

English Transcript of Mariana Pasquet Testimonial

Interviewee: Mariana Pasquet

Interviewed by: Dr. Giovanna Urdangarain and Dr. Rona Kaufman

**Interview conducted at Hogar Israelita Nursing Home in
Montevideo, Uruguay in January of 2019.**

Mariana: There is a story with my grandmother that when she came here, she was like a little girl. She came with her parents and with her sister. She took like a boat, a boat... I don't know what it's called. And the boat... What is it? Yeah, she missed her boat with her family, she missed it. That boat was attacked. And they all died. So she took the other boat and she came okay. I don't know if I explained it well, but she was going to take a boat, and they attacked it... A ship, not a boat. They attacked it, and they all died, because, of course, it was a boat with Jews coming to South America.

Giovanna: So she was saved...

Mariana: She was saved because she missed the boat.

Giovanna: How long did you study German in school?

Mariana: All of it. Primary school, secondary school, and some years of Kindergarten. So in total, 13 years. Something like that.

Giovanna: And you're bilingual?

Mariana: Trilingual. English too.

Giovanna: Have you been able to use your German, for work or for something else?

Mariana: Traveling. I went on a trip with my school to Germany and I used it there. What happens is, the majority of the students from my German school end up losing their German...

Giovanna: Because you don't use it.

Mariana: Exactly. You hear English in TV shows, in movies, in film... You hear it everywhere

Giovanna: And It's not the same with German.

Mariana: You see German nowhere. I even have family from Germany who visit, they speak Spanish because their parents are Uruguayan, so they speak better. But once you go to Germany, it comes back immediately. I went about two years ago and, of course, I realized that I understood everything.

Giovanna: Of course.

Mariana: And my brother moved back but he lived there for three and a half years. He speaks it perfectly. But here at work, yes, I have used it because there are residents who speak German. But, it's not like I was hired specifically because I went to the German language school. I don't think so, at least.

Rona: Thank you so much for welcoming us and feeding us. I was wondering if you could just tell us a little bit about the home and its Jewishness, and how important it is that it's a Jewish home, and how the residents understand that.

Mariana: Okay, it's very important that it's a Jewish home. Here you live and breathe Jewish values. I was totally unconnected to the Jewish community. I went to a university here, the ORT, which is Jewish but the people who go there can be of any religion or have no religion, and nobody ever says anything about being Jewish, Christian, or whatever. Here, however, yes. And I, at least, began to enter the Jewish community to understand. I began to understand that here, we are always communicating... I am in the communication department. We are always communicating that we affirm the Jewish values. Those values are of solidarity, of supporting your neighbor... And in fact, I don't think it's just a story, I believe it's the truth, because this home was founded during wartime, and it was founded so that the... I don't know if you have already heard this, but the Jewish Europeans who were fleeing the war came here to have a place to stay, both the elderly and the children, the orphans. That is, because many people came here who could not come with their families, because their parents died, or whatever it was. And here there were barracks that had many rows of beds, and both elderly people and orphans slept there. That's why the corporate name of this home is "The Home for the Elderly and Orphaned Israelites of Uruguay." I think it was founded about 81 years ago, it is totally different now. The home is very important to the Jewish community, but it has made a radical change because about 15 years ago, I think it was, a new director for the home was chosen, and everything that the home was beforehand... Just so you can imagine, there used to be only two floors and there was no elevator, so if you went up to the second floor, you would never go down again. This was a very poorly-regarded place. If you had to come here, it was because you really had nowhere else to die, you didn't have a single cent, nothing. But it was Jewish and it was a place to live, that was the important part. That is to say, the Jewish community never allows their own to be left... I don't know.

Giovanna: Abandoned.

Mariana: Abandoned. And well, they have suffered a lot with that since the origin of the Jewish people, they were discriminated against again and again, and they have always come out ahead. And I think that in a community that that is not as massive as Christianity, for example, for me it is incredible how they have survived, their life is about surviving. And, well, after this change, the first change with this new director was to put in an elevator. So, everything that was the asylum, the old asylum... Elderly people who now come to visit, not the ones who live here because they already know, but the people who are the same age as the residents, still imagine it as the old asylum. They say "how horrible." Or, for example, they'll call you. This didn't happen to Pablo, but, they'll say "I heard that Pablo is in the home, what happened to him?" And we say, "It's not a bad thing to live here." But of course, the person has the image of this abandoned home, which was really for...

Giovanna: From another era.

Mariana: Exactly. You had nowhere else to go. So a lot has changed, obviously there are no more orphans, it's for the elderly. About 74% of them have a total or partial scholarship, and the other 26% pay. They pay even more than they would pay in other places, but because that is what the Jewish community is about, to function a bit like a cooperative, those who can, pay more, and those who cannot, don't. But the others are supporting you, and that is part of the Jewish values. The fact that it's a Jewish home is very important, the essence is not lost in any way. They have Sabbath every Friday, they have Hebrew classes and they are really, they are given a lot of that. And Ionit, who is the director, she is a magnificent person but she also implements a lot of those values, and she always backs them up within Judaism and within the education she had. I'm not saying that only Jews are good people. I mean, I am not Jewish and I closely identify with those values, but the fact that this home is Jewish is very important. It's very important for the community and it has become more and more beautiful. To me, this home is beautiful now. They want to improve that image. We are called up by Mides, the Ministry of Social Development. They call us because, for example, they find an elderly person in the street and if they are Jewish, we have the responsibility to take them. There are some processes that Ionit will tell you about for taking the elderly person to the home. We have cases where someone was living inside their house, all horrible, because, of course, they were cognitively deteriorated and couldn't realize it, and the neighbors report that situation. And here we have those situations where that person lives next to a resident who pays a certain amount per month, who has his apartment in Pocitos and who traveled every year to Europe, etc. But for us, it's the same. In fact, I do not know who is who because I have nothing to do with administration or management.

Giovanna: Is that information known only to certain people within the nursing home?

Mariana: Yes, of course.

Giovanna: Because it is personal. And the residents don't know either.

Mariana: Exactly. If you can tell who pays more, who pays less, or who does not pay it's because there are three different types of rooms here: a single, a shared room for two, and a shared room for three. Then there are also private or shared bathrooms, so you can look around a bit to see, but the truth is that nobody does it, not even the residents.

Giovanna: And then, what about the importance of religion in the home?

Mariana: Like I said before, the Jewish values that they uphold like solidarity, empathy, always thinking of your neighbor... Yes, we really emphasize those. But not... Well, for example, we do Shabbat every Friday and we respect that tradition, but the residents are not really super... What is it called?

Giovanna: Yes, practicing the religion.

Mariana: Yes, practicing. They aren't practicing. Of course there are some who are, but the majority aren't practicing. They do identify with the Jewish religion. That is, they know they are Jews and they have lived in the same neighborhood all their lives. Many are from the southern part of the city, many grew up here, then went to Pocitos or wherever. But it's not like they pray.

Rona: Well, I'd read before we came that less than half a percent of Uruguayans are Jewish. It's a really small part of the population who identify as Jewish.

Mariana: If I am not mistaken, it's ten percent. No, no, excuse me. If I am not mistaken, there are ten thousand Jews in Uruguay.

Giovanna: Ten thousand.

Rona: Yeah I read anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000.

Mariana: I think.

Rona: One estimate was 20,000.

Mariana: So, not much. Ah, sorry, but there are the same... amount?

Giovanna: Amount.

Mariana: ...amount of Uruguayan Jews living here as there are in Israel. I think. I think that is a real fact.

Rona: There are as many Uruguayan Jews in Israel as there are here?

Giovanna: The same number, that live here than there are in Israel.

Rona: Oh, interesting. Okay. Mariana: But verify this fact.

Rona: That's interesting, because a number of people have already mentioned having children in Israel.

Mariana: Yeah, yeah. A lot.

Rona: When we met Pablo, one of the very first things he said to us was that he was Uruguayan. So I wonder how, in general, if there's tension between being Jewish and Uruguayan, or if they've had to navigate those two identities, or if they're really assimilated and so there wouldn't be any problems then, being both, or one...

Mariana: No, no problem. Why? Because of what we were talking about before, because most of them are not practicing. Sometimes it's... Well, let me say it this way. They are not very religiously observant, that is something that I have noticed. Take me for an example, I am not Jewish. I see that they are not practicing, but one of the first questions they asked me when they met me was "Are you Jewish?" Not because of anything bad, they didn't say anything when I told them no, but for example they'll say "Oh, do you have a boyfriend?" "Yes" "And is he Jewish?" "No."

Giovanna: Did you tell them that your grandmother was Jewish?

Mariana: I told a few of them. But like I was telling you, my grandmother didn't identify with the religion either, or at least she didn't show that to her kids. So... Well there isn't really a problem because none of them are practicing, or very few are practicing, so it doesn't matter if you're Jewish and you were born in Uruguay or wherever. There is no tension whatsoever. But, even though they don't practice the religion, there are always questions. For the most part, the first question I always get is "Are you Jewish?" Or someone comes to visit, "Oh, and is he Jewish?" "Oh, and what...?" What are they called? They're part of those clubs when they're teenagers...

Giovanna: To which group do they belong?

Mariana: Of course, "What group are they from?" "And what...?" Yeah, things like that.

Rona: So I want to transition to thinking about the presence of the Holocaust and Holocaust stories, and how many residents have been directly affected by the Holocaust, either they're survivors or children of survivors or children of people who fled Europe, like your grandmother. So, what percentage, and also if they talk about that or how that becomes a kind of story for them or story of the Hogar.

Mariana: Okay, I don't really have this information, but I'll continue in Spanish. I don't have the information of how many, the percentage, or anything. I know of some in particular. For example, I knew the story of Hans in depth. He came, he was not in any camp, but, yes, he came escaped from the war and he had a thousand problems that were all resolved, and that was it. I know of some who were in the Holocaust, who are in the high dependency sector. One of them specifically, who was cognitively very bad, but... I don't know if you talked to Rachel about that because the best person to talk to about that is Rachel. She knows more, or maybe the director. But yes, I know that, for example, there was one resident in the high dependency sector who would say "Hitler is coming, Hitler is coming" and she would get very upset. I also know the case of one resident who was even in Siberia and I don't remember her story exactly, but she has a, like a trauma or an obsessive disorder or something. She keeps all the soaps because she spent years in a place where they didn't even bathe. So of course, she always wants a bar of soap, she keeps it and it's like a treasure for her. And also, now in the middle of summer, it's thirty degrees (30°C/86°F) and she is bundled up, fully layered. And the other day I was talking to her daughter who said "I am also always cold like that." I had seen her drinking water from the dispenser, half cold and half hot. I said "Oh, are you going to make some tea?" "No, I'm just going to drink water." "Oh, you don't drink cold water?" "No, I am always very cold like my mother. Not as much as her, she wears a scarf and jacket in the winter, but yes, I can't drink anything cold." So yes, traumas have stuck with them. I haven't been able to talk to many that.. Well, I don't think I've talked to anyone who was in a concentration camp. First of all because, I think that if you try to talk, they can talk to you... For example this woman with the soaps, she has a book that we can give you, but no, she is not doing very well and I don't really want to subject her to that. But yes, yes, everyone has their own story of how they came, or how their parents came. Many of the stories are of how their parents came.

Giovanna: You were talking about how in your case, on the one hand you don't identify yourself as Jewish, but on the other hand there is a Jewish history in your family, correct?

Mariana: Yes.

Giovanna: One way or another. When you started working here, why did you come and what made you stay?

Mariana: Okay. Well, before this job, I had a different job, and then I went to Madrid on an exchange program for college. I had left that job and when I came back, I started looking for a new job. The truth is that I sent out many resumes, and a friend told me... Because, of course, I wanted to work, I wanted to earn money. The travel bug had bitten me. And a friend sent me a photo that said they were looking for someone here. I didn't know the home, neither did she, but she had a friend whose grandmother lived here. She passed away about a year and a bit ago. So she had sent it to a group and by chance I got the picture that said they were looking for institutional development assistants that could work in communications. I sent in my resume. I think they called me the same day I sent it in to see if I could come in an hour, but it was Friday and it was May 1st, workers' day (May Day). So I came in on May 2, 2017. In the interview they asked me if I was Jewish and I said no, but I told them the story. And like I was telling you, I never had a link with the Jewish community. I do have friends, but no one in my family ever instilled it in me because it wasn't passed down down from my grandmother to my father, nor from my father to me. Here I found stories like the one of Hans, which is Juan in Spanish. That one really touched me because he really connected me with... Well, Hans was born in Germany, and he was Jewish. My grandmother was born in Germany and she was Jewish. And my grandmother, she was one of the best doctors here, she was a specialist in Parkinson's disease and with the twists and turns of life, she became sick with it.

Giovanna: What was your grandmother's name?

Mariana: Edith Gersler. She was a specialist, number one in her field. She got sick while being fully aware of what she was getting sick with. It was horrible. But Hans told me that he went with his mother to see my grandmother, to see the doctor. So I had a very strong bond with Hans because my grandmother passed away when I was three years old, so he was my link to her. It was amazing for me when he told me that. I told him my last names, but neither of my first two last names have my grandmother's, so when I told him my grandmother's last name he said, "Oh, I knew her," and it was really nice. But the truth is that I haven't stayed just because of that. It's not like, "Well, I'll stay in this job, because it links me to Judaism or because it has awakened something in me." No. I stay because I love the work, I love working with the elderly residents. It's incredible how you return home after being here. It has made me grow a lot professionally because there's a lot of opportunity. And, yes, it has also made me more sensitive to the Jewish community. I'm very interested in history and I think about WWII, and it's incredible what happened. I think about the fact that my grandmother was there and I say "Wow."

Giovanna: How old was your grandmother when she came to Uruguay?

Mariana: I know she was a child. She would have been about ten years old.

Giovanna: Did your dad ever have a chance to talk to your grandmother?

Mariana: Sure, yeah. My grandmother... There's a name here for the German Jews which is 'Yekke' if I'm not mistaken. It's like an inside joke. They say Yekkes are more closed off and more moody and things like that. And my grandmother was very German. She was, I don't know, six feet tall maybe.

Giovanna: And Yekke was the word for German Jews, specifically?

Mariana: German Jews, yes. So, for example, if someone is grumpy: "Ah, they're just a Yekke." They'll tell you, "Ah, it's just because they're Yekke" I didn't understand at first. When I told them in my interview that my grandmother was Jewish, they said, "Ah, Yekke" and I didn't understand, but then I started to figure it out. But my grandmother was like that, very rigid, very... I don't know. And my father... Well, I always tell him, "You never tell us stories about my grandparents or anything like that." I have an uncle who is a psychologist. He is very sensitive and everything like that. He tells us a lot. He says, "Oh, you used to sit on your grandfather's lap and he loved to tell you stories..." My father, as loving as he is, he didn't bring home many stories back then.

Giovanna: Your grandmother was the one who came, but your grandfather was here?

Mariana: No, my grandfather is Uruguayan, from Salto. Nothing to do with this.

Giovanna: Your grandmother is the one who migrated and that's the part of the family with that history.

Mariana: Exactly. And like I said, her personality was... Well, just the other day it was the birthday of my grandfather on my mother's side, and my grandmother on my mother's side, who is super Catholic and is very loving... For example, she always gives my boyfriend presents at Christmas, she's super inclusive and super... I don't know. But anyways, the day of my grandfather's birthday is the day that my grandmother passed away, it's the same day. So we called my father who is in Chile: "Yes, well, let's honor her and toast her." And my father told us "You kids didn't get to know your grandmother Edith when she was healthy and well, but you would have had two very different grandmothers, both of them wonderful and you would have loved both very much, but, of course, one that always hugs you and the other that keeps her distance and loves you in a different way. She wouldn't be so expressive." They sometimes joke with me here and say that I inherited that Germanness because I'm very... I do not know. I like things in order and things like that.

Giovanna: Mariana, what is your job here? Can you tell us a little bit about your role?

Mariana: Yes, the position is an institutional development assistant, and well, institutional development has a lot to do with communications. I work with Yoni Kurlender and we do the work of... Well, first there is the internal part. That deals with all of the residents' activities. They have 3 to 4 activities every day. I can show you a grid of activities later. But they do everything from theater to... They go to the institute of psychology to present the play.

Giovanna: Do they rehearse here and then perform there? Mariana: Yes, once a year they go and perform there.

Mariana: We coordinate all of the activities. Internally, we coordinate all communications. Then on an external level, we are in charge of all the communications with the families. That's why Yoni also coordinates the resident care area. They communicate with the families. We also coordinate the communication with the Jewish community. We have many partners. Then we also hold external fund-raising events. We hold a Brand Fair, for example. 3,000 people go to the Sheraton hotel where a number of clothes and household items are sold. Then we do one play per year, in the Movie Center. We bring an Argentinean play to be presented here.

Giovanna: And those are all events to raise money for the home?

Mariana: Yes, exactly. They aren't for the residents. I'm always asked, "Oh, are all the residents going?" Grandparents can go, but...

Giovanna: It's for...

Mariana: It's to finance the home. So we coordinate the organization of events, external communications, internal communications, activities, and as of just a little while ago, as I was telling you, they assigned me the new area of volunteering so that this whole area is professionalized. Because there is a lot we can make use of, there are many people willing to give their time and work. We have volunteers who come to talk to the residents but we could also have dentist who comes once a week and that would be incredible for us. We have a psychologist who is a volunteer in addition to the home's psychologist. So professionalizing and making use of all of that. Giovanna: About how many volunteers are there in the home?

Mariana: The truth is that I am currently making a database for...

Giovanna: To have all of that.

Mariana: On the other hand, we have volunteers who come in once or twice a week. And we have sporadic volunteers. As an example, for the Brand Fair, we take two huge trucks full of boxes from here to the Sheraton and it's an all day event that 3000 people attend. If we didn't have the 40 volunteers who came and were there all day...

Giovanna: You wouldn't be able to do it.

Mariana: We wouldn't be able to. Because otherwise it's just Yoni and me, and someone from here who comes to help.

Giovanna: And those trucks are full of things that are then sold?

Mariana: Of course, they are sold.

Giovanna: And who donates all of it?

Mariana: Brands, like 200 different brands.

Giovanna: And that is done every year?

Mariana: Every year in June. June or July.

Riley: What percentage of the volunteers do you think are Jewish?

Mariana: Before, almost all. Before, almost 100%. Since 2018 we have been using a platform that is a webpage called "Involucrate." It makes it so that if you want to volunteer, it will guide you to the different organizations. You can filter through. You can filter by children, adults, education, sports... I don't know. By neighborhood, by age, by everything. So from there, we receive many volunteers. Right now we have, for example, 10 volunteers who are not Jewish who always come once a week to talk to residents. Jews have also volunteered, but beginning in 2018, we've had many volunteers who aren't Jewish.

Giovanna: So that also opened up the home to a whole other group of people.

Mariana: Exactly.

Giovanna: Mariana, if you had to share with us something that we haven't asked you relating to your experience with the home or the community, what could you say?

Mariana: I think I already shared everything, but...

Giovanna: Yes?

Mariana: I mean, I love this home very much. It's a wonderful place for me to work. The people are very nice. Beyond my bosses and whoever, the people are very nice. I, at least, don't think... And maybe it's not great to say but, I am not of the idea that this is all great because they are Jewish, no. They are great because they are good people. They do have values that they learned from their family, and if those values are connected to Judaism, then that's wonderful. But it's a wonderful environment. It is super nice, and above all, I really like that everything is done for the sake of the resident. Here, you will never see... He is the accountant. You will never see them with money to spare. Everything that is bought, all of the supplies, it's all for the residents. We now have these beautiful offices because it really is much better to work this way than if we were scattered about. Sometimes we would have internet, other times we wouldn't. Here we work in "Cowork" and it is great. We have meetings every Monday here, all the areas meet, we are kind of like the team leaders.

Giovanna: And "Cowork" means what? Is it like a working method?

Mariana: Exactly. "Cowork" is when... Well, we work in "Cowork" part of the time because all of us administrators work back here. But then we also have all of the nurses, right?

Giovanna: Of course. But yeah, we all work back there. So if something happens, we are all there and each area can give full focus to the resident, because there's the nutritionist, the logistics...

Giovanna: So everyone can meet together. Mariana: Exactly, we meet all together on Mondays but day-to-day we all work back there. So if something happens, we can give you all administrative attention and see what your options are. There's the nutritionist, like I said. We ask him to find out about their participation in activities. There's hospitality services who knows exactly what your room is like, if you've had any problems with it. So the focus on the resident is integral. I've left out some of the areas. Resident care is another, of course. But...

Giovanna: And they all meet once a week?

Mariana: Formally, once a week. With the doctor, psychologists, psychiatrist, hospitality services, logistics, administration, resident care, communications and development, the psychologist... I can't remember if I said that one already.

Giovanna: You told me that over 100 people work here.

Mariana: Yes. But the Monday meeting is just the team leaders.

Giovanna: I was going to ask you...The environment that you described, and the emphasis on the residents is very clear in what we see here. But it must also be difficult to work in a place where part of this community is constantly dying, right?

Mariana: Totally.

Giovanna: How do you, let's say, take care of the other residents and take care of yourselves when that happens?

Mariana: It's difficult, and I think it's the first thing you think about when you start working here. And the residents think about it too. Here how it works is... If someone dies, for example, the people who eat with them, with the one who passed, are personally notified. Especially for cognitive reasons, because sometimes some people don't even realize it because of their cognitive level. But yes, down here where most are quite healthy, they are notified. Resident care or the psychologist notify them, and they evaluate it between them to see if any support is necessary. The psychologist and resident care work together a lot. Then, I don't know... For example, there are people who are very loved and very... They are like icons here at the home. When they die, the families choose to drive by with their cars on their way to the cemetery. They drive through here and the residents come out to say hello, those who want to. But, generally, it's taken quite naturally. I suppose it is a decision for the management, the psychologist, the medical area... Because, well... We change the concept so that they do not come to die, but to enjoy their last years of life, and to live out their old age. But yes, in the end everyone knows and that's it. And from the point of view of those of us who work here, I think it's the first thing you ask yourself and the first thing you figure out too. Because there are deaths that hurt you much more. I was particularly hurt by Hans' death, but as I told you today, I am happy that he died being him. I mean, I never saw him get worse and that is very important. So, even though some deaths hurt you more, well, you know that's life and you can rest assured that the institution gave them everything.

Giovanna: Does the home work directly with other Jewish community organizations?

Mariana: Yes. Ionit, for example, is in constant contact with the LeDor VaDor home which is one of the Jewish homes in Buenos Aires. It is very large. I didn't go, but they do trainings there. For example, not so long ago, about 2 months ago, resident care, the physical therapist, the accountant, Ionit... I don't remember who else went to the training. So we are in contact with them, yes. We also have connections with other Jewish institutions here, like the Kehila, for example. In my area, I know that many volunteers come from there. The Kehila also has a community closet called Meilí. So for photo production and so on, for example, they lend us clothes. Or also when resident care asks for clothes when we need some.If there is a resident who

has no belongings, they will give us some. I know that there are more institutions, but Ionit knows more about that.

Giovanna: Thank you so much, Mariana, for everything.

Mariana: No, please, my pleasure.

Giovanna: Thank you for all your help today and for giving us time to talk with you.

Mariana: Whatever you need, let me know. I'm coming in late tomorrow, but generally...

Giovanna: We'll see you everyday we are here. Fantastic. Thank you.

Mariana: Of course.

Thank you to Mariana Pasquet and Hogar
Israelita