

**Interview with Cyrus H. Gordon,**  
conducted by Gary A. Rendsburg,  
at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies  
of the University of Pennsylvania,  
February 3rd, 1998

**Video available here:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evuOgZhItN4&feature=youtu.be>

**Length: 2 hours.**

**Transcribed by Peter Shamah, Rutgers University, 2018.**

**Annotated by Peter Shamah and Gary Rendsburg.**

**CHG = Cyrus H. Gordon**

**GAR = Gary A. Rendsburg**

**Others who speak are indicated by their initials as well.**

N.B. The transcription is totally searchable, though we also append an Index of Persons Named and an Index of Places Named, for easy perusal. People present in the room are not included in the index, however. When a person is mentioned by surname only, we include the first name or initials in brackets.

**[0:00]** Gary Rendsburg: Cyrus Gordon, and I'll introduce Cyrus in just a moment. I first want to introduce Connie Gordon, Cyrus's wife. Connie is a scholar in her own right, she received her Ph.D. at New York University, we were doctoral students together under Cyrus's tutelage, and has published a few articles. An important one that I cite all the time in *Abr-Nahrain*, sometime

in the 80's I think,<sup>1</sup> based on her dissertation on the formation of plural nouns in Hebrew, so I commend her work to you as well, and I thought we'd begin just by quickly introducing ourselves to Professor Gordon, many of you know him through past contacts, and if we just go around the room real quickly, and say a word. Who you are, your home institution, and it's more likely that Cyrus knows your teachers better than he knows you, so maybe a word or two about one or two of your teachers, who they were, graduate advisors of course, but even an undergraduate teacher, so that Cyrus may know. So why don't we real quickly, David?

David Goldenberg (DG): Well I'm David Goldenberg, and I would like to hear you speak about my main teacher, who was Solomon Zeitlin.

Sol Cohen (SC): So I'm Sol Cohen, I'm the bibliographer here, and I studied with [E. A.] Speiser and Sam Kramer.

Cyrus Gordon: Yeah, Kramer was my fellow student, and Speiser was one of my teachers.

Yaakov Klein (YK): I'm Yaakov Klein, I studied often with Speiser, but I was Kramer's *talmid muvhaq*.

GAR: Connie I think you know (laughter), and I know you know Tallay, but why don't you introduce yourself anyway.

Tallay Ornan: I am Tallay Ornan, from (?). I did my Ph.D. with Professor Pirhiya Beck, from Tel Aviv. . . . . to Israel.

GAR: I think that we should mention that for those of you who don't know, Tali's uncle is Zvi Rin, one of Cyrus's students, and Cyrus and Connie were

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is: Constance W. Gordon, "Qetûl Nouns in Classical Hebrew," *Abr-Nahrain* 29 (1991), pp. 83–86.

telling me that they had dinner with Zvi last night, so there are family connections here around the table. Linda?

Linda Bregstein (LB): My name is Linda Bregstein, I got my Ph.D. from Penn in 1993, so we were students of your pupils.

CHG: Yeah well, I'm a little bit ahead of you, I took my AB at Penn in '27, and my Ph.D. in '30. Nonetheless, I'm glad to meet a fellow student (Laughter).

GAR: But Linda, I'm upset that you're not mentioning your undergraduate education.

LB: Oh, I did my Undergraduate at Cornell, before you were there.

GAR: Before I, but David Owen was of course your teacher too.

Theodore Lewis: I'm Ted Lewis, I work with Frank Cross and Bill Moran.

Gary Beckman (GB): I'm Gary Beckman, University of Michigan, and I met you once years ago, and you informed me that I was your scholarly grandson.

Cyrus Gordon: (Laughter) That's right, that's right.

GB: Harry Hoffner was my teacher here in America. I also studied in Germany with Heinrich Otten.

Jenny Goldenberg (JG): I'm Jenny Goldenberg, and I wrote an Undergraduate paper on you for Phil Betancourt... Did you hear me?

GAR: Yeah, it's news to me, Jenny said she wrote an Undergraduate paper about you. This year? What did you say, I thought you said this year.

JG: Years ago.

GAR: Oh years ago.

JG: It was years ago with Phil Betancourt, about your theory.

CHG: Which theory, by the way?

JG: The Linear B Theory...

CHG: The Linear B Theory is not mine, Linear A, right. Of course I disagree with one thing in the title, it's not a "theory" (laughter).

JG: It was back then!

CHG: That was (?), but I know better! (laughter).

Arthur Kiron (AK): I'm Arthur Kiron, I studied with Ted Good at Stanford, and now I'm getting a degree in History at Columbia University.

GAR: We should mention that Arthur has curated several exhibits, or at least one prominent one at Mikveh Israel here, on Sabato Morais, and some other connections with the synagogue here.

AK: One of my other affiliations is with what used to be the Dropsie College, and I worked on some of the papers of Max Margolis.

GAR: I'm hoping to show Cyrus the archive room in the next day or two, and Arthur, and Arthur was the organizer of all the Margolis material.

CHG: Max Margolis was by far the best teacher I've ever had, and whatever I've done in Ugaritic, he didn't know about Ugaritic, it was discovered about that time, he never mentioned the word Ugaritic. But the fact that I was able to work on the Ugaritic grammar and do something with it, I owe entirely to Max Margolis. He taught me the way the Semitic languages work.

GAR: We'll hear a little more about Margolis down the line, obviously. Chris, whom I just met for the first time.

Chris (?): Hi, Chris (?), I'm an Archeologist . . . . Tell Billa . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Liz Smith: I'm Liz Bloch Smith, I'm an archeologist. I worked with Larry Stager. My husband is Mark Smith, who sends his regrets, he unfortunately had jury duty.

Bernard Malis: I'm Bernard Malis, guest, happily so, enthusiastically so. Penn, Jim Muhly, Phil Betancourt, and the rest of the crew over at the museum.

Sy Gitin: Cyrus, it's good to see you again. Of course you knew some of my teachers, [Nelson] Glueck, [Mattityahu] Tsevat, [Jonas] Greenfield, others.

CHG: Glueck I not only knew as a scholar, but in 1934 I was on his expeditions where we explored together, on camels, and identified the chronology of about five hundred mounds, and we got to know each other very well. When you work on archeological expeditions, especially that kind of thing, where we weren't living, sleeping in different houses, but sleeping under the same heavens. The title for it in Arabic is *diyufallah*, we were Guests of Allah, that was the term we used out there, and we got to know each other very well.

GAR: Is that how it works at Tel Migne?

?: Actually we never saw the stars (laughter).

GAR: Wayne?

Wayne Horowitz: I'm Wayne Horowitz, and as I said before, I'm probably the last of the Mediterranean Studies people from Brandeis, because the whole department was swallowed up, but well, we won't go into that. I studied there

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<sup>2</sup> At a distance of 20 years, we have not been able to determine the identify of "Chris."

with Martha Morrison, and Dwight Young, and after that I went to Birmingham to study with [Wilfred] Lambert, and now I'm in Israel at the . . . .

GAR: And Avigdor?

Avigdor Hurowitz (AH): Okay, I'm Victor Hurowitz, I'm from Philadelphia and at the Ben-Gurion University, and I studied at the Hebrew University with, you name him, but my major mentors were Menahem Haran, Aaron Shaffer, and Hayim Tadmor, as I said, with all the rest of them, and I have an ancestor, his name is Frank William Gordon, and I wonder...

CHG: Well where did he come from, what country?

AH: Lithuania.

CHG: That's about the time I came from there too, my people.

AH: So maybe we're *mishpacha*, and my wife was a student of yours at Brandeis, Anne Roshwalb, who's an archeologist, a pre-historian, working with Sy, and unfortunately she can't be here today.

**[08:14]** GAR: And just for the record, I should introduce myself as Gary Rendsburg, I was a student of Cyrus for my Ph.D. at New York University in the 1970's, taking my degree in 1980, and presently at Cornell University.

It's my pleasure to host this and good to see Cyrus back where it all began, here in Philadelphia. So let's talk a little bit about your earliest years, you're a native Philadelphian, your father, Benjamin Gordon was a physician,

CHG: That's right.

GAR: Who migrated from Lithuania to America,

CHG: The town that they immigrated from was called Naishtat [Neustadt], and well, they were really Litvaks in the classical sense, dedicated to Hebrew, but also to secularism, and it's a good background to come from and a good one to live up to.

GAR: Now you told me once, your father obviously was an Early Zionist, and an Early Hebraist?

CHG: Yeah, he worked with, what's his name, Stephen Wise, and Stephen Wise delegated to him the establishment of Zionist members and Zionist clubs in both Philadelphia and Trenton. But the orientation was always very, very strong, and it was a nice combination because while they were dedicated to Zionism and to Judaism, they also had a yearning to become a part of Western culture.

Apparently across the border, they were very close to the East German border, not too far from Tilsit. Tilsit had a university, and they knew, they sensed that these gentiles in Tilsit and other German universities were doing something worthwhile, and fortunately the rabbinic training they had, the sharpening of the mind through the pilpul conditioned them, so when they got a chance to get into the Western tradition and part of the universities, they were well prepared to contribute, not only learning, but what Harry Wolfson called "mental horsepower."

This was an interesting thing, mental horsepower was something a little different from intellectuality. For instance, I asked a leading question to Harry Wolfson, I asked him how we would compare the Greek mind exemplified with Aristotle, with the Rabbinic mind. So he said, "If you're talking about an orderly presentation, where you go step by step, and it's very easy to follow, he said, obviously the Greek is better. But if you're talking about mental horsepower, the Rabbinic mind is far superior to the Greek mind." It took me years to understand that this was so, at first I thought the answer was crazy, but it is so, and the difference that I like to make, which maybe will be useful for you.

GAR: Now, obviously the Zionism of your father was a factor in the name you received. I remember as a graduate student, Avraham Malamet was at New York University, and he told us what an honor it was to speak with Prof. Gordon's class, because as a young person growing up in Israel getting into the field, he admired not only the man, but also his names, Koresh and Herzl, which were the two saviors of the Jewish people in antiquity and today. So you were named obviously Cyrus and Herzl, for good reason, and we of course know other people with the middle name of Herzl.

CHG: This all came in the wake of the Dreyfus case.

GAR: Which was in the air?

CHG: Yes, which was very much in the air. It took quite a while before it was settled.

GAR: You mentioned to me that you have a cousin named Theodor Herzl Gordon, who was a rabbi here in Philadelphia, and we all know of Theodor Herzl Gaster, so this was something in the air in the early part of the century. You came along in 1908. So Cyrus passed the stages of *seva* and *gevura* some time ago, and looks forward to his 90th birthday this June, so I wish you an early Mazal Tov and Shana Tova on that event. Now, much of your childhood was, early years were obviously at the corner of Broad and York. Mikveh Israel, Gratz, and Dropsie.

CHG: That's right, Gratz which is the oldest [?] in the western hemisphere, and celebrated their hundredth anniversary not so long ago. That was the school I went to, and it was connected very closely with the congregation, which has now been absorbed into, what is the official name, on the mall?

GAR: Well, Mikveh Israel still has its own name.

CHG: Yeah it has its own name, but it's connected with the ...

GAR: The museum, Arthur would know.

CHG: And the affiliation with the Mikveh Israel is a very interesting one and played a major role in my mindset. Mikveh Israel was not Sephardic, and not Ashkenazic, it was a different tradition. It was dedicated to Hebrew tradition, but it was very American. One of the documents that I prized from the beginning and I have a copy of it, I probably showed it to you in my home, didn't I, is the letter that George Washington sent us along with some other congregations. The other one he sent which was more famous was to the Touro Synagogue in Newport.

But, so this left me with the feeling, that the best in America and the best in Judaism was identical, and it wasn't until I was a professor, it's not that I couldn't see it, but I didn't want to see it, I turned a blind eye to it. I discovered that we had our fundamentalists, and what I like to call our "wildlife," the same as every other people, but I was completely unaware of this, and I grew up, there's this wonderful feeling that the best in America and the best in Judaism were identical. People affiliated themselves with the Germans, because at that time, this isn't true today, the reform Jews were trying to be as un-Jewish as possible, and were hostile to Hebrew language and culture. He wouldn't affiliate himself with the Litvaks who were unworldly and others because their manners and everything were un-American.

GAR: "He" meaning your father?

CHG: Yeah, so this was an illusion that I was raised on, but it was a good illusion. One that made me very happy and very much at home, and what I was, and again I'm going to use a term that was unknown at that time, I had no "identity crisis" whatever. "Identity crisis" was coined by Erik Erikson, is that right, Connie? Whom I also knew years later, but it's a strange thing that these clichés which describe very effectively, things that to us are so important and universal, at that time, were not even known.

GAR: And you started taking classes at Gratz college as a high school student?

CHG: No, no, no. They had a school of observation and practice on Sunday, and two afternoons a week, and then on graduating from that school, then I went to Gratz College, which was the preparation for teachers, teachers of Hebrew, and I took my certification and graduation in 1926, and of course I enrolled also with the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1927 that I took my Bachelor's degree.

GAR: And you continued at Penn, so you were an undergraduate at Penn, and continued immediately into a doctorate.

CHG: Immediately, right.

[16:40] GAR: And your main teacher at Penn was [James] Montgomery. Now I should mention for those of you who were unaware, that Cyrus published a portrait of Montgomery, in *Biblical Archeologist*, about ten years ago, which is a delightful piece,<sup>3</sup> but tell us a little bit more about Montgomery.

CHG: Well he was a scholar and a gentleman. Very funny sort of thing, years later I had a student from Israel, this was at NYU, and she noticed that I meant something very special when I called him a gentleman, scholar she knew, but she said to me "I know what a scholar is, but what is a gentleman?" Well, that word has become debased, now a gentleman means a member of the male sex, for instance, you have a ladies room and a gentlemen's room, this kind of thing, but the whole concept (laughter) of a gentleman was alien to her. In Israel, a person what we would call a person, approximated that but in a very different way, we would call a diamond in the rough. You know, very nice person, but certainly not a gentleman in the sense that I meant the term. But he was from two aristocratic Philadelphia families, and was a true gentleman,

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<sup>3</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, "BA Portrait: A Scholar and Gentleman: James Alan Montgomery," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983) pp. 187–189.

and he was very devoted to Hebraic studies, his specialty is what they call “the Old Testament” and he did something which was very characteristic of him, and my response was very characteristic of me.

He said, “I want you to write a thesis on the rabbinic exegesis in the Vulgate of Proverbs.” The idea was to find out whether any of the interpretations that got into the Vulgate, did not come from sources available to Christians, but which Saint Jerome got through his Jewish teachers. One of them was called Bar Hanina, the only trouble is that there are so many Bar Haninas that we don’t know which one it was, but he said, “To handle rabbinic sources, you have to be Jewish,” and then he made a statement to the effect that since I was Jewish, I was an expert in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, which of course was very far from the truth, but I wouldn’t tell him the truth. I wanted to live up to his illusions, this was almost characteristic of me, if a person had illusions and they were credible, I wanted to live up to them instead of saying “No, I can’t do this and you’re all wrong.” This happened a number of times in my life. One was with an old scholar that you may possibly remember, Jacob Hoschander, who wrote on Esther.

DG: He was at Dropsie, wasn’t he?

CHG: Of course, yeah. But when I was seven years old, I was walking home with him on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, walking home, and there I was a seven-year-old child, and he looked terribly tall to me then, and he said “Well, you know, Cyrus, have you ever thought of the influence of Dante on Hebrew?” So again, what was I to say to him (laughter), then he spouted long passages in Hebrew, and long passages in Italian, but my response was again very typical of me, at every age of life. I wanted to understand someday, who Dante was, and how he had influenced the Hebrews, and I remembered when I prepared at Penn for my sight reading exams, in Italian, I went back to Dante and read many pages of it. My preparation didn’t require this, but I wanted to do it. Why? Because this man thought that surely I was interested in that, and that I would know it. But it’s nice in life, to live up to good impressions people have, even though the impressions might be complete illusions.

GAR: Well you knew Hebrew and Aramaic from home obviously?

CHG: Well (laughter) I knew some, I knew some of the Hebrew words, but I didn't know any of the Italian words.

GAR: No, I'm going back to your education now. Hebrew and Aramaic you knew from home, Greek and Latin you learned at Penn?

CHG: No, the Greek and Latin came in high school, but I continued both.

GAR: So when Montgomery suggested this for your dissertation, you obviously had to work in the Hebrew and Aramaic material, and Greek and Latin.

CHG: Well, he thought more than that, he had me working on both Talmuds, and what is the index of these things, it says "Ein Yaakov," is that the index volume? What the names are doing, is that for each verse of the Bible it refers you to rabbinic sources where...

[Side discussion between and among AH, DG, SC about Ein Mishpat, Toldot Aharon, Masoret ha-Shas, etc.]

**[22:20]** GAR: So you used the listing of Proverbs material to... ?

CHG: So what I had to do was see if there was anything in Proverbs that you couldn't get the sources available to Christians in that time, in Latin and Greek, and then if I couldn't find it anywhere there, but it's in the Vulgate. He died in the year 420, and he went to Bethlehem, because there was no room in Rome for him, they didn't want him around. You see, they were all reading the Vetus Latina, and if that's what you're used to, then it's meaningful to you, and they didn't want anyone coming along saying it's inferior. And of course he was right, and then when he was asked to defend himself, "Why do you study with Jews?" you know, it was a terrible thing for a Christian to be doing, to be

studying with Jews, and he said, *peritis in arte sua credendum est*, “You have to depend on the experts for knowing their own art.”<sup>4</sup> This is what he said, and I always felt that it’s the duty of the Jewish people to be experts, not to make converts, this we never have been interested in, in a long, long while, but it’s our duty, who else is to do it if we’re not to do it?

GAR: And all along you’re at Penn, and you were taking classes at Dropsie as well, and there was no such thing as formal registration, you were just able to study with Margolis?

CHG: That’s right. The thing, by the way, was of tremendous advantage to me, because I was completely independent, and I was going to take my degree at Penn, and he wanted me to do a thesis with him, but Montgomery wouldn’t permit it. I don’t blame him, in retrospect. But the teaching I got from Margolis, well if any of you are my students, or the students of my students, then you know how indebted I am to him.

GAR: Just back to Penn or a moment. Your other teachers, [George] Barton was there...

CHG: Right. Speiser, [Isaac] Husik. Husik was not an interesting person, but I’ve never had a more thorough teacher. What we’d do is that we’d take a tractate in medieval Hebrew, or in Ancient Greek, and build up every phrase with every element, and build it up from sentence to paragraph to section, and show how it all fit together. He was a professor of philosophy, but what he did to you was better than what many original scholars could do. He brought you directly into contact, as close as you could get to Aristotle’s mind, or to the Rambam’s mind, and everything had to be done according to the real sources. For instance, for the Guide for the Perplexed, it was the Arabic, not the Hebrew version, or Hebrew translation, he was a wonderful, wonderful person.

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<sup>4</sup> For the Latin expression, see Cyrus H. Gordon, “Rabbinic Exegesis in the Vulgate of Proverbs,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1930), pp. 384–416, esp. p. 405, n. 79.

We didn't have many students, there was three of them in the class, but this was the kind of atmosphere, the kind of thing that many administrators wouldn't put up with now, you know. A professor holding these seminars for three students or two students. When I studied Sanskrit, W. Norman Brown was my teacher, and I was the only student. I knew that at that time, there were many places already where you had cost accounting, expensive man like W. Norman Brown to spend time with one student, but whether he had one student or no students, it had to be done.

It was a very different atmosphere. I like to feel that, and I honestly feel, that the wisdom will not die with us, but I often feel that wisdom is going to continue, not always in the universities, but in other types of institutions whose form I cannot predict.

GAR: I think you told me that with Montgomery you studied Ethiopic, and the only other student in the class was Kramer, is that correct?

CHG: With whom?

GAR: With Montgomery? Were you doing Ethiopic?

CHG: Yes, we had two years, Ethiopic by the way I used to read with fluency, but that was part of the picture and we didn't study anything comparatively then. I had a lot of Arabic, a lot of Aramaic dialects, and nothing was done comparatively, but at least when we compared things, when we got to that stage, we knew what we were comparing. Now you know comparative studies is very often by people who do not know. They may be experts in some phonetic principle, but they really don't know the material first hand. We knew everything first hand, which was a (?) a lot, and of course I didn't have any other interests. I was a full time student like all the students, I wasn't working part time outside.

GAR: Many of you are familiar with this book that we should pass around, and if you're not familiar with it, that Cyrus wrote, *The Pennsylvania Tradition of Semitics*,<sup>5</sup> which goes through and chronicles the history of study of Semitics, and cognate fields here at the University of Pennsylvania over the past century, and many of the people, of course, whom Cyrus studied with and is talking about now are mentioned in there.

CHG: It started, you know, around 1885, but in the lifetime, my teacher was in the first class, Montgomery. From 1885 until this present year now, the whole thing was covered during the lifetimes of Montgomery and I.

GAR: Now at Dropsie we should mention that two of the three people whose portraits are hanging in this room, Cyrus knew, Cyrus Adler, and you knew Judge [Mayer] Sulzberger.

CHG: Yes, oh yes. Judge Sulzberger I knew from the synagogue, and Mikveh Israel was very much a part of the scholarly tradition there, and Max Margolis also came, by the way, to synagogue at Mikveh Israel, and I couldn't help noticing that the sermons, mercifully, were only once a month. The reader, Leon H. Elmaleh, who was a terrible sermonizer, and he knew it, but he had to do something with sermonizing, and I noticed that Margolis always had the book open, the Bible, while the sermon was going on. So I asked him why he did this, he said "Why should I listen to a bad sermon, when I can read a good one?" (laughter).

GAR: Let's talk about some of your classmates at Dropsie with Margolis. Was [Harry] Orlinsky there?

CHG: No, Orlinsky was not around at all.

GAR: Came later then?

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<sup>5</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Pennsylvania Tradition of Semitics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

CHG: Yeah, no, no, Orlinsky was at Penn, but he didn't come in until after Margolis died.<sup>6</sup>

GAR: And [Robert] Gordis? How does he fit into this?

CHG: Gordis came in regularly, and he was a very brilliant student, and we were together for three years, during his three years, and I was in all the classes.

GAR: We should pass these things around here. Margolis, and Arthur was the one who showed me this a couple of weeks ago, that for those of you who are not familiar, in the building here in the archive room is all of the Margolis material, as well as all of the material of others who taught at Dropsie in decades past, and down that the B2 level, under lock and key, is a card file cabinet, and I'm just going to pass out these three little slips of papers. There were literally thousands, if not tens of thousands of these snips of paper in Margolis's handwriting that shows you the mind at work of a man who was obviously at home with these texts. To say "at home with these texts" is an understatement. And I hadn't realized this, I see here that basically you have the makings of a Hebrew-Greek concordance, obviously Margolis having worked so much on the Septuagint, and it was Cyrus who pointed out to me that the Hatch-Redpath Concordance already existed, but of course that wasn't good enough for Margolis, say something about that.

CHG: Well, Margolis considered all dictionaries and commentaries as secondary material, and they were useful as aides, but on the other hand you can only depend on actual sources themselves. His methods of teaching were rather brutal, are you familiar with them? What he would do is, that he would fire at a student half a verse, and the student had to tell what book it was from and what chapter, the number of the verse, he didn't insist on. And if he didn't

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<sup>6</sup> For the record, Harry Orlinsky did receive his Ph.D. from Dropsie College (and not Penn), though not until 1935. Orlinsky arrived at Dropsie in September 1931, to study with Margolis, but their time together was short-lived. Margolis took ill and died in April 1932. By this point, Cyrus Gordon had been away from Philadelphia for several years.

know it, he said “Go to hell!” Then he would call on the next student, and the next student wouldn’t know it, and he would say, “There’s room for you too!”

So, you see, when I began studying with him I was eighteen years old, and I could take it. I wanted to learn and I had self-confidence in my ability to learn, and I respected my teacher and the subject, but we had men in the class, men who were married and had children. The men, let’s say, were forty five or fifty years of age, and this was life or death for them, and they would go home and take the nervous breakdowns. That’s why he had so few direct disciples. Whatever has survived of Margolis’s influence in Hebraic studies, I think was through me and maybe through a very limited extent, some good students like Gordis.

But, one of these men complained to Cyrus Adler, and I was having lunch in the room where the Margolis library was kept, and he was called down and they came back, and he said the “The boss told me that I should not use the kind of language that I’ve been using in class.” “The Boss,” he never referred to Cyrus Adler, only “The Boss,” and then he turns to me and he says “Now Cyrus, don’t you think that the language I use simply adds to the informality of the class?” and apparently the man never realized that with an eighteen year old, you know, my life was ahead of me, I didn’t have a wife and children, so I could take the thing, but a very sensitive person whose life was on the line couldn’t take it. He simply didn’t understand this at all, and his attitude, or his method, not his attitude but his method, killed off the students. A strange sort of thing, the best teacher I ever had, but as a teacher he killed off most of his students.

**[33:48]** GAR: The other book I brought with me is Cyrus’s book *Forgotten Scripts*, this is the second edition in hardcover, but the first edition which was a Penguin paperback,<sup>7</sup> has an autobiographical sketch of Cyrus, with some

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<sup>7</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, *Forgotten Scripts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971); Cyrus H. Gordon, *Forgotten Scripts*, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 1982). As indicated in the interview, there is much more autobiographical information in the first edition (see especially pp. 144–157). For the most complete account, see Gordon’s memoir, published

stories about Margolis, and I never asked you why it wasn't included, and much less of it in the second edition, but I commend the first edition to get a picture of Margolis in there. Now one of the things you mentioned to me once, and I asked both Orlinsky and Gordis about this at some point, and they confirmed this, Margolis knew the entire text of the Tanakh, simply by the *niqqud*?

CHG: Yeah, obviously any person who works with Semitic languages knows how to work with Phoenician. If you see the consonants, you don't need the vowels. What he could do, is if you gave him a whole verse, a good sized verse of the Bible, and gave him only the vowels, he would identify it.

AH: I heard that he could know with only the cantillations.

CHG: This is quite possible, and by the way, the *te'amim* are earlier than the vocalization. I don't want to go into this now, but it's earlier, and we can show this from quite a few places. No, I didn't know this about the cantillation part, yeah. It's quite possible.

AH: I heard a story that he would compete with his friends, that they would exchange verses only by cantillation, and the object was to fill in the verse.

CHG: Well, I thank you for this, because this is new to me, but this doesn't surprise me.

GAR: And this wasn't just for Torah, this would be for Nevi'im and Ketuvim.

CHG: Oh, yeah, sure.

GAR: An obscure verse from Job would be no problem. That's a remarkable mental achievement, to say the least.

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twelve years after the interview, shortly before he died: Cyrus H. Gordon, *A Scholar's Odyssey* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

CHG: Well, he was a remarkable guy.

[35:50] GAR: Now, you took your Ph.D. at Penn, you left Philadelphia, and it was off to the Near East?

CHG: Right, at the museum.

GAR: So you were officially under the museum expeditions in Iraq?

CHG: Iraq during the winters, and Southern Palestine under the British Mandate during the summers. My first expedition in what's now Israel was at Bet Zur, the Maccabean site, we dug there for one year in 1931, and then later, at Tell Beit Mirsim, where [W. F.] Albright produced a classical work on the chronology of the ceramics.

GAR: You met Albright for the first time in Palestine?

CHG: No, I met him actually in Margolis's office several times, but he was not one of my teachers. He had a lot of influence on me, but this was the post-Ph.D. studies. I remember one thing that he said at our meal in the tent, this must have been at Bet Zur, he said "Anyone who wants to work in the Old Testament will have to work on the Ugaritic material," and again, I respected my teachers, and when I heard a thing like that I was determined that I was the one to do this, but it was Margolis's training that enabled me to do it, and then it turns out that this caused a rift between me and Albright, because of something that happened earlier in my career, I don't have to tell you now, I decided that when I wanted to do something very important and I wanted to do it very badly, it meant a lot to me. I was not going to get anyone's permission, I was just going to do it. So, I was then writing for the Pontifical Biblical Institute, and they approached me, Father [Alfred] Pohl was there, Father Alfredo Pohl, Pater Professor Pohl, S.J. He wanted me to write for the seventieth birthday, *Analecta Orientalia* volume, for Father Deimel, Anton Deimel, and this started a very close relationship, and then I suggested that I

work with the Ugaritic grammar, and he took this before his colleagues immediately, and they told me to work on it, and put me right ahead on it to work with dispatch, don't let anything else interfere, because this was important and they wanted to do it.

Well, then the war broke out, so it was a little difficult for an ordinary person, with mail service during the war period, to have the printing and the proofs and everything done in Rome. This didn't stop Father Pohl, they used the Vatican dispatch, the diplomatic pouch was used. So within a year I was able to finish the Ugaritic grammar and have the thing printed up, and I remember I was walking through the streets of Jerusalem in uniform. Some friends saw me, they had already bought copies of the Ugaritic Grammar which sold out in no time. But Albright was very angry because he said that when he found out about it that he hadn't been consulted. He said "Look Gordon, no one can possibly do that, least of all you." So, he's entitled to his opinion, but after the thing appeared, he was man enough to retract and give it a very enthusiastic review and admit that he was wrong, but other things came up later which created further problems.

GAR: In Iraq, you were with Speiser?

CHG: I was with Speiser the first year, and it was a very interesting experience in many ways. We were excavating two mounds. We were excavating Tell Billa which in ancient times was called Shibaniba, and actually the gate in Nineveh leading by road to Tell Billa, is called the Gate of Shibaniba, Shibaniba Gate, and the other one was Tepe Gawra, which was a prehistoric site. I don't call it prehistoric, but most of the scholars did. It came to a point at the very top where you had just a small fortress of about 1500 BC, and you couldn't go in any further, so it was very nice, because you start at 1500 and then you go down. It went down over twenty levels, going back into early Neolithic times, and some of it preserved to a remarkable depth. I think the eighth one going down was preserved to a height, I remember you could stand in the walls, in many cases the walls were higher than a man's hand standing up because it was made of brick, and burnt hard by the conflagration.

And the place was interesting because the religion of Bashiqa, which is where the town near Tell Billa, was not Muslim, but it was Yazidi. These are people who love God but they don't worship him, because there's no use worshipping God, he can only do what's good, loving, and helpful, so you're wasting your time praying to him. But the one whom you have to appreciate, the one who you have to propitiate, is Satan, and so they would avoid all kinds of words.

For instance, they don't call the Tigris River *al-šatt*, as the Muslims do, because "shatt" begins with the same sounds, you know, as Satan.<sup>8</sup> They would call it *al-baḥr*, because we had to use a different word, and it put a lot of constraints on us. I would like to tell you more about it, but that would be a whole lecture itself, but I'll tell you this much. When we spoke to each other in the evenings, the Americans, we would have to say "Close the door," not "Shut the door," because "Shut the door," would terrify them (laughter), so I've always said that it's a very unfortunate thing, because "Close the door," sounds, if you say this to your wife, it sounds very unromantic. But, "Je t'adore" means "I love you," or "I adore you," you see (laughter). But anyway, living in that kind of a community is a very interesting experience, and religion, to have a different kind of religion, and if you take it by its own terms, it's not offensive. God is the spirit of goodness, and is capable of nothing else, and it's the other guy that you have to watch out for, keep him as quiet as possible.

**[43:45]** GAR: Now, you describe being in the tents with Speiser, reading tablets by kerosene lamp in the evening.

CHG: That's right, that's right.

GAR: Excavated tablets of the season that you were...?

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<sup>8</sup> That is, Arabic شيطان, *šayṭan*, though in some dialects pronounced *šaṭan*, with the same or similar first syllable.

CHG: Well, [Edward] Chiera, who copied beautifully, just beautifully, was in the course of publishing the tablets found at Nuzi, or Nuzu, as the French and others like to call it. We were reading these tablets together, and actually I learned as much from him reading these things in the evening, as I did in class with him.

GAR: So these were the tablets that were just excavated at Kirkuk, but you were at Tepe Gawra, so they were brought to you? How did this work?

CHG: No, we had copies of Chiera's.

GAR: So you used Chiera's copies. And then you mentioned that you worked with [Leonard] Woolley at Ur.

CHG: Oh yeah, that was a very short assignment. It was in 1932, and Woolley was still digging at Ur, and Woolley, he was then Major Woolley. He became Sir C. Leonard Woolley much later, and he married late in life, a very attractive young woman, but she was difficult, as I'll try to bring out. And she treated the members of the staff very high handedly, and she had a beautiful study built all for her with fireplaces, this was quite a luxury out there. And she kept inviting me to call on her, and to see her fireplaces, because she wanted me to go back to my main station, which was up near Mosul, and tell the Americans how splendid their things were down there at Ur. So she complained to her husband about me, and he took me aside and said, "Now look, next time, she'll invite you soon, will you please accept the invitation? Please accept it, because it's very hard on all of us if you don't." So I accepted the invitation, and peace was established.

She also did one other thing, which will typify the woman, there was an American named Richardson, and he was on the dig, and she had a dog that she liked, and when the dog was naughty, Richardson had a duty to beat the dog, because she wanted the dog to hate Richardson and not her. (laughter). So when you're on expedition, living together so far away from civilization, these are the things you run into.

The other thing was, that I was the nearest thing to a physician within a radius of fifty miles, so after work each day, they came to my clinic.

GAR: You mean the natives?

CHG: Yes, the natives.

GAR: You were the nearest thing because your father was a physician?

CHG: Yeah, you know, you pick up a little bit (laughter). The only dentist was a man who inherited a pair of pliers (laughter). This was really Kurdistan, in a remote area, and during the summers, of course, as I told you, I worked in Mandate Palestine, and it retrospect the idea of “evil empires” is a misnomer, the empires of the Near East were a lot better, I’m talking about the natives, they were much, much better off then. They were not ready for independence, especially American-style independence and democracy. We’re very naive about this kind of thing.

I remember there was one man name ‘Isa, Jesus, ‘Isa the Muslim, and he was from Dhahiriya. Dhahiriya has caves, and the people live in these caves, and I forget the year, but I’m pretty sure that place is still around in Southern Palestine, Dhahiriya. So, ‘Isa was a terribly strong guy, and he would have a sledgehammer, and with the sledgehammer, break off big rocks so that they could be carried off to the dump.

So, he told me that the British are wonderful people, and that with the onslaught of winter, the cold days, he would steal a camel as amateurishly as possible, so as to get caught, and then they would put him in jail for the winter (laughter). Then he told me, he said, in the Turkish days and the Ottoman days it was terrible, they didn’t bring you goodies from the outside, you had food that was insufficient and barely edible, but under the British it was just a wonderful place. They had wonderful prisons, and they gave you changes of clothes every so often, and he told me, which was hard to believe, but he

mentioned this to me, you had meat once a week, and he was so happy to live under a government that had such wonderful jails, and they gave you your keep and warmth and clothes and food and everything else, and you see, to love a government so much so, that to be in jail was far better than to have freedom, during the cold months. Now, these people had personality.

My friends in America were, I mean people I could understand, but they were already being politically correct, although that term wasn't used then, "politically correct." But where do we have in America, a place where let us say a car thief steals a car so as to enjoy the jail sentence of a government which he loves. (Laughter) If you ask yourself the question, you realize it doesn't fit at all, but on the other hand you can have a politically correct person who is completely colorless, whereas these people you could never forget. I'll never forget 'Isa.

**[50:28]** GAR: Back to Iraq for a second. You once told me a story, I don't remember the details, you met the sheikh of the Yazidis who offered you a bride or something like that.

CHG: No, you're mixing up two stories. There's a Kurdish town called Amadiyya, which is mentioned in ancient sources. It's very steep, with a flat top, and to go there you have to up on donkeys. Not donkeys, mules, very sure-footed animals, you go up zig-zagging, and when I got there I saw a group of men standing aside, and I sort of suspected that there was a large Jewish community scattered all through Kurdistan, a very large one, and there were about thirty or forty men, so I went up to them, and I spoke Hebrew to them, and they answered me in Hebrew, a very quaint Hebrew, and they asked me about myself, and they asked me if I was married, and I said "No," and they said, "Why aren't you married?" and I said "Well, you know, marriage is an expensive operation, and I wasn't able to embark on that." So they told me that they would be very happy to give me twenty sheep to go to America and get a wife (laughter). But these were very touching things from the good old days, you know.

GAR: And the Yazidi sheik?

CHG: Then I went to the Yazidi sheik in Jabal Sinjar, in a place called Sheikh ‘Adi, and I addressed him as “Your Majesty,” that’s a little bit higher, *gilalatek*, a little bit higher than he was entitled to, but I figured that it was better to sin on that side. I spoke to him, and he said “Where do you come from?” and I said “From America,” and he said “America must be a wonderful place,” but first he asked me “Where is it?” and I said “In the West,” and he asked “Is it further west than Aleppo?” This is the furthest west in their world where they have a Yazidi community, Aleppo. And he said “Surely, America must be a wonderful place where death is unknown,” so I said “Your majesty, what makes you think that people don’t die in America, as they die over here in Kurdistan?” so he said “Because, if all the Americans were like thee, death would be too great a pity.” (Laughter) There’s a poetry to the way they behave, which is hard to imagine, but that was the Near East that I knew, and a wonderful place it was.

GAR: You would go back and forth by Jeep? What was the mode of transportation from Iraq to Palestine?

CHG: I’ll tell you, the British, I forget the name of the company,<sup>9</sup> had a fleet of 1920 Rolls Royces, and these made the trip.

GAR: Now when did you first meet [Benjamin] Mazar? In Palestine in the 30’s?

CHG: Mazar, I met him in ‘31, I met Mazar then. He didn’t have a job, and he was very dedicated to things, biblical and archeological and historical, and I used to come to their home, particularly on Shabbat, and we would play chess and discuss things, and his brother-in-law was [Yitzhak] Ben-Zvi. And I remember that when Chaim Weizmann died, they wanted the successor to be

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<sup>9</sup> The name of the company mentioned is the Nairn Transport Company, which transported travelers along a route which came to be known as “The Nairn Way” between 1923-1959, connecting cities such as Haifa, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nairn\\_Transport\\_Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nairn_Transport_Company).

the President, but the professor should be a scholar, a well-known scholar, the rest wasn't important, but someone who would be worthy of following Chaim Weizmann. So they actually asked [Albert] Einstein to be the president of Israel, and he refused, and he said it would be meaningless for him, and that he wouldn't do this. So then they chose Ben-Zvi, and Ben-Zvi was the brother-in-law of Mazar. So after that, Mazar was in the university, and became not only the president, but the rector, I mean he had everything tied up, and he was pretty much hated by the rest of the faculty.

GAR: Did you ever travel with Mazar to...?

CHG: Oh yes, of course, he actually visited us at Bet Zur, and also, he, and [Shmuel] Yeivin, and I, and who was that wonderful photographer in the early days? We actually hiked to the Lebanese border, and we went through the Arab country there, and it was beautiful, perfectly secure, and what was the name of the photographer?

GAR: Anybody know?

?: Is that the one who wrote the guide book?

SG: Vilnay?

CHG: [Zev] Vilna'i, that's right, he went with us, and he had a way with the natives that I'd never seen before. He would come to these wonderful peasant women who were picking pomegranates from the trees, and their cheeks were red and the pomegranates were red, and he would talk to them, and they were absolutely hypnotized with his charm.

GAR: That's straight out of Shir ha-Shirim [Song of Songs].

CHG: Right, right! (Laughter) Wonderful period.

GAR: And Egypt you visited?

CHG: Egypt, again, I visited early on. It was in the '30s, and there were connections, and it went through Jerusalem actually, there was an old railroad there that went to the border. The railroad was near the windmill,<sup>10</sup> and when you got to the other end, well there were a number of things. I shared a compartment with a Muslim, and he was telling me how much he loved the girl that he was going to marry, and he had never seen her, and I said "Well, how do you know what she's like?" and he said his girl cousins know her from the tea parties with the ladies and they told her how charming she was, and how lovely and beautiful her voice was, and he was in love with her. So I said to him "You know, it's rather difficult for me to understand, how you can be in love with a woman whom you've never seen?" And he said to me "It's very difficult for me to understand, how can you love a woman after you've seen her?" (Laughter)

Well, the other thing is, when you got to the end, you had Egyptians who had to live off the tourists, and one of them, he wanted to use the international languages, you know, if you want business, you have to use the international languages. So I'll never forget the way he invited people for the shoeshine, so this was the international languages, "Shine the boots, *putz di shekh*."<sup>11</sup> (laughter) So those were great days. (laughter)

**[58:46]** GAR: And you knew [W. M. Flinders] Petrie also?

CHG: Yeah. Well, Petrie was really the founder, more than anyone else, of modern archeology. And, early on, he worked on the sequence dates, the way we display jar handles, and this remained very important. And then while he was working in Egypt, [Heinrich] Schliemann was working at Troy, and his

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<sup>10</sup> This refers to the First Station, located in the Yemin Moshe neighborhood in Jerusalem, terminus of the trains that ran between Jaffa and Jerusalem. Gordon's mention of the windmill refers to the Montefiore Windmill, a well-known landmark, now a historic site.

<sup>11</sup> The latter expression is in Yiddish, surprising to hear in the mouth of an Arab c. 1930, though other such instances are known as well. See, for example, Gordon, *A Scholar's Odyssey*, p. 25.

architect [Wilhelm] Dörpfeld was the one who discovered that you had levels, and a level was always later than the one underneath it, which is called stratigraphy.

And then at Tell El-Hesi in 1890, Petrie put the two things together, the stratigraphy and the typology, and that was the founding, and everything else by the way is secondary compared with that. Now especially in America they have things like you go to dumps where they have piled up the bones of food, and you determine from the examinations whether they were cottontails or jackrabbits. Well, this is all very interesting, but it's not as important for the history of archaeology than what Flinders Petrie did at Tell El-Hesi.

GAR: So you met him at Tell el-Ajjul?

CHG: I met him at Tell el-Ajjul and there was a lot of excitement going on. There was a big truck, a big postal truck, and a lot of police around, British police and local police, and they were loading big crates, very heavy crates onto this truck, and then when I came there the truck finally went off and the Arabs dispersed. They had come from all over to see what was going on. So then he invited me into his tent that he used for working, and also partly living quarters, and he told me, he said "You know, there's no gold in those crates, it was all sand," but he said "The Arabs are sure that all the gold was moved to Jerusalem, and now they won't rob me, and so far as the actual gold goes, I have buried it under my bed, and under Lady Hilda's bed." Well the fact is that he was not robbed, and there were violent crimes and robberies, and everything else. Do you remember what happened to [James] Starkey? He was killed. So there were things going on but this thing was safer than any insurance policy could possibly be, (laughter) and that's the kind of guy he was.

So then he took me into his lab and he had a tripod made of wood. He was the first one to put out, by the way, a manual report for every single campaign, and what's more, they were illustrated photographically. He would take a box, a lady's hat box and run a pin through it, and have time exposures, and these

were for its time, and I mean, we obviously have better photography today, but they were very effective. Now the tripod that he had was made of wood, and it was already warped, if you blew on it it'd probably move over, so I said "So Flinders, you know in Jerusalem on Jaffa Road you can get a stainless steel tripod, and there won't be any warping, why don't you use one of those?" He said "I wouldn't think of it. This is the original, which I invented in 1885, and all those steel things are fakes!" (Laughter)

But he respected his own genius, and there's one story that I was told by the Megiddo people. When they found these tethering holes at Megiddo they thought they were the stables of Solomon, and now I think the correct opinion is that these were market stalls, and you have to tether your animal there, while you do your shopping. So they asked him where they should find the palace of the governor. Now I'm trying to give a story, some of the things, the elements of the thing are already wrong, but I want to show you the way the genius is at work, going to work completely differently from the way normal people might do things. He'd been around, and he was spitting in the air to see which way the prevailing winds were, spitting all over us, spitting. So he said "Now look, you have the stables here, and you're looking for the palace, you can be sure that it's upwind!" (laughter), so when I'm talking about if the elements of the theory were correct, they're a special case, but this was Sir Flinders Petrie. And he liked me because I was young and he thought there was hope for me, and considered the other archaeologists idiots, and this was his reasoning ...

GAR: Including Albright?

CHG: Oh, all of them were idiots. He said "What these people do, is that they're going to the cities of the prophets," and he said "Whatever the prophets have left us is in the Bible, and also we know that we have a high standard of spirituality, you don't have a high standard of living with gold, but we know that there were sinful Philistines. These people could make golden mice, and we know also know from the tradition of the Aegean, so he said "So I go to the sinful Philistines, who are known to be miniature jewelers and goldsmiths,

and I find things, and they're looking up there, that produced the great spirituality, and they're finding nothing. But this is the way it goes, they're idiots and I'm not."

**[1:05:38]** GAR: In Jerusalem in those years, Hebrew University was already in existence, [J. N.] Epstein was there?

CHG: Yeah, Hebrew University was founded in 1925, and the first time I consulted Epstein is, I was studying Mandaic, by the way, he was laying tefillin in the morning, and he gave me very, very valuable information.

But they had a number of very fine scholars then. One of them, Samuel Klein, was the professor of Biblical geography and topology, and he came to see us in 1931 at Bet Zur, and at Bet Zur there were caves, and after the rainy season these caves would be filled with water and mud, and he visited us, and we told him that this is from the period of the Maccabees, and he comes in there, with the water and the mud. The water and the mud of course, would fill the roof with the rains of last winter, and he was amazed with this, and he said *mit-tequfat ha-ḥašmona'im, ve-ʿod raṭuv* ["from the Hasmonean period, and still wet"] (Laughter) So this is what happens when you're an armchair archeologist, it's still wet.

DG: You said Epstein taught you something very valuable, what was that?

CHG: Oh, he knew the West Semitic languages amazingly well, and I was already working on magic bowls. I worked on them rather extensively as you may know, and some of the material was in Mandaic, but with Montgomery I had studied several years of Mandaic, and I mean I did have good training, but this was a man, he had a sharp Jewish mind, who could deal with the sources, his head was well stocked. And I went to consult him on some of my problems, and he gave me very good answers and led me along profitable directions. So, this is why I called on him.

GAR: Now you visited Istanbul in those years as well? You went to Istanbul and worked in a museum, that's where the bowls were?

CHG: That's where some of them are, that's where Montgomery's, well, they had part of the collection. They were given by the Sultan, see, these were found in the nineteenth century. But I wanted to tell something that will show you the way times have changed. There was a Turk, a Muslim Turk, named Nuri Bey, who was interested in showing me around, he knew I was interested in learning. So there was one group of men, a very forlorn looking bunch, men of forty or forty five years of age, and what had happened was less than ten years before they had abolished the Sultanate and the Caliphate, and also they outlawed polygamy, and they disestablished Islam. This was under Mustafa Kemal [Ataturk], and these forlorn looking guys were the eunuchs of the imperial harem, who were in a profession that was completely rendered useless, and they had nowhere to go. But it's an interesting thing, you see, in my own lifetime I could actually see people who came from that age, which was entirely over by that time.

**[1:10:00]** GAR: When did you first have contact with H. L. Ginsberg, how did that happen?

CHG: Oh, it was during 1931, or I think it was in '33 that my contact with him started in the library of the school, which is now called the Albright School, and his translations at that time were far ahead of anyone else's, and these were of the greatest value to me in getting a headstart, because when you work on a grammar, you have to know what the stuff means, and you could sniff this, and he was a very gifted person. It's a funny thing, later, when he became a professor in New York, he scorned Ugaritic studies. Scorned them. He was interested only in Bible, and what he would do is, he would make transpositions and emendations. When he got through taking a passage from Isaiah, and making the transitions and the emendations, he did it in a way which was in no way inferior to the best that Isaiah was capable of doing. But what he could never understand is that this was not what Isaiah wrote. He

didn't understand that at all, and I have a feeling that a good bit of the work of that generation was according to false suppositions.

I could probably give you a better example of this. Yeah, the Dead Sea Scrolls came along, and something didn't sink in completely, maybe it just hadn't completely yet, is that we could see that the old supposition that the Biblical books or many of them, came from an autographed original, and then this autographed original had been copied, inscribed, introduced different changes, and that if you wanted to, and also the Septuagint was earlier than the earliest Hebrew manuscripts at that time. If you wanted to get back to the earliest Hebrew what you had to do is restore the Septuagint, and then to do this, you had to take all of the daughter versions and granddaughter versions and what-not, and restore them. In other words, before you can get to the wrist, you had to restore this finger, this one, this one, and do this.

It's not the way that happened at all. What happened was something quite different. What happened was that there was a great variety of these things floating around, and uniformity was imposed on them, this was the thing. The uniformity was imposed, and with good reason, because if they're going to be sacred texts, you have to decide which ones are kosher, and which ones aren't. Now I wanted to tell you about Max Margolis. He used to sense this, he was not a stupid person, he was a bright person. He was working on the sub-daughter version, and he threw down his pencil, and he said to me, "There must be an end to such slavishness." I have a feeling that he had a suspicion that something was wrong in the whole business, and there was a big barking up the wrong tree.

But to give you examples in this classical world, sometimes there is an original. For instance, the Aeneid is an original, it was commissioned by the Emperor to be the epic of Rome, and since it was commissioned and virtually finished, only one or two verses here and there were not completed, this does come from one original. The other example, Homer, is completely different, Homer, before he could gain recognition, was floating around the place with an infinite variety of variants, and then what we call "The Vulgate of Homer,"

was imposed on a mixture of all sorts of things, and most of the Hebrew books come under that category. Nehemiah might be an example of where there was one original, but that's not the way it usually worked.

**[1:15:04]** GAR: Ted asked me to ask you about Ugaritic, it was Margolis's training, but it was Albright who put the seed in your mind.

CHG: Yeah, both of these guys were great guys. Albright had perspective, and Margolis had thoroughness. They were very different, but I respected both of them, and he was the one that gave me the idea to do this.

GAR: Did you visit Ugarit in the thirties when you were in the Near East?

CHG: No later, much later. I came in much later.

GAR: And when did you first meet [Claude] Schaefer? and [Charles] Virroleaud? – let's talk about both of them.

CHG: Virroleaud, I listened to some of his lectures, and Schaefer I knew about, but I have a feeling it was more like the 1960's when I met him.

GAR: Yeah it was much later, but Virroleaud you met earlier?

CHG: I met him, but from what little I know, I'd be working on the Ugaritic and he would be making the copies of the things.

GAR: Now back to Jerusalem, you were at what we now call the Albright Institute, and the École Biblique, you visited as well and worked there?

CHG: Yes, the École Biblique at that time had Père Belson (?),<sup>12</sup> he was a wonderful scholar and archaeologist, wonderful guy, and the grand old man at

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<sup>12</sup> We believe that Gordon refers here to Père Félix-Marie Abel (1878–1953).

that time was Marie-Joseph Lagrange. He was the one in the church who said that Catholic scholarship must not be divorced from world scholarship, and this was to have the Catholics also working on literary compositions of the Bible. And finally at great odds, he prevailed, but he was the grand old man, but also the tyrant who sat there, and he would terrify everybody.

GAR: [Édouard] Dhorme was also there in those years?

CHG: No, Dhorme had already left, but this is interesting, Père Dhorme was the one who converted Albright's wife.

GAR: I didn't know that.

CHG: You didn't, but you should.

GAR: I knew that Albright's wife was Catholic, I don't know, the whole family was Catholic, isn't that right?

CHG: Yeah, but Albright was a very loyal Methodist, and he never wanted to be called Catholic because he wasn't, but she converted all the children, and he had four sons. They were all priests I think. Or at least some of them were priests, and Dhorme wrote me a letter which had a great deal to do with bolstering me. He wanted me to support him on his reading of the Byblos inscriptions, and I looked at it very carefully, and I think it was very ambivalent, and that I think hurt him. He didn't like that.

But he said something about my work on Ugaritic, he said until I came along with the Ugaritic grammar, the field was chaotic. Everyone interpreted the way he wanted. You know, it's great when there are no rules, you can have an awful lot of fun. So they were making all the rules as they went along, and he said, I was the one who injected law and order into the thing, which ended the chaos, and made it a discipline. So I realized I had done something, but I never quite realized until then, how much really was accomplished by this particular

job. But, the French, you know, are officially anti-clerical, so they made a place for Dhorme.

**[1:19:24]** GAR: Let's come back to Philadelphia, and mention a few names, and I'm not sure how they fit in. But we should mention of course the vector of Cyrus's education, he came back and taught at Dropsie in the forties and fifties, so I'm going to throw out some names and I don't know if they go back to the twenties, or if they're later. Let's start with Zeitlin, who of course David mentioned, was he there in the twenties already, as a teacher?

CHG: He was there very early on, and I knew him when I taught there, and Zeitlin, there's no question about this, he was brilliant, but if I can say this about his education, he was catapulted from the cradle to the graduate school, to post-graduate school. He did not have a basic education, and I was having lunch with him, and I said to Zeitlin, "You never told me, where did you get your early education?" and he said, "Me, early education? I didn't need any early education I was an *'illuy*." (laughter)

Those of us who were not an *'illuy*, we're not geniuses, we're not geniuses. You know, I had to go to grammar school, I had to go to high school, because I didn't have the natural genius that makes it all so unnecessary. So he was an *'illuy*, he was bright, there's no question about that, and I think it was that he made a reputation with the Slavonic Josephus<sup>13</sup>, it's what he worked on, yeah it was way back. Also he said there were certain documents [Dead Sea Scrolls] that were medieval, that turned out they were quite ancient. That's because many things that survived the medieval times, that you know, are the languages that we speak and use and all these sorts of museums of antiquity, and he turned the thing backwards, he made it a medieval<sup>14</sup>...

GAR: But you learned Talmud with him?

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<sup>13</sup> See Solomon Zeitlin, "The Hoax of the 'Slavonic Josephus'," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 39 (1948), pp. 171–180.

<sup>14</sup> Most famously, Zeitlin published a series of articles claiming that the Dead Sea Scrolls were medieval and did not date to the pre-Christian period.

CHG: I actually read the first Talmudic tractate that I read that was Yerushalmi [pause], yeah, I studied both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud with him.

GAR: Solomon Skoss.

CHG: Solomon Skoss was one of the best teachers I've had. Montgomery taught me Qur'an, and Montgomery, unfortunately, he considered Muhammad, he used to call him "that imposter." So you know, if you want to consider Muhammad an impostor, this is alright, but then don't teach it, let someone else teach it. Solomon Skoss told me, he said "No Cyrus, he was a very, very clever man, exceedingly clever man, and you have to understand the greatness of the man, and the way he was a great mover of history." Skoss was a good teacher for Islamics. He also worked in Judeo-Arabic. But Montgomery, for all his culture and everything else, was a person who never should touch anything Islamic because of his attitude. If you don't love it, you should leave it, and he didn't do that. He kept his hand in the thing, but it was not a good influence that way. Skoss's work on, that Yale put out in two volumes, the dictionary. What was it?

DG: al-Fasi, David al-Fasi.<sup>15</sup>

CHG: Right, I remember the kind of thing that Skoss uncovered. In Proverbs, there's a verse that says good news makes the "gehah," *yeṭiv geha* [Prov 17:22 – יֵיטֵב גְּהָה], remember? Improves the *geha*. Now in Arabic, the root *w-h-g/j*, has as the noun *g-i-h*, it's *gihaton*, so that *geha*, although it appears only once in the Bible, the context, the meaning and everything else, shows that it means 'face', that good news gladdens the face, the cheerful appearance. So he was capable of pointing out things in the great dictionary, that I still value. I doubt,

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<sup>15</sup> Solomon Skoss, *The Hebrew-Arabic Dictionary of the Bible known as Kitab Jami al-Alfaz (Agron) of David ben Abraham al-Fasi, the Karaite*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936–1945)

by the way, whether all the Hebraists, good and leading Hebraists today know what I've just told you, but Skoss was the one who pointed this out, and he was a good influence.

**[1:25:14]** GAR: Well, when you were at Penn, I want to go back...

DG: Well, if I could ask, do you know Walter Bucholtz and Theodor Gaster both?

CHG: Yeah, I know Walter but he came early on, and Theodor Gaster came late. Theodor Gaster, of course, was a person who had a good British training. He knew some classics, and his English, he was a devastating person in the way he behaved. He was, I mean I admired him, and I could respect his knowledge, and he used to say the most terrible things about people. And somehow or another these things that were terrible, they would stick. For instance he hated A. S. Yahuda, he hated him. So what he said about A. S. Yahuda was, that if his morals improved, he might become a necrophiliac. (laughter) But he'd have to improve. (laughter) Well, anyway, I learned to keep out of his way, because this was terribly funny until it was turned against you, you see, and then it wasn't so funny.

GAR: What about [Henry] Malter?

CHG: Malter was a very serious guy, an old fashioned scholar, and even in the early days, and by the time I came there to teach he was long dead.

GAR: But you had him as a teacher?

CHG: No.

DG: He did Hebrew, Philosophy and Talmud?

CHG: Yeah. He was a good scholar, but I missed him.

GAR: Who's the person who did the Hebrew Reader at Dropsie, was that Halper?

CHG: Oh yes, he died young unfortunately.

GAR: Did you know him, Benzion Halper, was that his name?

CHG: Benzion Halper, that's right, that's right, and he was the Arabist, I think, wasn't he?

DG: He did a catalogue of Genizah fragments, I know that.

GAR: Let's talk about Reich, Nathaniel Reich was doing Egyptology?

CHG: Yeah, now a funny thing happened with Nathaniel Reich, because it turned out I was his successor, did you know that?

GAR: Well, you taught Egyptology at Dropsie, I know that.

CHG: Well, this is a funny thing. They hired me as professor of Assyriology, and I got this while I was in Iran, in the Persian Gulf Command, and I accepted the thing. And then after I accepted the thing and they appointed me, they told me "You will also cover Egyptology." [laughter] But again, I did something typical. I was not prepared to take on Egyptology, but I decided that if people had this illusion about me, I was going to live up to it. I taught one Egyptian course, either Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, or Coptic, for the ten and a half years I taught there, and I can assure you that after ten and a half years, I could do things, a lot of things, that even many Egyptologists couldn't do. But again, I did it to live up to a completely false impression people had of my ability and my knowledge.

GAR: The president of Dropsie when you were teaching was [Abraham] Newman?

CHG: Newman, yeah.

DG: But Reich was no longer when you came...?

CHG: No, when I was a student there, I and Sam Kramer took Egyptian with him. By the way, I don't know whether you know this or not, Sam Kramer and I began Sumerian together under George Barton, and he hated the course and was not interested at all. Then he went to Chicago and he met that monster, that Nazi monster [Arno] Poebel, and Poebel by the way is the only person who has written a book, a grammar covering the whole works. Now we have fine detailed work, you know, of one particular writer, but this was... Sam went to Poebel, and Poebel treated him in a rough way. He said "Look Kramer, you know nothing, you learned absolutely nothing, and I will take you as my student under one condition. That you admit that you know nothing, that you forget everything that you thought you learned, and you'll study with me." So Kramer took it. It was in three months what he got from Poebel, just three months that he became a great Sumerologist, and this was the treatment he needed, and something that couldn't last. I forget what happened, Poebel I think ruined himself financially by investing all of his money in Nazi stocks and bonds. But that's a remarkable thing, where he began Sumerology, hated it, and then fell under the influence of this monster who gave him the foundation for becoming one of the greatest Assyriologists of our time.

GAR: So did you learn Egyptian first with Reich, when you were here as a student?

CHG: No, actually I studied Egyptian with George Barton. He, I and Sam Kramer were in Reich's class, and Reich took a little book, a very little book, I think it was by [Günther] Roeder, I think it was called *Ägyptische Grammatik*, R-o-e-d-e-r, Roeder,<sup>16</sup> and Reich translates it into English, and then he lays the book down and says "Remember, everything I have taught you belongs to me,

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<sup>16</sup> The book appears to be this one: Günther Roeder, *Ägyptisch: Praktische Einführung in die Hieroglyphen und die ägyptische Sprache* (1913/1925).

don't you publish it." With this, Kramer and I withdrew from the class, this was the end.

Reich was a character, and when I spoke to his family back in Austria, they told me that they heard he's a professor in America, they told in Europe this would never have happened (laughter), and then he published, I think, two issues, of a journal called *Mizrayim*, do you have copies here? His specialty was Demotic, so he used to go around saying "I am a Demotist, a Semotist, and an Egyptologist." And then after my time, Harry Orlinsky was up to his tricks. Got some mail, and the mail used to come to Dropsie College, and some mail came and it was directed to the cheerleader, ... , you know, the cheerleader. So Harry Orlinsky put all mail for the cheerleader in his box. So, Reich goes to Cyrus Adler, and said 'Well could you tell me what a cheerleader is?' and Cyrus explained to him, "Well, you jump up and down and say 'Ra-ra-ra!'" So he said "I was hired as an Egyptologist, not some cheerleader!" (Laughter), but anyway, I'm his successor, among other things, of Nathaniel Reich.

**[1:33:23]** GAR: At Penn, Zellig Harris, you must've known?

CHG: Yeah. Now Zellig was very able, and I, at Montgomery's advice, went out into the field and that lasted a number of years, and Zellig was actually my student in Old Babylonian, and he was not interested in this. He was interested in sort of the theory of language, and in his family, they all spoke Hebrew, and he married his cousin, his maternal cousin, and what Speiser did, he disqualified me because I was not interested and I didn't know Arabic, whereas Zellig was the Arabist. Well, I was interested in Arabic, not that I did in my life work, but I was interested in Arabic. What Zellig did was, and I knew he would do this, is that the moment he could get rid of it, he got rid of it, and went into linguistic theory, and Noam Chomsky was the one, whatever Noam Chomsky learned about linguistics he had from Harris. Harris was very able, and he achieved his aims, and dropped Arabic like a hotcake when he no longer needed it to play along with Speiser.

GAR: Let's talk about Chomsky's father William.

CHG: William Chomsky! Now William Chomsky was my teacher at Gratz College, a very good teacher.

GAR: His wife also?

CHG: No, she didn't teach there, but she too was a very good Hebraist, these were devoted Zionists and Hebraists, and of course things happened to these old Zionists. I remember I was called twice to be professor at Hebrew University to succeed [Umberto] Cassuto, and I turned them down because I'm very strongly American, I'm very strongly American, and I feel just as Nehemiah needed the great empire, the world empire to support him, and to rebuild Jerusalem, that Israel needs a very strong American Jewish community to fulfill its role. What was your question there?

GAR: I'm just thinking of some other individuals, did you know Alan Gardner? Did you ever meet him?

CHG: No, no but I know his grandson very well.

GAR: Of course, I do too.<sup>17</sup>

AK: Did you know Solis-Cohen?

CHG: Yes, there were two Solis-Cohens, brothers. One was J.,<sup>18</sup> which is not the one that you mean, and J. was the founder otolaryngology in America, and he was a professor, one of my father's professors at Jefferson Medical, here in Philadelphia, and the other was, Meyer was it? No not Meyer. The other one was...

AK: Solomon?

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<sup>17</sup> With reference to Martin Bernal.

<sup>18</sup> J. Solis-Cohen, standing for Jacob Solis-Cohen.

CHG: Solomon. Solomon Solis-Cohen came regularly to synagogue, and he was the one who translated Spanish-Hebrew poetry into English poetry for the Schiff Classics series. Now Meyer Solis-Cohen, he was a doctor and the son of J., and Meyer married late in life. He married a girl named Rosebud, and Rosebud had given birth to a daughter whom my children and grandchildren have had associations with, and he invites me to spend the Sabbath supper with them. So he tells me "Cyrus, it'll be black tie at Sabbath supper." Well, alright, I happen to have a black tie, and I happened by some accident to have a white tie, but I came in black tie, and the guests were, well, all the people present at the Sabbath supper were Meyer Solis-Cohen, and Rosebud, and the infant daughter, and I. It was a very small party.

So, I said to him, "Dr. Meyer, how is it that I always see your Uncle Solomon, but I never see your father J.?" So he says "Well, I'll tell you Cyrus," this was in 1925, he said, "Unfortunately my father became alienated from religion, right after the war." So I said "You shouldn't judge him so harshly, the war is only over seven years." "No, my dear boy, no, not that war, I mean the Civil War." (laughter)

But this was the atmosphere I was raised in, and they were glad to have me, because for the most part, they were too good to marry anybody, you see these were aristocratic Sephardim. I wasn't there to marry there, and they embraced me because I was sort of an adopted son, and I took part in the tradition. They could always call on me to sing the Haftarah, and I was an important young man.

GAR: Before I open it up for just a few questions, let me just mention one other person whom I think you told me you met at some point, [François] Thureau-Dangin? Did you encounter him?

CHG: Yes, yes, this was in 1936, and I called on Thureau-Dangin in Paris, and now he was an aristocrat. Now, a true aristocrat, where you had an aristocracy, has to own land. Now he was stone deaf, and he had a big horn,

this was the days before hearing aids, a big horn, and you could yell into the horn, and if your pronunciation in French was very, very good, he could understand it, but it wasn't an easy thing.

And Julius Levy gave me a very good suggestion before I called on Thureau-Dangin, he said "Look, you will understand his French without trouble, so you don't worry about that, but he will not understand your French or your English or anything with his hearing aid. So you come with a pad of paper and pencil, and you write your questions and comments in English and then give them to him, and he will answer you." So I did this, and it worked out beautifully, and he had already begun citing some of my articles on a number of different subjects, and all of this in a complimentary way, and he had taken a liking to me, and he had just come back from hunting the wild boar on the swamps of his own estate on horseback. He had a very powerful position by the way, and he was pretty much hated by the others. Otto, what was his name, the Austrian mathematician?

CWG: Neugebauer?

CHG: Neugebauer. Otto Neugebauer hated him for another reason, that Thureau-Dangin had re-edited some of Neugebauer's Assyriological things, reedited, put out a new and improved edition, and he felt that this was gratuitous and unnecessary. But in general he was hated, he was very powerful, and kept a number of young people out of the academy, but I guess these things are normal anywhere. But anyway, he said to me something that made a big impression on me, I can never tell exactly what he meant, but he said, "Young people like you, Assyriology has a very beautiful prospect, future." And when a person like Thureau-Dangin, the greatest of all Assyriologists, says this to a young man, it does something. It gives you some strength to go on, when the going is rough, and if you do any pioneering it can always go rough for a long time.

GAR: You mentioned Levy, so let's hear a little bit about Levy, and of course we can't mention Levy without [Benno] Landsberger, I guess.

CHG: I remember I was sitting with Levy, Julius Levy, in his office, and he had a big glass door there, and then some very harmless looking person, I forget his name, I shouldn't, and then a Levy with a golden gleam in his eye says "You see him? He's so-and-so, I haven't spoken to him in five years." (laughter)

And then I heard from [Jack] Sasson something, that didn't surprise me, that in front of the whole American Oriental Society, Levy got up and said to Landsberger, and incidentally you know why the hatred started? Landsberger's review of Levy's doctoral dissertation. Levy got up, and he pointed to Landsberger, and said "In Germany you knew nothing, and in America you have learned nothing." (laughter) This was the relationship, they never got over that feud.

**[1:43:48]** GAR: Arthur?

AK: You, just alluded briefly to Cyrus Adler, and I'm wondering, first of all, if you ever heard any stories about his teacher, who was Sabato Morais who was a Hebraist, and I know he consulted him on various matters, concerning Bible.

CHG: That doesn't sound right to me because his training was at Johns Hopkins.

AK: His training was at Hopkins, but his...

CHG: Morais certainly didn't teach at John Hopkins.

AK: No, but his Hebrew training...

CHG: Oh his Hebrew training, this could well be ...

AK: I wonder if you remember anyone from that circle, from that time period, or of his son for example. I particularly was thinking because he was a student of Dante, Morais, do you know him?

CHG: No, I didn't know about him. But I knew about Morais, we called him, but he made a big contribution. Now I'm not an expert on the different pronunciations of Hebrew, but you know the pronunciation was *šamaḥ yiśra'el*, are you familiar with that? This was the way I was taught to pronounce, and I was told that this was brought back from Leghorn<sup>19</sup>, you probably know, by Sabato Morais. If any of you have any enlightenment on that I'd like to know, because it has to do with my own background, and the problems with the changes that are taking place.

SC: Now the Lithuanians, Yankl...

CHG: Yeah that's a good example, but there's not very much of that, Yankl is a very good one, a good example of it. But this was for every single *'ayin*.

YK: Zvi Rin was your student, what do you think...?

CHG: Who?

YK: Zvi Rin, what do you think of his work?

CHG: Zvi Rin, when you hear him speak Hebrew, when you hear him speak Hebrew, if you pay attention to the way he handles prepositions, you know you don't open the door, *'im mafteaḥ*, it's *be-mafteaḥ*. He knows a tremendous amount. He also went a little bit crazy on the Canaanite business, you see. But basically, a very hard worker, a very individualistic one, and that monumental tome that he put out, running his own printing press in the basement of his own home. This is something of an accomplishment, and he had a very rough time because of a student of his. He turned down a thesis, do you know this story or not?

YK: Barry Prince was his name.

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<sup>19</sup> Leghorn is the traditional English name of Livorno, Italy.

CHG: Yeah, that's right. Barry Prince made a big mistake. He threatened his life through the U.S. mail. Now you see, if you threaten a person's life in Pennsylvania, but not through the mail, Pennsylvania law may not have the death sentence, if it's any other thing. You do it in New Jersey, you've got New Jersey law. But once you put it through the mail it becomes a federal offense. So, they put him in jail, in a psychiatric jail, and unfortunately they let him go after six months, and this condition, the life of Zvi Rin and his wife Shifra ever since, they live next to a shooting range. They're both expert marksmen. He makes his own bullets. He took me down to his cellar where he manufactures his own bullets, and he made them live a very, very strange life.

But, does he know anything, did he do anything? Yes, definitely, definitely. But in as much as he was a Canaanite, this conditions of Rin's, if I see a word in Ugaritic, I don't say "This must have been in Hebrew because we have it in Ugaritic." I don't do that. It can be, for instance a word like "kosharot" appears once in Psalms, and we know it Ugaritic where it occurs often, it means "a songstress." When you have a happy event like the birth of a child you call in the *katharat*, the *kosharot*, if you had a sad occasion you have the *bakiyat*, the *bokhot*, the "weepers." So there is a tremendous amount of overlap, but I wouldn't push it to the extreme that just because it occurs in certain places, it must occur everywhere over the... but I spent some time yesterday afternoon with Zvi and Shifa, and I think that huge volume they put out is really a treasury of all kinds of things,<sup>20</sup> and whatever your attitudes you can learn a lot from this.

YK: I became friendly with him.

CHG: Good, good, very sweet people.

**[1:49:28]** GAR: Anybody else, want to raise any names, any questions?

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<sup>20</sup> Zvi Rin and Shifra Rin. *Alilot ha-'Elim: Kol Shirot 'Ugarit (Acts of the Gods: The Ugaritic Epic Poetry)* (Philadelphia: Inbal Publishers, 1996).

SG: I'm curious about Eliezer Sukenik, who was here for a very short time, not here, but at Dropsie somewhere in the thirties...

CHG: He took his degree at Dropsie.

SG: I don't think he actually finished but I know he was here at Dropsie.

DG: He's known as having completed a Ph.D. from Dropsie, but we could never find a thesis. (laughter) We searched all over for it.

CHG: I also called on him in his museum, he had a museum...

GAR: What's the background there, why did Sukenik come to the U.S.?

SG: I think Albright sent him here to complete his<sup>21</sup>...

CHG: It could be. They made him very unhappy in Israel because, they said he was a schoolteacher instead of a scholar, so he had to get a foreign degree, and there was something unpleasant about him. He, by the way, made some very important discoveries, very important ones, but there was something unpleasant. He called me into his museum, and he had a brass, rather than copper or bronze, rolls or bars, and it had cuneiform writing on them, and he asked me to come in, he said "I'd like you to read these for me." So I told him what they were, and then I said to him, "If they turn out to be genuine, may I publish them?" So he said "Of course not," and I said "Well do you know Sumerian?" "Well, I'll learn it!" But I thought it was a little bit insensitive of him to ask me to do the work, and then he would publish the thing even though he didn't know the language. There was something very unpleasant about him that way.

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<sup>21</sup> According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Sukenik finished a Ph.D. at Dropsie College in 1926, and was the Director of the Jewish Antiquities Museum.

?: Happens all the time. (laughter)

CHG: But ... he did a number of important things. By the way, was he the one? Who was the one that first identified, no, that was Naveh, who identified Ekron.

SG: Joseph Naveh.

CHG: Naveh is a very different kind of scholar.

GAR: Any other questions?

DG: Well, let's go back to Hebrew University, go back to the early years, did you know anyone besides Epstein, and also I think Max Margolis taught for a year didn't he? He lost his son?

CHG: Yes, that's right.

DG: Do you know anything about that you could tell us?

CHG: He had a daughter named Catherine, and he had twin boys, and one of the twins got a fever, what's the name of the fever that comes from, oh, you get very swollen...?

GAR: Malaria?

CHG: No, no worse than that. Well, anyway the boy died. This changed Margolis's life. The body was brought back to America, and once a week he made a pilgrimage to the boy's burial. He never got over that, and he often spoke of the experience in Israel as a wonderful one, and it meant a great deal to him, and I think psychologically he managed to separate that from the death of his son, but he never got over it.

GAR: You told me, and I guess it's important for us to remember since we fly back and forth so often, between Israel and here, that people like Montgomery and Margolis spent one year of their life there, and that was it for them. They knew that, that would be their one experience...

CHG: Well, in those days, what brought Montgomery to Jerusalem, was that once in a lifetime you got your steamer trunks and your family, and you went on a boat, and it took months, I mean, to get there. But it was a once in a lifetime thing, and my first trip out there took place in that general period, in 1931, where I went on the French line, the Messagerie Maritime, on a boat, a ship called the Patriot, and we started in New York and the first stop was Boston, and the third stop was in the Ponta Delgada in the Azores.

You see it's an interesting thing, when Columbus came he went south to the Canary Islands, and then came over to the Caribbean, and he knew that he knew that to get back and to go with the currants, he wanted to go by the Northern route. In other words, he knew perfectly well that the currants in the Atlantic ocean are clockwise. He didn't go there with an ignorance, there was a whole collection of data built up, and this was known to the inner circle. But the idea was that the, I don't know whether it's current now or not, I can't keep up with opinions of these things, but the idea that he was simply a brilliant navigator and managed to do this out of no background at all, this is nonsense, complete nonsense.

YK: Forgive me if I go back to Israel, can you tell us anything about Cassuto, because you were supposed to replace him ...

CHG: Yeah, by the way the thing is with Cassuto and I, what we wanted was not fancy theories, but *peshat*, what this means, so we liked each other. The only thing that bothered me about him, and I'm a little bit more understanding now, I hope, but the only thing that bothered me was that he was a member of the Fascist Party in Italy, and then one of his sons, I think, was lost in an air

accident, I think he flew for the, do you know anything about that?<sup>22</sup> Yeah, but this bothered me, that a Jew should belong to the Fascist Party.

WH: Well that wasn't unusual.

CHG: Yeah, I mean, these were Italians, really, really Italians.

(Multiple people speaking in the background)

CHG: Yeah, and I know a very close friend of mine Giorgio Levi Della Vida, you know there was a house on the grand canal on the palazzo, Levi Della Vida's, and his son became a champion tennis player instead of a scholar, and the father was terribly ashamed of him, the great Giorgio Levi Della Vida, he has a son who's a bum! I mean, he plays tennis, a tennis champion, a bum! So, he was complaining to me about this terrible son of his, so I said "But did he at any point bring you some satisfaction?"

So he smiled, and he said in a strange kind of way, he said, "I was going through customs, and there was this customs official who was tearing everything apart, everything, and making a mess, a complete mess," so he comes to Levi Della Vida's trunk, and he says "Your name is Levi Della Vida?" He said, "Do you know so-and-so?" And he said "Well that so-and-so happened to be my son," so he said "You go right through, and they'll give you first class treatment and not interfere with you. Never had we had the honor of being the father of such a great man." (Laughter), yeah, but these were first and foremost Italians.

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<sup>22</sup> We have not been able to find a record of a son of Umberto Cassuto who was killed in a flying accident. His son Nathan Cassuto was the Rabbi of the Synagogue of Florence, was deported to Auschwitz in January 1944 and died at Gross-Rosen concentration camp in February 1945. All records seem to indicate that Nathan had three sisters, Hulda, Lea, and Milka, all of whom lived and died in Israel, but no other brothers.

Another one was Levi, what was his first name, he was a big-shot in Sardinia, and also he became the director of the Italian School of Classical Studies in Athens, no one can help me with the first name?<sup>23</sup>

GAR: A Classicist. But...

CHG: They were first and foremost Italians.

GAR: And Père [Roland] de Vaux as well?

CHG: Yes, Père de Vaux, also, yeah sure I met him. Met him actually in Boston, he came through.

AK: I vaguely remember, you reminded me during the World War, well, the Second World War, that there was a faculty member at Dropsie College who was a Semiticist, or one of the languages of the ancient near east, and he worked for the government, in the Defense Department breaking codes. Do you have any recollection of who that?

CHG: Well the description would fit me perfectly! I was the one who did this! It's a very interesting thing.

GAR: I didn't cover all of the aspects of his life.

CHG: To break codes and cyphers puts you in a certain group called the intelligence community in Washington, and I thought they had a mission. The mission was that America should not depend on the British for telling us what's in the messages in Turkish, Persian and Arabic. We should be able to have our own capability. The British gave us things, but they didn't want us to have our own capability. So my mission was, now I don't know whether you know the methods, but these things are snatched out of the air. I never wanted

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<sup>23</sup> The reference is to Doro Levi: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doro\\_Levi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doro_Levi). The correct name of the institution referred to is the Italian School of Archaeology in Athens.

to be a sneak or spy, I never did that, but these messages are all sent in the air, anyone can intercept them. So, we have a large collection of these things, and depending on where they came from, for instance if they came out of Baghdad they were Arabic, if they came out of Tehran they'd be Persian, and it's an interesting thing that the Turks, although they had switched to the Latin alphabet, for added security they used Ottoman Turkish script....

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*The recording ends abruptly here, at the end of two hours. The interview continued for only another few minutes.*

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