassy to meet some people to go to a movie and the guards accompanied us to a certain point downtown, then we got out of the car and were on our own after that. They felt that the dangerous parts were when you were leaving and arriving at the embassy, but as long as you'd left, (laughing), they didn't care, they didn't follow you around every minute.

So we were walking along on our way to the movie and I remember Irwin either nudging me or whispering to me and we stopped in front of a store window in order to see the reflection of who was behind us — the men were suspicious because they felt someone was following us. It turned out the guards were following u(laughing again) to see that we were all right but the officers hadn't recognized them at first! That's one of the very few things that I can recall. I do remember when we gave a party one night and had invited a lot of the embassy people who were walking around with guns as part of their job. When they entered the hous(she laughs) we made them check their guns in the closet out of the way of the children.

Q: Your next post?

RUBENSTEIN: Cali, Colombia. That was so-o-o lovely. Again, not the capital city. It had perfect weather, eternal spring. We had a lovely home, after we got it fixed up, because it had deteriorated. The kitchen was a disaster; we sent pictures of it to the embassy to show

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what it looked like. Seeing Irwin later, the ambassador asked, "What slum are you living in?" It was unbelievable — this beautiful home with gorgeous swimming pool and so forth, and the kitchen you wouldn't believe. Underneath the sink the shelf had rusted, you could have put a basketball in the hole. There was no hot water. Such a mess.

Q: Was it an embassy house?

RUBENSTEIN: Yes.

Q: Well, you had a job ...

RUBENSTEIN: Yes, and when we left it was a beautiful kitchen; yellow Formica, stainless steel. I think it's now owned by a drug vendor. There's no consulate there now.

Q: Was Irwin there a Labor officer?

RUBENSTEIN: No. In Cali he was consul.

Q: We'll get to that when we interview him. And still, the kids are getting along fine.

RUBENSTEIN: Very happy. They had really good schools — good teachers, good schools. When we were in Uruguay there was an American school but it had just been started and some of the people who were living there at the time didn't send their children there and didn't recommend it highly to us; they did recommend a British school, St. Andrew's, where both of our girls began their schooling. It was a really good school so far as basics were concerned — reading, arithmetic, discipline and all that. I didn't realize until I got back to the U.S. after Colombia the contrast: in Uruguay there had been no parent-school relationships, we were not invited ever to come see anything. Well, their school was not a school building, it was a house, really, they didn't have an auditorium or a real school playground — a few tires and a few swings — but we weren't invited until the last day to come walk around the room and see things on the bulletin board and take home the child's

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folder. And when I returned to the States, the contrast was quite strong, with the PTA and monthly meetings and all that.

Q: Were the children disadvantaged because of that type of school when they got back to the American system?

RUBENSTEIN: No, because the educational part was very strong. No, they were never disadvantaged as far as their education was concerned.

Q: And, on the other hand, you think there was some advantage to all those ...

RUBENSTEIN: Oh yes, because the classes were smaller and they had more individual attention. Yes, they all know Spanish. Our second child Lisa is now married, she's close to 30, she went to Jamaica last year to live with her husband and got a job teaching Spanish on five different levels in a private school. She married a man who is Indian, whose parents are from India but where he has never lived, born in Ghana where his father was an engineer.

Q: You say your daughter is in Jamaica now and has begun to teach, which indicates that her Spanish is also very good. The other children's language?

RUBENSTEIN: They're good in Spanish. Our oldest daughter doesn't have opportunities to use it but when she does, her accent is perfect, so is our son's. And they enjoy speaking Spanish.

Q: Any Hebrew?

RUBENSTEIN: They all went to school for three years in Israel and they studied Hebrew. I don't know how good their Hebrew is. I know I got to a certain conversational level but I probably wouldn't be able to say more than a sentence now. As a child, I knew how to read and write Hebrew, and I how to read the prayer books, and before we went to Israel I had about two months at the Foreign Service Institute. When we got to Tel Aviv I enrolled in

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the Ulpan, with the immigrants, and studied for four months intensively and got to be good, I thought. I could speak in Hebrew all night at a party with one person about basic things. Unfortunately, I have lost most of that facility.

Q: Well, we were going from post to post. Any special events or types of work you did?

RUBENSTEIN: There was something interesting, I think, that happened in Cali. You'll recall that earlier I mentioned Mid Allen, wife of Ward Allen? Well, when we were in Cali, they were in Bogota and Mid came down for a visit one day and I took her sightseeing. When we came back — our house was built at street level and there were gratings separating the garage from the sidewalk — our maid was on the inside and a young man was on the outside and she took me aside and told me that he was a Cuban who was in Colombia for the Pan American Games and wanted to defect. She was just standing there talking with him and didn't know what to do. I looked at Mid Allen, who in my estimation had all kinds of relevant knowledge and experience, and asked, "What do we do?" She said, "Take him into the house." Which we did. We gave him tea or Coca Cola or whatever. He was a cyclist on the Cuban team, and I called Irwin immediately. I think he wasn't in his office, because for some time we didn't know exactly what we were supposed to be doing and we just sat and talked with the young man for perhaps an hour. I finally got Irwin and he gave me some instructions. [End of Tape 1, Side A; Begin Tape 1, Side B]

... but they seemed unclear to me because subsequently a man came to the door — the maid told us he wanted to take the Cuban away. I didn't know who this man was and I wasn't about to hand over the Cuban without knowing. I told the maid to tell the man he couldn't come in and would have to wait until I heard from my husband. I think it was about an hour later I found out that the man I had kept waiting was the equivalent (she laughs) of the head of the FBI for Colombia, and I wouldn't let him in the house!

Q: A very good response! You should have gotten a star in your diplomatic passport for that.

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RUBENSTEIN: Anyway, it was an interesting and unique experience.

Q: Anything else to mention there?

RUBENSTEIN: We enjoyed Cali very much. As I said, the weather was ideal, the people were friendly, the children were very happy in an excellent school, we had a beautiful home. We were there for two lovely years.

Q: And after Cali?

RUBENSTEIN: We went back to Washington for those three years that were my children's first experience of living in the U.S. and attending public schools. They had some negative, some positive experiences. My son had good teachers, one daughter had good teachers, the third child was in a combined class — two sixth grades, with only one teacher who had to be a genius and a saint to run two such classes, and she was neither. She was inexperienced and in an impossible situation, so my daughter was very glad the next year to be out of that class, it was like a zoo. And they were absolutely ecstatic when they learned we would be leaving the States and going overseas again! They were happy about going to Nicaragua even though they knew nothing about it.

Q: Did they make friends in school and were such friendships maintained during periods overseas?

RUBENSTEIN: My older daughter did make friends that she maintained but she's the kind that maintains friends wherever, she's still in touch with some kids she went to school with when she was five or six years old. She finds them an (laughing) doesn't let them get "lost." Lisa had a few; I don't think Michael is still in contact with any of his friends from overseas.

Q: Any special experiences during those three years other than normal ones like coming back home?

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RUBENSTEIN: I learned to live without a maid. I should add that even while we were overseas I was always very strict with the maids on the fact that the children had to pick up their own toys and their own clothes and from the time they were five or six years old they made their own beds. So that aspect wasn't such a big change. Ellen, the oldest, was 12, so if we wanted to go to a movie she could babysit the two younger ones, her sister who was 10 and her brother who was seven.

Q: Did you find some advantages to not having a maid?

RUBENSTEIN: (laughing heartily) Not too many! There were some advantages to being back in that we didn't feel the need to entertain so much, but I was very busy chauffeuring the children to different lessons — ballet and drum and flute and piano, you know, the usual; and myself active in the PTA and so forth. I can't think of any other specific ...

Q: After those three years, you went to?

RUBENSTEIN: Managua, Nicaragua.

Q: And there, the children had the same sort of experiences they had had before?

RUBENSTEIN: Yes, they enjoyed it very much. And so did I. Irwin was deputy chief of mission [DCM] and my duties were a little different but we still had to entertain as always.

Q: Speaking of your "duties," you realize now you're expressing the old-fashioned version of the wife.

RUBENSTEIN: Oh yes, I guess I never got over that. It's true, I'm not of the new generation.

Q: In that respect

RUBENSTEIN: Right.

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Q: Your husband was the DCM in Nicaragua for how long?

RUBENSTEIN: Two years. In January I left with the children so they could enter school for the second semester, and Irwin was supposed to follow in two weeks. At that point Somoza started having many problems and the Department didn't want Irwin to leave so soon. Two weeks stretched to two months, so instead of living in a motel for two weeks and then the whole family moving into the house, I moved in with the three children, I got the house ready, unpacked, and when everything was completely unpacked, Irwin came home. As he got off the plane, he said, "How would you like to go to Israel?"

We had about four more months for the children to finish the semester, then about two months of Hebrew training, and then in the summer we left for Israel. We lived there for three years, Irwin serving as labor officer.

Q: He'll be telling me about that. And your reactions?

RUBENSTEIN: Well, the funny thing is that when we were living in Nicaragua my mother was in Miami and wanted to take a second trip to Israel — her first visit was in the 50s, when conditions were very bad — food was scarce, and so forth. She wanted to go back and her second husband didn't want to travel by plane and she asked me if I'd like to travel with her. My situation in Nicaragua was ideal for leaving (laughing) I mean, I had a live-in cook, a maid, houseboy, ironing woman, gardener — my family wouldn't even miss me, so I left and was gone for three weeks. We have a lot of family in Israel, my mother's first cousins, seven of them, and their children and grandchildren. So we traveled for three weeks with the American-Jewish Congress tour called "Israel in Depth" and it really was in depth, I felt that I saw everything, I met my relatives — who asked me, "Isn't there some chance that your husband would be sent to Israel?" And I said no, "because he's a Latin American specialist." And that's why it was so funny when he came home from Nicaragua and said, (laughing) "How would you like to go to Israel?" I couldn't believe it.

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So, we went. I got to know my extended family better over there. Our son was bar mitzvah'd in Israel, the two girls finished high school in the American school.

Q: They were studying Hebrew there?

RUBENSTEIN: Yes.

Q: Any difficulties there because you were Jewish

RUBENSTEIN: In Israel? No.

Q: Well, some people who are Jewish who served in the embassy feel at a slight disadvantage, that they have to lean over backwards to be a proper diplomat at posts like that. I'll be talking to Irwin about that.

RUBENSTEIN: The reaction we have had from some people who are not in the diplomatic service is, "Oh, I didn't know that they sent Jews to Israel." So Irwin then proceeds to name all the people who were in the political section when we were there and I think six out of the seven were all Jewish. Maybe in olden days there was a different attitude.

Q: There was a time when, yes. So that experience was good too. Your continued good experiences leads me to feel that you must have earned that attitude by yourself being warm and open. After Israel?

RUBENSTEIN: We went to Mexico City, Irwin again being labor attach#. By then our two daughters were in college. Our son was with us, finishing high school there. I did volunteer work as "Pink Lady" in the American-British-Cowdray, the ABC Hospital there for three years. I was the only woman at the embassy who ever did that — I don't know why; it was a very nice experience; it was my main volunteer work there.

Q: You went directly from Mexico City to Guadalajara?

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RUBENSTEIN: There was uncertainty as we were leaving Mexico City as to whether we were going to Guadalajara. We packed up and all of our earthly belongings went to Washington. By the time they arrived the powers that be said, "Oh, he's going to Guadalajara" so everything turned around and went back. Irwin can go into more detail. We were there four years. Irwin was consul general.

Q: And there your position differed, you were the wife of the chief of mission. From that vantage point, what was your relation to the spouses and other members of the staff?

RUBENSTEIN: We had a little organization of consulate wives, which met in our house once a month. That's where I spent about a year collecting recipes and editing a bilingual cookbook.

Q: By this time there's a new situation in which spouses of Foreign Service officers have the opportunity to be employed by the government. Did any of them at that post or in Mexico enter the Service? What problems did you note, if any?

RUBENSTEIN: Some of them worked in the consulate at Guadalajara but were not members of the Foreign Service; in Mexico City, some were; there were tandem couples.

Q: Did you feel as though that was a worse or better situation than in the "old days," as you describe them when wives did not have those possibilities for employment?

RUBENSTEIN: I always felt that, for myself, after I got married and had children, I had enough to do in the home with family and entertaining and volunteer work, that the thought of working for salary never interested me. If I had wanted to work for a salary, I could not possibly have done the other things well. Maybe some people can.

Q: Let's summarize your volunteer activities and what the remuneration was in non-financial terms. I gather that when the kids were young you didn't do much if any of that.

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RUBENSTEIN: No. I was busy with them.

Q: Later on you began the Pink Lady business and so on.

RUBENSTEIN: Also in Guadalajara I read some books for the Blind organization, once a week in English. The organization had a little room set up that was soundproof.

Q: Anything else you'd like to cover? So far, you haven't given one word about any honors you've gotten or anything. Irwin reported that you had some recognition for your volunteer work.

RUBENSTEIN: Well, one very nice woman on the staff in Guadalajara wrote me up to nominate me for something. Somebody else won but I thought it was very nice that she did what she did.

Q: I thought it was very modest of you not to mention the fact that this was for the Avis Bohlen award. (laughing) How will we get this without my pressing you to say that this is quite a prestigious nomination. What happened?

RUBENSTEIN: Somebody else won! (hearty laughter) But I felt very honored to be nominated.

Q: Your modesty is admirable, I'll try to worm more out of Irwin. (They discuss possibility and details of her transcribing the interview.) Now I'll start interviewing Irwin.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse:A. Irwin Rubenstein

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Spouse's Position: Labor Advisor; Labor Attach#; Consul; Executive Secretary, Board of the Foreign Service; DCM; Consul General; Coordinator, U.S./Mexican Border Affairs

Spouse Entered Service:1960Left Service: 1993You Entered Service:SameLeft Service: 1993

Status: Spouse of retiree

Posts: 1960-62Guayaquil, Ecuador 1963-64Washington, DC 1964-67Lima, Peru 1967-71Montevideo, Uruguay 1971-73Cali, Colombia 1973-76Washington, DC 1976-78Managua, Nicaragua 1978Washington, DC (4 mos.) 1978-81Tel Aviv, Israel 1981-85Mexico City, Mexico 1985-89Guadalajara, Mexico 1989-93Washington, DC

Place/Date of birth: Miami, Florida; April 18, 1928

Maiden Name: RoseParents (Name, Profession):

Joseph L. Rose, Furniture Merchant

Dorothy (Dottie) Rose, Housewife

Schools (Prep, University): BS, Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, 1949 (now UNC at Greensboro;) before marriage, completed 50 percent of requirements for master's in education, George Washington University

Profession: Teacher, Legal Secretary, Housewife

Date/Place of Marriage: July 17, 1960; Durham, North Carolina

Children:

Ellen, born Guayaquil July 30, 1962

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Lisa, born Lima June 7, 1964

Michael, born Lima March 27, 1967

Positions held (Please specify Volunteer or Paid):A. At Post: ALL VOLUNTEER - Uruguay: Editor, American Women's Club newsletter; Israel: Editor, embassy cookbook; Mexico: Guadalajara, Editor, bilingual cookbook. Also recorded several books for the blind.

B. In Washington, DC: Teacher's aide, Bailey's Elementary School, Falls Church, Virginia, 3 yrs.

End of interview