BERMAN: Today is July 17. I am here with Cathy Smithline at her home. She has agreed to be interviewed for the Esther and Herbert Taylor Oral History Project of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. Cathy is the great niece of Leo Frank.¹ I'm very grateful that you have agreed to do this interview. I'd like to begin by asking you to tell me a little bit about the family, how you were related to him. A little bit of background.

SMITHLINE: My grandmother is Leo Frank's sister.² When all this occurred, my mother, who is now 89, wasn't even born. So, it's very far removed. It's been many years, but he's my great uncle.

BERMAN: How did you first hear about what had happened to him?

SMITHLINE: When I was about 16, the book, Harry Golden’s, A Little Girl is Dead,³ came out in paperback. I don't know if it was written before that. I don't remember, but when it came out in paperback my mother had purchased the book. She handed it to me. She said to me, “This is about your Uncle Leo,” or her Uncle Leo. You know, your great uncle. She told me a little bit about the story. She said, “You might want to read this,”

¹ Leo Frank (1884-1915) was a Jewish factory superintendent in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1913, he was accused of raping and murdering one of his employees, a 13-year-old girl named Mary Phagan, whose body was found on the premises of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta, Georgia. 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.
² Marian Frank Otto (1886-1948).
³ Harry Golden, author of A Little Girl is Dead, published in 1965.
which I did. That was my first encounter. My first experience. When I spoke to my mother later about it, her first encounter was also when she was a teenager. She had gone with a boyfriend to the movies. It was a movie with Lana Turner. I don't remember the name of it. Do you remember the name?

BERMAN: Yes, it's . . . I’ll think of it.

SMITHLINE: I'll think of it too. When they came out of the movie, the boyfriend said to her, "This is about your Uncle Leo." My mother was shocked because she had always thought he had died of pneumonia. That's what she was told. He died before she was born, so she never questioned it. She went home, and she said to her mother . . . her boyfriend’s name was actually Leo also . . . said to her, “This movie I just saw was about Uncle Leo." Her mother said, "It is about him. We don’t talk about it. Never bring it up again." And it was never ever discussed in her family. She really never got any information from her parents about this.

BERMAN: Was she curious? Was it something that really . . .

SMITHLINE: I don't know. I think in those days, you sort of did what your parents told you to do, and I don't think you questioned very much. But I do think she spoke to her siblings. She had an older brother and sister. I think she spoke to them about it at some point. I think she later spoke to her dad about it, but it was never brought up in front of her mother. I think that she got information. She was told it wasn't true. That he really did not commit the crime. Basically, she really never discussed it until relatively recent years.

BERMAN: Were there photographs of him around the home? Did the family try to keep his presence alive in some way?

SMITHLINE: She was aware of him. I have . . . we have the family photographs with him in it up to a certain point, so the answer is yes. I think they just said he died of pneumonia, and he was included in all their thoughts or whatever. Yes.

BERMAN: Did you know your grandmother?

SMITHLINE: No. My mother's mother died when I was a year old. She knew me, but I didn't really know her. I don't remember her. My grandfather, who was very close with Leo in their young years, I knew him very well. He died when I was about 16 or 17.

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Never was this brought up. I mean, up to that point, I never spoke to him about it. It's really a lot of lost history. I'm sure he knew a lot, and nothing was passed along.

BERMAN: For the purpose of the tape, if you could say his name.

SMITHLINE: His name was Otto Stern.

BERMAN: So you never had the opportunity . . .

SMITHLINE: I never had the opportunity to talk to him. The first time I actually spoke to any family member about it was my, I called my Uncle Robbie, who was Robert Stern. I called him after I had come from Atlanta. I had done the original research, and I told him I had found these letters. He said. "Yes." We discussed it slightly. He didn't really want to talk about it. He says, "I'm very uncomfortable talking about it." The whole situation was something we just never discussed in the family. Later in life, maybe ten years after that, he, for whatever reason, had very little trouble talking about it, and he spoke a lot about it.

BERMAN: Why do you think the family just kept it kind of quiet?

SMITHLINE: I think the reason is . . . first of all it was a very sensitive matter, but I think a lot of it was embarrassment. I think a lot of it, they were ashamed of the whole situation. I know they felt it wasn't true. I mean, I never doubted that for a minute, but I think for whatever reason they just felt it was something that they just . . . it was easier not to talk about than to talk about. Sometimes a bad situation or a difficult situation, it's just easier to put it in a corner and just forget about it. I think that's what they did.

BERMAN: Do you think it had a long term effect on the dynamics of the family?

SMITHLINE: It's hard to say because your family is what your family is, and I don't know if that particular situation made any difference at all. I tend to think it must have [had an effect] on my grandmother because it was her brother. It must have been to my great grandparents. I don't think it affected my mother or her family or her outlook on life because, I think, she wasn't around when it occurred. She only knew her parents from a certain point. I don't think that it probably did.

BERMAN: To get back a little bit to the history of the family, do you know how your grandparents ended up, before they lived in Brooklyn, how they ended up in Cuero, Texas, where Leo was born?

SMITHLINE: I'm not sure anybody really knows the answer to this. I know my grandmother was born in America. My grandfather was born in Germany. He was a
physician in Germany. He came over to America, but he did something with real estate, from what I can gather. I think my grandmother was actually born in Brooklyn.

Somewhere along the line, I think her parents or her mother's family, whoever was here already, was from the Atlanta area or Atlanta itself. Somehow they migrated down there. Then they went to Texas for a while. I'm really not sure how they got there . . . I take this all back. I think Leo was born in Texas, but I think my grandmother was actually born in New York. Somehow in those few years they somehow got up to the New York area.

BERMAN: And Moses Frank. How did he play into this?

SMITHLINE: He was my grandfather's brother. He and his wife never had any children. He was very close with my grandmother and my Uncle Leo. I just think the families were close.

BERMAN: Because he was in Atlanta.

SMITHLINE: I also think he was from the New York area, because they are all buried up in New York. I think he was also from the New York area. Either he had family down there or his wife had family down there, or whatever brought them to that area. I actually think the family was originally from Atlanta. I think they moved around after that, but I'm not sure.

BERMAN: You already mentioned you were 16 years old when . . .

SMITHLINE: Yes.

BERMAN: Did you talk about it with your siblings then? Was it something that you were . . .

SMITHLINE: Right. My sister is older than I am. I think we . . . my sister has never been that particularly interested in the subject at all for whatever reason. My brother is a lot younger than I am, so I don't even think he would have understood at the time what that was all about. I don't know if he was told at that time. I don't know the answer to that. He certainly knows about it now. I don't know exactly when that transpired. The answer is, we've mentioned it back and forth, but we don't really sit and discuss it.

BERMAN: With your own children, have any of them shown an interest?

SMITHLINE: All of my kids are relatively interested in the subject. Probably my oldest, my daughter, is the most interested.

BERMAN: Are you amazed yourself about . . . I mean, this one particular case just

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5 Moses Frank (1841-1927) owned a substantial percentage of Atlanta Pencil Company stock.
doesn't seem to go away . . . the interest?

SMITHLINE: It surprises my husband way more than me. It just seems to keep popping up over the years. Since people are aware that Leo Frank had other family, it just doesn't go away. It keeps popping up.

BERMAN: Why do you think there is this interest? What is your feeling about it?

SMITHLINE: That's a good question. I'm not really sure. I guess the fact that . . . it's like this big case that . . . it was the first time a black man's word was taken over a Jew, a northern Jew. I don't really know. When you think about it, I don't understand what the big deal is. It's unfortunate it happened. It happened to happen to my family. We think about it. I feel like it's unreal. It doesn't seem possible, but it obviously did happen and it obviously is real. I don't know. I don't understand all the excitement over this.

BERMAN: How do you feel about the South?

SMITHLINE: I'm not a big fan of the South. I've been to Atlanta a couple of times. Everybody's always been nice to me, but I've always had this feeling in the pit of my stomach that I shouldn't be there. I don't belong there. I'm definitely a northerner.

BERMAN: How do you feel about this exhibition? Are you happy about it that we're going to be . . .

SMITHLINE: I'm looking forward to seeing it because I'm sure you have more information and things that I haven't seen, which is interesting to me. But I'm neutral. I don't care a lot if you do it or not. It's another thing. It's of interest. I can live without it.

BERMAN: You gave a large number of items, letters and photographs, family memorabilia to the Bremen. Was that a difficult decision?

SMITHLINE: I've had these things for a while, previous to having given it to you. I always felt it should be somewhere. I felt if it stayed with me, it would deteriorate. No one would know who it was in another fifty or a hundred years. So I always felt it belonged somewhere. When you got in touch with me, it just felt like the right place for it to be.

BERMAN: Well, I'm very glad.

SMITHLINE: For whatever reason. Maybe it was that you're the only one who ever asked.

BERMAN: Well it's gotten a good home. Trust me.

SMITHLINE: There you go.
BERMAN: It's gotten a good home. Your uncle, we interviewed him.

SMITHLINE: Yes.

BERMAN: We were very fortunate to interview him before he fell ill. He mentioned that he thought Lucille [Frank] was pregnant at one point. Did you ever hear that story?

SMITHLINE: I did hear that story. I don't think she was pregnant. I think my grandmother was pregnant, and then she miscarried during this time. I'm quite sure that's the right story.

BERMAN: That your . . . that’s Leo's sister?

SMITHLINE: Marian was pregnant, and I think she miscarried during this period of time. I don't think Lucille was pregnant.

BERMAN: So she did not miscarry during this time period.

SMITHLINE: I never heard that. I remember seeing that on the film. I was surprised because I don't think that's true.

BERMAN: So he may have misinterpreted who was . . . who miscarried.

SMITHLINE: Yes. I'm quite sure my mother told me my grandmother miscarried during that time.

BERMAN: I know that that's true, because Leo wrote to her. In one of the letters you gave to the museum, Leo wrote to your sister. I mean, to his sister that he was upset that that had happened.

SMITHLINE: Right. Maybe that's how I know it, from the letter. I think I asked my mother, and she confirmed it.

BERMAN: Did your family keep in touch with the Selig family at all?

SMITHLINE: I know Lucille used to visit my family, my grandparents, regularly. She used to come up and stay an extended period of time. I know my mother knew her very well. I don't know when that stopped. I don't know if it stopped when my grandmother died or it stopped . . . it must have stopped later than that. My mother actually said I had met her, but I didn't remember. I must have been very young.

BERMAN: That's interesting, because I think the Selig family today, doesn't really even have a connection. The ones that are in Atlanta today don't have that much of a connection to who she was, and they were related.

SMITHLINE: Right.

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6 Lucille Selig Frank (1888-1957) was Leo Frank’s wife.
BERMAN: You know, closely related in the earlier years. There's not that much of a connection.

SMITHLINE: Right.

BERMAN: Is there anything else that you would like to say regarding the case? Anything that has been on your mind? Something that I've forgotten in all of these questions?

SMITHLINE: I can't think of anything. No. I can't think of anything right off the top of my head. Of course as soon as you turn that off, I’ll remember.

BERMAN: Well, we can turn it back on. That's great. I really, really appreciate it.

SMITHLINE: You are very welcome. Thank you.

BERMAN: Finally, Cathy, we would like to know how you would like people to remember Leo Frank and how you would like to see him portrayed and the legacy of Leo Frank. If you could give us your thoughts on that.

SMITHLINE: It’s hard to put it into words. I would like to think that people would think that Leo Frank was the same type of person that was pretty much anybody else. There was nothing extraordinarily special about him. He was a good person. He was trying to lead his life in the best way he knew how. I think he just caught up in a series of unfortunate events. I think people have to put it in perspective and realize that this could really happen to anyone. It just happened to happen to Leo Frank, and it happened to happen to my family.

BERMAN: Thank you, Cathy.

<End Tape 1, Side 1> INTERVIEW ENDS