

# UC Santa Cruz

## Cultural History

### Title

"I Respond": Alissa Goldring's Photographs of Mexico in the 1950s: An Oral History

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## **Introduction**

I conducted these oral history interviews in Alissa Goldring's home, a little cottage just blocks from the ocean in Aptos, California. The entrance is hidden by overgrown plants, and despite its proximity to neighbors, the house feels cozy and secluded. Inside, it is filled with decorative pieces from her travels around the world, as well as her own art. Everywhere, there are colors, textures, materials, images and words, as well as plenty of evidence of the occasional presence of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Although Goldring has done much in her long life, these interviews center on the photographs she took in Mexico between 1955 and 1971, both on assignment as a professional photographer, and pursuing her own photographic aims. This oral history is intended as a guide and supplement to Goldring's Mexican photos, slides and negatives, now preserved in the Special Collections Department of the University of California Santa Cruz's McHenry Library. A finding aid to this collection is on the Online Archive of California's website at <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt9x0nd1bc>

I was happy to be asked to work with Goldring in creating this oral history, as part of my work as a student editor at UCSC'S Regional History

Project. Although Goldring and I had never met, I soon felt right at home with her. Talking with her awakened memories of my own years as a painter, and experiments I made with photography. She is from approximately the same generation as the painters I studied with, and has a similar background in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European painters, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century American figurative painters. Her enthusiasm for art has reinvigorated my own interest.

Goldring sees her life as having unfolded in three chapters: the East Coast, Mexico, and the West Coast. She was born Alice Berman, in lower Manhattan, in 1921. As a child, she lived on a North Carolina farm for a few years, where she developed a lifelong love of rural areas. Goldring knew from an early age that she wanted to be an artist. She took art classes in the New York City public school system, and the Roerich Museum, as well as Washington Irving High School. She majored in art in Brooklyn College. She also studied photography and other forms of art at the American Artists' School in Manhattan, and remembers Moses Soyer as a valuable mentor. She was also inspired by the photographs of Henri Cartier Bresson. She came to believe early on that art was not taught as it should be in the public schools, and put her passion into teaching it her own way. She taught art classes to both children and returning war veterans at the Bedford Hills Union School, and eventually earned a Masters in Art from Teachers College of Columbia University (Columbia University Graduate School of Education).

Throughout these years, Goldring was rarely without her sketchbook, and developed a beautiful abbreviated ink style capturing the character of people,

boats and buildings in Manhattan. Two of these pieces appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine under the name Alice Reiner.

In 1954, newly divorced, and with two children, Goldring flew to Mexico, despite not speaking Spanish, and knowing no one there. Her photography served her well, though, allowing her to support herself and giving her an avenue into the local culture. Initially, she did photographic portraits of children. She then worked on assignment for Mexican magazines such as *Gente* and *Claudia*, as well as for local newspapers and non-profit organizations such as Planned Parenthood. She was sent to schools and monasteries, psychiatric hospitals and rural villages. On her own, she roamed through open markets and mountain towns with her camera, usually a Rolleiflex, and later a Hasselblad. She unobtrusively captured rituals, such as children floating candles on water on the night of el Dia de los Muertes (the Day of the Dead), and services at a tiny Jewish temple in Venta Prieta. Goldring was especially intrigued by Lacondonian and Chomula cultures. She also met figures such as Erich Fromm and Daiset Suzuki, and the archive contains photographs of Rufino Tamayo, Dolores del Rio, Alma Reed, architect Juan O'Gorman, and the clowns Firulais and Cantinflas.

Despite the lively character that comes through in this oral history, Goldring doesn't intrude on her subjects' lives. Often, in photographs of economically depressed countries, people have an appearance of being uncomfortably caught, or on the spot. Some look defiant. Others look intimidated by the photographer, and hopelessly resigned to being witnessed. It is true that when children pose for Goldring, they often wear big smiles. But

more often, she seems to have been invisible to her subjects. She does not confront them and frame them in such a way that forces their lives into a statement. She captures the complexity of life-as-lived, and allows her subjects their integrity, never reducing them to simple examples of poverty or need. Instead, they are people in action, movement, concentration. Struggling, succeeding, failing, but above all, living, they are working at their professions, going to market, performing operations, washing clothes, waiting, dancing, playing chess. She trusts her audience to glean what they will from the photos. Goldring is not a manipulative image-maker. As she says, "I just take pictures. I just don't judge, or . . . I respond."

Nonetheless, when she looks in the viewfinder, it is as an artist. Her balanced compositions make playful use of pattern and depth, and it is clear that her training was not in photojournalism, but in the Western fine art tradition. When Goldring recalls her life, too, it is in visual images. Touchstones are the dust cloud on a country road from the wheels of a departing car, a golden angel fallen from a building after an earthquake, floating gardens, the gap between two buildings thrown off kilter by shaking ground...

Eventually Goldring returned to America, and this time to the West Coast, where she has continued her photography, but also pursued her interests in drawing, painting, meditation, and dream work. She also attended a UCSC extension class with Ansel Adams, photographs from which are included in the archive.

Goldring was a pleasure to interview. Her eyes have an impish sparkle, often due to some just retrieved memory. And like the perfect grandmother, she popped up several times during the interview to offer vegetarian food or herbal tea. Sometimes Goldring gives the impression of a precocious child in a brand new world, while at other times, she is critical and grounded, with strong and long-held opinions.

This oral history was recorded in February and March of 2006, transcribed verbatim, edited for continuity and clarity, and then returned to Goldring for her review. Copies of this oral history are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; in Special Collections and the stacks at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz; and on the Library's website. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and University Librarian Virginia Steel. Thanks to Irene Reti for her work on this volume and for her guidance, over the three years I have worked with her, in the oral history process.

—*Lizzy Kate Gray, Regional History Project*

*November 2007*

## Early Life

**Gray:** Alissa Goldring, let's start with, briefly, can you tell me what your early life was like?<sup>1</sup>

**Goldring:** I was born January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1921, in New York City, Manhattan, in a hospital. My parents were living in the Lower East Side, and I don't know the street. Some little apartment, where my father and his mother had been living, and when they got married, my mother moved in with them. My early life was rather strange, as I look at it now, because my parents had such opposing ideas about everything. My father would leave large tips; my mother would leave as small as possible. That's just a simple example. I have a recollection of being at the table, I must have been about two, three, and my father saying, "Must the child eat the cereal that she doesn't want?" And my mother insisting, "Yes, the child must." My recollection is that I was down at the table level, my head just about level with the table, and their voices were way up above. That was how it was. They didn't seem to hold me. They were dedicated parents, each trying to do their very best, and in such basic conflict that years later when I was twelve, I asked my father, "Why did you abdicate as a father?" and he understood what I meant. He said, "For peace. I saw that your mother and I had totally different ideas about how to raise children, and it would just be constant argument, so I decided to leave the children to her, and I would go out and earn a living." And that was a really, in many ways, disastrous decision.

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<sup>1</sup> Alissa was born Alice Berman. In 1948, the year of her first marriage, she became Alice Reiner. In 1958 she remarried and took the name Alice Goldring. Some of her work in Mexico was published under the name Alice Reiner Goldring. In the early 1970s she changed her name to Alissa Goldring.

What happened was that my father couldn't get along with people. He lost his job as an engineer on the first New York City subway. So he took a job in North Carolina as a mining engineer. We drove down in a Model A Ford, and it was a rather harrowing trip. When we finally got there, my first vivid recollection is of sitting in this silky, dusty silt on the farm where we rented a room, and playing with a few of the farm children there, and I suddenly turned around and saw that the car we had come in was leaving. I ran after it, desperate. I was sure they were going away without me! They finally saw this child racing after them crying, and they stopped. They were only going into town to go to a movie, or have a little relaxation, but I say this because I think I have always lived in that fear of being left and not wanted, and [was] not aware of that until as an adult I started to look over things.

My parents' friends thought of them as *the* most dedicated of parents. And this was true, in a self-sacrificing sort of way. But they didn't really have pleasure in life, and they didn't . . . we as a family never did any of the things that I later found out ordinary people do without thinking twice about it, having picnics and going on trips and so forth. However, we did things that were healthy. We went to the beach, Rockaway, and I went roller-skating and sleigh riding. But I was a lonely child, and I was very much looking forward to the birth of my sister when I was six, thinking I would have a companion to play with, but instead there was this little infant who was not playable with, and my mother would not let me hold her. When I see my daughter letting her three-year-old child hold her new sister—or she was only two, maybe—she just sat her down so that the baby



would be safe, and she put her in her arms. That never happened. And my sister and I grew up quite separate, which was very sad, very unfortunate.

Eventually the whole thing in North Carolina, which had many very positive aspects to it, ended, quite sadly, and we had to come back to New York. But before that, it was those—I'm not sure how long we were there. I don't know if we were there a year even, maybe months—but whatever we were there, I played with two little farm boys. I wore overalls. I had the run of the place; it was safe. And to me it was heaven. It was my taste of childhood. And ever after that, I was always trying to repeat, to be away from cities.

But we came back to New York City, and under all sorts of—living with my mother's friend, and in a furnished apartment, and for my mother it was all terribly frightening. She was a person who had never wanted to leave the city. To her, the city was as heavenly as it was unpleasant to me. Her major fun was to walk along Fifth Avenue window shopping, looking at all the . . . or to go to the museums. She was a city person. We settled on 104<sup>th</sup> Street on the West Side, eventually, because her family lived on 105<sup>th</sup> Street there. They got the nearest place that they could. And as my father's fortunes rose and fell, we moved constantly on that same street, so there must have been about four different buildings that we lived in. At one point my father made a lot of money in real estate. That was when they decided to have the second child. The school was on the corner, and that was where I went to school, PS 54, and I have many memories of that, too. And of drawing, but the school wanted you to draw, and make things look like they saw them. They didn't appreciate children's art as we do today. This was a long time ago. I began school there about eighty years ago.

That's (laughter) hard for me to believe, but that's true. And later one of the teachers told my mother that I was an oasis in the desert, and that pleased my mother, (laughter) and when we were asked to go up in front of the classroom and tell a story, and kids said "Jack and Jill" or something like that, I told the story of Persephone. (laughter) They said I had an IQ of 160. And unfortunately it wasn't a school that was adapted to anything individual.

Eventually I went to junior high school, within walking distance of my home, and then to Washington Irving High School, which was a long ride on the El, which is a train that's about two stories up on a track. I guess nobody here knows what an elevated line is, but . . . and then a walk across town, so that it was a long trip every day. And by coincidence, there's someone living here in town who was in high school when I was: Marge Frantz. We were good friends while we were in high school, but then we went off in different directions, college and so on, and marriage, and children, but then we reconnected here, which was nice.

**Gray:** Would you like to tell me a little more about your education after that?

### **Brooklyn College**

**Goldring:** While I was in high school, I had a deep longing to go away to college, but there was no service there helping you to find out how to get a scholarship or what to do, so I ended up going to Brooklyn College. It was either Brooklyn or Hunter. Hunter College would have been straight academic. At Brooklyn College I got a good art course, and I also worked for the music department, different departments, making posters. Nowadays there's no need

for hand-done art. Anybody can turn out, on a computer, the most clever posters or flyers or anything, but in those days it had to be done by hand, and I did the lettering and the designs and illustrations for posters for the music department and that sort of thing. And I also at one time I worked as a copy editor in a publishing firm, but that was later.

I loved my art classes. And it was there at Brooklyn College that I met my first husband, and we used to hitchhike out to a place—in those days hitchhiking was safe and acceptable. It was a different world. It was a much nicer world. But the funny thing is that then, we used to think that the world was going to get better, that change was going to come and the change would be an improvement.

Well, there was a place called Stelton, which was a colony.<sup>2</sup> People had gotten together, bought land, built houses, and my husband's father knew people there, and so we went there and had the use of a cabin, and it was lovely. I did some lovely sketches there, and paintings. We were seventeen when we got married. (laughter)

**Gray:** Wow.

**Goldring:** It was the summer. I didn't tell my folks; we just went. And since we were so young we couldn't do it in the regular way. We were in the mayor's mansion at Gracie Square or something. We set up housekeeping with another

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<sup>2</sup>The Modern School at Stelton (New Jersey), commonly called Stelton, was a colony originally founded in New York City in 1911, based on the libertarian educational principles of Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer. The program had an anti-clerical approach that included communal childcare, radical education for adults and creative arts education for children, as well as relaxed views about unmarried co-habitation. Margaret Sanger, Will and Ariel Durant, Robert Henri, and Emma Goldman, among others, were all at times associated with Stelton.  
[http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/modern\\_school/modern.shtml](http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/modern_school/modern.shtml).

student to share the rent. I continued going to college, but I felt that I couldn't go to my graduation because I was pregnant. In those days, people wore full dresses to try to hide their pregnancy; nowadays, people go around half-naked to flaunt their pregnancies. That, I think is great! I think it's just wonderful, but it's certainly different. Anyway, I did not get to my own graduation. I graduated *magna cum laude*. That period I think was the happiest time of my life. I was free of college. I could read for my own pleasure, and I could paint as much as I wanted to. I had no responsibilities except to keep this little—oh, and then we moved finally, and we had a nice little apartment all to ourselves, and it happened that the owner, it was a small brownstone in Brooklyn, and the couple who owned and lived there (they lived on the ground floor where there was a garden in the back and we were upstairs), their name was Weber, his brother was Max Weber the painter. And Max Weber had had his very first art show in their house there. That was very exciting. And I don't know how, when we finally moved, I don't know how we lost touch with them. It's one of the question marks in my life, and sad because Mrs. Weber had no grandchildren of her own, and she loved my first child like her own child. And since my mother was way off in Manhattan, and also not terribly interested in babysitting or . . . so Mrs. Weber was like a grandmother. I mean, she was like a mother to me during my pregnancy. She was wonderful. There are so many question marks in my life that I don't know why I did what I did, but when I see where the sum total has somehow left me, it's okay. I often feel I did the wrong thing for the right reasons and the right thing for the wrong reasons, and somehow, here I am. And I'm grateful to be here.

## Teaching Art

I felt that there must be a way that I could get away from the city, even though Brooklyn was less horrendous than Manhattan. So I started looking in the ads, the real estate ads, making a circle, with New York as the center of the radius, so that my husband could continue with his job. My parents took care of my child and I went to various places along different train lines out of New York City to get a sense of what was available in different areas, and I finally centered on Westchester, about forty miles north of the city. What I was shown were nice, clear, clean, up-to-date little houses, with postage stamp lawns in the front. That wasn't my idea of what I wanted. I guess now they call that the 'burbs. But one realtor showed me thirty acres that was called the Horse's Aid Farm. It had been a farm, you know, George Washington slept there. But now they had old horses out grazing on it. And somehow or another, between my father and two friends of ours, a couple, we managed to pay for that and move there. The town was called Millwood. There were seven hundred people there. There was nobody there of a different anything. It was homogenous. And I wasn't there very long when somebody said to me, "You know, you're the first Jewish person I have ever seen." And what's more, forty miles away from the city, no one there had ever been to New York City, to a museum, to anything. So it was an interesting place. And I wasn't there very long when I discovered that I could teach at a school not too far away, so eventually, after my second child was born, and my husband was back from the army, and all sorts of exciting adventures had happened, I started teaching at Bedford Hills High School.

**Gray:** What year was that, approximately?

**Goldring:** Well, to date it, my children were born in 1944 and 1942, so it may have been about 1950, because they were old enough, I guess, to go to school, but they stayed with a friend of mine who lived in the town.

**Gray:** So what were you teaching?

**Goldring:** I was teaching art. And after a couple of years there, I used to go into the city, to Columbia, to take my master's in fine art education at Teachers' College. The school was called a union school, meaning it was a union district or something like that (it had nothing to do with labor unions). It served the entire community, starting with kindergarten, going through high school and post-graduate, and adult education in the evening. I taught art at all those levels, which meant that I used to go from classroom to classroom, first grade, second grade and so on, working with the teachers one day a week, starting them on projects and keeping them going. Projects like murals, and trying to instill in them the idea that we were not trying to make the best looking result for parents' night, that our aim was to give each and every single child equal opportunity to paint, and in their own way. Whereas, they were used to picking out the "best drawers," and letting them do the thing, to show off on parents' night. So it was an interesting time.

### **First Pictures**

**Gray:** At what point did you start becoming interested in photography?

**Goldring:** Well, when I was small (before we went to North Carolina, or after? I'm not sure), my father wanted to build a summer colony in the mountains

some distance from New York City, so that his children and other people's children could spend the summer away from the hot city. My father was an absolute idealist. He bought the land, next to a lake, in a town called Lac Sheldrake. Lac, meaning lake, Sheldrake, so I don't know if people had come years before from Switzerland. Anyway, Lac Sheldrake was the whole town. And he built a summer colony there with bungalows that were so good that when I was there years later as an adult, those bungalows were still standing, whereas all around, all the other buildings, hotels, bungalows, were falling apart. His had been turned into year-round cottages. But as good as he was as a builder, that's how bad he was as a businessman, so he did not get *one* house out of that whole thing. And my mother was so mortified that when we continued going there we had to rent rooms in someone else's bungalow. So you can see that she had a great deal of bitterness, a great deal of sadness. In fact that was the underlying, overarching feeling about her, although she maintained a cheerfulness in spite of all that, but that was that combination. She had had a terribly sad childhood herself, because her mother died, and their father put them in an orphanage, 'cause he couldn't take care of them. And in the orphanage she contracted measles, and it ended up affecting her eyes because they did not take good care of the child, so all her life her eyes hurt her. She had to wear thick glasses. She felt terribly ashamed. And she felt that she could never find a husband because of her glasses, so she had to take what she could get. That was her feeling. It so happened that my father was a very well-educated person, but from Europe, so he spoke with an accent, and to her he was a failure, whereas her brothers had all assimilated, become Americanized, were successful as lawyers or in business. So she was very unhappy. And she tried to make me

the . . . to compensate for all her own disappointment, and to make me a big success, and to be outstanding. When I was three, she taught me to recite Annabel Lee [by Edgar Allen Poe] and other long poems. When I see a three-year-old now, I know what it would take to drill a little person to remember all that. But I did. The only time I can remember my mother being pleased with me was when I was about that age and we were walking to visit friends, and she forgot the way, and I told her, turn here, turn there, and when we got there, she kept saying that I had remembered the route and had told her. I have other memories. When you ask me what kind of a childhood it was, I was sitting outside the apartment house, and I must have been about five or six, I was sitting on the curb—I used to roller-skate in the street there—and looking very pensive, and my father came home from work and he said, "What are you looking so serious about?" And I answered him with utter directness. I said, "I'm thinking about how old or how big I will have to be to hit my mother back."

**Gray:** Yikes.

**Goldring:** And he went on upstairs. He didn't respond to that in any way, but when I came upstairs, they were both laughing. He had told my mother that story. So I see that I was utterly alone, utterly betrayed. Alone because we didn't really have family. My mother had a family, but they were sort of embedded with her. I didn't have anyone to talk to or anyone to help me. And I'm realizing now that while that was very apparent to me as a child, that a lot of that was going on when I was newborn and when I was an infant. And my mother brought me up according to . . . What Dr. Spock was for a more recent generation, there was a Dr. John Holt, *The Care and Feeding of Babies*, which said



you should leave a child between feedings for four hours, period. So I deduced that I starved for several hours and cried, and was considered an impossible child. So, they had such good intentions, but no connection with feelings . . . But there's another aspect of my father. He was very destructive. I remember him telling me, "You looked like a drowned rat when you were born." Now that's not a very nice thing to say to a child, or to have thought.

**Gray:** Right.

**Goldring:** It's quite . . . and yet he was also very sentimental. He did his own reading in American literature, just finding his own way, and discovered *Winnie the Pooh*, and Walt Whitman, Willa Cather, *Huckleberry Finn*. He had good instincts in some things, but in others he was terribly destructive, which I didn't realize until later.

**Gray:** Was there something about Lac Sheldrake that had to do with you starting to do photography?

**Goldring:** Oh, thank you. Yes. Somewhere I had gotten the use of a little box camera. And then, or in Lac Sheldrake, I got my first thirty-five millimeter camera, a little Argus, and I remember the first time I took the film in nothing came out because I hadn't done something you're supposed to do. But eventually I did learn, and I started taking pictures, and I was always drawing. I think I have one photograph that I took when I was about eleven or so, when my father took me to visit my grandmother, and I drew her, and I took her photograph. And by some miracle, I am so grateful, I have those now. Many

things I wish I have that I don't. I've traipsed around here and there but somehow I have those. It's a backlit photograph.

Then the early photographs that I still have are from high school days. There's one of Marge and her sister, and my first husband, and a May Day parade, and scenes . . . I used to go all around New York City sketching, and I would take photographs at the same time, and some of those sketches I sold to the *New Yorker* magazine. And eventually they returned [them], and I have them framed up there (points to sketches on kitchen wall). But the photographs, the whole album, when I left Millwood to come to Mexico, somehow my photographs stayed there and—gone.

**Gray:** When you were traveling around and taking photographs and drawing, were you using the photographs later to draw from or to use as [a source for] art, or were you doing them, really, as separate art forms?

**Goldring:** That's an interesting question. I was doing them separately, but I often had ideas of how to combine them, but never did, much. I think I may have done some. I worked for a magazine there and a newspaper, and I may have done some combinations, but I don't recall.

### **The American Artists School in Manhattan**

**Gray:** Did you take classes in photography, and did you have any mentors or teachers or influences in photography?

**Goldring:** When I was in high school and college, I studied art at the American Artists' School on 14<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. I took every kind of class you could

take, including photography. Alexander Alland was one teacher, and another man whose name I hope I remember sometime, because he was *really* a mentor, and encouraged me a great deal. I have a photograph of myself that I took. I set it up and took it. I loved that photo class. I took lithography, and etching, and oil painting, and life drawing, and watercolor with Harry Glassgold, and painting with Moses Sawyer—if not Moses Sawyer, one of the Sawyer brothers, and now I'm not remembering for sure which one—and a lot of interesting people. It was a wonderful school. It was just artists, practicing artists in their fields. And I did silk screen with somebody noted in that area, and another photographer whose work I still see around. I just carried the camera and the sketchbook wherever I could, and when I was really short of money, somehow I had money for film and processing.

### **Influences on Goldring's Photography**

**Gray:** Had you had any schooling in photographic journalism, or did you just really study fine art photography?

**Goldring:** I just studied fine art photography, but when I got to Mexico, eventually I teamed up with Mary Comstock, and she was a writer, and the newspaper or magazine would send us out together. We covered the Olympics together. She had a daughter named Roxanne, and we did a lot of good things together. Then she went to the states and got herself a job on the *Chicago Trib[une]* or something in Chicago, and made a success of it there.

**Gray:** And then outside of school, any influences in photography that you would think of?

**Goldring:** Well, of course I was very aware of Weegee and his photographs, and of Steiglitz, and his wife.

**Gray:** Oh, you mean Georgia O'Keefe?

**Goldring:** Yeah, Georgia O'Keefe. And I went to the museums. I was in a show at the modern museum New York was . . . you just walk on 57<sup>th</sup> Street and there were so many good shows constantly, and in the museums, and the Whitney, and then of course the Guggenheim. So you could just see everything that there was going. [Much later] I remember seeing—it was the first so far as I know—of that photographer who did all the nude men, and he made such a splash.

**Gray:** Mapplethorpe?

**Goldring:** Yeah, right. I remember going to that show before I knew what to expect, and just walked in.

**Gray:** (laughter)

**Goldring:** And . . .

**Gray:** What was your reaction?

**Goldring:** They were good photographs. They were good. I wouldn't have wanted to spend all my time taking such subjects. I would have been bored silly. For me, photography—but I respect—it was good photography. That was what he wanted to take. And now lately I just looked through about six different books of Diane Arbus and her photographs. That's what's so wonderful about art: the variety. Of course, back in high school, I was enamored of Van Gogh, and

a teacher gave me a wonderful biography by Meier-Graefe.<sup>3</sup> I still have that book. It was a prize for something. It's a good biography of Van Gogh. And they say now that some of his derangement may have been due to the chemicals in the paint, because very often an artist will tip the brush in his lips, or just inhaling, if you're sensitive to that sort of thing, it can . . . But I have a drawing in my bedroom, a facsimile of one of his sketches, Van Gogh's sketches, in that town where he did *The Potato Eaters*. It's a beautiful pen and ink drawing, beautiful. He was so dedicated. *There's* an artist I can respond to, not because of the hype around him, but just looking at his work. Whereas looking at Mapplethorpe doesn't do anything for me. Maybe there's others. I haven't seen a broad range of his work.

### Moving to Mexico in 1954

**Gray:** So when and why did you choose to go to Mexico? Was it a photographic project, or . . .

**Goldring:** (laughter) No, nothing that logical. I had been divorced, maybe a year before, and living in Westchester, alone, subbing in school, and dealing with snow by myself, and stoking a coal fire for the furnace, was really more than I could cope with. I wanted to go someplace with better weather, and where I could do art, and I thought of California or Mexico. I don't know how it definitely became Mexico, but it did. This was 1954, New Year's Eve of 1954, is when I got tickets for, and got the kids and myself on the plane. Somebody we knew slightly had taken a furnished apartment for us and met us at the airport,

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<sup>3</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, *Vincent Van Gogh: A Biographical Study* (New York: The Medici Society, 1926).

which was such a little kind of an airport with wooden tables to put your luggage on. It was just so different from Mexico City today. But, we got there.

I had flown to Florida before, but it was the first time I had flown at night. I looked out and I saw Mexico City. It was like jewels strewn across velvet. It was so beautiful. In the daylight it was not beautiful. It was all the poor parts of the city, was where the airport was. But eventually we got into this furnished apartment, and we started a life there. And it was a very interesting life there.

**Gray:** Did you know Spanish when you went?

**Goldring:** I did not. Before I went, though, I had gotten out, bought records or something, to start to learn. But I didn't make much headway with it. So I started to learn by talking with my maid, and with other people. And then I took classes. I really made every attempt to learn Spanish. And I never really succeeded in getting a good accent, or getting . . . I'm not musical. Well, that's another whole story. I was told I was not musical. So I grew up believing I was not musical, and to be musical is the basis of language. So I can communicate, and I do. I would be glad to speak a few other languages as poorly as I speak Spanish. But because of that, when I was married again, and my third child was born in Mexico, I put her in the French school, the Lycée, so that she would learn French with a really good, correct, Parisian accent, which she did, and she has it to this day. And when she got a job for a while, for the Niger government, or the US government in Niger [Africa], or something, she could speak French there, and that was useful. She grew up speaking French, Spanish and English, simultaneously. And she was very bright. I had a friend who lived across the street from me, and her

son always spoke with a Spanish accent. And one woman, I remember saying to me, "I can't talk to my children because they only speak Spanish." She was an American; the other woman was a German. So . . .

**Gray:** That's what happens when you don't talk to your children enough.

**Goldring:** That's right. But when Luin was two, we drove, she and I and her nanny, Maria, and a friend of mine, drove up to California, my first visit to California, and she was just beginning to speak a little, so her first words were—she was hearing English. Maria was speaking to her in Spanish. Everyone else was speaking English. We were only there a month or so, but she had time to visit with her grandmother, her father's mother. Then when we came home, she was dropping her English. And I said to this little two-year-old, I said, "I'm going to speak to you in English, and I want you to answer me in English, and you can go on speaking Spanish with everybody here," (and we did the French school a little later), and I said, "That way, when you see your grandma again, you'll be able to speak English with her." She understood, and she kept it separate, and she spoke Spanish to the maids and everybody else, and English to us. Then in a couple of years she went to school, and she started French, and she never had any trouble keeping them separate, and being—her spelling (laughter) has always been sketchy, but that doesn't matter.

**Gray:** (laughter) Well, what was it like adjusting to going to Mexico so suddenly, and as a, basically a single mother, with two kids?

**Goldring:** Yes, I was a single mother before they invented that term.

**Gray:** (laughter)

**Goldring:** Well, what complicated it was that my source of income stopped. I had rented out my house thinking that that rent would come to me and I would not have any trouble from that side of it, and that my ex-husband would send some child support. Well, he objected to the children's being in Mexico, and my mother sold the house, so the income stopped. Then things were very rough.

### **Making a Living as a Photographer in Mexico**

And then is when I started taking the baby photos, because it seemed to me that that was the way to earn a living with photography, because there's plenty of babies in Mexico, and parents who love them, and I began there. [recording paused]

I needed a bread and butter income. I started doing photographs for some ad agencies, but that was sporadic. Sometimes I'd be very busy, sometimes not. So the baby photography was a very good standby. I bought a machine for binding books, spiral binding, and I mounted the photographs, eight by tens, back to back, and made books of them. I still have some examples of those books. Then I made small ones of my own daughter. I also photographed people like Erich Fromm, and Daisetz Suzuki, and did a lot of photographs of the Ballet Folklórico, and some visiting musicians like Pablo Casals, and worked for some magazines and newspapers.

**Gray:** Did you [always] do freelance work, or did you ever have a regular relationship with a newspaper?



**Goldring:** I had a regular relationship with a magazine for a while. Let's see, I worked for *Gente*, but that was on assignment. But there was another magazine, I don't know if it was called *Claudia*. It was a women's magazine. For a while I was on staff there, and I took photographs of models, clothing things, and food, fashion, food, decor, whatever the magazine needed a photograph of, I took. I enjoyed that staff position for a while.

**Gray:** In your career in general, were you able to choose what you wanted to focus on, or were you sent out on specific assignments?

**Goldring:** Well, for a little while I worked for *Magnum*, and they sent me on an assignment—I remember some visiting sports group . . . So no, basically, I was sent on assignment. I don't think I ever developed a subject, a theme, and sold it, the idea, to anybody. (long pause) Except for the J. Walter Thompson [agency] during the earthquake. I suggested that I would do a portrait of their agency in the experience of the earthquake. So they said, "Okay, go to it." So I did, including, at one point, I stood at the place—it was a building that had had two buildings together that split because of the earthquake, so I could stand there, on this part, and there was a space, and then the next building. And you could look down, I don't know, thirty flights? Fifteen? I don't know, but it was far. And then you step across it and keep going. (laughter) So I took photographs of that building, and also of the new building that they moved into, which was quite a distance uptown. So that was a whole interesting story, that portrait of an ad agency in transition. Other interesting things that I did for them, well, "interesting," was two of their account execs posed as models in a steam bath, a

men's steam bath. I don't know what the text was, but that was the photo they needed. And there are probably others that slip my mind now.

### **The Mexico Photographs**

**Gray:** I have a few questions that are follow-ups from last time. And then I think we'll go on, if we feel like it, we'll go on to particular towns, or sets of photographs. We were talking a little about your adjustment to being in Mexico, and speaking Spanish, and so forth. I'd like to ask you a little more about the experience of taking pictures. As a woman alone, were you ever uncomfortable? Were you ever harassed? Did people offer you entrée into their lives? Your photos of people are very . . . sometimes at very intimate moments it seems like somehow you were able to get right up close to people and not make them nervous, so I wanted to ask you about that.

**Goldring:** Yes, it was wonderful. Most of the time, it's just as you said: People didn't notice that I was taking pictures because I was using a two and a quarter reflex, a camera which you don't have to hold up to your eyes, like [you do with] a thirty-five millimeter.

**Gray:** Ah.

**Goldring:** So it would be down here, and I could look into it and just snap. And I took lots of pictures. I was very short of money in those days, but the one thing I always had money for was film, and processing. When I got to Mexico, I was lucky to get in touch with a man who ran a photo processing business, who, in addition to the regular work, did work for three photographers, two others and

myself. And it was like having your own darkroom assistant. I would come in there and show him what I wanted, and he would do it. Gomez was his name. Such a nice man.

The only time I remember someone objecting was—and they objected very seriously—it was the day of the earthquake, the first big earthquake, first in the sense that the first one I was there for, when the golden angel fell.<sup>4</sup> I remember how I was wakened in the middle of the night. It felt as if somebody was shaking my bed and the bookshelf at the foot of my bed, where I had Mexican blue glasses and things, was all shaking. And when I got up in the morning I learned that there had been this big earthquake. And my son and I came in from San Angelin where we lived, which was sort of a suburb, you could call it, in a way. And we went downtown to see what had happened, and we had no idea. We had just felt a slight shaking. And we found the golden angel on the ground, broken, and then we went down to Lagunilla. La Lagunilla was like a vast flea market. Every weekend. Many streets. And with such interesting things, and we went there and was taking pictures, and a man, a well-dressed man, came over to me and said, “Why do you take pictures? Why do you Americans take pictures of our poverty, and all these old things that people are buying and selling? We have beautiful stores up in the Zona Rosa. Why don’t you go there? Why don’t you go and take pictures of our beautiful homes out in the Pedregal?” And I

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<sup>4</sup> *El Ángel de la Independencia* (“The Angel of Independence”), most commonly known by the shortened name *El Ángel* and officially known as *Columna de la Independencia*, was built to commemorate the centennial of the beginning of the Mexican War of Independence, celebrated in 1910. In later years it was made into a mausoleum for heroes of that war. It is one of the most recognizable landmarks in Mexico City, and it has become a focal point for both celebration or protest. The monument suffered some damage during the earthquake that Goldring experienced on July 28, 1957 when the sculpture of the Winged Victory fell to the ground and broke into several pieces.

could see that he really was hurt. He wasn't just angry, he was hurt too. I said, "I'm taking these because it's beautiful. Those are ordinary, those expensive mansions. Up at the Zona Rosa it's just stuff for tourists. That comes and goes. Why should I perpetuate it?" I tried to explain to him, but I know how he felt. I don't know if either of us convinced each other, but it was an interesting conversation.

**Gray:** When you explained, were you explaining what your conception of beauty was?

**Goldring:** Yeah, in a sense, because authenticity is part of beauty, and originality, and heart. And not things made to show off. And of course, as time has gone by, there's very little of the authentic things left.

But no other time comes to my mind, of people objecting. I did meet some Americans who said that they used to give a dollar to each person that they took a picture of. And at times, I do now recall that there were people who hid their faces, didn't want themselves to be—have their pictures taken. And somebody told me that in some places they felt as if, if you took their picture, you took something away from them, like their soul or their spirit or something. But it's not something that stands out in my mind. I guess if somebody didn't want their picture taken, I just didn't take it. But mostly, I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. I felt captivated by what I was seeing, and I wanted to have a record of it.

**Gray:** Were there any times when you felt like you were in danger, out alone with your camera equipment?

**Goldring:** Not that I recall. First of all, I didn't have a great deal of equipment. I had a Rolleiflex, that's the name I was trying to think of. I had a little Rolleiflex that hung on my shoulder. And sometimes people were impatient with me. The one time I remember somebody being impatient was a well-to-do official in some company or other, connected with some, I don't know if it was [a] rubber plantation or some, something. And he was annoyed. He just didn't want anybody bothering him. But the poor people, you can see from the pictures. They were, they didn't care much one way or the other. I guess they were used to letting people do what they do.

**Gray:** As a woman, did you have special entrée into women's houses?

**Goldring:** Well, women didn't have houses separate from men. They were all families.

**Gray:** I noticed, though, that there are very few photos of men inside homes. Is there a reason?

**Goldring:** Well, they were outside doing some work at the time, I guess. And the women were home taking care of the kids, and cooking, and . . . yeah, the men were out working. I guess that didn't interest me as much as the women and children. Yeah, I don't recall having made a point of investigating what were the men doing, that's true.

**Gray:** At the time you were there did you identify yourself as a feminist?

**Goldring:** In my mind, or to other people, or . . . ?

**Gray:** Either one. (laughter)

**Goldring:** You know, I wasn't aware of the whole feminist movement. It happened in the states while I was down there, and there was not much talk [in Mexico]. Once in a while on a visit up here...I do recall a visit where I was sitting talking with somebody, and this feminist woman seemed so strident, and so angry. That's my recollection. But I met Betty Friedan in Mexico, and eventually I did read her book, but she herself—it was a little village in . . . I'll think of the name later, of the area, and there was a group of us there and she was part of the group, and she was so antagonistic to everyone, and to the people who were in the local, little local store. It was a little village on the edge of a wilderness, a little village, and . . . but I think that she did very good work, and I'm all for women's rights, and it was just International Women's Day. But I wasn't aware, really. Mexico was kind of remote.

I have since realized that I've been sort of split between different opposites, like I've been very brave, and very scared; very adventurous and very careful. When I went to Machu Picchu, while I lived in Mexico—I think, or after I left?—I did really daring things where I climbed along the edge of a wall. It's a miracle that I'm alive today. But, other times I was just very timid. And that split, that being extremely one thing or extremely another, has been a strange characteristic that I only now recognize.

I met women who were so powerful, women like Virginia Satir, an American woman who, in her time, was very well known. Such is fame. In the area of human development, Esalen and things like that, she was a leader, tremendous

woman. We became friends, and she visited me in Mexico. And I took her on a trip to the ruins in . . . I'll have to remember the names, but I do have photographs of that. She and another friend and I, we flew in a little plane so low that we could see the people as we [inaudible]. When we got to this holy city in the jungle, the plane couldn't leave because the weather was bad, so instead of having the usual quick visit, we were there for about three days, and it was wonderful. We visited all these little temples, each one on a little hill within the jungle, a whole holy city. I'm sure I have pictures of that. But what was interesting was that she came with me on that trip, so she was certainly a living exponent of feminism at its best. She was a tremendous person, and she wrote books that were very important in the human potential movement.

**Gray:** What were your perceptions of the status of women in Mexican society?

**Goldring:** Well, it varied so much with the social class. The poor women did all the work, and I don't suppose they had *any* rights. But there were wealthy women I knew who were well-educated, and because of their wealth and the fact that you could hire help so easily, they could educate themselves, and they could work in a way that really liberated them. There was one whose last name was Saenz, and she taught classes in the pre-Columbian art, so she was very well informed, and very skillful lecturer. And I took a course with her. And there were women, many women doctors, writers. Elena Poniatowska is one who comes to mind. (long pause) I don't know if that answers your question.

**Gray:** Sure, it does. When we were just talking before the interview, you mentioned differences between the poor children playing in the villages and the rich children, and maybe we could talk a little about that.

**Goldring:** Oh. The contrast between poverty and wealth was so evident because of the way living conditions were structured. Because you'd have a very poor *barranca*, neighborhood, and some magnificent, expensive house, right in the middle of that. I think later they tended to have more homogenous areas, and the Pedregal is one area outside of Mexico City that was built on the lava, and it was all magnificent, expensive homes. And then there were areas that were just poverty stricken, and I have pictures of those, where the children are playing. I wouldn't generalize. I only say the ones I saw the day I was there, these very poor children, the older brother, maybe he was ten, eight, was taking care of the younger ones, and they were all playing in the mud, with sticks and nothing, but they were (pause) there was . . . they were gentle with each other. They were real. They were . . . whereas, when I went to the wealthy homes to take photographs for the families, on the whole the kids were spoiled, and . . . They were brought up by the servants. And they had rooms full of toys. Sometimes they were spoiled. But sometimes they were fine kids because they were brought up by the same Mexican women, who were bringing their own children up in the *barranca*.

**Gray:** Did anything strike you about, either differences between Mexican children and American children, or how they were brought up? I know that you were bringing your children up there—



**Goldring:** My first impression, when I was very new there, I visited an artist friend and he took me to some other people, and his children came along, and they fit in. We visited another fellow in his studio, and the children were just comfortable there. They didn't make any disturbance; they didn't require special attention. They were welcome! And I remember being surprised. As a whole, I found people were very gentle and kind to their own children, and to other children. And we had a friend, friends, who had a son who had Down's syndrome. They kept that boy with them, and he was free to roam around the neighborhood, and all the people in the area knew him and chatted with him. He had a life. And when I left, he was an older person by then, which is unusual for them, and he was still at home. He had two sisters, one older, one younger, and mother and father. The father died. One sister moved to the states and married. The younger sister and the Down's syndrome fellow, and the mother, and the maid, housekeeper maid, stayed there, and I don't know what happened, but I can find out, because the younger sister is a close friend of my daughter's. So I'm interested to inquire. But my point is that the Mexican people accepted who you were, and they didn't have the attitude toward Down's, for example, that we do. Whereas another family we knew there also had a Down's syndrome child, but they were people with an American company, firm, and they sent their child away to somebody. That difference is so marked. Interestingly, in none of my pictures do I have those troubled children. I guess I didn't see any. It's interesting, because I remember in Nepal, there was a blind girl in a little village, but I don't remember ever having come across blind or Down's and so forth children in my travels in Mexico.

**Gray:** Well, there are some interesting sets of photos, one of which is, I believe it's a polio hospital?<sup>5</sup>

**Goldring:** Oh, that! Yes. But you see, polio is not something that you're born with. And that was a wonderful hospital in Mexico City—children, I guess, from all over, and there was another school for the blind that I went to. Now, I guess most of that blindness was congenital, so they definitely—and then there was another, the *monicomio*, for—and there are photographs of the children and adults in a lunatic asylum.<sup>6</sup> So there was a lot of that. Yes, definitely. And I have photographs at an orphan asylum.<sup>7</sup>

**Gray:** The children with polio, in the photos, they're remarkably beautiful, sweet little faces, and all seems well and happy. Did you feel at all that they'd been dressed up specially for the occasion, put in dresses, or . . .

**Goldring:** Oh no, everybody in Mexico is in a uniform, every schoolchild. The uniform is part of it, of going to school. And these children, I think, lived there. I don't know, but I think they lived there, and they were in uniform. But there was nothing put on for my special visit. You couldn't. You couldn't force children to be the way they were. They were just being natural. And the pictures speak for themselves.

**Gray:** They're remarkable. The children's psychiatric hospital, I think that's what you're talking about when you say the lunatic asylum?

**Goldring:** Yes, yes.

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<sup>5</sup> Box 4, Folder 3.

<sup>6</sup> Box 4, Folder 8.

<sup>7</sup> Box 3, Folder 11.

**Gray:** Some of those photos are very surreal. I mean, some of the children are naked; they all have crew cuts; some are in straightjackets; some are eating with their hands. I think to a lot of viewers they would seem shocking. What was your feeling about what was going on there?

**Goldring:** Well . . . I guess I just take pictures. I just don't judge, or . . . I respond. It was terrifying to see some of the strange behavior. I once took pictures of a family that had seven children, a wealthy family, he was with some big company, I think Swedish or something, and one of their children sat on a rocking chair and rocked himself back and forth the whole time I was there, and presumably all the time. So you had a child who, if he was poor, would have been put in the *monicomio*, but because he was wealthy, he was at home. And his family just went on, and he was there doing that on this rocking chair. I don't know what happened when I wasn't there. But in the *monicomio* . . . I think there were adults as well as children, if I recall.

**Gray:** The folder I looked at said, "Children's Psychiatric Hospital," and I didn't see any adults. Maybe there was another one you went to.

**Goldring:** Oh, well, maybe I also went to another. But then children could be up to eighteen, I think, so they could seem very adult. But it was a very unhappy place to be, very difficult. But (pause) very different from the Institute for the Blind, and the crippled, the polio children. That was not devastating. The other was very devastating. . . . but I think that in Mexico there was more acceptance of all sorts of variations.

**Gray:** How did you come to go to the children's psychiatric hospital? Was that an assignment?

**Goldring:** Yeah. I was so lucky. I worked freelance for a magazine called *Gente*, which [means] people. And really, it gave me entrée to all sorts of things. They did articles. And then there was another magazine. I think I have some of these magazines. I forget what that one was called, but they sent me on assignments. So that was how I got there. And the Olympics, they sent me out to do the Olympics, and to interview a British writer who wrote *The White Goddess*. All sorts of things I was sent out on. His name will come back to me [Robert Graves].

**Gray:** The city that, the little village that Erich Fromm studied . . .<sup>8</sup>

**Goldring:** Yeah, Chiconcuac.

**Gray:** . . . and the photos you took there, how did you come to be involved in that and do the photos for the . . .

**Goldring:** I knew Erich Fromm. I had met him and Daisetz Suzuki when they were all involved in something about Zen. And I was really *very* interested in Zen and meditation. So I was glad of that chance to meet Suzuki, and I did a whole book of his photographs. And he gave me copies of his books, and someone stole them.

**Gray:** Aw.

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<sup>8</sup> Box 1, Folder 15.

**Goldring:** I heard from them that they had this study going on at this village, and one of the things that I remember they were studying was the range of wealth, from the poorest member to the wealthiest, and it was something like two hundred—the wealthiest had two hundred more than the poorest.

**Gray:** As in, they had a scale that had two hundred—

**Goldring:** Yeah. I was fascinated, and I said I'd like to go and see it, and of course, if I saw it I took pictures of it. And they had no objection. So that's how I got into that. It was partly following my nose, what interested me, or where I happened to be, like I happened to go to the floating gardens. And so I guess I went like a tourist, with other people, and I took pictures. And the same with the bullfight, but I don't think I have pictures of that.

**Gray:** What was your impression of Erich Fromm and of his work?

**Goldring:** Oh, I thought it was very important. *The Will to Freedom*, yeah, he did a lot that was important. But I remember always thinking, the trouble is all of those books are written by adults, for adults. And nothing will change if the way children are treated isn't changed. I could go on and on about that, because more and more, I realize that we have to make changes in how children are raised.

**Gray:** I agree. (sigh) . . . One follow-up question on Chiconcuac. Did the families live outside? I was a little confused because in the photos most of the housekeeping seemed to be in the open air.

**Goldring:** As long as the weather permits, that's true. The housekeeping and the child-raising, and even sleeping in hammocks, if the weather, depends on what part, but some places. Yeah. Of course a lot of the weather is pretty mild.

**Gray:** You mentioned bullfights, also, and there *are* photos of bullfights in the collection.<sup>9</sup>

**Goldring:** I think those were taken in a small town. I also went to the big bullfight in Mexico City, and I don't know if I have the picture, but there was a comedian who—Cantinflas, very well-known comedian—and he did an act where he does a bullfight and he lets his pants drop little by little. I think I got pictures of that. But the one I have more pictures of was, I think, in San Miguel Allende, and then I have pictures, I think it's more like a bull run than a bull fight, where the people, like they do in Pamplona, where they run after them. I don't remember too much about that.<sup>10</sup>

**Gray:** How did you feel about the bullfights? I know you say you just took photos, but in case you have feelings behind that . . .

**Goldring:** Well now that we stop and talk about it, I don't think it's nice to do mean things to any kind of animals, but I guess at the time I just thought the people were risking their own lives. I guess I thought about it more from the people, being so preposterous, running after a bull.

**Gray:** There were some photos of guns in holsters on these fellows' hips that you took . . .

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<sup>9</sup> Box 1, Folder 10.

<sup>10</sup> Box 4, Folder 15.

**Goldring:** Oh, *that's* another thing altogether. They're the macho, cowboy, sort of, wealthy Mexican that's there. They show off their uniform—their outfits and their guns, and their activities. And what do they do? Do they rope bulls? They have a whole show, and people come and watch. There's a name for them that's escaping me. But I did, some of those photographs were printed in the *Chicago Tribune*, or some newspaper, so I'm sure there's information about it. I can't think of the name, but it's—I don't know if it still goes on.

**Gray:** I was just wondering what your focus on the weapons was about.

**Goldring:** Well, to show what—like children playing with toys, these self-important men. But Mexico is one country that has never engaged in all of these world wars that everybody did. So whatever they did, they were smart. They haven't gotten themselves . . . So it's better that they play at it that way.

**Gray:** (laughs) Reading about Mexican history, I'm seeing all these military overthrows of governments, lots of assassinations and so forth, and lots of accusations of graft. Did you ever see any evidence of that, or experience any of that?

**Goldring:** No, but I'm sure it's true. I mean, it was riddled with corruption, totally. If a young fellow killed a person, but he was from [a] wealthy family, he could be bought off. He wouldn't be caught. Everybody knew that. In the time that I was there, I saw such change. When I arrived, the airport had a few little wooden buildings and wooden counters. Now it is a modern airport. And that's true of everything. When I was first there, where they did the government papers, people used to write out, in triplicate, by hand, whatever was a

government thing, and people waited for *days*, and now I think it's more like a regular place. But they managed to stay out of war.

**Gray:** Were there any other changes during the time that you lived there?

**Goldring:** Oh, the *periferico*, and I have photographs of that. The *periferico* was built while I was there, and it was up on huge stilts. It was a circular causeway, a road so you could go from one part of the town to the other. It was a huge difference. Before that, you went by street routes. You could take a day (laughs) to go from one side to the other.

**Gray:** This is Mexico City?

**Goldring:** Yeah. It was a huge difference.

**Gray:** There are photos of a Jewish temple. It looks like a whole community, and the ritual with the hanging bearded man and the donkey! That looked interesting.<sup>11</sup> (laughs)

**Goldring:** This was a fascinating place that I happened to be taken to by a man named Sam Cook, who was collecting music all over Mexico. And this particular music had to do with a particular Jewish community. It looked . . . they looked Mexican. It seemed Mexican. But they had somehow descended from people who had come to escape the Inquisition in Spain, I don't know how many generations before. But they maintained their Jewish customs. And they had built this little temple. It was really bricks and glass. It was a real thing, it wasn't like the shacks, it was a real temple—a one story temple with benches, and they

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<sup>11</sup> Box 5, Folder 5.



all sat and conducted a service. And this friend of mine was recording, and I was taking pictures. There was a little boy with a yarmulke, that's the little hats that men wear in the temple, and the shawls, which were white with blue embroidery. And they were the *real thing!* They chanted in Hebrew, and they were raising their children to do that. It was most moving. The particular day we were there was also a holiday, so after the regular service, of which I have photographs, then we all went outside, and they enacted the story of Esther, Mordecai and Haman.<sup>12</sup> And the Esther, who was the queen who saved the Jews from being killed, looked like, and was, a Mexican beauty queen. Like one of the local, when they had their . . .

**Gray:** Pageants?

**Goldring:** Yeah, exactly, their, the beauty contest, annual beauty contest. She was in her tight bodice and everything, just . . . That's who she was, but she was Queen Esther. And in the story Haman is the evil man who tries to get all the Jews killed, and she saves them. So in the end, Haman is hanged. So they had a gallows, and they ride him through on a horse, donkey was it?

**Gray:** (laughs)

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<sup>12</sup> Purim is one of the most boisterous Jewish minor holidays, commemorating the story told in the biblical Book of Esther. Esther is brought up in Persia by her cousin Mordecai, who tells her not to reveal her Judaism. King Xerxes (Ahasuerus, or Achashverosh) takes her for his queen, but his vizier Haman hates Mordecai and promotes a plan to exterminate the Jews. King Xerxes goes along with the plan, until Esther bravely approaches him and advocates for the Jews, at which point Xerxes relents and Haman is hanged in Mordecai's stead. In many countries, the holiday is celebrated with masquerades, theater pieces, and the burning of an effigy of Haman, however the enactment of the hanging of Haman described here seems unusual. (Theodore H. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (New York: William Morrow, 1952)).

**Goldring:** And they reenact their version of that story. It was charming. *And* what was specially charming was *all* the people, so enthused and so for the good ones and against the bad ones. It was wonderful! I'm not sure of the name of the place anymore. [Venta Prieta]

**Gray:** We can look it up. The photos are fascinating. I mean, you can just tell this is a ritual that's sort of a hybrid that you will never see ever again. (laughter)

**Goldring:** And nowhere else. I guess they don't do it anymore. They were naive enough then. I think I have a vague recollection that some Jewish group from the city or from the States gave them some money or some help, but I'm not sure about that.

**Gray:** How did they receive you?

**Goldring:** Like they receive everybody, you know. They didn't make a fuss one way or another, which was fortunate, because this fellow had recording equipment that he brought in. He must have gotten some interesting sounds, songs.

**Gray:** Do you remember the music at all?

**Goldring:** No, I wish I did.

**Gray:** You were thinking visually at the time. (laughter)

**Goldring:** As usual.

**Gray:** There were some photos of a hypnosis session of some sort?

**Goldring:** Oh, yes, yes! You know, I should say that all the time that all these fascinating things were going on, and thank God I have the proof in the photographs. My personal life was so erratic. I was so—at times depressed, and I was scared about money, and all sorts of things. So it's like a miracle that these happened, in spite of—and the effort I made to learn Spanish, and the difficulties, and so much unhappiness; so much struggle; so much fear—fear of money, not of people—and so much . . . It's like, as if two lives were going on at the same time. I was like a walking—what's the word I want? Nervous breakdown. I was like a walking nervous breakdown. But when I got behind the camera, I was a different person. Thank God! It's really extreme opposites.

**Gray:** It's as if you had an artistic life that was progressing its own way, independent of the difficulties in your home life.

**Goldring:** That's true, and you know, it just occurred to me how lucky I am to be alive today, because somebody like Diane Arbus, who's a great photographer, but she killed herself at a young age. But I think my photographs are more important than hers because they are of these real people. I appreciate these photographs now more than I ever did before. I just took them for granted. But now, it's like they have a life of their own, [that] had nothing to do with me. Those places that we've been talking about, that you've pointed toward, to look at, I'm just thrilled that I was lucky enough, that my camera was lucky enough to be there, and I was just pressing the camera. It just . . . I'm really lucky.

**Gray:** Well, we're lucky to have the photos. The portraits of the town that Fromm studied . . .

**Goldring:** Yeah, Chiconcuac.

**Gray:** . . . they're immortal, you know? They become timeless.

**Goldring:** Yeah, they are, and they're the kind of people that weren't usually taken, have their pictures taken.

**Gray:** I don't want to pry, but I know you were married again down there, had another child . . .

**Goldring:** Yeah, she's the one who lives in Toronto, and I was visiting her last month.

**Gray:** Ah. Is she the sociologist?

**Goldring:** Yes she is.

**Gray:** Ah, okay.

**Goldring:** And she's in Puerto Rico right, these few days, soon, and then, she goes to Mexico frequently. When we were leaving, she was about eleven, ten, on the plane, she said, "I'm coming back here and I'm going to help the Mexican people." And she has done that. She started focusing on immigration, and especially on a group of people who live in Watsonville and come from a particular place in Mexico. And I have pictures of her there, back and forth, or one picture she gave me of herself there, and then she worked in Niger for a while, also. So she's done her work in different places, but mostly she wanted to help Mexico, and she's done that. And now she's doing a lot on immigration, up in Toronto. She's doing a lot.

**Gray:** Wonderful.

**Goldring:** Yeah.

**Gray:** But I take it that being married down there didn't settle things for you or make things more stable?

**Goldring:** Well, yes they did, certainly, because we bought a house and fixed it up, and I have a whole book of photographs of that house, which I'd love to somehow insert in this because it's part of the story. Because that house was on a street in a residential area, and the back of it was on a *barranca*, that's a ravine, and when I went back there a few years ago, it was all built up! You couldn't—that house is long gone, and there was a condominium, and all condominiums, and in the ravine were buildings. I could not believe it.

**Gray:** Building boom.

**Goldring:** Yes, definitely.

**Gray:** Well, the hypnosis class . . . <sup>13</sup>

**Goldring:** Oh yes, that was a doctor. And—I forget which doctor—who wanted to see whether hypnosis could be used instead of anesthetics. And whoever it was who had the idea to do that came and demonstrated how to—and I think he used a thing on a pendulum, a pendulum on a string, and he was going to use it for dental work, and for delivery, birth. And I think I went once, to have a session, but it didn't work with me. For dental work, that's what that was.

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<sup>13</sup> See Box 2, Folder 12.

**Gray:** Interesting. Do you remember ever doing a project for Planned Parenthood? There is a folder that's titled Planned Parenthood . . .<sup>14</sup>

**Goldring:** Oh, really? Then I did! I didn't remember it.

**Gray:** There are many interesting individuals. I notice there are photos of someone named Miss Alma Reed.<sup>15</sup>

**Goldring:** Oh, well!

**Gray:** And she obviously has her finery on. (laughter)

**Goldring:** Oh, *she* is a historic figure. There's a famous song in Spanish, *La Peregrina* . . . She was the mistress or lover (or something) of a Mexican [leader]. and she was part of Mexican history.<sup>16</sup> I met her when she was an older woman. I remember going to her salon with all these people, and I took a whole bunch of pictures. And the funny thing is that later on, I got a letter or call from a cousin of mine who worked for—*National Geographic*?—some big magazine, asking me for my pictures of her. How he found out that I had them, I don't know. But he knew he had a cousin who lived in Mexico, who took photographs. And I sent them to him, and presumably they did an article—you could maybe have them look it up—about her, because she was famous. Stephen Fisher was his name. Steve Fisher.

**Gray:** I kind of had the impression that she had gotten out all her jewels and best clothes, and worn them all at once, but maybe . . . (laughter)

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<sup>14</sup> See Box 4, Folder 1.

<sup>15</sup> See Box 4, Folder 11.

<sup>16</sup> Alma Reed was a journalist from San Francisco who became involved with involved with Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a progressive governor of Yucatán who favored women's rights.

**Goldring:** Could be. Is that what the photograph looks like? I've forgotten by now. But she had a salon, and there were all these people. And I remember there was a lovely young woman there, who she was or what happened to her, I don't know. Oh, and then I met all—and I don't have photographs of them—all the "Hollywood Ten." Do you remember, did you ever hear about that?

**Gray:** [shakes head "no"]

**Goldring:** Such is history. There was a time—do you ever hear of McCarthy, McCarthyism?

**Gray:** Sure, absolutely.

**Goldring:** Well, because of that whole scare, these directors and writers and so forth, Howard Fast, do you ever hear of him? Such is fame. He wrote a lot of books that at one time were very well known. They all fled, and there's a very good book that one of them, Hugo Butler's wife Jean Rouverol wrote a book about the Hollywood Ten, and they all fled the states because they were going to be jailed. And they went to Mexico, and we knew them. And all sorts of things happened.

**Gray:** Were they writers, mostly, or producers, actors?

**Goldring:** I think they were mostly writers. Dalton Trumbo had written *Johnny Get Your Gun*. That was a harrowing book. But he had written screenplays, and this book by Jean Rouverol, which I don't remember the title [of], could be *The*

*Hollywood Ten*<sup>17</sup> is worth reading. And by coincidence, I met her again in Los Angeles when I moved there on my way up to here. I didn't know then it was on my way up to here, but it was. So I did see her then, and kept somewhat in touch with her.<sup>18</sup>

**Gray:** Now, who is Ernst Rosenthal?<sup>19</sup>

**Goldring:** Ernst and Merle were two friends of mine. [In Mexico] I was walking on the street one day and I saw a couple even more newly arrived than I, and I said, "Can I help you?" Well, they turned out to become lifelong friends. They still live in LA, and I still am in touch with them. Rosenthal is their last name. Merle was a dancer, and he was a painter. He may still be. And then he taught painting. When I was eighty and my son made a huge party for me, they couldn't come to it, but they sent a lovely birthday card with many pages, just beautiful. That was five years ago, and I have been in touch with her. They built themselves a most wonderful handmade house in one of the canyons in Los Angeles. And then he became an art teacher at some college there. That's who they were. And they had an apartment, in a house—they had half a house—in San Angelin, and when the children and I arrived and needed a place, they were about to leave, and we took their apartment.

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<sup>17</sup> Jean Rouverol. *Refugees from Hollywood: A Journal of the Blacklist Years* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> The Hollywood Ten were producers, directors, and screenwriters, including Dalton Trumbo, who were suspected of having left-wing views. In 1947 they refused to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, citing their First Amendment rights, and were sentenced to jail terms. Although Hugo Butler and Jean Rouveral weren't technically part of the actual "ten," they and many others in Hollywood were also blacklisted. [www.britannica.com/eb/article-9040813/Hollywood-Ten](http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9040813/Hollywood-Ten)

<sup>19</sup> See Box 1, Folder 6



**Gray:** Well, we are at an hour, so we could stop if you feel like it, or if there's anything else you want to bring up today, we can do that, or we can continue next time.

**Goldring:** Good. We'll continue next time, but let's tie up any loose ends also now.

**Gray:** Sure.

**Goldring:** For some reason, Xochimilco comes up in my mind, which was a tourist place.<sup>20</sup> But it wasn't just tourists from the states. It was a place that Mexican families went to, to enjoy themselves on a weekend. And I hope the pictures show some of that. I know that in it, my daughter who lives in Toronto now is a young girl, a little girl there, in some of those photographs. And I'm sorry I didn't go to see whether they still do that now.

The thing about Mexico that impressed me was that people smiled and danced and sang and laughed even though the world was tumbling down around them. The peso was dropping in value all the time. There was all sorts of trouble. And yet they laughed. And they cared about each other. It's true there was an awful lot of murders and this and that. I'm not trying to paint an idyllic place. But there was a humanness, a warmth. And it's still true now, in spite of all the motorcycles and the overbuilding and all sorts of stuff, there's a humanness about the people that I would like somehow . . . I don't know if my photographs can say that.

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<sup>20</sup>See Box 5, Folder 9.

**Gray:** I see it there in the photos.

**Goldring:** Yeah? I hope so. Like that young woman with a child on her back, who's scrubbing clothes. There's a joyousness in her face! It's drudgery! The child is heavy; that's not a baby. She doesn't have childcare.

**Gray:** Remarkable.

**Goldring:** Really!

**Gray:** And she looks very statuesque, almost. She has a kind of an elegance, a natural dignity.

**Goldring:** Yes! That's right, and strength! Really. Exactly. And (long pause) there's much more to these pictures than I realized. It's interesting. And of course, I don't know if I—the Day of the Dead, have we spoken about that at all?<sup>21</sup>

**Gray:** Not on these interviews, no.

**Goldring:** Because the Day of the Dead is an interesting holiday. We don't have anything like it. We try to *forget* cemeteries. But they embrace the cemeteries. It's part of life. And that particular village was particularly photogenic, and I was lucky to be able to go there a few times. But the idea happened all over. There was a wonderful one at a lake—maybe it was at Patzquaro, I don't know—some lake where there put little candles in paper boats and sailed them on the water, honoring the dead—the children one day, and the adults another day.

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<sup>21</sup> See Box 1, Folder 23.

**Gray:** At night, the candles?

**Goldring:** At night.

**Gray:** It sounds beautiful.

**Goldring:** You saw the little book I did of Day of the Dead.

**Gray:** Yes, and the exhibit at the library.<sup>22</sup>

**Goldring:** Oh, right. I never got to where they do it on the water, but I heard about it. Must have been wonderful.

I had no idea what moving to Mexico would mean for me and for my children. I must talk with them sometime, the two older ones, about whether they use any Spanish now, and how they feel about those years. I must do that. But Luin, it's an integral part of her life. She was eleven when she left, about eleven, but it's been a huge part of her life.

**Gray:** That's amazing she said she would come back and help when she was eleven and she went right ahead and—

**Goldring:** That's right, and she did. Absolutely. (pause) So, thank you very much.

**Gray:** Thank you, Alissa, it's a pleasure. (laughter)

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<sup>22</sup> Goldring's Day of the Dead photographs were on display at the Aptos Public Library in November 2005.

**Goldring:** It's been a real experience for me. Makes me really rethink a lot. And remember things I've forgotten. And finding these books of pictures is wonderful.

**Gray:** It is March twenty-second, and I'm with Alissa Goldring at her house, and this is our third interview.

**Goldring:** I'm looking at photographs taken in Mexico City, so long ago . . . The people on their knees . . . Ah, what people do in the name of religion. But they don't hurt anybody. And it's these people who hurt other people! But *they* hurt their knees.

**Gray:** (laughter) They're photos of, it looks like, an open town square area.<sup>23</sup>

**Goldring:** It's the plaza in front of the cathedral.

**Gray:** Okay, and some of the photos you took out through what looks like a wrought iron fence.

**Goldring:** Yeah, it's the fence around it.

**Gray:** One of the things that struck me about those photos is the graphic elements of them. It's definitely an artist's vision at work. It's not just a document of the area. There's a lot of playfulness, taking the photos through the wrought iron fence with the kind of curlicues. I wanted to ask you if it's different on different assignments, but just how much your training as a painter, with composition, and so forth, affected your choices for your [photographs].

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<sup>23</sup> See Box 2, Folder 24.

**Goldring:** It happens naturally. It's just like, do you think about grammar when you talk? You don't. But you manage to speak grammatically so people understand you. I think that's how it is with art. It's just part of my grammar, part of my background. And beauty has been something . . . I was realizing recently, beauty moves me a great deal, in nature, or in the light coming through a prism, or in a little sketch that I've made. I look at it, and it's beautiful. And the flower, maybe, that I paint, or . . . So, I realize that from childhood, that was something that I would say was a saving, because there was so much that was destructive, and painful, and isolating, and lonely, and scary, and so much starvation for affection, for respect, for nourishment of all sorts. So that I think I fed myself on beauty quite a bit. I can remember when I was very young, looking at clouds—in New York City, you could see clouds in the sky—and the pinks and the blue, I still remember thinking, How would I paint that if I tried? I can't imagine whether it's possible. I used to think, if I could paint those clouds, then I'd be [a] really good painter. (laughter) I was very little. And once when I was flying with a friend of mine who flew a plane, through sunset clouds, I still remember how amazing it was. It was like we were going through avenues with clouds on either side, like going through a canyon, but the clouds were pinks and blues and way at the end, it was like a fairy castle. It was like another world, a beautiful world. And later he flew a plane and crashed and died.

**Gray:** Oh dear.

**Goldring:** Yeah, I was glad I wasn't in that plane. . . . But, in all my travels I've brought home lovely things. Needlework from China, *exquisite* things. And I have loads of beautiful things in the house, which I never thought about, until I

put it all together and realized how . . . And the pre-Columbian art that I have. People have always wanted to make beautiful things. And the style of what they consider is beautiful—Inuit design is different from Chinese, is different . . . and so on, but it's—American Indian—it's all a striving for beauty, and what's amazing, just like language, how varied it can be. But language, I guess, expresses a striving for communication, and decoration is a striving for beauty.

**Gray:** In all your travels, and the many cultures you've seen visual art in, do you think that there are consistencies in the idea of beauty?

**Goldring:** Well, my eyes make a consistency, because I'm seeing all of it, and I'm seeing it all as beautiful. And that includes Picasso and Matisse, and Van Gogh. It includes the Westerners too, which is different. The other cultures tend to be more of what we call decorative, whereas the Westerners tend to be more realistic. I think that's an overall characteristic. And the less representational seems to lend itself more to the decorative, to me. But no, decorative can begin to sound trivializing. It's like they transmute the forms into—I don't want to just call it design—into the essence, and they're not concerned with what the visual eye surface sees. They're not trying to copy nature. I think it was Klée who said, "Art does not copy what you see; art makes you see."

But my . . . What is beautiful? I suppose that's totally a question of . . . they say beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, and what one person thinks is beautiful . . . I'm thinking of Africa and the distortions, to my mind, distortions of the face that are done, of making the lips stand out, or the necks elongated with many rings, and things that to my eye are strange and—I wouldn't consider—or, the bound

feet of China, and so on, so many things that to me are disastrous, in some culture is considered beautiful. So certainly I was molded by a European tradition of beauty going back to Greece and Rome, and at the same time valuing what we now call aboriginal or primitive art. Certainly the Inuit art is beautiful, both the paintings and the sculpture. So it's an interesting question of what makes beauty. It does certainly jump over borders. And I might give it some thought some time, whether there is something more basic, something that appeals . . . Certainly a lot of the things that I have seen from the Hindu culture did not seem beautiful to me, and yet, the underlying philosophy of Hinduism appeals to me greatly, and I spent four months in an ashram studying, and that's my spiritual practice and path of meditation.

The other quote I like, I may have said it before, is Robert Henri saying, "Art may not earn you a living, but it'll make you a life." I think that's been true. I have not been a good businessperson in terms of selling my work . . . (telephone rings, tape turned off for a moment.) . . . Of course, the formal qualities of art are there, even in representational work. People like Arthur Dove, [Arthur Wesley] Dow, Milton Avery . . . Different . . . there's just different languages in art. And I've tried a lot of different things.

**Gray:** Well, speaking of Matisse, who's, I guess, a favorite of both of ours . . .

**Goldring:** Yes.

**Gray:** The paintings he did off of the balcony in the South of France, of the beach [through the wrought iron railing] . . .

**Goldring:** Mm, yes.

**Gray:** Your photos through the wrought iron remind me of those. Very playful.

**Goldring:** Oh, aha. Yes, there's a whole series of those. There's the idea of looking through something that frames the view. Another person that I like is Chagall.

**Gray:** Ah. Your composition is so strong though, and Chagall, I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but his, everything is just swirling . . .

**Goldring:** Yeah, that's his style.

**Gray:** . . . and almost randomly placed. Right. So, let's see now. Here are the people on their knees on their way.

**Goldring:** Yeah. They do that, a penance sort of thing, and they move on their knees this whole length of this vast courtyard in front of the temple, and sometimes you'll see processions on their knees on the roads if you're in the small towns. They'll be doing that, and they'll be carrying an image of the saints, or Jesus, or Mary, or somebody, they'll be carrying a huge statue. So some men will be carrying that on their shoulders, and the other people will be following on their knees. But in this—and you see, they have flowers they're bringing. And men, women, and children. Not so many men, but . . . men, women, and children. What's done in the name of religion. (long pause) These flowers are very typical of Mexico City. Gladiola?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>See Box 2, Folder 24.



**Gray:** Right.

**Goldring:** And they sometimes dip them in dye, so you'll have a *whole* yellow, or a *whole* red, or a *whole* blue.

**Gray:** Here's another set that is so striking, graphically. The palm fronds create that striped, curved pattern.

**Goldring:** They, again, are a frame through which I'm looking at different places in Mexico City. This was on assignment to do a portrait of Mexico City for something or other, I don't remember for what now. Some magazine or something. I can't quite see what these children are doing. What's happening here? I need a magnifying glass or an enlarger. But it's probably interesting. (both laugh) You can see them here.

**Gray:** Oh, yeah. Interesting pattern the windows make on that building.

**Goldring:** Yes, and the contrast between the very modern—and you can see the style of the cars back then.

**Gray:** This is almost like a Mondrian in itself here. (laughs)

**Goldring:** Yes, that's right, it is! And then here you have the older kind.

**Gray:** Those are fun. Here's a set, you seemed to be following a small family, a man and a woman who seem to be in more traditional dress

**Goldring:** Oh, this was again part of that show, *Mexico City*. I took these people who had come from a village and were in costume. It's not costume, that's what

they wore. And the child is on her back, or on her front, in a *reboza*, and the father is carrying the little boy, and they're both wearing these big hats, big brimmed hats. I was following them around just to get a good shot of the modern city and these people. And here was a city couple, and a country couple.

**Gray:** Ah, right. Contrast. And there are many photos, there are many of this series, a couple pages of contact sheets, and they do look so innocent, and in a way, so lost, in the city.

**Goldring:** Yeah.

**Gray:** Did they have any reaction to you following them?

**Goldring:** No, I wasn't that close. I don't recall. I might have spoken with them afterwards, but I don't remember. But I took so many because it was an assignment, and that was the way of getting the best one. It was easier to just shoot, shoot, shoot, rather than to wait and pick on one. This way, what I might prefer might not be the one that somebody else on the . . . because several people would look at it, whoever was the account executive, or the . . . so forth.

**Gray:** They would look at the contact sheet and pick what they wanted to print?

**Goldring:** Mm hmm.

**Gray:** How much influence did you have on—with what you thought was the best shot?

**Goldring:** Not much. Except that I wouldn't give them anything that I didn't think had possibilities.

**Gray:** There are some photos of them waiting to cross the street. I'm not sure we've got them on that sheet there, but one almost feels anxious for them with the cars whizzing by.

**Goldring:** (laughter) It's true, it's true. It would be interesting to shoot a picture from that spot now, those spots, and see what the city looks like, and what the people look like. And whether people come in from the country in those clothes anymore. Sometimes you'd see somebody in real regional dress. This is near the city. But you'd see people in clothes from Oaxaca, and from further south, really, and sometimes they would be near the museum store—there was a museum store more or less opposite the Palace of Fine Arts, and it sold all sorts of *artisanía*, from the localities. And sometimes there'd be some Indians who had come up to bring some of their crafts. And they looked so . . . they'd peek out from the door, and I think I have pictures of that. They'd be so curious about the city, and the cars whizzing by, and intimidated at the same time as eagerly curious.

**Gray:** Wow. And these people were in the city. Do you remember why the family was in the town?

**Goldring:** No, I probably didn't engage them in conversation, although I can't remember now. That's a good question. I was only sent to be eyes . . . so I didn't do any interviewing.

**Gray:** Then here, I guess these are from the open market, with the jumble of items available?<sup>25</sup>

**Goldring:** That's La Lagunilla. Yeah, that's all La Lagunilla. It's a little bit like the flea market here, magnified a great deal. And there's the people, with their babies, the women carrying the babies, and there's, it looks like a typical American, doesn't it? Tall . . .

**Gray:** The posture . . .

**Goldring:** . . . and blond. Yeah, isn't that interesting? Just look at the two men, the difference, in the Mexican man, the way he stands, and the American.

**Gray:** True.

**Goldring:** There's another couple. And they're selling everything, all sorts of things. There's candlesticks like I have here.

**Gray:** Wrought iron.

**Goldring:** Yeah. And birds in cages, and they sell the birds individually without the cage. They bring them in . . .

**Gray:** For pets?

**Goldring:** For pets. And musical instruments, harps. They have lots of, or some harp concerts and contests, people playing harps. Not in the city, but in certain localities.

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<sup>25</sup> See Box 2, Folder 15.

**Gray:** Are they the smaller [Mexican] harps, or the large classical harps?

**Goldring:** This kind.

**Gray:** That looks like a large, classical harp. With all the little objects laid out there, are those—it's hard to tell from the small contact sheet—are those tiny, you know, screws and washers and nuts, or are those creative pieces?

**Goldring:** No, no, no, those are like candlesticks.

**Gray:** Okay.

**Goldring:** You can tell from the comparison with a person. I have things someplace like that, but they're brass, ornate candlesticks, maybe six inches, twelve inches.

**Gray:** Okay.

**Goldring:** And a horse, different metal objects, and people keep buying them, and more people come to sell more of them, and it's probably still going on right now. Saturday was the big day, or was it Sunday? I don't remember. The weekend. Like the flea market here in Soquel.

**Gray:** Right. There's a series here of battered-looking religious sculptures and icons.

**Goldring:** That's all part of Lagunilla.

**Gray:** Okay.

**Goldring:** And there's a woman looking at things with an idea of buying something. There's a Mary, I guess, a saint of some kind. There's a simpler form of a saint. And there's more indigenous type. This isn't like early Christian art, and this is more like pre-Columbian art.

**Gray:** It's a wonderful photo. I'm going to describe it a little for the recording. On the right side of it there's a little shrine, and a woman who looks maybe like a tourist, European or American, leaning over looking at something, and then there's a vertical line, and then at the top is another saint that stands out very nicely, and then underneath is the pre-Columbian art. It's a photo that just seems to have segments of different periods and different cultures. It's wonderful.

**Goldring:** Yeah . . . His display was arranged that way, and that woman could have been a tourist, or she could have been a local person. There were middle- and upper-class people who would come there to look for things. And then here's a statue in front that's a European type of statue, holding up, I think it would have been a candle holder. I'm not sure.

**Gray:** It looks like there are some wooden . . . there's a crucified Christ, as far as I could tell . . . and there are kind of pieces missing from the sculptures. I was wondering . . .

**Goldring:** Oh yes, that's for sure.

**Gray:** . . . if these are battered because of the wars over religion, the *Cristeros* versus the socialists?

**Goldring:** I doubt it, I think they're battered because they're old and they got handed around from place to place, and thrown in people's attics or cellars.

**Gray:** It's an interesting image with his arms up there . . .

**Goldring:** Yes.

**Gray:** . . . looking so battered, and then there are paintings behind him.

**Goldring:** They were all framed, and the frames are really what the people would have bought them for. Those little objects that are up on that wall there, I probably got at Lagunilla. This little black one, and even that weathervane kind of thing, I might have gotten at Lagunilla, and of course, the candlesticks.

**Gray:** So some of them are forged at ironworks, I take it?

**Goldring:** Yeah.

**Gray:** Okay, and then maybe that's . . .

**Goldring:** That's a flat piece of iron that's been cut out in a machine.

**Gray:** hammered . . . okay, cut out.

**Goldring:** I think it was meant as a weathervane. I'm not sure.

**Gray:** It has little angels on the curlicues there, cute. Here's a nice graphic one that has a large picture frame (laughter) and then you see a person through the picture frame.

**Goldring:** Right. And you see another picture being carried. It's got a cloth around it.

**Gray:** A couple more. The reason I picked these out was that they had such a combination of the culture, but also your compositional sense, and a kind of a poetic quality to them. Here's one from La Lagunilla with, I guess it's at a market and someone's selling a violin, it's lying open in a case, and it looks like there're some game pieces or something next to it, and then there's an older woman off to the left, and then you see straight through, in silhouette, you see a long hall, or space between buildings with light at the end of it, and a dark silhouette of a woman coming toward you. It has a very poetic quality.

**Goldring:** Thank you. It's part of La Lagunilla. And this is some kind of game, I think.

**Gray:** Or a box with pieces of, game pieces in it?

**Goldring:** When I see the box, I think of type that used to, you used to have to set type . . .

**Gray:** Oh, in drawers, right.

**Goldring:** . . . in individual letters. When I worked on that newspaper in high school, we did that. You wouldn't believe the changes that have happened since then. But whether this has anything to do with this, or this, I don't know.

**Gray:** This reminds me of the Dutch paintings where you see through long hallways to the spaces beyond, in the back.



**Goldring:** Right.

**Gray:** And here's another one I just picked out for the contrast of shapes, arches and stripes.

**Goldring:** I still think this is La Lagunilla. Another angle on it.

**Gray:** So why don't we look at the list of locations, and if something comes up that you want to tell me about . . .

**Goldring:** Okay, good.

**Gray:** That was fun.

**Goldring:** Well, Xochimilco, you know. That's the floating gardens.<sup>26</sup>

**Gray:** Okay, I didn't quite understand that when I looked at the photos. I could see that the boats floated but I couldn't tell that the gardens floated.

**Goldring:** Well, long ago, they made gardens, they planted gardens, you'd have to look this up historically, and then after a while, they stopped floating because the roots went down and down and down. But they're still called the floating gardens of Xochimilco. These lovely boats weave in among them, and people go to picnic for the day. And local people do it. It's a tourist attraction, but it's mainly the local, native Mexicans. Mexico City people. A man stands and pulls the boat, and other boats come alongside, selling food, and I think making music. It's a lovely way to spend Sunday. It's probably there during the week, but Sunday's the *day*. It's very lovely.

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<sup>26</sup> See Box 5, Folder 9.

**Gray:** From what I remember of the photographs, there are two children on the front of your boat. Those would be your kids?

**Goldring:** My daughter and a friend of hers.

**Gray:** Oh, okay. Let's go from the top down, and just, anything that happens to strike you. You don't have to talk about every group, but just if something comes up.

**Goldring:** Well, the Day of the Dead you've got lots of. The *charros*, you had seen one with a man with a pistol.<sup>27</sup>

**Gray:** Right.

**Goldring:** *Charro* is the word for that, which I might not have had at the time [in the last interview session]. The shrine of Guadalupe is where they're on their knees.<sup>28</sup>

**Gray:** Okay.

**Goldring:** We spoke about the polio, and the child psychiatric hospital. And Rufino Tomayo?

**Gray:** He's a muralist, am I right?

**Goldring:** Yes, and paintings as well. He was one of the more sophisticated. There were the greats: there was Tomayo . . . I'm forgetting names now.

**Gray:** Diego Rivera, maybe.

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<sup>27</sup> See Box 1, Folder 12.

<sup>28</sup> See Box 2, Folder 24.

**Goldring:** Yeah, Siquieros, and I guess that's it. The washing is outdoors at San Miguel Allende, I think. There's this line of cement trucks where the women are washing their clothes, and there's a little boy sitting in the front minding a baby. I don't know if you came across that. But that was how it was. People washed their clothes by hand, and the [older] children took care of the younger children.<sup>29</sup> And the whole thing about Yelapa school: that was where some Americans had settled. They wanted to make a hotel, and to live there. And one couple, Brice Wilson and his wife Jenny, and she, amazingly, turned up here last year. It seems she's a friend of a woman who lives here, and somehow they found out that I was here, and I had the photographs that I took of Jenny and her children when they were little . . .

**Gray:** Oh!

**Goldring:** . . . and now they are grown and she has grandchildren. And this had been a very slim young woman and now she's (pause) an ample woman. But I gave her the photographs. I have wonderful photographs of the children at the beach in Yalapa. And also in the local school. They went to the local school.

**Gray:** The American children did?

**Goldring:** These two American children, yes. Zihuatanejo was a place on the coast north of Acapulco, and at that time, it was a quiet little fishing village.<sup>30</sup> I remember going there when I was pregnant with my third child, and the water was so wonderful. There was a park that had been set aside with some huge

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<sup>29</sup> See Box 5, Folder 10.

<sup>30</sup> See Box 5, Folder 13.

boulders that made it like a small outdoor swimming pool within the bay, and that had been Montezuma's playground, a swimming pool.

**Gray:** Wow.

**Goldring:** And it had stayed there. And that bay, I later got a small sailboat, and one day I was sailing by myself in this little sailboat called a sunfish, practically a surfboard with a sail, and I was sailing along, and there was nobody else, and it was this beautiful bay, and up ahead was the open sea, but I was in the bay. Gorgeous day. And I looked to my right, and there's a dolphin, and it's going up next to me and down, and up and down, and I'm sailing along, and it's swimming along, and then suddenly it wasn't there, and I felt bereft! And then I looked, and it was on my left side.

**Gray:** (laughter)

**Goldring:** It had gone under the boat and come up. And we continued that way. As you can see, I remember it so clearly. It is one of the high spots of all my seventeen years in Mexico, and of my whole life. There was something so natural, and so sweet, the sort of thing that can only happen in a place like that. I go down to the beach and walk on the beach and I'm thrilled when I see a seal or a dolphin, but there's no chance of swimming alongside it. But even a glimpse of one is very satisfying. So that was Zijuatanejo. We continued to go there summers, but the first time we had stayed in a little hotel in the fishing village. Later, when Luin was five or so—she was the child I was pregnant with when I went there—then we stayed in a regular hotel, which was up a hill. The hill rose at that end from the water.

**Gray:** So let's see. Zihuatanejo is box five, in folder thirteen, and there are men throwing fishing nets, am I right? And then palm trees, and it's very beautiful.

**Goldring:** The fishing nets are probably . . .(long pause) well, maybe it's there . . .

**Gray:** They're in that folder, and then there's a girl with a plate of seafood, a little girl.

**Goldring:** Well, then it is.

**Gray:** It looks paradisiacal.

**Goldring:** It is.

**Gray:** Playa Azul?<sup>31</sup>

**Goldring:** Playa Azul was not a place I went frequently. I was there once. For some reason I wanted to see it. It was a new area being developed at that time, and had wide avenues. It was not a tourist place yet, but the government was developing it toward being available. I remember at one home a woman had a Singer sewing machine, not electric, but a pedal. A Singer sewing machine. And there was no place to stay. A family let me stay there, and let me pay, and gave me some boiled eggs for breakfast. I was just sort of adventuring. I bet now it's a really well-developed resort.

**Gray:** That was box four, folder two, and I was struck by the sewing machine and a shack that had, really, no other machinery or technology or anything, just the sewing machine.

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<sup>31</sup> See Box 4, Folder 2.

**Goldring:** Exactly. Yeah. But it was a treadle, and she was probably earning her living with that sewing machine, supporting the family.

**Gray:** Outside, in that folder, and I guess in that area, there's a huge hole, and there's a little kid going down into the hole. I don't know if you remember whether it's a hole where they're digging up clay or if that's a well and they're—it's wet at the bottom.

**Goldring:** (Nods that she doesn't remember.)

**Gray:** Very peculiar. Did you get there by a small plane or did you travel overland?

**Goldring:** That's a good question. How did I get there? I don't remember. That's not much help to you.

**Gray:** (laughter) No problem.

**Goldring:** No doubt, I came by plane. There was no other way to go.

**Gray:** It looked very remote from the photos.

**Goldring:** Small plane. Small planes that landed in a field.

**Gray:** Were there any scary moments? It sounds like you took a lot of small planes when you were down there.

**Goldring:** I did take a lot of small planes, and fortunately, knock wood, (knocks on cabinet) sometimes—it was thrilling to be low, and you could see the people

and the trees and everything, you were just so near the ground. But the men were careful, the pilots. They didn't fly if the weather was bad.

**Gray:** Box five, folder one . . .

**Goldring:** What page is it in here [on the finding aid]?

**Gray:** It's page ten. And it says, "Typewriters, El Centro, and Kate."

**Goldring:** Yes. That was very interesting. Kate was Kate Simon, a friend of mine then, who is dead now, who was a travel writer, very, very good travel writer. She was with me that day. I remember that square. The thing was that people went to the men who sat at the typewriters, and it was usually men, and they asked them to write letters for them and to mail them out. There was a movie from some South American country about a woman who did that, typing letters up. It was a wonderful movie. Anyway, I went down and took photographs of that.

**Gray:** Lots of typewriters.

**Goldring:** Old, battered typewriters, but they managed to get out the letters, and then people paid for the letter and paid for the stamp. And I hope they mailed them themselves because there's no guarantee.

**Gray:** Right.

**Goldring:** And they could be letters to a lover, letters back home to your family, mainly those. I don't think they were for jobs.

**Gray:** El Centro, where is that? I know there's one in California, but was this . . .

**Goldring:** We called El Centro going downtown . . .

**Gray:** Meaning it was downtown Mexico City?

**Goldring:** Yeah.

**Gray:** And there are huge doors in some photographs. Kate is standing against magnificent wooden doors. Do you remember where that was?

**Goldring:** Downtown, any of the old, old buildings would have those doors. That was the old part of the city. So it was traditional architecture. And what the specific building is, we could probably go back there now, and they'd still be there. Some of them had murals in them. There was one that had been a school. You probably saw it in that film of Diego [Rivera] and Frida Kahlo where she first taunts him? He's painting and she . . . did you see it?

**Gray:** I haven't seen it.

**Goldring:** Oh, well, it shows her being outrageous with him, and that's the school, and he has his murals there, and there are big lovely doors. What else strikes you?

**Gray:** Well, why don't we go with what strikes *you*?

**Goldring:** Well, I already spoke about the monastery in Tepoztlan. Lemercier, I guess. That was something interesting.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Box 2, Folder 27.



**Gray:** I don't believe we got that, no.

**Goldring:** No? Okay. He was a Dominican monk. I'm not positive, but I believe it was that. But he was a monk who started a monastery where he was training young men. And they made wonderful chocolates and wine, and different things which they sold. And with the proceeds they kept the monastery going, and trained the people in whatever monks are trained in. Apart from the work they did, in the religious aspect. And then Lemercier had trouble with one of his eyes, so he eventually was in psychoanalysis with Frida Smud, because I guess they felt that it was a psychological thing. And he decided to offer analysis to his entire group of monks. I have photographs of all of them sitting in a circle. *LIFE* magazine was going to publish that article because it was so interesting. And they didn't because the church would have objected. But they sent me a holding fee of four hundred dollars, which was money in those days. So he left the church. Well, he left as a monastery, I don't think he personally left the church. Then they were lay people but still living the monastery life, until he married a[n] ex-nun, and I don't know what happened to the whole place there. I think he left. Whether it continued, I don't know. But they made very good chocolate and wine.

**Gray:** I guess the question would be, did the psychoanalysis clear up his vision problem? (laughter)

**Goldring:** That's a good question, and I heard that he had other physical troubles with his face, A growth on his face or something, and that he left and went to Europe. I don't know.

**Gray:** And so he arranged for his entire flock of young trainees to have group Freudian, I mean, not strict psychoanalysis, because you mentioned they were in a group? Or . . .

**Goldring:** A group, and I think, maybe there were a dozen or so, not a huge number. And there's photographs of all that.

**Gray:** Fascinating!

**Goldring:** It was very interesting. I wonder what happened with her. She was a colorful person in her own right.

**Gray:** The former nun?

**Goldring:** No, Freida Smud, the psychiatrist. I was never in touch with him later on.

**Gray:** And you were in the room while she was doing the group?

**Goldring:** This was outdoors, actually, on their place, yes. And I was there, taking pictures. It was outdoors at their monastery.

**Gray:** Interesting.

**Goldring:** A lot of Mexico was sort of semi-indoors, semi-outdoors. The house would have one side of it very open to the outdoors, with a terrace, and sort of . . . I guess there was a way of walling it off when it rained. But it was very much open. Tepoztlan<sup>33</sup> is a beautiful place. It's a small city about an hour away from Cuernavaca, and it's a flat plain ringed by mountains, and in the mountains are

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<sup>33</sup> See Box 1, Folder 25.

temples left from earlier times, little, little temples. Hikers go up there because it's just a pleasant thing to do. And I happened to be there at the time of an eclipse, did I tell about that?

**Gray:** Ooh, no!

**Goldring:** So in the middle of the afternoon, it suddenly started to get dark. The chickens were fluttering around; they didn't know what was happening. The children had been told, and they had pieces of plastic, or different substances to hold over their eyes. They were forewarned. And I had something too. And little by little, it darkened, like evening, but quickly, quicker than evening. And there in the middle of the day, it was all dark. It was very strange. It was 1970.

**Gray:** It's box one, folder twenty five.

**Goldring:** Popocatepetl, we climbed it, that's the, there are two volcanoes that you can see from the city.<sup>34</sup> One is the sleeping princess, and the other is Popocatepetl. And we, some friends and I climbed. They went further up. I stopped just about where the snowline began, but there were some interesting pictures.

San Cristobal de las Casas was where Franz Blom and Trudi Blom—he was dead by the time I got there, but I met her. They were anthropologists, and they ran this sort of a guesthouse, and they took people on trips. We went in to see the Lacandonian Indians, which was quite amazing. I mean, it was primitive. And I had lots of photographs of them, so I guess they have, I don't know if they have

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<sup>34</sup> See Box 4, Folder 4.

the Lacandonians in that group or someplace separate. That was the most primitive part of the place that I had ever been to. The people were still living untouched by Mexico City, and they spoke their own language.

The Chisme trip I've spoken about. Have you gotten information about that?

**Gray:** I don't think so.

**Goldring:** That was the place—the word means “gossip,” *chisme* in their language. We had an interpreter from their language to Spanish, and there was an, I think I spoke about this [off the recording], Doctor Rouquet . . . He's the one who organized the trip to go there, and he had been going every year or so. And he brought with him young doctors and dentists . . .

**Gray:** That's right.

**Goldring:** And he set that all up. That was quite wonderful. And Ejo, the Japanese Zen monk, came on that trip. So you have that completely.

**Gray:** Yes, we talked about that last time.

**Goldring:** We've done that.

**Gray:** Press IPADE, that's box four, folder seven—is that a newspaper you worked for?

**Goldring:** No, that was a business group of some sort, and very dull photographs, just men in business suits having a meeting about something, and what the letters stand for, I don't know.

**Gray:** I take it that was an assignment?

**Goldring:** Ah, yes, definitely. Silvia Pinal was a very well-known actress.<sup>35</sup> I worked for a magazine that used to send me to take pictures of actresses and that sort of thing for the cover of the magazine. Julissa was a very young, up-and-coming actress.

**Gray:** You took photos of a clown.<sup>36</sup>

**Goldring:** But I think Firulais, he was a clown who, not with the circus, but he went to children's parties. And I have nice pictures of him with the children. You know, one of the really striking things about Mexico, as in all parts of the world, was the difference between the well-to-do and the poverty-stricken. The well-to-do had a clown come for a party, and they had weddings. They were lavish, with wonderful food and ice carvings to decorate the table, and . . . sumptuous. And waiters, and so on. Then you had the beggars and the poor people. But the quality of life, the rich paid in losing a lot, especially the children. Very often they were "poor little rich children." And I showed all the pictures of the poor children in the slum where I took photographs? That, I think, was the Planned Parenthood thing.<sup>37</sup>

**Gray:** Right.

**Goldring:** Yeah, because they were trying to show that people would be better off if they did not go on breeding, one year after another, and wearing the women out. That's why Planned Parenthood wanted pictures of that. But they

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<sup>35</sup> See Box 3, Folder 16.

<sup>36</sup> See Box 1, Folder 17.

<sup>37</sup> See Box 4, Folder 1.

were dealing with a Catholic country that didn't believe in birth control, so that was difficult. And a country where the men ruled the women. So, but in spite of it, little by little, I think, birth control spread.

**Gray:** We talked a little about that Jewish community . . .

**Goldring:** Oh yes, that was wonderful.

**Gray:** When you're talking about being in a Catholic country, were there any other things that you, from a Jewish background, experienced—

**Goldring:** Well, in San Miguel Allende, on the outside of some of the walls, was a little ceramic plaque, or metal plaque, on which it said, "The Inquisition" . . . "Aquí Fue La Inquisición," "The Inquisition was here." Which means that they had done something to people in that house. So there was the mark of the Inquisition. And there was a mark of the cruelty to the Chinese in certain areas, where they had burned down their places.

**Gray:** You were completely immersed in a Catholic culture there for many years.

**Goldring:** Well, I personally wasn't, but the country was.

**Gray:** (laughter) Was it a challenge to bring up your children?

**Goldring:** No, but I was thinking about what happened to the Catholic Church in some of the indigenous areas. The indigenous people quietly took over. They sat themselves down and they did their rituals, right with the saints looking down. They had saints stuck on little shelves. Tall saints, but on a shelf against

the wall, here and there, looking down on these people, and here's a man with a candle of—a taper kind of candle—and he's doing his own thing.<sup>38</sup>

**Gray:** (laughter) Such as what? What was he doing?

**Goldring:** I don't know, whatever he was mumbling to himself. It was certainly not what the Church was expecting him to be mumbling.

**Gray:** (laughter)

**Goldring:** It was a big open space with an earthen floor, and a fancy church around this. It was like a real combination of two cultures that accommodated each other, which is certainly much better than being extremists and fighting each other. They accommodated. To my knowledge, there were no religious wars in Mexico, nor national conflicts, nor tribal conflicts. All the European countries had their own little worlds in Mexico City. They had a cultural institute, and a library, and a school, and a diplomatic . . . whatever, consul. So they had their little enclave of their country, and the United States had its, and so on, and the British Consul rented the house, when I left my house there, I rented it to the British Consul. And nobody fought with anybody. That's the thing. Mexico's never been in any of these wars. I think that that's quite an achievement. But on the other hand, it was ruled all these years by a terribly reactionary government, the PRI, and then when they finally got somebody different, he hasn't been able to do, they haven't been able to do very much. And of course, there've been more recent earthquakes than that one.

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<sup>38</sup> Editor's note: Goldring is not speaking of a photo here.

**Gray:** There's an election coming up. We'll have to see what happens next.

**Goldring:** That will be interesting.

**Gray:** Do you have any plans to go back to Mexico?

**Goldring:** Well, I was there three years ago. I think I told you that. And I have two very good friends living there, a brother and sister. I do not plan to go back there, but I do write, and if I ever get email [capability], I will do that with them.