This is an interview with Lily Goldblatt and it’s Friday the 15th of August 2008. Lily, on behalf of SALS Foundation in the United States we really want to thank you for agreeing to participate in the LRC Oral History Project. I wondered whether we could start, if you could talk about your early childhood memories, where you grew up, and what brought you to South Africa, and where you think your sense of social justice and injustice developed?

Lily Goldblatt

I was born in Latvia and we came out here when I was 3/4 years old, I think…and lived in northern Natal in a place called Vryheid. My father had come out ten months before us and had no special skills, no language skills, and he worked as a miner in a mine in northern Natal called Hlaba. The family…we came here because my mother had some family here, an uncle, her father’s twin brother, who had married her mother’s twin sister, and they had settled there. And of course when my father wanted to call for us there was a lot of disagreement amongst family members to say, why did Schmul which is my father’s name, want to bring his wife out after only ten months because we’ve had to wait two and three years before our families came. My father was very insistent, and had he waited we would have been caught up in the war, in the Holocaust, and not come. We came out in ’38. We grew up on a farm, a place called Ntinini. It’s now I think a game park. But then I remember living in a zinc structure, we lived at the back and my parents ran a shop and post office in the front. The house was on stilts because of snakes. I remember very clearly bathing with my sister in a zinc bath in the living area. And…my mother ran a post office using a Yiddish English dictionary, and I don’t know how she managed (laughs). In the course of time they learned English, they learned Afrikaans, they learned a smattering of Zulu, where I think I heard Zulu and was able to pick it up later, especially when I was working at the Legal Aid Bureau. And then we moved to the nearest town, which was forty-four miles away called Vryheid, and I started schooling there. One was of course aware of other people, it was a very rural community. I remember nagmaal. Do you know what a nagmaal is? Nagmaal was a coming together of members of the Dutch Reformed Church to a major church. They would come in maybe ox wagons but later in cars, and have a sort of religious and folk…

(interruption, interview resumes…)

they would have a meeting and come with food, it was semi-religious and a semi folk festival. And very important to the town. It was usually on a Friday night. At that stage, shops were open on Friday nights and we would sort of mingle. Vryheid had a lovely Dutch Reformed Church in the centre of the town, as most places do, but this was a really good building. So one was aware of other things going on. I remember stopping by an Indian family that lived near us, on my way home from school, and enjoying very much their hospitality. I got into trouble once because I came home late. I was seven, and it happened to be the day that my brother was born, and I got into trouble for coming home so late. So the visits to the family became hazier after that. We walked to school, you know, even from primary school. When we started school, I was told that I could only speak Yiddish and Zulu. I knew no English, I knew no Afrikaans. And I don’t remember ever learning English. I don’t remember having to learn an alphabet or…that’s very hazy in my memory. And then…my first encounter with race relations came when I was in standard 4. Standard 4, I must have
been nine or ten. And we had an Afrikaans teacher, I remember her face clearly, I’ve never forgotten her name, she was a Mrs Venter, and she gave us hell, the way we were treating our servants. I’ve never forgotten that, you know, suddenly she put into perspective something that we all took for granted. And it was always interesting to me later that the person who made me aware that there was a race issue in South Africa was an Afrikaans woman. And I’m talking now of ‘42/’43. We moved to Pretoria shortly after that and lived there, went to high school there. And in my early teens joined a Jewish youth movement, Habonim. Have you come across that?

Int No.

LG A very interesting youth movement. Came out of the offshoot of the various movements in Eastern Europe and Germany. There used to be a Bundist movement which was half socialist, half naturalist, you know. Hiking was important, living a decent life, you know, in the sense of being in the open air, was important. And of course a political ideology. And then, Habonim started, I think, maybe…also was an offshoot of the rise in Zionism. For me it was a life saver. It gave me a social group, it gave me a purpose, something to do over weekends, and it was an ideology that made a lot of sense to me at the time. It rooted people. Besides the social aspects of having a group, and I still…my friends today are people I met there sixty years ago. A very strong social bond. And then went to university. I started at Wits, I spent two years there and I didn’t do much studying, and after the second year when I hadn’t done well, I went back home and…joined Pretoria University. They used to have an extra mural department, and did a BA and then after I married came back to Wits and completed a Social Work degree. While I was studying extra-murally I worked in a lawyer’s office, but not on the legal side, I was in the administrative side. Enjoyed that, remember very, very clearly the Women’s March of the 9th of August…

Int 1960?

LG Yes…no, was it 1960?

Int Mm.

LG No, then I wasn’t…well then what was it? Oh, I’ll tell you what it was that I was aware of…it wasn’t the Women’s March, it was when they first mooted that women should carry passes, and I think that was in fifty…there was something happening in the…I was married in ’55…in ’54. I’ll tell you what that was. That was when we were told that we’d all have to have identity cards. Because there was a very staunch Afrikaner lady there who said that she’s not going to carry passes like a ‘kaffir meid’. But there were was a change in the legal system with reference to passes in the early fifties I think.

Int So the Women’s March that you speak of must have been in the late fifties.
LG Yes. I think that…I’m almost…

Int About ’57, ’58?

LG No. No, by then I wasn’t working in Pretoria, I don’t think. I got married in ’55, November ’55. And we moved to Johannesburg and we lived in a flat opposite the water tower in Yeoville. My husband worked in Randfontein for his father who had an outfitting shop, and travelled in and out every day, and he had done a BCom degree, also extra-murally while he was working. His father became quite ill and we moved physically to Randfontein when…thereabout 1960/61. My sister-in-law was arrested in 1960 when they rounded up people who were supposed to have been Communists. And she…that was very traumatic, very traumatic for the family because by then she hadn’t been active for years, you know, she was an activist in her late teens. And we had…David (Goldblatt) had a cousin who was involved in the trade union movement, Phyllis Altman, and when she…very interesting, she was very friendly with, you know, David’s older brother, who was also a cousin, and had spent the night in their home when the police raided our sister-in-law. They picked her up and didn’t…Phyllis was hidden. And after that my husband took her across to Swaziland where she stayed with all the other refugees (laughs) for a while. And one was aware of the time that things were not right, you know…it used to be really very painful. I remember when we would go out as young people, I used to hate going out on Saturday nights because there was always an incident, someone being beaten up, there was a…there was something to make you aware that there were severe problems and people weren’t being treated properly. We have three children, and after my father-in-law died we moved back to Johannesburg. My husband then became a photographer and he’s been working at that ever since.

Int Lily, you went to university and you became a social worker…

LG …I became a social worker, when we were in Randfontein I worked for Cripple Care for a while. And then when we returned here I was looking for work. And then at that time I think men had more say in what one did. I mean, David (Goldblatt) was, you would say perfectly liberal, but he insisted that with small children I shouldn’t work full-time and I’m very grateful for that. And I was looking for work and found an advert that the Legal Aid Bureau was looking for someone. I went for the interview, told them I had no legal knowledge, and I was told there was a job, a part-time job, and that it would…there was money for six months. This was…and I started in February ’68. And stayed for 31 years.

Int My goodness!

LG I’m not sure if my salary increased very much (laughs). That was the story. And at that time the Legal Aid Bureau had a grant for a social worker from the government, which was withdrawn almost immediately, but I stayed on and my job at Legal Aid was to do what we called family matters. So I dealt with people who had problems at home. Today we would call them dysfunctional families.
Int  So divorce, maintenance…?

LG  Divorce, maintenance, problems at home, not getting on with family…housing became a major problem. It was…can’t imagine the confusion, the humiliation, the…just the chaos that the housing policy created. Then of course the other section of the work we did labour matters, accident matters, criminal matters. The Legal Aid Bureau started off in ’37, through the intervention of the Institute of Race Relations, SA Institute of Race Relations, because they became alarmed at the number of people who turned up at court unrepresented. And the first function of the Legal Aid Bureau was to get representation for these awaiting trial prisoners. And that’s what they did, they would get people to come and represent people awaiting trial. Pauline says that a frequent visitor at that time was Nelson Mandela. He would come in for tea, for a break, and he told her it was the only place in Johannesburg where he could come in. Their offices were at the magistrate’s courts.

Int  When did the Legal Aid Bureau start?

LG  It started in ’37.

Int  1937. And who ran it initially?

LG  I’m not sure of the names but I know it was run by the Institute. Pauline…

Int  Institute of?

LG  Race Relations. They did amazing work there. They brought out…did research, brought out bulletins. Have you not come across them?

Int  I have.

LG  I’m not sure who the first person was. Someone called Cooper. I can get the name for you if you like. And Pauline had been there…I think she started in the early forties. I’d been there for 33 years from ’68 to ’99, and when we’d left she’d been there for 50 years. And then the nature of the work changed, people came with different problems, and they weren’t turned away, they weren’t told we only do work for criminals, so that’s when I sort of bisected it and started working for them.

Int  But it seems to me that you ran on quite a small budget.

LG  It was…I mean, our offices were almost derelict. The most basic furniture, the most basic accommodation…we just had no money. And we had a staff who were very dedicated, and obviously quite resentful about the income they were earning. We had
clerks and typists, and really, I suppose it happens everywhere, but here one finds that in a small institution the people who work are related. If you need a member of staff and say I need someone, they’ll bring a cousin or a sister, so we had working for us a Zulu family, Ntabethe, very staunch Catholics, and amazing people to work with. In fact I’m still in touch with them.

Int That’s wonderful. So when Pauline and you started, by the 1970s there was talk of the Legal Resources Centre, what was your relationship if at all with the Legal Resources Centre?

LG Well…the one level we were very envious of them, because they had good offices, they had furniture, their staff were paid reasonably. They had all sorts of contacts, you know, people were giving them money when we weren’t getting any. But on the other hand it was a relief to have someone to lean on when cases came that we thought they would be interested in or they could help, we could refer to them. I mean, we were in touch with them almost all the time. Not on a daily basis, at least a few times a week. Sometimes the cases we spoke to were of interest and sometimes they weren’t.

Int The Legal Resources Centre really focused on test cases. And so I was wondering in terms of the major test cases, Rikhoto, Komani, etc, were you called upon to find cases that could have some bearing?

LG You know, we were on the periphery of things. As I’m sure that there were many cases we referred to them that they were able to use. There was another interesting aspect, when people would come with complaints, and if we would say to them, well I think with the Black Sash…you’ve been in touch with the Black Sash?

Int Yes.

LG The Black Sash can help better with this, or Legal Resources, the response was very often, oh but they’re for the…what was it called…the displaced persons’ committee, or they work with the ANC, and very often complaints we received were people who were having problems with street committees, with their homes being burnt.

Int So the LRC had this reputation of being pro the ANC?

LG And the Black Sash. Whereas we were regarded more as, dealing with people…I’ll use the word, grassroots before it became a cliché.

Int Now that’s very interesting, so including people on the ground, local people, had this perception that they might not always be safe if they wanted to complain about the ANC?
LG Yes, yes. And of course they couldn’t go to the police because that was being a sell-out so it really was a tightrope that they had to walk. One learned quite a lot of things earlier on. I mean the woman whom I spoke to were really downtrodden and we…our caseload…we used to open our doors just after seven. And often closed them at half past seven, quarter to eight, because we would have two hundred people in the waiting room. Admittedly many of them were returning clients to get reports, but a lot of them were new clients. And…what was I talking about…so there was quite a lot of pressure. I mean, office hours didn’t count. The work was from half past eight to half past twelve; if we weren’t there ten past seven we were late and if I got home at two it was wonderful, you know.

Int …from 1976 onwards, did the nature of the work change or did you just pretty much see the same type of cases and complaints?

LG We saw much the same because by ’76 we were able to refer quite a lot of cases which we thought were political, to Legal Resources. So that was a great help, because we didn’t ever go…there was no point in going into that because there were people doing it better. Let me just touch on some of the highlights. The feeling of abused and downtrodden women, that there was no help…I mean, they would come in with heartrending cases and couldn’t understand that the system perpetuated this. You know, I’ve got no money…surely there’s help, I mean, don’t they see, this kind of desperation, that there was no-one to turn to. And that made one realise that there was something wrong with our legal system and many legal systems, they didn’t take account of the people who most needed protection. And it unfortunately still exists today.

Int What was your relationship with Hoek Street and Mr Morris Zimmerman.

LG Oh we, you know…this was going to be my next point. We could never have existed without the humanity and compassion of local lawyers. It just wouldn’t have happened. I mean, what we used to do, if someone came with a complaint, and I used to get very depressed about the feeling that, there’s this person who knows from nothing, and the apartheid machinery stopped at my broken down desk. We’d have to assess whether there was any kind of legal case. Very often there wasn’t because the law sort of encloses. If there was, we would try to do as much as we could writing letters to offices, to bureaucrats, to employers, to firms, saying you can’t do this, or this is wrong, or our client has a claim in terms of whatever. And we would go as far as we could intra office as it were. And when we thought a matter needed going to court we would canvas attorneys. And until the early eighties, we very seldom had a refusal. We had attorneys who…some of the cases they couldn’t really claim for, it was an accident case…but for my work, they were doing divorces for women, all they wanted were their disbursements. We started off by asking for fifty rand disbursements, very often we’d put that money there, and at the end the big sum of two hundred and fifty rand, and some people couldn’t pay. There was a change in the legal profession in the mid eighties where lawyers just weren’t prepared to act without fee. And it was such a change from the attitude we’d had before. One would sweat blood to get an attorney to take a case. So eventually, I’m spending my Sundays typing up summonses. Some were easier to do than others, some I definitely needed
legal help with, some I got bad decisions because my papers shouldn’t have been what they were. It was very painful. But the legal profession had a...I’m not sure of their thought processes. We had a secretary of the Bar who would appoint a junior counsel and that worked very well until people...you know, the secretary would say, I’m having great difficulty getting people to come and act for you. I can’t explain the change in attitude because the need was the same, if not even more critical.

Int Do you think people were afraid because it was the 1980s and repression?

LG No...I think that...there was a change in terms of the finances of running an office. Suddenly everything became very expensive. I suppose chamber fees jumped, god knows how much, and to run a legal office became much more expensive and...and I think also maybe a whole shift in valuing one’s worth, where it didn’t become...of saying how much good, we’re not all altruistic...but a lot of attorneys accepted a responsibility to help people who couldn’t afford fees, it was part of their mindset. Whereas I think people did become much more materialistic. Where the car you drove was more important than the attorney who didn’t care what kind of battered thing he was driving. There was a definite change, and it became really difficult to get...there was still the old stalwarts, you know the people who’d done well and had major practices, they were never a problem. Because they just told the junior to get on with it and I think when many of the juniors went into private practice themselves, they’d had so much of legal aid that they wouldn’t touch us for love nor money (laughter). These were complex questions which we didn’t...you know, if somebody said, you’d phone an attorney and say, we need someone to be in court on such and such a date, and there was an outright no. In fact, (laughs) there were some attorneys who refused to take the phone if Pauline or I gave a name. And Pauline...I’ll talk about her just now...would then give a false name, Mrs Smith or Mrs Jones, and then speak to the attorney and say, you bastard, why didn’t you take my call! (laughter) And put him on the spot and he would do something. But phoning for attorneys was the worst. I would have been happy to have given up the whole weekend not to have to make one phone call.

Int So how did you resolve that in any way, I mean, did you get help from Legal Resources, did you get help from Morris Zimmerman?

LG Well, only those cases that they could take, I mean, they didn’t do divorce, only the Legal Aid Board came into existence, and they took many years, you know, they could take criminal cases. They didn’t take any civil cases. And their attitude to divorce I never found out because some cases they took some cases they didn’t.

Int So by the mid eighties, influx...because of Komani and Rikhoto case, the rulings, the pass laws and the influx control would have ended...?

LG Well, there were less of those but there were problems and of course the pass laws created all sorts of other problems. I mean, the break up of families and men having homes in the homelands and establishing families in cities, and these really disastrous spin-offs from that. I think that stayed on even after 1994, it didn’t stop, I don’t think.
Even thought wives could come here they were still in...not all men of course...but in many minds that was the way things should be.

Int When change happened in 1994, or before that actually I wanted to ask you, did you...when you worked with Pauline, did you really think that the law could be used to create social change and create justice mechanisms for indigent black people? Did you feel it was effective?

LG The law as it was then?

Int Yes...

LG No, no. One worked around the law. I mean, people would come in and tell us of their...being evicted from homes, let’s say, and we would then do affidavits to the superintendent. And they were lies, I mean, we would make them sign things that we thought would give them some sort of respite that they could stay on a little longer, that homes would be able to be...given to the women. I think that the law created a lot of problems that we obviously still have today. The one in regard to housing was that, a woman in her own right, could not be a registered tenant. So in order to stay on at the house, she would have to form an association. Of course there would then be children. And as happens there’s a domestic problem, the man has been put as head of the household so he stays in the house and the women and children have to go. A man with a home in Soweto was as attractive to a woman in Soweto as a man with a Lamborghini in a city. I mean, he had something...he had something to offer you. And the complication about houses and families and who should be there and who shouldn’t be there, I mean, it was a minefield that you just can’t imagine. I used to think to myself that if they changed their housing policy I would vote NAT. Just not to have this daily turmoil and pressure. And they would live as many people as could be squeezed into a house. And come to your own home and there’s space. I remember a woman telling me about the shame of having to dress and undress in a room with thirty year olds who weren’t related to you. you know, it was just dreadful. I mean, the housing thing was a catastrophe which is still ongoing. How do you unravel it? How do you unravel the claim of whose house it is? And if they had done just the sensible thing and had a home woman based, knowing that the men are the ones who wander around, I think we wouldn’t have the population that we have, we wouldn’t have the social problems that we have. But it just didn’t happen. But this went through everything, I mean, women couldn’t open accounts in their own name. And...whether it mirrored cultural practice I don’t know, because even in black society, you know, the man is the one who sets the rules, who sets the...I had a full-time maid when I was working and she had a son who lived with her. Now it was her son but she didn’t do anything without consulting him. You know, it’s the direct opposite of what we’re used to.

Int I was wondering, when 1990 happened, when change happened, did you get a sense of the type of work changed at all or was it the same type of work?
LG My work didn’t change, you know, because social problems were still there, personal problems were still there. It changed in a way that I think women felt they had some authority, some power, and used it. And I think that the political philosophies of the day permeated in some ways to everyday life. I remember counselling a couple who were in trouble, and for some reason, with the consent of both parties, the man’s mother was present. And of course they were going at it…you know, this and that, and one of them turned…I think she turned to the mother and said to the mother, this is so, isn’t it, I am right? And the mother said, you are right. And her son got absolutely furious with her and called her an impimpi, which is the word for sell-out. So already the idea of sell-outs had permeated to his work place and he applied it to his own mother who turned against him. So there were…it was a very exciting time, I think, from that point of view, where you had the cross current of ideas. We always knew when there was going to be trouble, because people would come and tell us, and it would take weeks to get into the press. The press were very good to us. I mean, if all else failed we went to the press.

Int So by ’94 to ’98, and then ’99 you closed down, what were some of the cases that you took on?

LG There were still accident cases, there were still criminal cases. And the domestic things went on, you know, it was easier for women to be in homes. In the 1980s when overseas companies came, for the first time people were coming in and we used to ask what…you know there was a history sheet that we filled in, people were earning reasonable salaries. They were earning…I’m not saying, massive, but a living wage. So when the American companies were forced to pull out, it was a real hardship to a lot of families. We saw the hardship of strikes like the OK strikes. There were people in that strike who never ever worked again afterwards. They got an increase but it was short-lived. And…one was aware of the growth of the unions, you know…Let me talk about Pauline. She really became a figure in the legal fraternity in Johannesburg.

Int Sure, was she a lawyer by training?

LG She was a lawyer by training. She had done the course but hadn’t…and she was Articled, but I don’t think had done the finals. And she was very strong and very persuasive. Lawyers really lived in fear of her. I mean, she could get them to do anything and they did. She had a lot of respect for the work she was doing and a real martinet, I mean, (laughs) there was one story that she told. We used to get a lot of volunteers, we had students from Wits and Turfloop and even KwaZulu-Natal coming to do practical work. They were very important because they had their own case loads, they took some of the work off our shoulders, and it was very important to them because they were suddenly confronted with cases. This was before the universities opened their own legal clinics. And of course when they opened it was someone else to refer to because they were also looking for, you know…we referred quite a lot to them. We worked very well with the Law Clinics, with Legal Resources, with the Black Sash. So we sometimes had a staff of 17/20. Of course the students didn’t get paid. But I think it was quite…it was an important experience for them because they were able to see what a client looked like, to understand what case was all about. She was a very colourful person, smoked like a chimney, swore like a
trooper, but got a very difficult job done. And I was going to say that she once had a nun who came to do volunteer work, and the nun after a week said, no, I’m afraid I can’t work here. (laughter) But knew the law, knew the attorneys, and in the course of time knew who did what best. I mean, there were so many attorneys and advocates who were…they were so kind and so generous that it was almost embarrassing to ask them; they didn’t ever refuse. They were really wonderful. Appreciating the need and doing what they could to help. And got very little credit for it, you know, all we used to hear is how terrible the legal profession was. And even today when I hear this I’ve got to say that’s not my experience. But not all, there were some that you knew you couldn’t phone because they wouldn’t do anything, they’d refused a few times, said that they didn’t believe in this and had one bad experience with a client and didn’t want another. And many attorneys said, I don’t know why it is, but when you send me a client, I invest more work in it than I do with my paying clients. And that’s what happened, lives were very complicated. I sent one woman who’d been really very battered and abused to an attorney and he phoned a few days later and said, do you remember Mrs X who was sent to me? I said, yes. He said, well, that’s turned into a murder case. Because I think for the first time she felt she had something behind her, she had some support. So she tried to kill her husband. So then it became a murder case. I was really proud of her I’m ashamed to admit. And…but one learnt that there was a lot going on in society at the same time that was extra legal. There were customs and the traditions, there were ways of reacting. And women weren’t very kind to each other. You know, in many societies…mothers-in-law were real martinet. I mean, I heard very often from black clients a mother-in-law client would come in in tears and say my mother-in-law says, you think you’re better than I am? What do you expect? I had the same thing, what are you complaining about? And at the same time we used to take a lot of phone calls. People phoning in. I found the results of the women’s movement often very painful to witness. How the empowering of women didn’t give them much of a sense of justice. You know, especially in divorce actions. By then, you know, women had custody of children, how very often they simply refused access to the father. Certainly if they were unmarried it was almost…very few people who allowed their father, especially if you didn’t pay maintenance. But among white women they were really not acting on the children’s interest. In some cases justifiably, but very often out of spite, out of malice to the father and the in-laws, and I think that that’s still going on today.

Int Right. So the clients that came were predominantly African?

LG You know, at the beginning it might have been a third to two thirds, but towards the end predominantly African.

Int Did you have other race groups like coloureds and Indians…

LG …Oh, yes, we had a lot of coloureds. Sometimes the inaudible of Coronation. I mean, the streets…Yes, we had a lot of coloureds…and brown people from Lenasia. Oh yes, they weren’t only African.
Int So when change happened in 1994 and in that period, what led to the closure of the Legal Aid Bureau?

LG We’d got used to living on the smell of an oil rag, but we had our regulars. People who gave us money every year. I mean, we used to send out subscriptions to lawyers and individuals…I think annual subscription was four rand twenty. There were many firms who gave us money; the Chairman’s Fund was amazingly good to us. There was a time when we didn’t…on one occasion my husband gave us a cheque for monthly salaries because we didn’t have. And on another we were running short, we just couldn’t manage. We’d had money from Anglo, and we spoke to Mr King who was head of the Chairman’s Fund and we said, look we really have absolutely no money, could they help us out? And we were trying to raise money. And he…they bailed us out. And a week later we got a bequest from someone, so we thought, oh my god, what do we do now? You know, we’ve been to Anglo, we’ve told them we’ve got no money, they’ll see on the annual report that we got this bequest. So (laughs) the two of us walked to Anglo offices, we were then in Arop House opposite the post office in Von Brandis Street. Came to Mr King and we say, look, I’m sorry, we said we had no money, we’ve got it, do you want your money back? I think he must have thought, who are these two lunatics who are coming to offer Anglo their money back! (laughter) And also we had problems with accommodation. We had a lot of people coming in, a lot of black people, and we would sign a lease for two or three years, and in the end of it, they wouldn’t renew the lease. Because they didn’t want the sort of clients that they had. We must have moved…I started Legal Aid in Markham’s Building, then we moved to Arop House…we must have moved at least six or seven times. Pauline probably moved more than ten times.

Int That must have been very disruptive in terms of clients wondering where you were?

LG Yes, you had to tell clients where…well, we’d send notices out, if we were calling clients in we were able to say from such and such a date we would be…you know, we would have a month or two notice, so we always knew when we had to move because they wouldn’t renew the lease. Sometimes they would…the one place the building was sold and the new owner didn’t want us. But even when we were in Jeppe Street and in Indian owned buildings they still didn’t want us.

Int So when you ended up…you closed, what was the actual reason?

LG The actual reason was that we couldn’t raise funds, the whole climate had changed. People who knew the work we were doing were supplanted by young, black, or coloured, or Indian people who had no history with us. And two elderly women, two elderly Jewish women coming to ask for funds just didn’t make any sense to them. They had no idea of what we were doing. In the last few years we were bailed out by LegalWise. They gave us money. Which was also, you know, enough to run on for a year and we didn’t know whether they would renew, so it became a…I think it was the legal aspect, and also if you’ve been in a job for that amount of time, there was a feeling of staleness. And the clients were a different generation. When we did close down we felt that…one didn’t know how the next group of people would run the
Legal Aid Bureau. And I must say we were afraid of hitting the headlines with some case or other that shouldn’t have happened and having Legal Aid’s name, as it had been, besmirched. Pauline ran a very tight ship, she was scrupulously honest. You know, there’s certain people they have an honesty that’s almost foolishly honest, you know. This was the law, you couldn’t do this, you couldn’t do this. So they changed their name to JCRC, Johannesburg Community Legal Centre. And within a very short time the whole atmosphere had changed. The staff was greatly reduced…ya, it just changed. I mean, we were appalled after we…we used to have a Christmas party once a year, now that Christmas party, the staff and volunteers catered for. And when you’d heard that they’d taken out funds to have a Christmas party, we were appalled, you know, that…it would never have occurred to us in a million years to do something like that.

Int So this was after you and Pauline had left?

LG This is after we’d left, but I mean, that’s a minor detail, but the reports we started getting back were very, very disturbing.

Int Gosh. So has it continued?

LG Well, it’s changed again, it’s apparently a centre for women in trouble. But it’s now totally under the auspices of LegalWise. They were very good to us, I mean, we…from…they financed this for seven years. It was very generous of them. And then when we left in ’99 we stayed on for about six/eight months and then just left. At the beginning they would contact us quite frequently with cases, and then we didn’t hear from them again. Well, I mean, we still heard from them and there was still contact, but not regularly.

Int And Pauline left for Australia.

LG Her daughters emigrated. She left three years ago. Very unwillingly, I must say. But when one is getting older, one tends to do what suits the children rather than what one wants.

Int Lily, in terms of now, the terrain has changed so much, there’s no longer advice centres in the community, as you said the Legal Aid Bureau has really changed, it’s now become a centre for women in trouble. You’ve mentioned ordinary people, the Legal Resources Centre tends to turn away most people because it has focus areas, where do local people go do you think? What’s still available?

LG I’m not sure, I’m really not sure. The police, the courts…you know, it really was a very special institution at a special time. I’m not sure where they would go to, I don’t know whether the Legal Aid Board has branched out more and taken more cases? It hasn’t…
Int Well, it does mostly criminal.

LG Criminal work. So I really don’t know where people go with civil cases and domestic cases. The courts themselves do quite a lot, you know, the…we worked quite closely with the Central Divorce Court; that’s probably changed. And I think there are a lot of…every now and then one sees adverts for assistance in drawing up summonses that cost very little. Attorneys are very expensive, and that is a problem. There are the Labour Courts now, the CCMA that people can go to. So there are things that have taken its place. The Black Sash is still going. I don’t know maybe churches do more family counselling. When I say churches I mean all of them.

Int Do you miss the kind of work you’ve done?

LG I miss being out of the loop, because we used to know a problem before it became public. People would come in and say, ABC is happening, and two weeks later we would know about it. And we would certainly contact whoever we thought could help with such a problem: the press, Legal Resources when they were there. And I also miss very much walking in the street and not greeting by name the street cleaner whose problems I knew, because she’d sat in the office, we might have been collecting maintenance for her. I miss not knowing what’s going on. Whereas before I really felt I had a finger on the pulse of Johannesburg. I can’t talk for the rest of Africa…of South Africa, but certainly Johannesburg.

Int During the 1980s certainly, and maybe even early 1990s, the LRC was really in the public domain, you heard what it was doing…

LG Yes.

Int Now do you get a sense from newspapers, etc, what the LRC does?

LG Now and then, but not…William Kerfoot who runs the LRC, is a friend, he’s remained a friend, he was a (inaudible) and when I’m in Cape Town I sometimes contact him and get a feeling of things going on. But as I say I’m out of it now. One couldn’t but be aware of being part of a (inaudible) system. My husband always said that, everyone who’s lived in South Africa was tainted with it. There was no way you could avoid, it was in the air we breathed. It really was a dreadful, dreadful time.

Int In what ways have things changed, do you think, positively for ordinary South Africans?

LG Well, for me, in my limited sphere, going to a shop, you’re served by black people perfectly well. You go into a bank…there are many very positive changes. You know, just a freeing up of a society, and I mean, one wondered…although, you know…my mother-in-law died in ’85, and her advisor at the bank was a black man who worked there, so things were changing. I mean, we knew long before what became generally
accepted that people were living in Hillbrow. Because you’d write to people’s address and they would give you an address in Hillbrow and not in Soweto. One knew that there was movement before it actually happened. And that was…became important for me. I mean, it was…I was really very…in one way, very happy doing the work I was doing, and of course, you know, that we were torn apart by what one had to do.

Int In terms of working with people from the Legal Resources Centre, did you refer cases to Arthur Chaskalson for example, or George Budlender or Geoff Bizos?

LG Pauline would have done…yes, Geoff (Budlender) often, Pinky (Madlala) very often, Odette (Geldenhuys) very often…

Int Mahomed Navsa?

LG Mahomed (Navsa) we knew, yes. All these people we…and the others were very kind to us. Well, kind to us, there was a system, you had to help to do what you could.

Int I’ve asked you a range of questions, I’m wondering whether there’s something I’ve neglected to ask you which you think ought to be included in your Oral History?

LG You know, these are things that one thinks about afterwards, why didn’t I say this? (laughter)

Int That’s true. I was wondering whether we could end, if you could talk about a particular memory, whether it’s of Pauline, a client, someone from the Legal Resources, or Black Sash, a memory that you treasure of the time that you spent. I’m sure you have many memories…any one in particular which made you feel that this work is quite rewarding.

LG There were people whom I…at work who really meant something to me. When they would come into the office, it would make my day. There was a man, a Moslem coloured man, who came to see me. He had been in prison and I think his employer referred him to me, and said that he couldn’t wait for the man to come out of prison he was such a wonderful man. And he was totally honest. He said he had done this, he had done that, where normally, men would deny everything. And his honesty was something I’ve never forgotten. You know, he wasn’t devious, he accepted his role in the family break up, he accepted problems in the second relationship. He had a very, very clever daughter who was going to do medicine. And she fell pregnant, and that devastated him. But I must say I think of him often as a shining light of honesty in a sea of deceit. And there were a lot of clients whom I really loved. There was a woman who had been married to a Malawian, who had taken the children off to Malawi, and she walked to Malawi, walked to fetch the little ones. Some amazing cases. There was one case which I’m rather ashamed, you know, there was a woman who had come to see me, she’d had one illegitimate child, and the man had promised to look after the child and take it with him, and then she had two. When I first met her she’d had three
and then she...towards the end she’d had five. Absolutely no income. And she got her
children together and the oldest child was being cared for by the father’s mother in
Swaziland and she wanted all her children with her. And in terms of the law then, she
was the child’s guardian. So I helped her to get this child back. And years later I got a
phone call from a Catholic school in Malvern in the east of Johannesburg. Did I know
that the mother was selling the child for prostitution? And...you know, one didn’t
forget something like that because of one’s role on doing what was the legal route that
the mother could take in helping her along then. There were many people who...it
was just, you’d walk into a supermarket and be greeted by name, you know, it was
wonderful. You knew their problems, you knew where they were coming from, you
were...I was really privileged to be taken into so many people’s confidence.

Int Lily, thank you very much for a wonderful interview and I think you’ve made such a
valuable contribution, thank you so much.

LG Thank you, I can’t tell you how terrified I feel, because I felt I had nothing to tell you.

Int Well, you had a lot, didn’t you?

LG (interview continues) A woman for whom I’d typed out a divorce, it was quite simple,
she’s got her divorce, she came to the office to say thank you, and she asks me what
size slippers I wear, what size slippers Pauline wears. And I said, what do you want to
know for? And she says, I want to buy you slippers. I said, no, no, please don’t buy
anything. We used to get all sorts of presents, if someone worked for a chemical
factory we’d get extract of lettuce...yes, then you chose extract of lettuce and all sorts
of things. Doilies we had as many...no, why do you want...really don’t waste your
money. She says, I’ve got money like shit, she says. (laughter) Which made me think
that maybe she was dealing in drugs because where else does she get that sort of
money? Another client who came in and there was dispute about...she was living in a
back room and there was a dispute about the use of the toilet...very feisty lady, she
says to me, you know, this is going on, ek betaal vir kak en pis! (laughter) You pay
for the use of the toilet. But all these...I mean, the simplest was able to tell a phrase
that was staggering. One thing I got over very quickly and I called in my own mind
inaudible syndrome, you know, inaudible so charming and inaudible. Within a week
of being at the Legal Aid Bureau there was no more inaudible (laughter). I think if he
himself had to come and make a proposition I wouldn’t refuse (laughter). Oh dear. I
can’t tell you how privileged I felt with being in touch with people like that. One’s
own helplessness in all these things, it’s really, really distressing. This (painting)
comes from a woman also with five children and she had absolutely no income.
Nothing. So I broke the rule of social work and I gave her money every month.
Anyway, she...well, what do you do, you’ve got to do something.

Int Did she do this or did she just buy it?

LG No, her son did that. She brought me a whole lot of pictures and said, he wants you to
choose one. And it’s such a precious thing to me, I can’t tell you.
Int It is. It’s so wonderful, it’s colourful. He’s actually talented.

LG Yes. I’ve often wondered what’s happened to him.

Int And he was selling it for twenty rand?

LG Yes. And I think I gave her money, I think I paid her for this. Oh no, she wouldn’t take, she wouldn’t take. She was so proud…I mean, his work was very good.

Int It is, yes, definitely.

LG There were…you know, when people started coming back from exile, there were a lot of problems.

Int Really? What sorts of problems?

LG People had a different attitude to life. And came back to Soweto and with not a family (?). They felt they…felt they should be treated differently or they advised parents in a way that parents wouldn’t accept. A lot of problems…and I can speak about HIV, which we knew about, people, we’d interview somebody, they’d come in, their husbands are positive, they’re positive through their husbands. A woman of 65 being HIV when she resumes a relationship with her first husband. (interruption) …ages before.

Int So in 1980s.

LG Yes. I mean, before…what a shock when people would phone and say, I’m so and so, I’ve got cancer, and then suddenly…and people were phoning and saying, I’ve got HIV. That became the new cancer. A lot of our clients died of…you had people who were with you and then the mother would come in and say the child had died. That was dreadful.

(Interview stops at this point)…
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