

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM  
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR  
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA**

**MEMOIRIST:** MARY PHAGAN KEAN  
**INTERVIEWER:** SANDRA BERMAN  
**DATE:** FEBRUARY 19, 2007  
**LOCATION:** ATLANTA, GEORGIA

<Begin Tape 1, Side 1>

**INTERVIEW BEGINS**

**BERMAN:** Today is February 19, 2007. I am in the home of Mary Phagan Kean, who has agreed to be interviewed for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral history Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. I thank you very much for agreeing to do this. I'm very appreciative of you taking the time. I want to begin by talking to you a little about your relationship to Mary Phagan, the little girl who was murdered in 1913 at the National Pencil Factory.<sup>1</sup> If you could tell me your connection to Mary.

**KEAN:** I am the great niece and namesake of Little Mary Phagan. Little Mary Phagan was my grandfather's sister.

**BERMAN:** And your grandfather's name?

**KEAN:** William Joshua Phagan.

**BERMAN:** And the mother? Your grandmother?

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<sup>1</sup> In 1913, Mary Phagan, then 13 years old, was found murdered on the premises of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta, Georgia. Leo Frank (1884-1915), a Jewish factory superintendent, was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death for her murder. The trial was the catalyst for a great outburst of antisemitism led by the populist Tom Watson and the center of powerful class and political interests. Frank was sent to Milledgeville State Penitentiary to await his execution. Governor John M. Slaton, believing there had been a miscarriage of justice, commuted Frank's sentence to life in prison. This enraged a group of men who styled themselves the "Knights of Mary Phagan." They drove to the prison, kidnapped Frank from his cell and drove him to Marietta, Georgia where they lynched him. Many years later, the murderer was revealed to be Jim Conley, who had lied in the trial, pinning it on Frank instead. Frank was pardoned on March 11, 1986, although they stopped short of exonerating him.

**KEAN:** Mary Delilah Richards Phagan.

**BERMAN:** Why don't we do a little bit more of the genealogy? If you could say the grandparents and your parent's names. We can go down the road a little bit so we can get that clear.

**KEAN:** My grandfather was Mary's sister. His name was William Joshua Phagan. He married my grandmother, Mary Delilah Richards. Therefore, she became another Mary Phagan, ironically. They had four children. They had my father, who was James Edward Phagan. He married my mother Filomena Mastandrea. Out of that union came at me. I became Mary Frances Phagan.

**BERMAN:** Were you born here in Atlanta as well?

**KEAN:** No.

**BERMAN:** Tell me a little bit more about your background.

**KEAN:** I'm a military brat. Daddy was in the service. He left home at 16 and joined the Navy. He met my mom in 1951. They married in 1953. I was born in a little Air Force base called Larson Air Force Base in Moses Lake, Washington State. Three of us children were born there. One of us was born in South Carolina on an Air Force base.

**BERMAN:** How did you end up back in Georgia?

**KEAN:** Daddy did his tour in Japan and Hawaii. Then we came back to the mainland and came to South Carolina. Grandfather got sick. Daddy felt we needed to know who our family was because we didn't really have a family except for us when we were overseas, so we moved back to Atlanta in 1968.

**BERMAN:** How did you first find out about your great aunt?

**KEAN:** It was in eighth grade. It was Mr. Henry, my science teacher, who told me about it. He was going through the list of names. We were in line, and he was checking our names on the list. He asked me what my name was. I told him my name was Mary Phagan. At that time, he didn't look at anybody. But when he heard my name, he asked me to spell it. I said it was P-H-A-G-A-N. He pointed his pencil at my name. He looked up at me, and he said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Did you know that there was a little girl by the name of Mary Phagan that was killed in Atlanta in 1920?" I said, "No, sir." He asked me if I was related. I said, "No, sir." And that was it. At recess, all the boys were teasing me, telling me that I was dead and reincarnated. I went home and cried. My dad happened to be home. He was not on a trip. I asked him who was the little girl named Mary Phagan? He turned white as a sheet. He said, "Who told you about that?" I said, "Mr. Henry said that there was a little girl who had the same name as I did that was murdered in 1920, and I told him that I wasn't related." He sat me down and he said, "Well, tomorrow you will go back to school and tell him that you are related to Little Mary Phagan."

**BERMAN:** Did he tell you the story then and there?

**KEAN:** Yes, basically.

**BERMAN:** Did he correct the date for you and all that?

**KEAN:** Yes, he did. He told me it was 1913.

**BERMAN:** How hard was it for him to tell you the story? It must have been gut wrenching since it had been kept a secret for so many years.

**KEAN:** It was such a secret that my mother didn't even know. He had been married to my mother all those years, and she didn't know. So she sat down and got to hear this story for the

first time as well. It was just something that was not discussed in . . . the Phagan family did not discuss it. It was not to be discussed. It was never to be brought up.

**BERMAN:** Why do you think, Mary?

**KEAN:** Because she was murdered, and she was murdered so horribly. It was such a tragic murder, and they just didn't talk about it. It was just an unwritten rule that we didn't talk about it.

**BERMAN:** So there were no photographs around of the house or . . .

**KEAN:** There were photographs of Little Mary Phagan. Yes. You just didn't talk about it.

**BERMAN:** So you didn't know who this person really was?

**KEAN:** No. I was overseas, so I would never saw those pictures, ever. I do know that Grandmother and Grandfather had a picture of her. Of course, they had the original picture of her, but it was never talked about. I never knew who that person was. Of course, I wasn't around so I didn't know.

**BERMAN:** Tell me a little bit about the family. What they did, your grandparents, Mary's parents . . .

**KEAN:** I know that grandfather worked in the cotton mills. I knew that. Grandmother Phagan owned her own restaurant in downtown Atlanta. She was a great cook. She was a wonderful person. It was called Miss Mary's. She had owned the restaurant for a very, very long time. I know that she had a very giving heart because she would sometimes feed people who didn't have food. I know that she had done that. I remember coming back one time as a little girl and she took my sister and I to a restaurant. We had hamburgers and French fries and a Coca-Cola. I remember that. She took us to the Fox Theater to see *The Sound of Music*. I remember that, and that was fun.

**BERMAN:** Why did Mary work in the factory?

**KEAN:** I was told that the reason why she was working in the factory was because she couldn't get a seat in school. It was during the middle of the year, and she had to wait until fall to go back and get a seat, is what they called it in school. To get a seat in school.

**BERMAN:** So, you think she just wanted to earn a little pocket money or . . .

**KEAN:** She was bored, you know, being bored. She just wanted to do something to earn a little bit for the family. My understanding is they didn't need the money because we had W. J. Phagan, who was very well to do in the community of Marietta.

**BERMAN:** Tell me about the relationship to W. J. Phagan.

**KEAN:** W. J. Phagan was Mary's grandfather. When her father died, they came back here to Marietta. It's my understanding that he took them under the wing of the Benton family and the Phagan family and that they had lived with him for a while.

**BERMAN:** Whose house was it on Atlanta Street?

**KEAN:** W. J. Phagan's.

**BERMAN:** And they lived with . . .

**KEAN:** Yes, for a while.

**BERMAN:** For a while.

**KEAN:** Yes.

**BERMAN:** So the subject really was a taboo subject in your home?

**KEAN:** Yes.

**BERMAN:** After you first heard this story were you inquisitive about it?

**KEAN:** No.

**BERMAN:** Did . . .

**KEAN:** Nope.

**BERMAN:** Did you . . . so, your father told you this story?

**KEAN:** That was the end of the subject.

**BERMAN:** What made you start thinking about it again and wanting to write about it and investigate it?

**KEAN:** We moved back to Atlanta. I went to Shamrock High School, and every one of my teachers asked me if I was related to Little Mary Phagan. I thought, "Hmm, there's got to be more to this story than what my dad told me at age 13." So I went to him. I said to him, "Daddy I think there's more to this story than what you originally told me." He said, "There is. And you need to go find out for yourself."

**BERMAN:** Boy. Did you go interview family members at that point? Did you try to . . .

**KEAN:** I tried to. I tried my grandfather, who . . . I'm going to choke up.

**BERMAN:** Take your time. I'm sorry.

**KEAN:** That's okay. I asked my grandfather about who is Little Mary? You know. What happened to Little Mary Phagan? He just could never finish the story. He could never finish it. He just said she was very beautiful and she was murdered at 13 by Leo Frank. He could never tell me what happened after that. Or I would ask him about the trial, and he just cried and cried. He could never finish. So I never, never asked the story again. He looked at me and tell me that I looked a lot like her. Of course, you've got to remember that I was very young back then. I was only 15. I wasn't very much older than Mary, and my hair was down to my waist. It's not now. It was back then. He just cried and would look at her picture and would look at me and start crying. It was very terrible for him.

**BERMAN:** Did you try to do other investigative work at the time?

**KEAN:** Oh yes. My mother went with me, which was good. She had to drive me because I couldn't drive at the time. We went to the Atlanta archives. It was the big building, the big marble building. I forget what they call . . .

**BERMAN:** State Archives [Georgia Archives].

**KEAN:** The State Archives. It was the strangest experience that we had. When we walked in, they had a 10 foot picture of the lynching of Leo Frank. I was horrified. I knew that he was lynched, but you know, to walk in there at 15 years old and see a picture of a lynching, it was just startling, and so mom was too. We told them who were. They brought out all the papers, everything that we needed. We went back for weeks to look at the information. So, I decided that that was my quest [and] that I wanted to find out everything that I could. I started a collection of getting books and anything that I could on the case, but I didn't want to be just a relative. I wanted to be a historian. I wanted to know the facts. I wanted to be able to discuss it without emotion, although I have the emotion, but I wanted to discuss the facts. If someone were to ask me a question, that I would be intelligent enough to answer that question and to have the knowledge based on it.

**BERMAN:** How did this sit for the rest of your family? Were they glad you were doing it? Or were they upset with you for doing it?

**KEAN:** They are upset with me doing it, the older family. I should say, excuse me, the elder family members were not happy because it had never been really discussed in open, and I was asking too many questions. They didn't like the questions that I was asking.

**BERMAN:** Well, the case just doesn't ever seem to be put to bed. How has that affected your family over the years? Just the fact that it's every 10 years or whatever, every other, it's in the paper again. How has that affected your family members?

**KEAN:** Well, it's a tragedy. It will never go away. It will never be put to rest. We feel that there are certain organizations that will not let it die and certain people that won't let it die. It will never die because it has historical significance. I had to realize that it will never go away. Whether I'm here or not, it will never go away.

**BERMAN:** Do you think it has been a cohesive force in your family or a divisive force within your family?

**KEAN:** I don't think it's ever been a divisive force. I think it's been . . . I think it's been a good force for me, for this generation. For other generations, I don't think it was. But for this generation, it's been a good force.

**BERMAN:** Is there anything that I haven't touched upon about your family and about Mary herself that you'd like to take this opportunity to address or to mention? Just about her in general. Some of the . . . about what you were able to discover and all of your research about this girl who only lived 13 years?

**KEAN:** I heard she was just so cute. Well, she wasn't cute. She was pretty. She was fun-loving, and she had a wonderful personality. A lot of the family said I was a lot like her and that personality. So, I was kind of excited to just know that she was real bubbly and that I have a lot of the characteristics that she had, although I couldn't be an actress like she was in *Sleeping Beauty*. But it's just nice to know that she really is a person to me and that I have some of her in me. It's exciting to know that she is real. She was a little girl. She didn't look like a little girl. She didn't have boyfriends. She just was a little girl, and she just had a lot of fun, according to my cousins, who knew her very well. They played a lot. They did their hair a lot, which I thought was fun, how they braided their hair. They used to comb hair and played dress-up and

things like that, just like you did when you were just 12 and 13 years old. So it's kind of neat to know that.

**BERMAN:** She was a little actress in the making?

**KEAN:** She played in *Sleeping Beauty* in the church. She liked to act and stuff. They said she was real funny in doing that. They told me that. The cousins told me that.

**BERMAN:** I'm so grateful that you decided to do this. I'm very appreciative. I'd like to thank you very much.

**KEAN:** I appreciate it too. Thank you very much.

<End Tape 1, Side 1>

**INTERVIEW ENDS**

Cuba Family Archives